

## **Architecture as an art of care in historically marginalised communities: the case of Heidedal, South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

South Africa has a long and lamentable history of creating urban inequalities in calculated ways through legislation inspired by racial prejudice. Twenty-five years after democracy, appropriate ways to develop these vulnerable, marginalised communities remain elusive. One such place is Heidedal, a historically segregated township of Bloemfontein which today forms part of the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. Like many similar settlements in South Africa the township is flanked by an industrial buffer zone meant to separate it from the ‘white city’. Consequently, in addition to being a product of vindictive historical policies, the township currently has an uneasy relationship with its bleak industrial surroundings; a potent reminder of past injustices. This paper interrogates how architects think about such communities in three ways: first, it questions the historical narrative of Heidedal by introducing an alternative phenomenological reading (inspired by the writings of Martin Heidegger) revealing the actual scope of corruption that saturated apartheid planning. Second, it laments the tendency of architectural phenomenology to avoid questions posed by this kind of settlement, instead focusing its attentions on unspoilt or pastoral landscapes. Last, it proposes an alternative way to think about the traumatized relationship between the settlement, its history and its place by considering a project in Heidedal by one of the authors, a young architect who grew up in the township. In response to previous

attempts at calculative machination, the paper proposes an architecture of care and parsimony.

**Keywords:** Heidedal, apartheid, Heidegger, care, parsimony, inequality, vulnerable communities

### **Introduction**

Heidedal was planned as a segregated township intended to house the ‘coloured community’ of Bloemfontein.<sup>1</sup> Under the apartheid urban planning regime it was common practice to spatially segregate townships by creating industrial buffer zones between them and ‘white’ segments of the city (see figure 1). In Heidedal ‘the domestic’ and ‘the industrial’ uncomfortably rub shoulders to this day. In which ways can this uneasy discontent be recast by works of architecture that foster a sense of belonging to the new democratic society through the creative reinterpretation of the industrial vestiges of apartheid planning policies? Specifically, the goal is to promote appropriate poetic responses to the established ways of life in marginalised communities, challenge old conflicts and thereby strive towards new forms of contentment and dignified dwelling. In a general sense, the aim is to identify significant principles that may be useful for architects working in other communities characterised by similar levels of inequality, vulnerability and the assumed conflict between ‘domestic life’ and ‘industrial production’.

