
THE RESILIENCE OF THE KAROO TOWNSCAPES OF SOUTH AFRICA: CONSERVING WHAT THE GROUP AREAS ACT, 1950, SPARED

Walter Peters

University of the Free State

Apartheid South Africa was obsessed with separating citizens on a racial basis yet despite passing various segregationist laws, in many urban areas members of different ethnic groups continued to live as neighbours. This was countered by the passage of the Group Areas Act, 1950, which restricted the occupation of land and property ownership to specific racial groups, and saw the forceful relocation of citizens and the demolition of building stock, even in small towns. This paper will examine the imposition in Richmond, a historical town of the Karoo in the arid interior of South Africa, and a settlement with built environment characteristic of the type. By tracing the origin and development of the town, this paper will define the impact of such political vandalism. It will also argue that the spatial separation and demolition in terms of the Act affected mainly the visible environment of the poor, which vestiges remain for all to see. In 2013 the morphology of Richmond was studied by senior students of Architecture of the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein campus, who set out to conserve the resilient historical townscape with demonstrations of appropriate infill functions and architecture.

Keywords

Boers, church towns, Karoo houses, water leads, Group Areas Act

How to Cite

Peters, Walter. "The resilience of the Karoo townscapes of South Africa: conserving what the Group Areas Act, 1950, spared". In Carola Hein (ed.) *International Planning History Society Proceedings, 17th IPHS Conference, History-Urbanism-Resilience, TU Delft 17-21 July 2016, V.02 p.067, TU Delft Open, 2016.*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7480/iphs.2016.2.1223>

INTRODUCTION

The villages and towns of the semi-arid Karoo interior of South Africa, have common townscape features which unify the group and distinguish them. Almost all were established by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the early 19c, and the towering ecclesiastical building on a matching square can usually be seen from afar, as can windmills for pumping water from boreholes, without which no settlement is sustainable. To this developed a concomitant vernacular typology of houses attuned to the hot, dry climate. While originally built in support of the religious rituals, the Dutch legacy of town houses conceived as a walled development, and the ingenuity of water furrows, provided settlers with tree-lined streets and a sustainable form of urban agriculture in the backyards.

This paper concentrates on the built character of the Karoo towns while focusing on Richmond, which morphology was conditioned by topography and geography. Having developed naturally with the gradual inclusion of people other than whites, in the late 1960s the town was forcibly subjected to a reordering in terms of the Group Areas Act which separated citizens spatially on a racial basis.

Richmond has since been re-discovered as a book-town, in which process it was opportune to structure a project in 2013 for senior architectural students of the University of the Free State on the Bloemfontein campus, to focus on the conservation of its heritage¹. Soon it dawned that, in fact, one was dealing essentially with what the Group Areas Act had spared, the central theme of the paper. Drawing on the field work and the published report (2013), this paper aims to illustrate the making of the historical built environment, the impact of the forces of political vandalism on its transformation into a formally segregated town, and the student proposals for the conservation, restitution and re-building of the townscape.

THE MAKING OF THE KAROO TOWNSCAPE

The Karoo is the name given the hot, semi-arid region of the interior of South Africa with little perennial water and scrub as the vegetation, making only low-intensity pastoralism possible. Settlement of this region has its origins in the migration of descendants of Dutch settlers, Boers or Afrikaners, who spoke Afrikaans, from the south-western Cape into the interior in the early 19c.

Here farmers settled on vast farms with especially wool-sheep, and the DRC, in turn, established villages as *kerkdorpe* (church towns). These would be located wherever good water supplies could be tapped, and the town plans were characterised by grids, and churches on large squares for the encampment of farmer parishioners over high festivals lasting a few days, and some had market squares. Affording farmers would build *tuishuise*, cottages initially for use during communion services and later in retirement. Following the Dutch tradition, the *tuishuise* were unified as a walled development, and their proper context has quiet, tree-lined streets with irrigation furrows which allowed the settler to be nourished by the products of vegetable and fruit gardening at the rear of the allotment.

