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Vernacular or not? Preliminary thoughts in developing a methodology to understand the imijondolo

The informal dwelling could be considered a cultural universal in its global replication as immediate shelter prompted by modernism and modernisation. Simultaneously, one could argue that such buildings are of vernacular construction, most being assembled of found materials in a manner which satisfies the various definitions of vernacular architecture. Interrogating the interface between the informal dwelling and traditional or vernacular accommodation could assist in disentangling the position of the informal dwelling. Furthermore, this understanding could provide insight into appropriate methods of addressing the informal housing issue.

This article presents preliminary thoughts in which the archetypal Zulu dwelling or *iQhugwane* is used as a control against informal dwellings or *imijondolo* constructed on urban peripheries in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Using spatial anthropology and architectural analysis, comparative linkages between the traditional and the contemporary could aid in positioning the informal dwelling as an architectural vernacular, and suggest a prognosis as to its architectural and cultural sustainability.

1. Introduction

A substantial proportion of the black African population of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, resides in informal dwellings locally known as *imijondolo*. As with their global counterparts, these orthogonal buildings are largely constructed of found or recycled materials costing their builders, who are usually their inhabitants, as little as possible. They are found in city peripheries, within urban areas and on marginalised and left over land. Their inhabitants often dwell as illegal squatters, with their access to land being acquired through informal means; not an ideal situation. Fundamentally, understanding where these structures are situated within their sociocultural contexts may lead to an insight as to the means by which housing delivery in the province may be made more real, rather than the current delivery programme of anonymous boxes constructed through the national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).

There are many reasons why people construct these buildings, with the overriding reality being poverty and the result of the economic pressures of the modern era. They are also, for some, a means to an end, in which the choice to live in such a structure allows the resident to access rent from tenants living in a RDP house allocated to them. Furthermore, although many of these buildings may be constructed and viewed as temporary shelters, the reality for many of their inhabitants is that they are permanent and need to last for many years into the future.

As such spontaneous buildings, existing frameworks of categorisation applied to a formal built environment fall short in providing an ideal space in which to situate these buildings, limiting comprehension and thus restricting the means by which an official method of housing delivery can be considered. Their names, fundamentally regional, refer to the transient and unsettled: while the etymologies in this list are derived from informants from different areas and are by no means comprehensive or lexically correct, Doke, et al. note the Zulu term for the 'shack' as being *indlwana*, literally a 'small house' (Doke, et al. 1999: 432) whereas other such slang terms exist such as *abokufika*, suggested by informants as relating to informal dwellings constructed by newly arrived settlers, and *imikhukhu*, strongly associated with such buildings in established townships. More endemic terms such as *ikhoyi* (Edendale) and *jonda* (Clermont) appear to have emerged. *imijondolo*, however, is widely used by Zulu people and thus, given the methodological approach, will be the word used in the study of such buildings in KwaZulu-Natal. Importantly, the Zulu-English dictionary compiled by the noted linguist Sibusiso Nyembezi defines the *jondolo* as *indlu yesikhashana enqaqinile*, literally an unstable, temporary dwelling. He provides an alternative word as *umkhukhu* (Nyembezi 1992:213). This note

alone alludes to a cultural perception that these structures are temporary and flimsy. Importantly, it is suspected that this temporary nature as described by Nyembezi is a state of liminality, an architectural manifestation of always being on the road to a better place, although one may never reach there. It is, perhaps, a temporary space between the sanctity of the rural areas, and the dream of return, or a move to the more affluent suburbs. This interstitial position must be tested, in order to understand where these buildings are cognitively positioned. In order to do this, a more structured framework, albeit imported, may provide a means by which this can happen, followed by the official parameters by which buildings may be deemed to be vernacular, and thus reflective of a group's world view and cultural practice.

For buildings constructed in similarly marginal circumstances, Ronald Lewcock describes colonial architectures in the Cape as being restrained by circumstance: lack of expertise on the part of the settlers, little understanding of environment, and problems with labour created these challenges so that "The peculiar character of early 19th Century colonial architecture lay not alone in interacting building traditions and styles, but in the disparity between intention and realization." The details of fashion become transformed into something simpler and restrained styles as, he notes, "ennobling the architecture where it might have been debased" (Lewcock 1963:420).

Thus, for the colonial settlers, the intentions of production of buildings to mimic the built fabric of one's origins were, of necessity, pared down to the bare essentials: as immigrants into a city landscape, surely much the same cognitive framework would apply for rural migrants in KwaZulu-Natal, in which patterns of their former existence are replicated in their new environments?