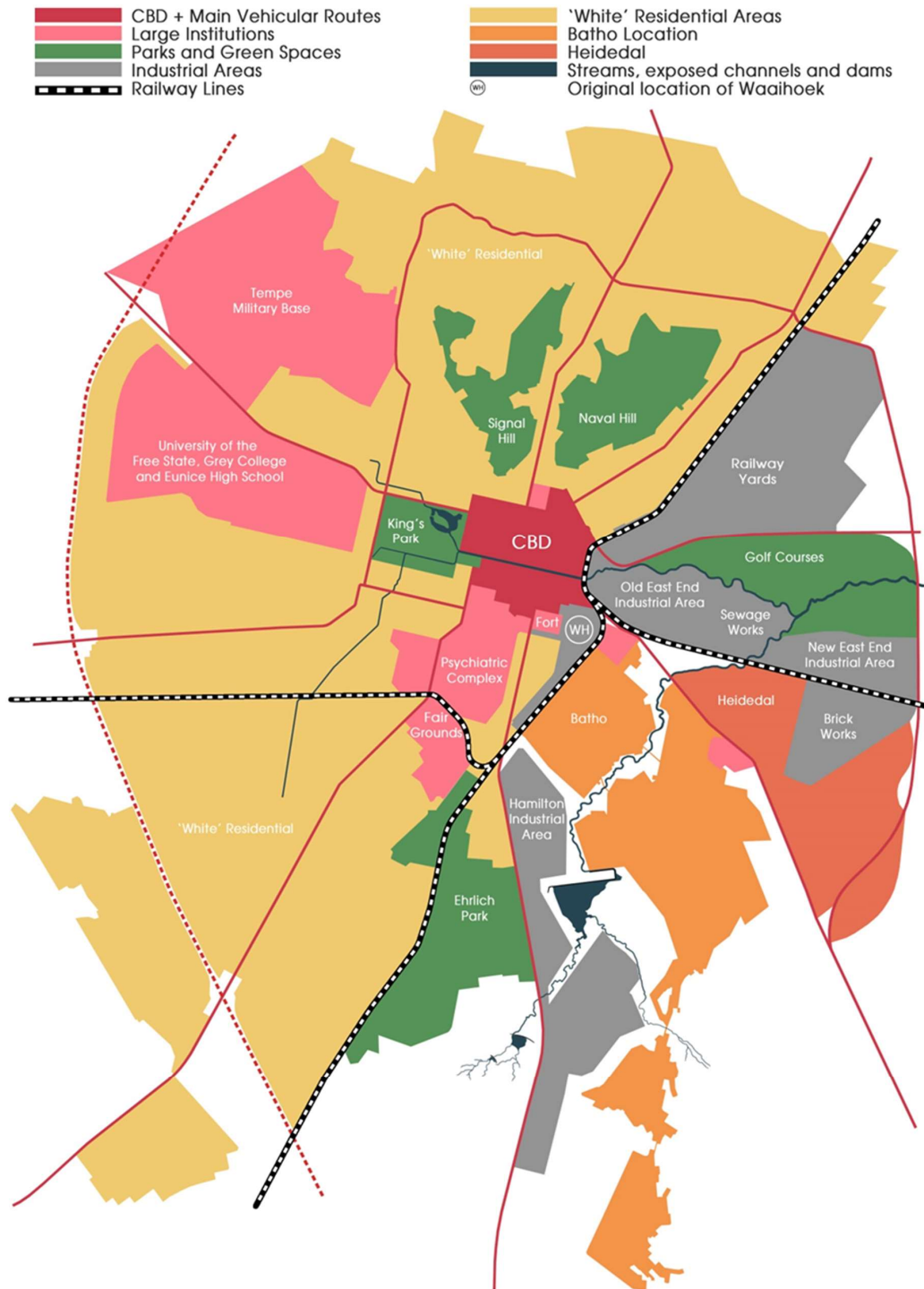


Figure 1. Bloemfontein, Heidedal and Batho as a 'model apartheid city' in 1971 (authors).

In philosophical terms, this paper builds on attempts to recognize people as ‘beings of care’ pioneered by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and recent efforts to understand architecture as an “art of care” and places as “regions of concern” (Auret 2019). Essentially, Heidegger approached care [Sorge] in an ontological way rather than proposing it as a “special attitude” (1927, 193). Care is the ‘precondition’ for the meaningful existence of mortal beings, i.e. beings who are aware of their mortality, because “in its being this [kind of] being is concerned about its very being” (1927, 12). In other words, care does not prescribe the way people “ought” to live (Heidegger 1935, 150/211), but offers a means to draw near and notice the way mortals always already exist as beings of emplaced care. Care enables the search for meaning, creates the possibility for feeling a sense of belonging (or marginalisation) and directs all aspects of human intentionality. If architects are to find appropriate ways to dignify established ways of life, we believe they should do so by practising architecture as an art of care. To that aim, this paper will first present a traditional historical reconstruction of Heidedal’s origins, which will be followed by a more rigorous attempt to understand the place as a ‘region of concern’.

### **Heidedal, a historical reconstruction**

During the first years following Bloemfontein’s founding in 1846 the ‘white settlement’ was established in the topological ‘inside’, formed between Naval Hill, Signal Hill and Fort Hill, with very little thought given to the settlement patterns of indigenous groups. However, by 1861 the matter had become an ‘issue’ for the town council and, in their very first attempt at dealing with the co-existence of different groups in the area, the Town Clerk divided the indigenous population along ethnic lines into three ‘locations’ sited beyond the confines of the ‘white inside’. One of these locations, already known in 1864 as “Waay-hoek” (which soon changed to the more colloquial Waaihoek), eventually became the most influential ‘native location’ (Schoeman 1980, 35). It is hard to overstate the historical significance of the settlement, since the African National Congress was founded in Waaihoek in 1912. Yet twenty-two years before this event the prospects of the location were already dealt a mortal blow due to a fluke of history. When the railway line from

the Cape was extended to Bloemfontein in 1890 the tracks, merely following the topography of the terrain, included Waaihoek on the ‘right side’ of the railroad.

It was not long before the ‘white town’ felt threatened by the growth of the location and starting widening the gulf between the two settlements. In 1904 a devastating flood in the CBD provided the town council with an excuse to ‘strategically’ funnel the spatial transition between the two settlements – already hemmed in between the Fort and the railway – even further by establishing a stone quarry on the eastern side of Fort Hill. Initially, the thirty stands closest to the quarry (and ‘white’ Bloemfontein) were expropriated. However, the intimidating effects of the quarry extended far beyond its physical boundaries due to blasting activities.