The cottages are sited up against the street and raised by a *stoep* (an uncovered platform) at the interface between pavement and house. Plan and section are the most economical conceivable with a central passage, off which lie the principal rooms, and a *brakdak*, a flat roof of poles covered by a layer of reeds tied together with twine, which supported a covering of about 300mm of brackish soil as insulation. However, from the 1850s on, corrugated iron, less prone to leaks, was increasingly preferred, either on top of the *brakdak* or as hipped or gabled roofs with boarded ceilings. Floors and walls were of stone or slate, the latter usually plastered and whitewashed.

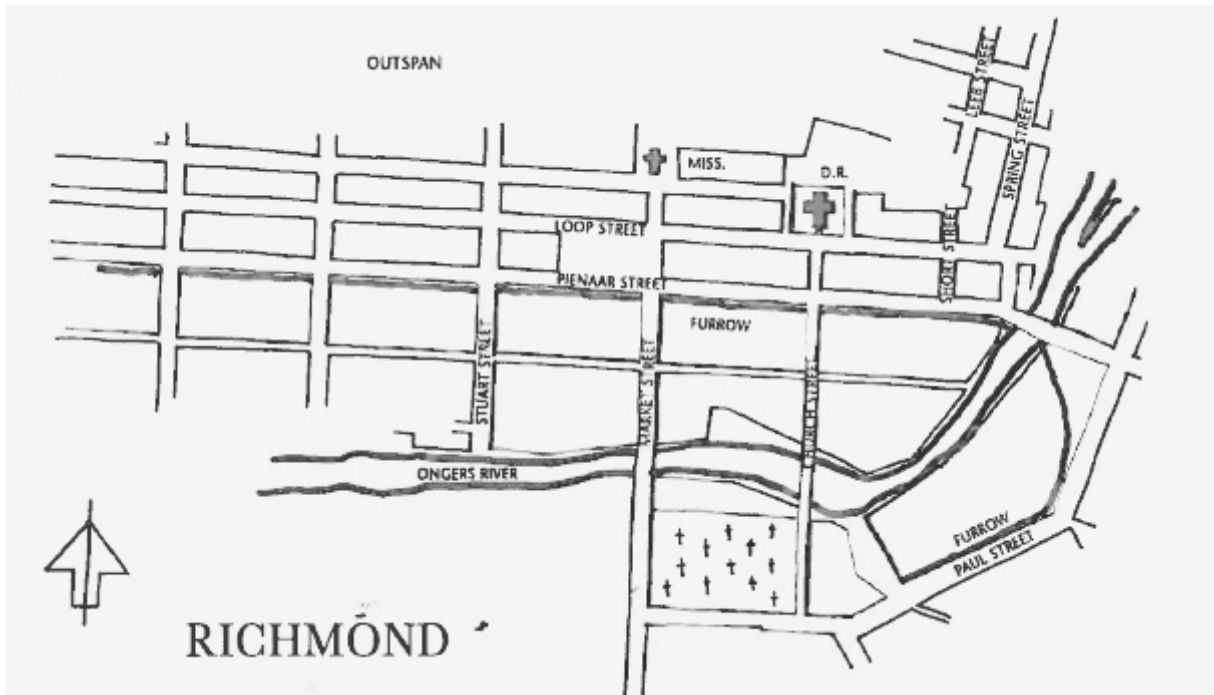


FIGURE 1 Richmond town plan of 1843 by surveyor JL Leeb (Fransen, 2006: 297)

The classical origins of the Karoo house are manifested in the symmetrical street façades with sliding sash windows and louvred shutters, to either side of a panelled entrance door replete with fanlight of many designs to illuminate the central passage. The street elevation would usually be parapeted with a cornice, either pedimented or stepped, with the climax co-incident with the axis of the centred door. In time, the narrow stoeps became verandas, with timber posts and trellises, and these were covered with bullnose-, bellcast-, or tent-profiled corrugated iron sheeting, with individual sheets often painted in alternating colours.

The regular townscape of Karoo houses, tree-lined streets and interspersed windmills, is in sharp contrast with the church, usually of the second generation, towering and somewhat medieval in proportion, and the church square, and sometimes also a market square.