However, while Lewcock's description is appropriate, it does not explain the changing architectures sufficiently in order to analyse the *imijondolo* in a manner that informs social relations or identity. Margot Winer fleshed out this framework to address such connections in her examination of settler architectures on the Cape Eastern 'frontier' (Winer in Bender and Winer 2001:262). In searching for indications of identity formation, Winer suggests that divisions in the settler domestic architecture can illustrate the extant social condition through examining choice of material in which wealth is displayed: for instance, the use of imported materials, and the meaningless adoption and adaptation of the by then outdated Georgian house suggests a distinct need to create social divisions based on wealth, which she interpreted as a desire to create a settler identity and an innate Englishness on the remote frontier (Winer in Bender and Winer 2001:263). In addition, she suggests that settlers used buildings to create a voice for themselves as perceived marginalised people, asserting their identity as opposed

to the indigenous inhabitants and the Boers, whereby they used the material culture to 'talk down' to local people and create social distance. Her categories include an immediate response to constructing shelter or the 'Architecture of coping' such as the vernacular *hardbies* dwellings, 'Architecture of identity', Architecture of affluence' and 'Architecture of fear' – in this case referring to the stockaded homesteads in the mid-19th Century. The informal dwelling fits perhaps, into the first category: yet, efforts to recognise and understand these structures have problematic origins in the definition. They do not fit into the rigour of those buildings described by formal construction standards, nor are they traditional in that they are handed down with learned material cultures, as was the *hardbieshuis*. They are usually spontaneous, taking a short period of time to construct, yet, as noted, may act as shelter for a long period of time thereafter. Furthermore, unlike structures such as the *hardbieshuis,* gentrification is limited by uncertain tenure, economy, security and circumstance; as such they remain as transient structures subject to the potential effects of climate, social pressure and governmental intervention. If these structures exist on a liminal thread connecting them in some manner to their rural counterparts based on a rural/ urban migration process and conveying the memories of form and space and its use, then surely an assessment of their level of vernacular response can act as a marker in understanding the making of space in the informal dwelling.

In order to address the problem of assessing these buildings as examples of the vernacular or otherwise, it is important to start with the 'known' and test the qualities of the building type against this established standard. Definitions of vernacular vary: for the purpose of this paper, it is perhaps most appropriate to employ the definitions embedded in the *Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage* as ratified by the ICOMOS 12th General Assembly, in Mexico, October 1999. These briefly read, "Vernacular building is the traditional and natural way by which communities house themselves. It is a continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints." Notably, this charter entrenches a strong focus on the aesthetic, employing subjective terms describing pleasure, such as 'attractive' and 'beauty' and relies on an outwardly imposed sense of nostalgia and romanticisation of poverty. *imijondolo*, and their global counterparts rarely fit into this category. In addition, one should not lose sight of Paul Oliver's contribution in this regard, in which he notes that "Vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources they are customarily owner or community built utilising traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them*" (Oliver 1997: preface).

With the 'control' of traditional Zulu buildings from a gendered, metaphysical and task perspective, as described in myriad ethnographies and other such studies as sociocultural context, this paper intends to examine the informal dwelling and establish points of interrogation which can aid in forming a structure for further study. These will be used to present the results of preliminary thoughts regarding the 'experiment' of the *imijondolo* in order to develop a methodology to establish at which point this could be considered a form of vernacular architecture or, perhaps, be more appropriately relegated to a category of its own under 'buildings of survival', given a possible extension to the matrix submitted by Lewcock (1963) and Winer (in Bender and Winer 2001:262). This process will then inform how further information needs to be gathered and provide the framework for a more structured research project to be undertaken.

The next section will discuss the 'traditional' spatial approach of the Zulu homestead as presented in myriad ethnographies, in order to establish the points of interrogation in the future study.

2. The spatial anthropology of the Zulu homestead

The Zulu comprise a significant assimilation of Southern Nguni clans who histo-ricaly live on the littoral of the east coast of southern Africa, largely in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. They are polygamous cattle-keepers, living in scattered, often extensive circular homesteads or *imizi,* consisting of a number of circular dwellings (*iqhugwane* or *rondawel*) with a central cattle byre known as *isibaya.* In traditional Zulu society, land is allocated to a family group by the king, on the understanding of continued good custodianship. This allows for the establishment of a homestead, as well as the grazing of stock. Importantly, due to the requirements of a largely pastoral way of life, homesteads do not characteristically form part of a village; they are constructed around a family lineage and reflect the aims, aspirations and wealth of the family they house. This is the first point of interrogation: a rigorously determined ordering of private, family space with limited access for outsiders.
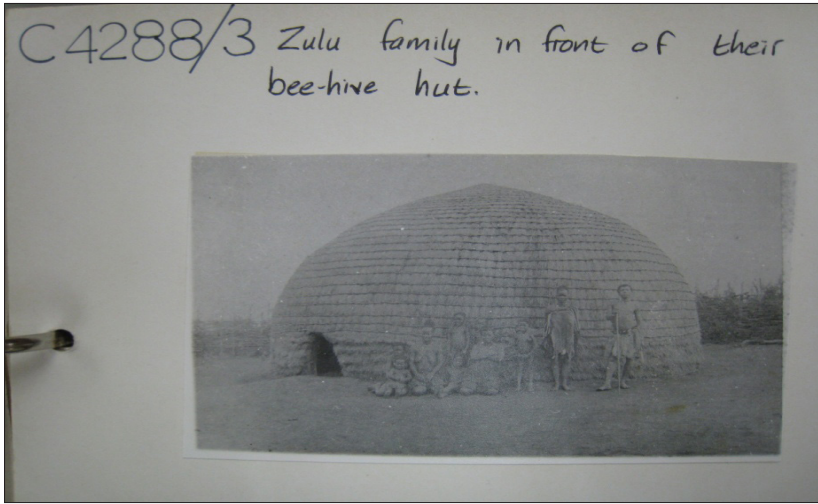
Figure 1: Beehive dwelling early 20th century (C4288/3 KwaZulu – Natal Provincial Archives Repository)

