Stanley Saitowitz's *Transvaal House*

by

Michael Benedikt
Meadows Professor of Architecture
The University of Texas at Austin.

I

This we know: If we drew a line representing the history of the universe from the big bang 'til today, say, 100 feet long, then the first inch would represent the time it took to establish all the subatomic particles, their interactions, and all the laws of physics obtaining today. Presumably *ex nihilo*, now there was mass, energy and gravity, space, motion, and physical law.

On this same 100-foot scale, the creation of the earth occurs in the last inch of our thought-experimental line, or 4,600 million years ago. Now there is a horizon and a sky; there is wet and dry, sound and silence, night and day.

Let us zoom in on that inch of "earth time" until that final inch looks like 100 feet again. The first living organisms appear about halfway, and the first mammals in the last 5 feet, some 225 million years ago. Now there is eating and growing and reproducing on dry land; there are eyes that see landscape, ears that hear in air; there is walking, flying, sleeping, eating, limbs and nostrils and stomachs, alarms and peace, lust and loss and motherhood.

In the last inch of our twice-magnified time line, precursors to modern man evolve, some 4 million years ago. Now there were families, plans, and hunting parties; there were tools and words, camps and settlements; there was war, revenge, self-consciousness, erotic love, thoughts about *why this? how that?* and *to what end?* What end, all This?

Let us zoom in on this last four-million-year-inch until it looks like 100 feet once more. Moses walked on the earth only in the last inch-and-a-half of our new, 100-foot scale. Already there had been thousands of years of irrigation and planting, reaping, herding, and counting, streets and houses, but now there were also fine robes and writing tablets, boats, empires, jewelry and spices.

In the last eighth of an inch of this thrice-magnified scale: printing and looms, fire-breathing machines of all kinds, (all but) universal literacy, the end of slavery, electricity, cars, highway systems, air travel, telephones, television, movies, computers, the internet...and here we are—here *you* are, dear reader, hearing your own voice in your head as you read these words.

All of Architecture, which we in the West usually take to begin in earnest some nine thousand years before Christ with the establishment of Jericho, represents no more than one five-hundredth of the time we know man has been on the earth and one millionth of the time mammals have been numerous—a time before which the essential elements of advantage accorded by shelter construction

and site selection were already a part of all living and surviving: temperature control, defensibility, proximity to food sources and fresh water, armor, view and privacy, identity and social activity support, and so on.

Yet the sensibilities that give meaning to architecture are older still. One cannot help but be awed at how much of what we take to be specifically modern in human feelings and problems emerge with general form intact from this unimaginably long history of perception, consciousness, hunger, mobility, sexuality, desire and fear in the world. Paths of pursuit, places of surveillance, concavities of shelter, locations of food; traps, strongholds, graves. These, like drought and flood, are ecological givens common to all living, terrestrial things. Given too, and simultaneously, are the significance of: high places and low places, light places and dark places, near places and distant ones, of inside and outside, cold and warm, soft and hard, easy to traverse and difficult to traverse, fertile and infertile, fresh and foul; of places bustling with others and places devoid of competition or company or one's own kind. The meanings of these places, far from "culturally assigned" or free for the invention, are givens for lions and pigeons no less than people; givens, for all intents and purposes, no less reliable than gravity itself.

The problem for architects? Getting to these "origins" of meaning, understanding them, and using them to give realness and depth to their buildings. Few contemporary architects have set themselves to carrying out this program, and Stanley Saitowitz is one of them.

II

Saitowitz has designed quite a number of buildings now. All those built have been published in the professional architectural press; all have been well received. Here, however, we restrict ourselves to his "House in the Transvaal," sometimes known as the Brebnor House, done very early in his career. The work brought Saitowitz early notice. It also seminal to understanding his later and current work.

The education both Saitowitz and I received at The University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa was remarkable in many ways, not all good. But one way in which it was remarkably good was in the seriousness with which architecture's social mission was equated with its artistic ambition.[1] Perhaps is was proximity to black African culture, so recently urbanized, so rich in living, folkloric wisdom; perhaps it was the tutoring by politically avid young teachers who happened also to be gifted designers such as Roeloff Uitenbogart, Ivan Shlapobersky, Ivor Prinsloo, Stan Field, Hans Hallen, and Julian Beinart. But certainly, for Saitowitz, it was the influence of the inimitable Amancio d'Alpoim ("Pancho") Guedes, a Modernist free spirit then working in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) in nearby Mozambique.

