



Rustic homes that say, 'Come in, we belong here too'

BY ALAN LIPMAN

Crafford & Crafford is a fraternal architectural partnership based in Pretoria but working principally in rural areas. Some years ago, the brothers – then operating in conventional design firms – made a searching examination of what intrigued them most about their vocation.

That led to a joint practice that centres chiefly on vernacular buildings in rustic settings. Increasingly familiar with their subject, they are immersing themselves in indigenous principles and methods of construction. That, Crafford stresses, is a long-term enterprise. It is a journey upon which, he modestly claims, they have barely set foot, an odyssey that constantly alerts them to challenging practical and socio-cultural issues.

The pair are not alone in this. One thinks, for instance, of East Coast Architects in KwaZulu-Natal; of Peter Rich in Gauteng and further north. The Craffords seem, though, to stand out for their commitment to help develop indigenous planning and construction procedures among the people with whom they work.

In this sense, at least, they are immune to the glib charge of endorsing, and thereby entrenching, a colonial – purportedly regressive – means of construction and ways of life.

To assemble traditional, readily accessible building materials need not pre-empt efforts to

incorporate contemporary patterns of living – up-to-date rural production, social relations and cultural practices.

I was introduced to two examples: design drawings on an overnight visit to the QwaQwa Rest Camp in the Malutis, Golden Gate National Park; and drawings together with photographs of distant Blouberg Hiking Camp.

Consider, first, the 13 villages of the rest camp that follow in crescent formation the contour lines northwest of the Basotho Cultural Village: they make up what is termed a living museum, the main complex with its offshoots – an amphitheatre, a parking area and the clustered groups of residential kraals. The Craffords' new work encompasses this in a north-south sweep that opens on to stunning views of the northerly game plains and, westward, on to wind-sculpted sandstone mountains. Most of the villages contain four units apiece: a pair of two-bedded huts, one of which sleeps four, and a partly covered lapa for communal gatherings.

The visitors' rondavels have built-in fixtures such as cupboards, galley kitchenettes and attached bathrooms – containing a snower, wash basin and toilet. They are fronted by roofed stoeps that face on to a tree-shaded courtyard that is enclosed by a tightly tied, head-height sapling fence. Here, out in the sticks, one finds the conveniences of contemporary vacation life within a classic southern

African, distinctly rural ambience.

The building materials – thatch, stone, compacted mud and timber, by and large – are local. Construction techniques are handed down as well as influenced by imported, analogous practices. The products have been erected by locals adept at adapting those processes to their established stock of building competences. The appearance is unmistakably local; traditional but attuned to a recognisably emerging neo-vernacular. It is ineffably suited to the climate and surrounding countryside and its striking aesthetic impact seems effortlessly to meld into the natural backdrop.

We turn now to the Blouberg site, to the smaller, tighter hiking camp that snuggles in that splendid, rocky range. Here can be found much that reverberates with the QwaQwa settlement. Both designs acknowledge time-honoured building materials and methods without excluding recent innovations. Both celebrate past and present built forms – for instance, circular and squared-off huts in sensitive juxtaposition with lapa-like outdoor spaces. Both exhibit the receptive, adaptive construction skills of their makers; each exists in intimate, unforced compatibility with its home environs – from craggy hillsides to doringboom clumps and the characteristically hardy scrubland bush.

Our visit demonstrated that there is no avoiding the singular smells of southern

Africa: the region's birdsong, swiftly darting buck, insect chirps, and the crackling stones of pathways underfoot. One is within, indeed part of, a thoroughly local setting. Mawkish sentiment? Possibly, but none the less tangible for that.

The layout of these modest encampments echoes habitats that criss-cross the continent: from at least Kenya's Rift Valley area to our familiar southern kraals. Their roughly circular precincts cradle similarly shaped, thatch-roofed shelters that open onto central courtyards. In each, the whole is embraced by dense scrub and the sturdy, tied timber-rod fencing that demarcates the compound and its shady trees. Both sites feature immediate rugged mountain or koppie views of haunting sweeps of rolling plain.

Accommodation at the Blouberg camp comprises a furnished guide hut with attached bathroom and toilet; five furnished single and/or two-person units; and the central communal hut with its spacious lapa and sunken fireplace. The visitors' huts have small private yards, lapas to the rear and easy access to separate women's and men's bathrooms – each with an attached outdoor waiting area. The furnished communal rondavel incorporates a kitchen, wash-up and store room that, together, enfold a covered dining space and lounge. The accommodation is spare but not overbearingly Spartan.



A visitors' centre at Qwa Qwa looking on to the Maluti Mountains is inspired by indigenous principles and construction



The Blouberg Hiking Camp snuggling into craggy hillsides opens onto a central courtyard

PHOTOGRAPHS: CARLA CRAFFORD

The construction is as straightforward as it is unexpected. Treated, wall-height gum-poles are set, about a metre apart, in concrete surface beds and then clad with diamond-mesh plastic panels. The cavities thus formed are filled with locally obtained rocks, stones and similar materials. These substantial though unorthodox walls are then plastered on both sides for the inner and outer surfaces to be finished in hardy water-resistant paint, like the similarly constructed internal partition walls.

Conventional trusses and purlins are erected for thatched roofs that have comfortably wide eaves and conspicuous cut-back

portions to mark entrances. Timber doors and windows are set between the vertical supports, and several window openings are covered by canvas fitted with roll-down plastic panels or, in the kitchen, with grass mats that can be raised and lowered.

The overall effect is invitingly protective: home-built, indigenous shelters that, especially on a snow-threatening day in the deep of winter, offer welcoming havens in sun-saturated landscapes of undulating plains and, close by, pink sandstone peaks silhouetted against cerulean skies. Stimulated by their environs, the brothers Crafford and on-site, local