Indeed, this central position of the cattle in the homestead reflects the pivotal position of cattle in the Zulus' cognitive, social and economic culture, leading to the suggestion that this could be referred to as the 'Central Cattle Pattern'; this concept is the core of discussion in works by Huffman (1982, 2001) Evers (1984), among others. At the same time, it is important to note the scepticism of authors such as Martin Hall, who suggest that this concept of concentric circularity reinforces, to some degree, the construction of ethnographic stereotypes (Hall 1984). However, given that this paper works with the individual units within the homestead and not the larger whole, and that Hall's argument is located in the archaeological past, generic principles of general, ideal practice in the last century at least are the reference. Thus, homesteads are ideally circular, hierarchical and gendered, as are the separate dwelling units themselves. This is important in the scrutiny of the *imijondolo* as this distinct information is fundamental to the understanding and perception of space and place, and the present and the absent. The circularity of the homesteads and the buildings is a vital continuance, and will be dealt with more carefully in the next section.

In traditional, historical society, for each dwelling unit (domical grass *iqhugwane* or conical thatched *rondawel*) there is a strictly adhered to formula of spatial arrangement in which, generally, women occupy the area to the left of the low entrance, and men the area to the right. This general split can be further

fragmented into more specific seating arrangements, allowing for recognition of position in society and age (Argyle & Buthelezi 1992:3). This is the second point of interrogation: the remnant use of space or placing of goods associated with gender and seniority which may be transferred from the traditional homestead to the *imijondolo* in the cities.

There are three points of interrogation involving the spiritual world: the entrance arch or *ikhothamo* and its crown are places in which the ancestors are perceived to reside (Berglund 1989:104). This liminal space is an important transition between inside and outside, and the 'shades' are significant components of its purpose, mitigating entry and exit. *Muthi* or traditional medicine is buried in the floor at the entrance and for this reason one should not pause when entering or exiting (Krige 1962 [1936]: 47). The *ikhotamo*, the thatched component forming the crown of the arch, will be removed on the death of the inhabitant of the building and buried with them, indicating to the 'shades' that they must follow their ward into death (Berglund 1989:108). This space is often embellished with a variety of different medicine containers, as well as other ritual objects, or the horns of animals that have undergone ritual slaughter will also be found in this space. This is the third point of interrogation – the ceremonial importance of entrance and any remnant ritual that valorises the ancestors associated with it.

WOMEN   MEN

A *umnumzane* (head of homestead)
B *amadoda* (other men of the *umuzi*)
C *izihambeli* (male visitors)
D *inkosikazi yomuzi* (principal woman of the *umuzi*
E *umakoti* (recently married wife)
F other women of the umuzi
G women visitors

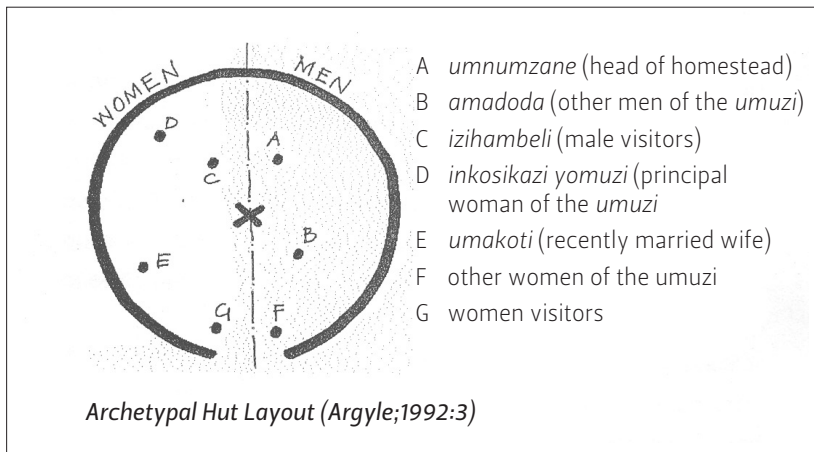*Archetypal Hut Layout (Argyle;1992:3)*

Figure 2: Archetypal dwelling unit layout (after Argyle 1992:3)

In the centre of the circular space is a stone hearth known as *iziko*. This is a vital part of the house, as besides the quotidian practises of cooking and heating, it is also a place with which the ancestors are associated. Food remaining in

the pots has to be left for the ancestors, so that they can taste it. In addition, one cannot step over the hearth due to its association with the ancestors. An important element of this construct is the hearth stone – a raised stone in the group positioned adjacent to the main post known as the *umlindaziko* (hearth watcher). This is the stone on which the ancestors sit in order to watch over the hearth, and should the dwelling have to be moved, extensive negotiations with the ancestors must take place to allow this (Berglund 1989:103). This is the fourth point of interrogation – the remnant material evidence of a central, valued space which may have connotations with an ancestral past.