Guedes exerted an almost magical spell over the school in Johannesburg, 400 miles and a country away. There wasn't a year when a delegation of the school's "hot" young designers did not make the pilgrimage to Lourenço Marques. Guedes' work, and Guedes' *love of life* (it is hard to think of a phrase more apt than this) drew deeply from the African native cultures as well as his own Portuguese culture. His buildings were as thoroughly worked out as they were humorous, or rather, good-humored, addressing level after level of the human condition, of site, and circumstance with both seriousness and wit. Although Saitowitz never worked for Guedes, his frequent visits and close rapport were enough to cement a relationship of lifelong respect and friendship between them.[2]

---

[1] Indeed, the School of Architecture shared a building with the Fine Arts Department.

[2] Ultimately, Guedes was to move to South Africa to become dean of the School of Architecture at The University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and would teach for a spell at Berkeley and at UCLA. He now lives and practices in Lisbon.

It is curious, this search for the deep, the archaic, the pan-human. In South Africa it was all around you. Living in a society so clearly built upon the exploitation of native populations made it imperative to think of one's work as an architect as addressing them in some way. The gulf which existed then between upper middle-class white students and the black servants and laborers who surrounded them on all sides, as they surrounded all white society with their strength and sighs and laughter, was a gulf that could only be broached in two ways: with direct, Buberian *I-Thou* interactions when possible, or with plunging oneself intellectually into the search for *common ground*, for the basis of being human on the earth in dignity. Saitowitz's banner for his own architecture—architecture as *Human Geography*—encapsulates this approach: the roots of architecture lie in the negotiated relationship between dwelling, dwelling-construction, and the elements of geography: climate, topography, geology, and natural resources.

Original? Not very. But this is not the point.

Like Glenn Murcutt, an architect often compared to Saitowitz, Saitowitz's deeply emotional appreciation of these things does not come to him—or to us for that matter—via Heidegger or Norberg-Shulz. Saitowitz's frequent invocations of "Man" and "heaven" and "earth" have none of the ponderousness of their academic analyses. They are his own. One has only to remember standing next to a African friend and watching a hundred flamingos circling against a deep blue sky over the estuary of the Umfolozi River in Zululand; one has only to remember striding across the thigh-high grasslands of Highveld with cattle dotting the shadow-flecked hills as far as the eye can see...to lay aside *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* pretty much permanently.

I say that Saitowitz's work—like my own, though I am more the writer—is based on a search for the *realness* of things and for their *depth*. From their realness comes their call to our serious attention; from their depths come a kind of meaningfulness that will last as architecture lasts. Those depths, in turn, come from geography and history, and that history is the history of dwelling before Architectural History. Evolution. Human Geography.

III

"But why bother with all this?" an architect might ask. "If these factors are so Old, then they are built into the very logic of architecture. And if they are built into the 'very logic of architecture,' why should we not just carry on designing and building as we do not thinking about them, which is to say, addressing the issues of the working day while following this style or that, trying to make a living, and let realness and depth take care of themselves as they always did, i.e., through intuition, common sense, and an acceptance of *the way things are*?"

This perspective is tempting. Certainly it is the time-saving. And by and large it works. Let us admit, therefore, that the motivation behind the search for depths down the clichéd "corridors of time" is essentially a *theological* one, a matter of wanting to find and define a "higher purpose" to things : redemption through Architecture. The idea fuels Saitowitz's passion. Not unlike Louis Kahn—and at the same risk of embarrassment—Saitowitz insists on bringing a religious or spiritual dimension to *all* of his work, large and small. Not every client and not every budget can support the task Saitowitz sets for himself and, by example, for us..

The felt imperative to be deep, to seek and show realness and depth in one's work, in one's life, in one's art, is indeed religiously and ethically based. Why? Because if one believes that the beauty, complexity, and truth of the world is hidden, or forgotten, or lies beyond normal ken, then "showing forth" its depth is a triumph, a proof and a reproof, an act of showing God's work and/or of making Him come about. One delves into geography and remote human history as one peers into microscopes

and telescopes, to break out to a place where one might glimpse a whole landscape, stretching into the distance: the Work in the making. Having seen this, one has wisdom. One cannot again look at the commonplace as valueless because now it has a nature, a history, and a role that can be known, all at once. The multiple directions of things and events are felt as currents, and the currents have divine and evolving order.