ORIGINS AND CHARACTER OF THE KAROO TOWN OF RICHMOND

The wool-sheep farming community of the Bo-Karoo (upper Karoo) had been spiritually served by the Graaff Reinet parish, based in the last town established under Dutch rule of the Cape as a *drost* (magistracy) in 1785, and its first church was built c.1796. At some 130km distant, in time, the need for a *dogtergemeente* (daughter congregation) dawned, which in turn, warranted the founding of a new *kerkdorp* as the seat of the new parish. For this, the community acquired the farm Driefontein, which as its Afrikaans name infers was distinguished by three natural springs and enabled settlement.

Unlike most, Richmond is without a gridiron plan. In 1843, the experienced Surveyor JL Leeb (Beaufort West, 1925; Victoria West, 1843) proposed a topographically sensitive plan, between the defensible Vegkop hillock in the north and the virtually perennial Ongers River on the south. Streets were aligned east-west, and the principal street, Pienaar Str, crossed the bend in the Ongers River as a ford. As the Cape fell under British rule from 1806, the name of the new town was changed on registration, from Driefontein to Richmond, with which British town there is, however, no association².

Given three springs, like many Boer-founded towns there would be both wet and dry *erven* (allotments). Supplied by the springs, the wet *erven* were the subject of irrigation in the form of an infrastructure of *leivoere* (water leads), which served to sustain villagers, who could grow vegetables and fruit in their backyards. Part of furrow system is extant in Pienaar Street, where the houses line the street in a walled and tree-lined development, leaving a maximum of space for urban agriculture in the backyards. The original town had 20 wet *erven* and 31 dry, the latter of which were considered for *tuishuise*, which with only periodic accommodation did not need backyards as gardens. These were located in Loop Street, higher yet parallel with Pienaar Street, which as the name suggests was a pleasant street to walk along, and is today the main thoroughfare.

Loop Street contains the town's landmark, the DRC church on its square, built 1844-7, also by surveyor Leeb, but since remodelled, and which terminates one transverse street crossing the river, obviously, Church Street. The other transverse street, Market Street, passes Market Square and crossed the next parallel longitudinal road, before terminated on the mission church³, which occupied the other church square of town, and both church and square defer to the DRC church. Neither of these church squares is sited on the highest point, in a bend or on any topographic feature, but it would appear that the crossing of the Ongers River had a bearing on the decision, especially as the two parallel streets define the cemetery on the opposite side of the river. In Boer-founded towns the cemeteries were always located on the outskirts, and often near the rivers.

The development of thick-walled plastered buildings with *stoeps* or verandas, and either *brakdakke* with cornices, or hipped corrugated iron roofs, and fanlights over the central entrance doors, characterised the town as the photographs of the 1950s and early '60s by Gabriel Fagan attest (2008).

TOWNSFOLK AND CHARACTERISTICS

The Karoo towns of the mid 19c were designed for Boers or Afrikaners, and attracted butchers, bakers, blacksmiths, innkeepers, photographers etc. while *smouse* (travelling pedlars) provided for most commercial requirements. In due course, the migrating English community saw to the towns also sprouting 'English churches', usually Anglican, but it would appear to have been Presbyterian in Richmond, often a free mason's lodge, and some had synagogues.

There are unlikely to have been indigenous black Africans, but certainly coloureds, people of mixed descent, or former slaves after their emancipation in 1830, and the mission church would have been established to provide for the spiritual needs of this community. Coloureds are likely first to have found accommodation on the fringes, in the earliest settled portion of town, along the floodplain on the southern bank of the Ongers River where the houses along Paul Street were served by another water lead. It is likely that less affluent, servants or labourers settled across the ford and along the road westward, in vernacular Karoo houses, with *brakdakke* rather than roofs of corrugated iron.

In the Cape there were no restrictions on ownership and occupation of land, and only moderate levels of segregation, thus coloureds could live wherever they could afford. In fact, no historically contentious issues based on race could be traced, and it appears that during the Anglo-Boer South African War (1899-1902) the defence of Richmond was a spontaneous and mutual affair. It could not even be established whether at that time Richmond had an *onderdorp*, a 'location' where people other than whites resided.