Importantly at the rear of the building, in the darkened gloom, is the space reserved for venerating the ancestors, and for them to visit the inhabitants of the homestead. This area, the *umsamo*, is a vital connection between the afterlife and the present, and is important in locating the inhabitants within the greater world.

The *umsamo* is in the dark and in the cool. This darkness and coolness is significant: Axel Berglund supplements earlier fieldwork, quoting an informant who noted that "the main difference between Christian homes which often are rectangular and pagan huts is the fact that the 'proper' Zulu hut has no window. But school people have windows. They put windows into walls because they do not know how to honour the shades any more, simply letting the light come in" (Berglund 1989:102). The *umsamo,* the place of the ancestors, of the 'shades' is an important space, for sole use by the family. Items of value are also kept here, particularly the ritual spear and *isipuku*, a ceremonial cloak worn during rituals. Due to their connotation with ancestral ritual, such items are considered to be otherworldly goods – a vital part of the ancestral family and not part of the material possessions of the living. Berglund quotes an informant saying "The ritual spear and *isisphuku* are stored in *umsamo* of *indlunkulu*, because '..that is the main place where they live. These things too are theirs. They do not belong to a man. They belong to *umuzi* (homestead, of which the shades are family members)"' (Berglund 1989: 103).

The *umsamo* is also used to place more day-to-day offerings. Items such as meat, beer and snuff are often left for the ancestors to sample, making this space a vital connection between the lives of the residents and memories of their forefathers: an active space for such memory to exist.

Berglund suggests that the location of valuables in the *umsamo* reassures the ancestors that they are cherished, as well as the positioning of items in space. It allows for transparency between the dead and the living allowing the ancestors to keep a watchful eye on the inhabitants of the homestead (Berglund 1989:102). Significantly for this study, in contemporary times this space may not be actively used to valorise the ancestors. However, it remains as a space in which items

of value are placed, perpetuating the idea of a valued space through time. This is the fifth point of interrogation: testing the degree of contiguity and validity of a prominent sacred space within the home, congruent with the *umsamo* and diagnosed, perhaps, as a place in which valuables in the home are kept.

Construction of the dwelling is also gendered: men cut the withies with which to make the bent basket-like structure, and build the form of the dwelling. Women are responsible for cutting the thatch, and fixing it to the framework. In addition, they are obliged to '*sinda*' the floors, made of termite mound, oxblood and earth, on a regular basis in order to maintain their condition. This is the sixth point of interrogation – the means by which the *imijondolo* is constructed and the social arrangements that allow it to occur.

These two factors, the spatial allocation deeply embedded in ancient tradition, and the task relations of assembling the building, are important threads in the construction of a 'proper' Zulu dwelling. This is more so, given the fact that these space and task allocations are common factors in both the *iqhugwane* and the more commonly built *rondawel*. Importantly, in discussing both the beehive *iqhugwane* and the cone-on-cylinder *rondawel*, it is vital to note that these buildings are both circular in form, situated ideally within a circular homestead. Given the prominence of the circle in the traditional homestead form as well as the individual building unit, the relevance of form, and its transference or not, is an important part of the discussion. Furthermore, if the accepted definitions of vernacular architecture, including the 'traditional and natural', as well as the stress on change and adaptation, are employed in order to evaluate the *imijondolo,* then the underlying metaphysical principles of the building, which are enduring, and their transfer, surely become a baseline point of assessment. This reinforces further discussion on the intangible qualities of the more concrete elements of these buildings such as form and material, in order to situate the discussion from a number of perspectives.

3. The relevance of form

The fact that few informal houses are circular in shape is an important point of departure in the discussion of form, in this case working back from the 'experiment' of the *imiJondolo* to the 'control', that of the 'traditional' Zulu *iqhugwane*. Indeed, Mhlaba, associates its symbolism as anthropomorphic in origin, following the example of the Vitruvian Man (Mhlaba 2009:123) indicating possible associations of the circular form with a greater metaphysical realm. For formally constructed vernacular dwellings this shift from what, in KwaZulu-Natal, appears to be a firmly established and consistent circular dwelling form to an orthogonal plan shape, particularly in its elevational and massing resolutions, has

been the core subject of papers by Frescura (1989), Harber (2001) and Mhlaba (2009). A dramatic shift to the orthogonal has only occurred in recent times, evidenced by historical aerial photographs. This strong adherence to traditional form and the reticence to move towards the orthogonal for whatever reason has to be examined in order to contextualise the wholesale construction of square buildings in the informal settlement, compared with the mixture of forms and shapes in rural homesteads.