If this sounds like an appeal for meaningfulness through "universal awareness," it is. As such it is nothing new. Up until and including the Renaissance, many great works of architecture, and especially sacred buildings, world over, attempted to illustrate and materialize the scientific cosmology of their day. In this way they sought to bring the larger Order of Things to consciousness and to guarantee the building (and its builders) an honored place in it. The penchant for *representing the cosmic* remains the chief explanation of the meaning of sacred architecture.[3]

I do not accept this as a valid approach. If one does, then one must ask: what is our modern cosmology? In 1995, in 2002, how *are* we—how are *we*—going to illustrate in bricks and mortar, in domes and squares however rotated and fractured, in windows and floor tiles and roofs and ramps a ten-dimensional, universal, space-time continuum containing superstrings and quasars, the shape and nature of which is under weekly revision in the pages of *Science*, and which is probably not even visualizable? Certainly no zodiac, no mandala, no medieval diagram will do. Neither will any gigantic pile of folds, shards, and cables.

Actually, this is just as well. For depths were *never* shown by making a cosmological diagram out of the shape of a work of architecture. Not then and not now. To believe so, in my opinion, was a strange vanity of the Church and its architects, and of historians of architecture who bought into the system of ideas that said that symbolically *representing* "all reality"—i.e. representing a cosmology—was the way to grasp its meaning most fully. To follow this road today is at best to turn sacred buildings, anyway, into mere emblems of ancient and inactive doctrines.

If harking to sacred geometries is futile then, so too is making meaningful buildings today on the model of surrealist movies or cloud-chamber tracks or from pictures in books about nature or the beauty of fractals. None of these “moves” in architectural form can represent what we now (think we) know of the universe's origin and shape.

How else to convey the depths?

We might look briefly to Stonehenge as an exemplar.

On the rolling hills of Salisbury, Stonehenge stands not as a representation or symbol of the cosmos, but as a structure that participated, registered, and came to life in the light of the cosmos. Stonehenge still "works," and it will continue to work until the stars rearrange themselves or its stones fall down.

Furthermore, Stonehenge's massivity is real and not merely referred to or shown. The labor that went into building it ten thousand years ago hurts our muscles today; our incredulity as to the magnitude of the task and the wisdom of its makers as much part of the modern as the ancient experience.

But as seriously as we take Stonehenge, we need not imagine that its use long ago was always solemnly ritualistic or transfiguringly significant: more often, at certain times of the year when the mists rose, wise men measured and took note; talked quietly, and left. Today, Stonehenge lives on as a cult mystery and tourist destination, appearing in countless, poorly composed Polaroids as a backdrop to smiles and raincoats—occasions for remembering a life, laid out on coffee table. Stonehenge's meaning was full and deep four thousand years ago, and, correctly understood, it still is. It is permeated by the

[3]The writings of William Lethaby on this topic have been quite influential on Saitowitz.

kind of meaning that suffuses all really good buildings and all moments of seeing things in their human, natural and cosmic dimensions simultaneously.

So where are these "cosmic dimensions" in architecture? How do we see them? It would take more space than I have here to indicate the method, but, as Saitowitz's Transvaal House will illustrate, we can say with some certainty that they do *not* lie about, spreadeagled and diagrammed in plans, elevations, graphs, or models of the cosmic order, in "sacred geometries," nor in superadded emblems or texts. No sign and no symbol approaches the fullness of the matter, which is neither signification nor symbolization but the *evident participation* of the building in a vaster context. "Cosmic dimensions" exist amongst, within, and behind every thing and space. They exist everywhere. They are as close to being revealed in a backyard full of chickens as in a church full of rose windows.