By 1920, in line with the “universally accepted principle of segregation”, the council decided to develop “the South-Eastern quarter of the town, bounded roughly by the Natal [Railway] line and the Cape line” into a “hygienic Native township” which could house “a large Native labour supply” (MM 1920, 8). This signalled the beginnings of the Batho and Heidedal locations and heralded the systematic destruction, through legislation and piecemeal demolition, of Waaihoek between 1927 and 1941 (Schoeman 1980, 285). The only alternative to living amid the deteriorating conditions in Waaihoek was for black people to relocate to Batho, while Heidedal was reserved for the coloured community.

### **Heidedal as a region of concern**

The story of Bloemfontein, Waaihoek, Batho and Heidedal illustrate the way in which black and coloured people were categorised, divided and spatially marginalised in a calculated way. In this section we will present Heidedal as a region of concern by exploring the deeper effects on these places and their inhabitants being subjected to the calculating forces of ‘segregation’ and the Heideggerian concept of ‘machination’ (*die Machenschaft*). There are those who argue that the ‘tools’ (segregation) and ‘thinking’ (machination) of modernism were merely blunt instruments in the hands of the apartheid government, but the story of Heidedal implies that acts of strategic spatial intimidation and calculating policies was well

established by the time apartheid was instated by the National Party in 1948. In fact, we propose that considering the situation in terms of the general sway exerted by calculation and machination on society is a particularly illuminating way to reveal the true depravity of segregationist apartheid policies and the deep pernicious effects of its stubborn lingering as the spatial reality of South Africa.

Heidegger saw modern technology as a “challenging-forth” (1953, 321) that aims at “efficiency” by unleashing the calculating drive towards optimising what can be “unlocked” from beings. Thus, beings are recast as resources that may be ordered, mastered and exploited as “standing-reserve” (1953, 322). The result of such thinking corresponds to the idea of Heidedal as a ‘labour reserve’ spatially segregated by the industries it was meant to serve. However, technology has many ways of “revealing” (1953, 318). When the nationalist aspirations of the Afrikaner came under the sway of machination, these forces conspired not only to ‘order’ black and coloured people in locations and homelands as labour stockpile, but established whites as “orderer[s] of the standing-reserve” (1953, 332). A way of life fixated on obtaining “maximum yield at minimum expense” ensconced in a system rewarding “monstrousness” (1953, 321). “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering” (1953, 322).

Yet humans may be incapable of fully mastering technology since, as efficient orderers, they ultimately come under the sway of that which they thought they controlled. The dangers of controlling can not be overcome by exerting stricter control. The limitations of control should be clear to any designer. In the process of designing, despite all kinds of technological aids, it has remained impossible to extend completely our “control over concealment itself, in which at any time the actual shows itself or withdraws” (Heidegger 1953, 323). The technological mindset is not innocuous, it menacingly ‘enframes’ people. Ultimately, both the ordered and the orderers suffer the “abandonment of being” (Heidegger 1938, 87-89). Their lives grow distant from the possibility of living as beings of emplaced care, for their place is prescribed by their paradigm and their care have been diluted by the false certainties of

categorisation (1935, 199-202). Heidegger saw this as a serious “levelling down” of the possibility for a dignified and meaningful dwelling life, since beings are “preconceived as the orderable, the producible, and the establishable” (1938, 388). Due to the machinations of apartheid planning, many may also see Heidedal as such a levelled-down place. What gifts may the architectural profession offer in order to undermine the effects of machination?

### Practicing care in Heidedal

Heidegger’s critique of technology is not without hope. In contrast to the modern proclivity for using technology as ‘challenging-forth machination’ the Greek notion of *techne* has always embodied the notion of making, or *poiesis*, as an act of “bringing-forth” (1953, 317). This possibility has long been a staple of contemporary architectural phenomenology, yet the example of Heidedal asks some hard questions concerning architectural phenomenology’s openness towards making in response to a wider variety of places.

Inadvertently, architectural phenomenology may have built its case for valuing places by predominantly referring to iconic ‘pastoral landscapes’. Places with presence, order, identity and memorable characteristics – “strong places” as the famous Norwegian architectural phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz put it – where “basic existential meanings” have been understood and articulated (1980, 179). In contrast, Heidedal is a ‘weak place’ with a nondescript image and a latent industrial character. Contemporary architectural phenomenology must find ways to also appreciate such marginalised edge-situations as regions of concern. In architectural terms, Heidedal must be approached with the same kind of poetic intensity and “creative participation” (1980, 185) which has overwhelmingly been reserved for ‘strong’ places.