While it is acknowledged that traditional structures were circular, the potential to move towards the construction of square structures began in the middle of the 19th Century. This was prompted in part by the imposition of a hut tax on the Zulu by the officials of the then Colony of Natal. While the general intention was that it was to pay for roads, rail and other infrastructure in the new colony, as well as contributing to the administration of Native Affairs, it also had more subversive ends. Hut tax was aimed at black people living in traditional fashion under chiefs who did not, in the view of the colonial government, contribute to the colonial fiscus, whereas Christian converts (*Amakholwa)* living on mission stations were considered to actively contribute to the colonial economy. These *Amakholwa* resided in 'European' fashion in orthogonal buildings while those living in a tribal system usually occupied circular structures. The plan form thus became the grounds for taxation; those in circular buildings paid, and those in orthogonal buildings were exempt. However, for some this criterion hit particularly hard since traditionally each wife in a polygamous homestead had her own sleeping and cooking huts, each of which was taxed. Nerissa Ramdhani infers that as tax was imposed on literally each hut in a homestead, it was considered a mechanism to discourage polygamy (Ramdhani 1986:15). Officially for the government of the time, fewer wives meant fewer huts and less debt, enforcing a process of cultural change conforming to a desirable 'Christian' monogamy.

Despite the incentive of lessened taxation for those living in orthogonal dwellings, few traditional Zulus began to build square buildings in rural areas until relatively recently. As noted earlier, for many decades, aerial photographs show traditional buildings to be situated in a circular format. This may have been due to the enduring nature of tradition itself, or indeed, it is suggested, a subversive resistance to the payment of hut tax and the subsequent incorporation into a modern post-industrial economy.

Lack of exposure to orthogonal buildings is also not a factor: the Zulu King Cetswayo (1826-1884) had a square building constructed at his Ondini III Homestead; thus, to some degree, the king sanctioned the building form. Furthermore, the proximity of mission stations throughout Natal and Zululand

from the middle of the 19th Century would mean that people were familiar with square buildings and their necessary technologies, and perhaps patronised the spaces and participated in their ritual. Georgetown, Edendale, is a case in point, in which a wholly constructed Wesleyan *Amakholwa* Mission Village was operating by the mid-1850s, discussed as the focus of Sheila Meintjes's dissertation on Edendale (1988) as well as in the seminal work by Etherington (1978:112). Despite this potential for cross pollination, the expected acculturation of building form did not occur.

This retention of form appears to be more than an academic discussion: in areas in which vernacular buildings are still considered sacrosanct from a traditional point of view, square buildings themselves often represent a liminal position between traditional and 'Western' society: women will live in circular structures, while bachelors will inhabit orthogonal structures at the entrance to the homestead (Whelan 2001:19), symbolic perhaps, of their potential to move to the cities and find employment. Fieldwork in Msinga in 2001 revealed that structures that housed migrant labourers, usually working in Johannesburg, were often square, while their wives continued to inhabit traditional structures. This format is also more convenient in accommodating the *accoutrements* of a Westernised lifestyle, such as beds, which are often a large part of this acculturation process (Whelan 2001:21).

The retention of the form, or not, given its associations perhaps with the city and urbanism, are the next point of interrogation. While the concept of 'correct' form has reference, it is also important to include discussions on the material aspects of the building. The next section discusses this in brief, allowing for an understanding as to the potential for flexibility of materials in the construction of the built form.

4. The material considerations of the building

Until recently, thatch was perhaps the singular most important feature of the traditionally constructed Zulu building, whether *iqhugwane* or *rondawel*. Fieldwork in the conservative rural area of Msinga in 2001 found that a distinction was made between thatch and the more commercially available corrugated iron or clay tiles. The thermal qualities of thatch were well known, but for many elderly rural people perception was more important: a real house is not brick and tile as in the cities, but thatched and, importantly, without windows. In the traditional *iqhugwane*, the thatch was considered such an important quality that according to Knüffel (1973:13-14), as much as 11 different types of grass with variant qualities were required to thatch a properly constructed beehive building. Other fieldwork

carried out by the author in the kwaNyuswa area in 2001 led to the realisation that, for this community, ancestors could identify their house by means of its thatched roof, and that any form of ancestral dwelling could not be roofed in sheet metal, for example. However, access to thatch has become, for many communities, problematic. Industrialised farming, lack of land management and increasingly restricted access to cutting thatch, means that nowadays proper roofing thatch has become difficult for many communities to source, and as a result it has become very expensive. Thus many people today resort to corrugated roof sheeting, or flattened-out oil drums to roof their homes.