So this is why we go so far back in time to look for architecture's origins: because only when the architect brings consciousness of true and tender origins—not just of robust and recent precedents—only when the architect brings consciousness of these to bear upon the experience of his or her work *now* can the building he or she designs bring about the necessary coexistence of stimulation *and* orientation, wonder *and* understanding, in the observer/inhabitant. Only then can the architect create something of both "novelty"—newness—and "inevitability"—historical necessity—to recall the words of G. H. Hardy.[4] Moreover, the architect performs a *mitzvah*, a good deed, a commandment. She shows forth, she bears witness; she reveals Order, as Kahn would say, and brings new levels and manifestations of Order into physical being.

Now: can any of this be achieved by chance, by casual practice, by intuition, or by adherence to time-proven models? Yes. But why should a designer not know what he or she is doing? Certainly the architect's own life is enriched to the extent that he or she is conscious of how and why his/her work is meaningful. But further, on a social plane, leaving meaning to chance and tradition does not always work out. In the practice of architecture there are just too many one-sided pressures related to short-term economics and expediency that blot out almost all finer considerations.

Further, we must agree with Sartre's and Camus' analysis of our times: we have lost our innocence. As members of a modern, technologically advanced culture, we cannot go back to being "natural" or primitive or pure (assuming we ever were); we cannot be totally reliant on ritual, tradition, myth, and ideas of destiny to impart meaning to our works. Attempts to do so are at best inauthentic, at worst destructive. The world changes. We are necessarily cast into the situation of having to be aware of how our decisions are (or are not) moral and aesthetic, this in ever new circumstances and with ever more consequences. We *have* to get better and better, and not just at better at things technological, but at law, art, education, and architecture. We are condemned, in a way, to understanding meaning itself as a phenomenon, just as we are condemned to seeking, to looking "back" and "forward" and "up" and "down" as far as we can in order to locate ourselves in the present and to point ourselves consciously towards a future worth wanting. Adherence to tradition *qua* tradition was never more optional, nor more suspect.

So if Saitowitz had the good fortune of having personal roots so physically close those of Architecture's (for Africa really is the wild Africa of our hearts), let us remember that twenty miles away from the site of the Transvaal House, in leafy suburbs and amongst a jostle of factories and skyscrapers of Johannesburg where he (and I) grew up, Saitowitz also received a painfully self-conscious education in the art and aims of Modernism. It was Saitowitz's good fortune that the problem of what one might

---

[4]G. H. Hardy, *A Mathematicians Apology* (Cambridge, Mass., Cambridge University Press, 1940, 1967, 1981).

call the *compassionate colonial* has become the world's: the preservation and recovery of meaning in an economy which is passing through the stage of the industrialization of labor to the stage of the industrialization of intelligence itself.

IV

Let us look more closely now (at last?) at the Transvaal House.

In obvious ways—and I am referring to the main house rather than the ancillary buildings—it is quite unlike the traditional Ndebele house from which Saitowitz drew so much of his inspiration. Its walls are not earthen and decorated. Its windows are not small. It makes no tight, walled forecourts. It does not sit in a community of similar houses in a grassy valley. It is not constructed in any unquestioned, time-honored way. Indeed, it is almost an antithesis of the Ndebele pattern. Metallic, almost industrial, its substrate of brickwork is left raw and its steel is exposed; its floors are not flat but contoured. Devised by intellect and constructed with considerable Western ingenuity, ambitious in its fight against gravity, the house allies itself to an outcrop of gigantic boulders whose rounded solidity it almost mocks by its paper-like openness and spiny assembly. Only the outer form of the boulders and hills carries over, and then not very closely. Where the Ndebele brought their buildings close together and leveled the courtyard between, Saitowitz put them at some distance from each other, accepts the sloping land, and indeed *inscribes* the contours—themselves a modern surveyor's abstraction--on the earth.

What is going on? Niels Bohr, the great physicist, is credited with the observation that there are two types of truth: trivial truths whose opposites are plainly absurd, and profound truths, recognizable by the fact that their opposites are *also* profound truths. Whatever one might want to make of Bohr's statement *vis a vis* science and philosophy (for example, we might ask: is his observation a profound truth?), it certainly holds true for architecture. *Engagement* is the point. Just as a face-mask can be turned inside out and still be a mask of the same face, the structure of the engagement with a design problem is maintained in the mirror image of its ideas. What is pointedly *contradicted* is at the same time *pointed out*. For example: does it matter if a house on a steep slope rests on thin poles or on a massive concrete base? There are univocal structural and safety considerations to be sure, but insofar as the existence, and meaning, and nature of *sloped ground* is brought to mind, it does not matter which tack is taken, so long as it is done well. Geography and inhabitation fully impose their discipline in either case. To be avoided is any inattentive response to this condition of the site, any non-committal strategy that leaves the nature of the site and the land "unearthed."

