

Intelligent little house on the prairie

Alan Lipman evaluates a research centre that satisfies the architect's brief and complements its surroundings

This report follows my earlier comment (*The Sunday Independent*, Culture, May 12) on an office complex designed by East Coast Architects. That highlighted their efforts to derive a specifically southern African architecture from the building's immediate surroundings – the neighbouring urban shacks, shops, schools and the like. Attention now turns to a distinctly rural setting.

The rolling green landscape of the Mpukunyoni district, northern KwaZulu-Natal, is, in Alan Paton's felicitous phrase, "lovely beyond the singing of it". And when, at the tiny village of Somkhele, the sky is its compelling blue, one delights in merely being there. One even bears with stoicism the cloying humidity that periodically pushes in from the nearby Indian Ocean. Here, in this typically rustic setting, the new state-of-the-art Africa Centre for Population Studies and Reproductive Health was recently declared open.

The centre now overlooks local chief Mkhwanazi's tribal court and a smattering of other single-storey structures, each overshadowed – literally and aesthetically – by the sparkling presence on the hillside above. There, encompassed by rich growths of indigenous vegetation, the main building is reflected in a freshly-made dam that drains water from the dense clay soil. From that elevated level, one is wrapped in views that run to the edge of the distant green/blue horizon. The entire area is stunningly beautiful. What, then, of the new additions?

They are, in my view, also com-

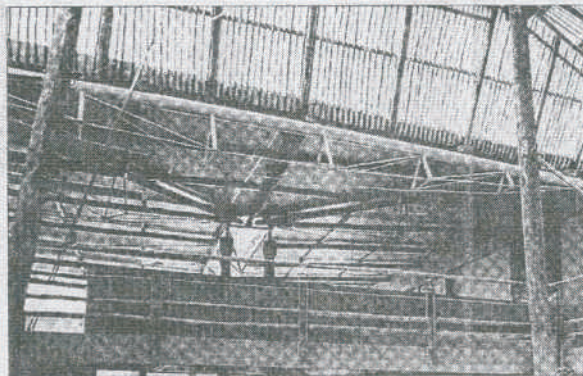
manding. So, I must at once confess to having a small role in their design. Since the final decision to build at Somkhele in mid-1999, I have, as consultant advisor to the institution's director, participated in selected aspects of the architects' work.

They, of course, have borne the responsibility. They conceived the design, prepared the plans, drawings and other contract documents. They supervised the building contract and certified the construction.

There are two sets of buildings on the upland site. They comprise the almost completed initial phase of the anticipated overall project; the central cluster of office and related accommodation plus the outbuildings that contain stores, security rooms and workshops for maintaining the centre's vehicles.

The latter unit is appropriately robust, functionally effective and, in an agreeably direct manner, comely. It does not, however, have the operational and emotional gravity of the former, the building on which attention focuses in this brief comment.

On reading a plan of the main building cluster, one is immediately aware that it consists of four slightly off-square, non-orthogonally related units. All but one of these has a rectangular open courtyard at its cen-



The large interior space of the Africa Centre for Population Studies and Reproductive Health in remote Somkhele, KwaZulu-Natal. The centre overlooks a tribal chief's court

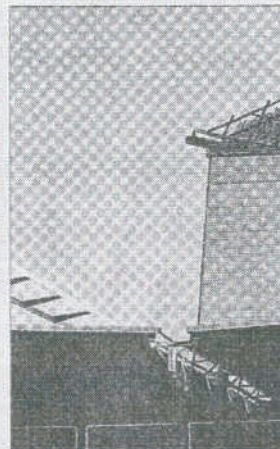
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tre. The framed reinforced concrete, double-storey units of primarily open-plan office space, step northward up the natural incline to take advantage of the district's crisp sunlight, its cool breezes and startling panoramic views.

The outer, undulating reach of greenery is appropriately complemented by the intimate planting of the inner courtyards that, in addi-

tion to offering tough semi-tropical foliage on all sides, can be used for small staff meetings.

The office units – referred to locally as "pods" – are linked by a roughly cross-shaped, also two-storey structure that occupies the appreciably irregular spaces between the pods. It houses shared facilities such as an auditorium, main committee room, staff canteen



internal spatial interplay.

Outside, it is an ever visible signal by day and, at night, a brightly lit beacon.

In their usage throughout the centre – as, for instance, columns, roof-beams, sun-screens, stair, ramp and gallery balustrades – blue-gum trunks and slender saligna saplings give a special interest to this rurally isolated, yet cosmopolitan research complex. Their emphasis certainly reaches further than my personal involvement.

The blue-gum off-cuts and sundry other local materials incorporated in the building epitomise the sharp urban/rural dichotomy which the architects have sought to confront. In some instances – especially in the sweeping, zooming space under the central tower – the smooth/rough, urban/rural tension is electric, quite as riveting as a taut jazz piano riff by our own Abdullah Ibrahim.

Like the technologically intricate social and epidemiological studies conducted in them, the new premises are "western", up-to-date and even avant-garde. They are part of a distinctive urban continuum. In this, they contrast markedly with the rural, languid, supposedly bucolic life about them. The buildings, their concrete-framed construction and

"machined" finishes, their sophisticated electronic equipment, the precise skills which their occupants deploy, exemplify the constantly shifting flux of urban experience, yet they sit in undeniably rustic, sylvan surroundings.

The architects have attempted to juxtapose "smooth" mechanically produced building materials with the "rough" natural gum-poles of the locality. They have underscored rather than by-passed the split inherent in the centre's chosen site; a choice that springs, of course, from the necessary propinquity of the research personnel and the rural population they are studying.

This is consistent with the commitment of the director and his colleagues to community participation. That has been as evident through the months of construction as it is in the landscaping and art/decorative work currently afoot. It ranges from the building workers who were drawn from the locality, to the mural artists, tilers, basketry weavers, carver-sculptors and others who have contributed and are contributing to the project.

Some have honed their new-found skills to the point of being invited to join the centre's full-time staff. Others, the majority, now find themselves positioned to gain employment elsewhere in the Mpukunyoni area or, perhaps, a less stricken district of northern KwaZulu-Natal.

Insofar as the architecture matches this desired goal, it too will have contributed to a viable regional style, a characteristic manner of working and of building.