At the same time, in areas in which thatching grass is scarce, form remains important. Few people still have the resources to construct grass beehive dwellings, and resort rather to constructing *rondawel* cone-on-cylinder buildings which require less grass, if any at all. Today, those few homesteads still pursuing a traditional and rural way of life will restrict fully thatched buildings to those most important: the *indlunkulu*, in which the ancestors are resident. However, while it is generally vital for the ancestors to occupy a thatched building, the author has experienced cases in which modern materials are deployed on a withie-constructed framed building firmly subscribing to the traditional spatial layouts. Ironically, the example in Figures 3 and 4 below photographed near the industrial town of Richards Bay around 1998, is bathed in an ethereal religious light, a quality lent to it by the employment of white roofing plastic membrane as the cover on the withies.

The importance of this example is that despite living on the periphery of the city, and being part of a waged population, the builder of this house was able to transfer the important value systems of his origins to his new place of residence.

Figure 3: Ancestral building, Richards Bay ca 1998 (Photo: Debbie Whelan)

Figure 4: Ancestral building, Richards Bay ca 1998, interior (Photo: Debbie Whelan)

Of specific interest is that the material aspect of the traditional building is, perhaps, less important than its form and space. Although regional sentiments abound as in the KwaNyuswa and Msinga examples, the agility of material transformation in the example above allows for an understanding as to how, in informal settlements, choice of material can be largely determined by the found, and has lessened effect on the interpretation of the building as authentic, or affects its status as home. Thus, the material aspect of the building will not act as a formal point of interrogation, but merely as an aspect of the discussion.

The emphasis on the circular plan, the general importance of material such as thatch, the strongly defined spatial divisions, the gendered space and tasks, and the importance of the *umsamo* as an altar of worship in a stable and prosperous society, all mark the traditional Zulu dwelling as constrained by a series of material cultural norms that guide their construction and determine their use. It is now important to engage briefly with the generalities of the constitution of informal settlements in KwaZulu-Natal in order to be able to frame the means by which the main study will be designed.

5. The informal settlements

From fieldwork conducted from time to time over the last two decades, the informal settlements that exist around the urban areas in KwaZulu-Natal, as with most informal settlements around the world, are characterised by cramped simple shacks of largely found materials, recycled or otherwise. They are typically orthogonal, mono-pitch, and may have a window. The logic of layout is spontaneous, and unofficially generated. Planning is organic and based on socially arranged layouts rather than any input from authority. The paths and spaces between buildings are negotiated, operated and protected by the dwellers. General settlement principles such as access to water are beginning to be supplanted by the modernist norms of access to transport or mobile phone signal, and the overriding generator of much of these settlements is access to work within a capitalist society.

Land tenure in informal settlements in KwaZulu-Natal is achieved through different channels from the traditional means. The sites are usually left over pieces of ground. The tenure is insecure, dependent on goodwill and political alignment and is often the ambit of slumlords. Thus, perhaps understandably, there are few efforts made to upgrade these houses; in principle, people are absent at work and cannot protect their spaces or investments, and at the same time it would be unseemly to gentrify one's house as opposed to those of one's neighbours. This lack of input automatically reinforces the position of the informal house as a 'temporary' dwelling, in which the interests vested in the values of hearth and home are noticeably absent.

Importantly, there is also no common derivative for the dwellers of the informal settlement. While traditional societies in rural areas will have strongly defined boundaries between clan and tribal groups determined largely by the physical landscape, as well as a mutually comprehended sociocultural framework of operation, informants describe people living in informal settlements as a general agglomeration of vastly disparate people who are not socially coherent. Some may have come directly from rural areas to seek work in the city. Others choose to live in an informal house as it is closer to their place of work: at Jika Joe settlement on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, in the central KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, some residents are known to have a formally constructed, government allocated 'RDP' house on the other side of the city, yet they build themselves an informal dwelling at Jika Joe as it is closer to their place of work. This is highly beneficial as they often let out their formal house, in which they are not living, to tenants. Living in an informal dwelling is also an opportunity: from time to time officialdom will attempt to address the issue of housing and such dwellers names are added to housing lists for allocation of new dwellings. In this manner, a person living in an informal dwelling can build up a rental property portfolio, of free government-allocated housing.

While the assumption of direct movement from rural area and a traditional way of life to informal dwellings on the periphery of cities may be an ideal framework in which to couch such research into vernacular architecture, the myriad circumstances of residence of people living in such accommodation must be taken into account when designing the parameters of the study. People movement into, around and within the city has a profound impact on the types of accommodation that are constructed, and create greater distances between themselves and their origins in traditionally constructed societies.

This means that the methodology of further intense research has to include this randomness as an underlying factor, since assumptions as to the origin of residents in informal settlements are not one-dimensional. This in turn informs choice of sample size, questions posed, and an eclectic approach. The building specific is the focus of this study, rather than the generalities of the structure of the informal settlement.