The roofs of the Transvaal House remind us the distant hills and also the adjacent boulders and the line of low, scrubby trees from which it seems to emerge. This is straight *mimesis,* a formal choice of the kind that has been meaningful in architecture and the arts since Plato, characterizing all art as mimetic, gave it a name. But then there's the way hills and clouds heave past and behind one another, like dolphins, is elegantly captured in an economical structural system which re-tropes also the standard bow truss, first into a double, "bow-tie" truss, and then back again into two separate ones "going" in contrary directions and belonging to different roof planes. The metal of the roofs is cut so that the remainder profile of one panel is the beginning profile of another in the next bay. (By-product? Waste is all but eliminated.) A channel in the porch around the house tracks the drip line of the eaves above in order to catch rain water (this in a gesture more symbolic than functional however, since the wind *does* blow when it rains in the Highveld). Indoors, floor levels follow and evoke terraced contours: another connection to the land outside. Views from the living area are captured seemingly through omissions in the skeletal wall structure, here in small triangular flags, there in rectangular patches where the frame

filling was omitted. In an extraordinary reversal of the normal layout of bathrooms, the fixtures array radially off a central, exposed plumbing stack. The effect is half laboratory, half shearing shed: water comes *up* , and something is *washed down*. In all, a brilliant piece of design whose element and themes echo in Saitowitz's work to this day.[5]

Again, there is very little done here in the way the Ndebele would do it, much less the way an Afrikaner farmer would do it. Saitowitz was after something else: a certain self-possession that imitates that of the indigenous population, a feeling of the *right* to be upon that landscape and to address it directly. More: he wanted not only to be heir to a tradition of building on the Highveld, but also to start a *new* one. In contrast to urban Modern architecture, this would be an architecture whose sensitivity to site and geography and culture, coupled with an ingenuity of means, would equal to the architecture developed over the years by the Ndebele: its principle theme a harmony with nature, a marriage with its rhythms. Saitowitz turns away from traditional building materials and methods because he is a Modernist. Like a Modernist, he is conscious of the impossibility—and doubtful of the desirability even were it possible—of going back in time or of crossing cultural divides. His forms follow available technology with the same rigor as the Ndebele forms followed their available technology.

Let us place ourselves in Saitowitz's shoes. The responsibility is daunting: one is young, just out of college; one is a *new* African; one is white; one has read Vitruvius and Venturi...and yet here, under the sun and on the veld, so close to Eden, the wind blows the same way for all, and the hills roll on as impassively as they have for countless generations.

We could continue to catalog the design features of the Transvaal House. However, since the photographs are more eloquent on this score, and since others in this volume with sharper eyes and more practiced scholarship will complement my efforts in this regard, I should like—by way of conclusion—to turn again to the question of *meaning*, meaning not just in Saitowitz's Transvaal House, but in architecture in general and what the Transvaal House, with all its tensions and contradictions, has lets us think about.

V

Saitowitz, like Kahn, would seem to be in the search for architecture's original meanings. But the truth is that *meanings have no origin* if, by the word "origin," one is put in mind a of a mother-lode, a sort of buried chest which, when reached and opened, would radiate its treasure of goodness, attainment, knowledge, power...or whatever it is one is seeking in seeking the "origin" of meaning. (One might call this the Indiana Jones Theory of Meaning). Heidegger's procedure of etymological root-finding had just this mythic quality: the "correct" meanings of certain important words, and therefore thoughts, were to be found in their ancient Greek origins. To redo metaphysics, as Heidegger wanted to do, therefore required a return to terms forged from the ground and in the pure light of an enlightened age, to a time when things truly had first and final meanings. This also is the belief of all “hermeneuts” in possession of a primal, ancient text like the Bible or Quran.