THE GROUP AREAS ACT AND RICHMOND

In 1931 South Africa gained greater autonomy from the erstwhile colonial power, Britain. Thus the (whites only) National Party came to power in 1948 with the narrowest of victories under the slogan of *apartheid*, an Afrikaans word meaning separation. The Party lost no time in going about the implementation of *apartheid*, and in 1950 already passed the Population Registration Act, in which every citizen had to be classified by race. This was the necessary base for spatial reordering of towns in terms of the Group Areas Act, passed in the same year (consolidated 1957; and again in 1966). Herewith the state could declare any 'defined area' for occupation and property ownership by members of a single race. Nowhere was this more glaringly done than in District Six, Cape Town, which saw the forceful relocation of 60 000 coloured residents and the wholesale demolition of their building stock in 1966. However, it should be noted that the apartheid government resisted the demolition of places of worship, Christian or Islamic, and that 50 years later, most of the land still lies fallow.

To return to the current narrative, in many urban areas members of different races continued to live as neighbours. However, the apartheid government wished to reduce social contact to a minimum, which would, of course, also eliminate any competition for urban space. Thus people not of a 'prescribed group' would be forced to leave and take up residence in the 'group area' set aside for their own racial group, geographically separated.

The initiation of racially divided town plans was prompted by the central authorities, who designated buffer strips of open land at least 30m wide between different population groups. Accordingly rivers, ridges, industrial areas, railways etc served to aid the design of the segregated town plan. There was also to be no direct road linkage between races except for commonly used parts of towns, eg the central business district. This was always declared white, but due to its zoning, no one was permitted to live there.

Upon the proclamation of a group area, 'disqualified groups' were precluded from acquiring property in that area. These people were given 'evacuation periods', the object of which was to ensure that there was alternate accommodation for those unable to provide for themselves, before they were required to leave their old homes. Willing sellers were offered the market value for their properties. Further objects were slum clearance, in terms of the Slums Act of 1934, in which case demolition of building stock would follow forceful relocation. The Group Areas Act affected mainly coloured people, but whites as well, although to a much lesser extent, and indigenous blacks were dealt with under different legislation. It should be noted that today coloureds are the majority group in both the Western and Northern Cape provinces, in which the Karoo towns are located. Later, the accent was taken off the creation of group areas and on to community development, with the object of setting up dual governance with a dedicated local authority for coloureds.

RICHMOND, THE APARTHEID TOWN

The DRC church played along, most likely without the application of any pressure as it supported segregation and played a "major part" in the implementation of apartheid⁴. It built a new mission church in the *onderdorp*, south of the Ongers River, while the historical building in Richmond was demolished. While no one notices its absence today, the square remains as a space, without activity.

It is difficult to access documentation of the 'group areas' intervention but the historical photos of Fagan suffice (2008). One can clearly see the development beyond the ford on the northern side of Pienaar Street, as well as the linear development at the foot of the *koppies* (hillocks) westward in what appears to have been a tightly integrated urban settlement. The first are fine examples of *brakdak* houses and stoeps, stepped in acknowledgement of the rising land, and the development westward, also mainly with *brakdakke* and not corrugated iron i.e. houses of the poor and probably self-built. Current day photographs which show the trees and stoeps prove the demolition, as do the floors of the westward expansion.



FIGURE 2 A row of stepped brakdak houses in Pienaar Street across the ford (Fagan, 2008: 179).



FIGURE 3 Remains of the stoep of the brakdak houses along Pienaar Street. (Photograph of 2013)



FIGURE 4 Pienaar Street looking east. Photograph of 2013.



FIGURE 5 Steetscape in the onderdorp (Photograph of 2013).



FIGURE 6 So called 51/9 houses given dispossessed parties in the onderdorp, south of the Ongers River (Photograph of 2013).

The apartheid government had decided upon an *onderdorp*, beyond the *koppies*, which rendered it invisible from the historical town, and the Ongers River conveniently served to reinforce the divide. It is here, south of Paul Street and distanced from the historical town that standard yet sub-economic houses were built for the dispossessed. Each dispossessed person was given a piece of land with a house, perhaps originally superior to the vernacular houses built westward but the replacements are alien in the Karoo setting. Different from the *Karoohuis* typology, these have brick walls and corrugated asbestos roof sheeting which maintain the heat of the day and provide none of the human comfort the indigenous variety is known for. Today exacerbated by rising damp, but from begin these houses bore the stamp of poverty.