6. The *Umjondolo* as a structure

It has been stressed that the traditionally constructed buildings of the Zulu, the grass beehive dome or *iqhugwane* and the cone-on-cylinder rondawel, are both circular in form in addition to being components of a traditional homestead layout that is also firmly circular in shape. This format is at odds with the general shape of buildings within informally generated settlements. Admittedly, circular

buildings do exist within these settlements, but as a rule *imijondolo* tend to be orthogonally constructed.

Lack of space within these layouts could, to some extent, be a generator of the squared-off shapes. However as mentioned earlier, it is suspected that the form is of infinitely greater symbolic value, in that it firmly represents the move to urban areas, and residence in the liminal space between Westernised society and the roots of traditional origins, as in the square buildings found in rural areas being symbolic of the transition between urban and rural societies.

Figure 5: Informal dwelling, Happy Valley near Pietermaritzburg (Photo: Author 2014)

Preliminary fieldwork shows that the move to the city heralds a rejection of the fundamental planning systems of the traditionally constructed buildings. The informal dwelling in KwaZulu-Natal is not generally characterised by the provision of spaces of worship, as in the *umsamo*, or a rigorously applied gendered space or construction protocol. Indeed, informants look alarmed at the thought that these elements of traditional buildings would be retained in the construction of the informal dwelling. When asked how they speak with the ancestors, the reply generally is that they 'go home'; they return to the rural areas in which the social and architectural landscape is appropriate for carrying out such ritual. They note that it is impossible to speak with the ancestors in an environment that is cramped and noisy. Furthermore, the situation of many people living in the informal dwellings does not form part of a correctly constituted family unit, and the absence of such limits the manner in which gendered space or gendered task remains relevant. Informants say of the *imijondolo* that 'this is not a good place' and for many the connection between the rural areas and traditional ways

of life remains well rooted in their contemporary lives in town. The *imijondolo* is generally a building of necessity, and not one of which any single informant is inordinately proud.

The informal settlement being 'not a good place' is thus not appropriate for the practise of direct religious ceremony. Besides the general noise factor as described by informants, a s*angoma* (traditional healer) who was consulted said that there can never be an *umsamo* in an informal dwelling, as it has no thatch, and the ancestors recognise the thatch, corroborated in fieldwork by the author, as noted earlier. Thus, for a building to be a real home space, the access to the *umsamo* and its direct connections with the metaphysical are paramount, and this cannot be achieved in a crowded and noisy environment constructed, to large degree, of inappropriate materials.

These thoughts and the results of informal questions are all fundamental building blocks in working through the material of the investigation. These are to be borne in mind when carrying out the fieldwork and establishing the importance of the different items that comprise the tests.

7. The test

As discussed, the test is to establish the validity of the *imiJondolo* as a vernacular building or not, testing the remnant cultural practice embedded in its construction and use. This information will then allow for the positioning on a matrix comprised of elements of economy, perception and status. This can then aid in working out a means by which housing delivery in the province can be supported.

The intention is to select a small informal settlement with a long history of occupation. Jika Joe, as mentioned earlier, and Happy Valley, both in Pietermaritzburg, are good examples for study. Both attract people from the township areas, as well as discrete and specific rural areas, making them a place in which a mutually agreed manner of operations within traditional frameworks has been fragmented. Then the study will commence, through the gatekeeper of the local councillor and assistance from NGOs such as the Built Environment Support Group. The buildings will be measured by Zulu-speaking students from the Durban University of Technology and the interviews carried out by the same group, items and evidence of cultural practice being mapped onto the two dimensional plans.

The potential for remnant practice in the *imijondolo* exists: Dumisani Mhlaba shows that for rural settlers the essential functions of the house remain, although the form may change. Citing an example of a Christian family homestead at Mvenyane, near Cedarville, Mhlaba notes that the layout of the building

was congruent with its function – the male side of the house is respected for official functions and worship to the Christian God, whereas kitchens and female-associated spaces are located to the left. Ancillary buildings also had their place. As he says, "The general layout of the entire house maintains the traditional hierarchy of primary zones A, B and C i.e. *insimu* (crop field), *izala, igceke* respectively." (Mhlaba 2009:30) This is corroborated by Argyle & Buthelezi (Argyle & Buthelezi 1992:16).

To recap, the following points of interrogation will act as the framework for the study.

- a. the ordering of private, family space around the house;

- b. the remnant use of space or placing of goods associated with gender and seniority that may be transferred from the traditional homestead to the *imijondolo* in the cities;

- c. the ceremonial importance of entrance and any remnant ritual that valorises the ancestors associated with it;

- d. the remnant material evidence of a central, valued space that may have connotations with an ancestral past;

- e. the degree of contiguity and validity of a prominent sacred space within the home, congruent with the *umsamo* and diagnosed, perhaps, as a place in which valuables in the home are kept;

- f. the means by which the *imijondolo* is constructed and the social arrangements that allow it to occur;

- g. form and its meaning; and

- h. materials and their meaning.