The fact is that the origin of meaning itself lies in the *searching for origins*, in the *process*, rather than in any ruin, buried treasure, bygone age or language, or abstract version of the alchemical

[5]I am thinking in particular of his Sundial House (never built), his winery in Madera, near Fresno, and his most recent structures for Mill Race Park in Columbus, Indiana, where we see him once again exploring the relationship of ground to earth and wind and human use with the same elemental logic and even more developed grace.

philosopher's stone. In matters of true meaning, as the old Russian saying goes, "it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive."

Using another metaphor: let us assume for the moment that the source of something's meaning *could* be found, and that it would be like finding the source of a mighty river. (Call this the Burton and Speke Theory of Meaning.) This metaphor might be more intuitive since it is implicit in our selection of the word "source," but the mightiest river, we quickly note, begins not all at once but in a little trickle from a rock, in some dampness of the soil, in an ooze. And these are significant *only in so far as we already know* of the river. Furthermore, to be true to the metaphor, any and every contributing little creek shares the praise and responsibility for a river's mightiness with a thousand other seepages, streams, rainfall, and rivulets, and a great deal of natural history in general.

On either metaphor, then, I would propose that the search for meaning's origin can indeed be undertaken—indeed *ought* to be undertaken—but on the pre-understanding that all origins, arrived at, are in themselves less interesting than their outcomes. This is in the nature of origins in general in an evolving universe. For, Descartes notwithstanding, in an evolving and animate universe the effect is always greater, if less "perfect," than the cause. In nature, beginnings are always humble. Meaning arises in the motion of the search for origins, in the travelling and not in the arriving. And the phenomenon of "meaning" itself emerges from complexity, evolves.

To bring matters closer to home: "Architecture is like music." "Architecture is like nature." "Architecture is like language. " "Architecture is like cooking." These analogies, so nicely identified by Peter Collins in *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, are all simple passings of the buck of meaning. They serve at best to postpone or add a stage to the journey. And yet, curiously, they readily satisfy the uncurious. Why? Because for most people, just seeing that one deferral, *one step* of reference, can be made from the phenomenon at hand to another phenomenon perhaps not at hand, is enough to warrant the meaningfulness of the first. "Oh," they say, "there's more to this. Good enough for me!" But of course, to the sensitive and the thoughtful, and to those who ask for more meaning in life than the mere guarantee of it betokened by one explicable step, only further questions are raised. If architecture is indeed like music, like nature, like language, like cooking, or whatever, then surely the question is raised: how and what do music, nature, language, cooking mean? Are we, are they—I mean the composers, the biologists, poets, chefs—to pass the buck back to architecture saying: "ah, music is liquid architecture," "nature is living architecture," "language is the architecture of communication," "cuisine is edible architecture," etc.? Are they now in a better position?

Only slightly. For each and all of us who would investigate meaning(s) seriously and who would wish to experience or produce the fullest expression of their art must take the more difficult passage, the passage that is, back through time and *down,* explaining the later in terms of the earlier, the local in terms of the universal, and the shallower in terms of the deeper...this, even as the meaning-charge supplied *at* and *by crossing* each level of life's Order dissipates, thins, simplifies, and dwindles until we have a handful of physical laws and, beneath that, the singular fact of *existence* itself. We *must* end in almost nothing...and turn back. We are, after all, mentally unraveling and re-viving the process of evolution, which is itself the multiplication, gathering, and becoming-unique-through-complexification of simpler things at earlier times.

To bring matters closer to home still: Saitowitz cannot finally explain the impact of the Transvaal House. And nor can I. But *in explaining* something is emitted. In describing his architecture as "Human Geography," Saitowitz flirts with simple nostalgia for a prelapsarian Eden, with romanticism of a sort that some would call racism in as much as it casts the Ndebele as Children of God or Nature, but children nonetheless, blessedly uncivilized. I worry about that. And yet in the utterly fresh way he responded architecturally, that is, with this building, we see no trace of condescension. On the contrary,

we are struck by the *frisson* of archaism and industrialism, with the contradictions, with his command over geometry, with his deep respect for what it takes to connect habitation to landscape *today*, and anywhere. The significance of the Transvaal House to Saitowitz's own later career, then, and its significance to architects and thinkers on architecture today, lies not on the plains of the faraway Highveld to be unearthed once and for all, but in the passage to a fuller understanding of the world which it provokes, and our enlargement in the process.