In a recently completed renovation of his parents’ house in Heidedal, one of the authors, David van der Merwe, offer an alternative approach in the way he has appropriated the industrial *genius loci* of Heidedal for his own creative purposes, simultaneously turning a historically menacing political policy into a catalyst for design. The renovated house (figure

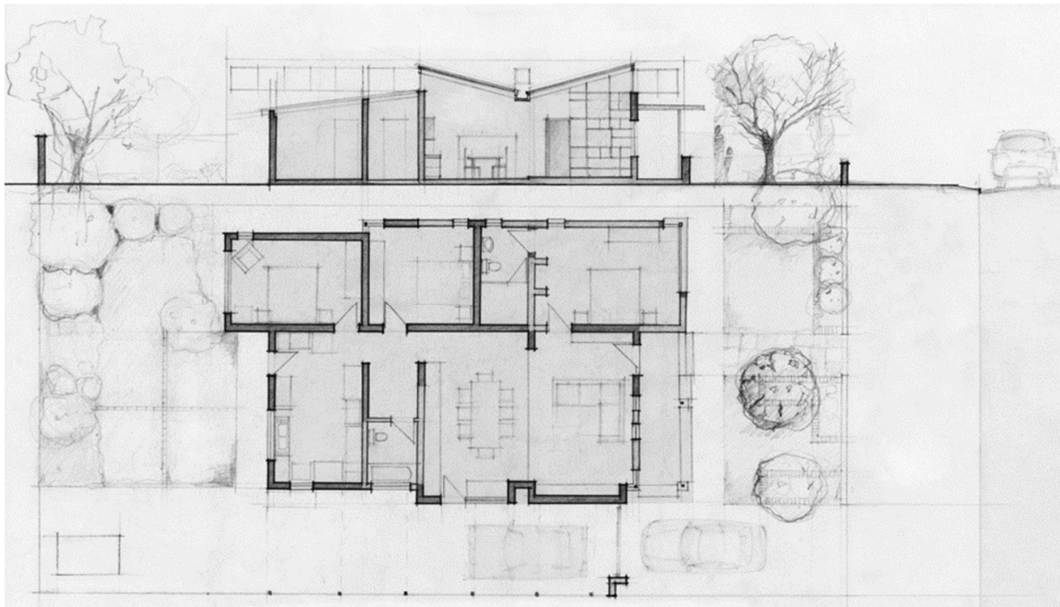


Figure 2. Plan and section of the renovation showing additions and existing material in darker shade (authors).

2) reinterprets tropes of industry, like clerestory windows (figure 3), lack of traditional ornamentation and applies ‘raw materials’ like bricks, steel and corrugated steel sheeting, in a domestic setting (figure 4). Yet the result is devoid of the challenging-forth of *techne* in that it is sympathetic to the old house, retains as much of the original material as possible and respects the rituals and typologies of the place: the tight spaces, intimate scale and threshold-rich transition from street to *stoep* (figure 5). In this sense, the design is resolutely embedded in what is there – including the industrial aesthetic of the place – while sensitively translating its harsh realities into moments of domestic calm.

The reinterpreting of this small house uncovers a way to acknowledge the ‘truth’ of the place, undermine its vindictive past and practice “the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful” (Heidegger 1953, 339). Here *techne* has been freed from efficiency-driven, stockpiling machination to become parsimonious *poiesis*.

### **Towards a remedy**

The challenge for architectural professionals in South Africa lies in finding ways to respond appropriately to the enduring vulnerabilities and inequalities embedded in our segregated-machinated urban fabric. The renovation discussed above is a humble, yet decisive, gesture which points to the seemingly obvious possibility that following the kind of calculative thinking that led to the current malady might not be able to suggest an appropriate remedy.



Figure 3. The interior with clerestory windows (authors).



Figure 4. Domestic use of industrial materials and the potential of the incomplete (authors).



Figure 5. The *stoep* in the evening (authors).

## Endnotes

1. The authors acknowledge that the term 'coloured' – a term historically used in South Africa to refer to people of 'mixed descent' – is contested. Some feel that the term should be "punishable by law" since it has been used to "rob people of their dignity" (Daniel 2018), especially as it relates to the first nations of South Africa. Some publications are gravitating towards the 'safer' option of 'brown communities'. To us, this seems a watered-down route. For instance, there are individuals who argue that the use of the term coloured, especially when seen in terms of historically determined 'racial hierarchies' in South Africa, is actually more "honest" and that mandating the use of "nonracial identities ... is the wrong antidote" (McKaiser 2012). The authors thus use the term for lack of an honest alternative and in the hope that communities who currently use the term to self-identify will find ways to overcome and undermine the negative stereotypes some associate with it

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