The intention of the study is that a greater understanding is reached as to where these buildings are positioned, for their inhabitants, using the framework as suggested by Lewcock (1963:420) and Winer (Winer in Bender and Winer 2001:262). This may be expanded accordingly, in the light of a different category being identified. This then can aid in providing a means by which a more effective approach towards housing delivery can be achieved in the province. In addition, being able to assess these structures within a broader international understanding may assist in sensitising authorities in their approach: ultimately, applying the 'General Rules' of the ICOMOS *Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage* can further aid in assessing the level to which informal houses in the KwaZulu-Natal context can be considered as vernacular, or not.

Preliminary thoughts in this regard are: as a manner of building shared by the community, the *imijondolo* can be classed as vernacular, given that it is a shared housing type derived through common need and constructed among a community of peri-urban dwellers. Although these buildings have little localised response to climate, the materials will typically be wattle and daub, which has local vernacular origins. One will never find a thatched roof – rather the roofs are of sheet metal or other recycled material. Either way it is a material sourced from their environment to suit their budget and their immediate needs. The buildings do display a coherence of style, form and appearance, among themselves, although they differ vastly from their circular counterparts. One finds that the materials employed in the form of wattle and daub fulfil a requirement of traditional expertise in design and construction which is transmitted informally. These buildings are thoroughly functional, economically driven and respond to the social constraints of access. Furthermore, they also display an effective although diluted application of traditional construction systems and crafts, where necessary. However, this needs to be tested, and can only be conclusively assessed once remnants of the cultural lives are found to be elements of these buildings, or not.

8. Conclusion

Much of the foregoing discussion has been regarding the intangible similarities, or the lack thereof, between the traditional and the informal dwelling or *imijondolo*. It is clear that evidence at this point has little to support the *imijondolo* as perpetuating longstanding metaphysical traditions involving religion and gendered space and task, and they certainly have little resonance in terms of application of form or similar cogent approach. They are deliberately constructed in the format of the 'other'; not of the origins but of the city, of modernity and importantly, with an intention of invisibility. There is little intention that they replace the integrity of the 'proper' homesteads in rural areas. They are apologetic structures at a point on a journey that is physical, emotional and spiritual.

From a physical point of view, as self-built buildings that house people to accommodate immediate lifestyles and to meet specific needs, these transitory structures largely fulfil the requirements of the common definitions of the vernacular, although they fall short in criteria dealing with environmental response, which, itself, is not always achieved in its entirety in many vernacular buildings. However, it is clear from the above that this aspect has to be investigated more fully, with more clearly defined guidelines in order to fully understand the social and psychological complexity of these buildings, as well as their position in the architectural landscape.

Importantly, the *imijondolo* are material cultural artefacts of people at a point and space in time. They could be considered architectural manifestations of liminality, in which people live between ways of life and economies, and at the same time are, perhaps, bridges to an unknown new and different life. Few people will admit that the informal dwelling is their permanent home, as they will always be on the way to somewhere else. They will not consider themselves as in a liminal space, but rather waiting, usually for an external actor as impetus to move on and up. This is reinforced by the return to the rural areas where possible in order to carry out the important things in life, such as ritual and event. Importantly, Mhlaba identifies what he terms 'worship' rooms as separate structures forming part of suburban households, constructed in the form of a rondawel as opposed to the orthogonal, formally constructed suburban house (Mhlaba 2009:123). This element is vital in understanding the need for incorporated religious space, in traditional form, as an extension of a suburban homestead; the end of the journey, and not located in a transitional part of the journey. Why then, is this aspect absent in the informal settlement, and what does this say about the informal settlement?

Whatever the results of such research will be, the definition of these buildings is not merely an academic exercise in the narrow field of vernacular architecture. Understanding where these buildings come from, that they are situated in instability rather than stability, and comprehending their liminal status as transitory accommodation 'on the way to somewhere else' may go a long way towards contributing to the discourse regarding appropriate housing on the periphery of urban areas, and explain the issues currently confronted by municipalities in attempting to alleviate the social, economic, sanitary and physical problems in the provision of basic shelter in developing countries. Thus the input of aspects of the vernacular in design of such spaces can become an active component in accommodating urban poor in a secure and meaningful manner.

In closing, Fritz Morgenthaler discussed, at length, the schism between the experienced coherence between shelter and symbol noting that the

> Disintegration in the organic entity occurs when the circumstances of life make the hitherto integrated meaning of an object lose its significance. It is therefore essential that the deviations from the traditional cultural-immanent symbol remain within the limits of integrative capacity. It is not the deviation as such that would represent disturbances of cultural equilibrium. The failure to maintain the median level constant (around which the progressive and conservative swings take place) or a widening of the margin for the swings would bring about an upset of the culture (Morgenthaler in Oliver 1977;148).

Hence, while the expected may be a direct and uninterrupted transition between the past, present and future, the reality of the results of the study may be something completely different.

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