It is difficult to imagine the scale or impact of the human tragedy of forcibly relocating people who had lived together as families, friends and neighbours, but, certainly, demolition of the housing stock in the late 1960s was totally unnecessary. All we know is that the westward development of vernacular houses was conspicuous. This fact and the fact that these buildings were occupied by coloureds was probably the most important reason for its demolition, with or without recourse to the Slums Act. The coloured community was disenfranchised and the allure of a new house a stone's throw away might just have tipped the scale for the town expeditiously to become re-ordered.

Twenty-two years into democracy numerous standard RDP houses have been built as have schools. What is more, the historical library in Loop Street was shut down and a new, state-of-the-art resources centre built in the *onderdorp*⁵ while a site could have been chosen as a model for an integrated Richmond instead of persisting with apartheid planning principles.

RICHMOND IN THE “NEW SOUTH AFRICA” & THE STUDENT PROJECT

The Group Areas Act was repealed in 1991 and the democratic ‘new South Africa’ emerged in 1994, but little has changed in Richmond, although the municipality became a shared responsibility with five towns, Hutchinson, Loxton, Merriman and Victoria West, some 80km distant!

But, in the 1970s already came an economic blow when vehicular traffic was diverted from Loop Street, the thoroughfare, to the new N1 national road, just north of the Vegkop hillock, parallel to town. While the diversion of heavy volumes of vehicles and especially trucks from the centre of town is to be welcomed, shielded from sight, the businesses felt the brunt.

It took outsiders to forge a new *raison d'être* for the town. Prompted by the dry climate which is good for the preservation of works of literature, during the 1990s a small coterie of townfolk stumbled on the branding of Richmond as a book town, which activities became located in former *tuishuisies* on Loop Street, the original dry erven. This, together with the visitor centre and the promotion of various festivals including the annual *Boekbedonnerd* festival in late October was the beginning of the revival of urban life in Richmond.

Observing the fruits of this initiative was the prompt for involving students of Architecture in the process. Equipped with an understanding of the historical and morphological basis for South African settlements and architecture, it is appropriate for students in their Honours year to come to terms with the art of townscape - the merging of history, topography, geography and the built environment - the context for most commissions in architecture. And, despite the politically driven demolitions, the unity of the surviving built environment of Richmond was not unattractive.

Interestingly, the voids created by demolitions or the vestiges of floors and stairs often do not register any particular association with today's students until historical photographs were found. It is then that the influence of politics came alive. However, understanding the forces of political vandalism and seeking confirmation from older residents is one thing; restitution and rebuilding in the ‘manner of today’ while conserving what the Group Areas Act has spared, is the design challenge.

No student ventured to propose rebuilding along the northward extension but a project on Pienaar Street across the ford saw the *brakdak* houses re-built, appropriately as an information and story-telling centre. Many students focused on the divide of the Ongers River and Paul Street with refurbishment projects, e.g. for agricultural skills teaching, a music or a culinary centre to empower the community with skills. Due to its position relative to the centre of town, a school for building trades was proposed for mission church square, while around Loop Street the emphasis on books lead naturally to a book and paper restoration centre; as did the safe house to focus on the social problems of the Karoo; and the absence of proper medial on a medial suite. In all cases, the function had been proposed by the students and the aim was to search for appropriate infill architecture.

While it was hoped to present a strategy for the conservation of Richmond's heritage, the compilation by the students is but a facet towards such objective, which would require a little more time than the curriculum could accommodate. The surveys and the ideas contained therein were thus presented as stimulation for further thought and action, the results of youthful enthusiasm with, hopefully, triggers for a new empathy with heritage.

CONCLUSIONS

Though site specific, the morphology of Richmond shares the family resemblance of Karoo towns with a walled development of vernacular houses and a still working furrow system, with an intense and sustainable form of urban agriculture in some backyards, and the DRC church on its square remains unchallenged in providing the landmark after over 150 years. That townscape has proved itself resilient.

While Apartheid South Africa was obsessed in minimising social contact between different ethnic groups and separated citizens on a racial basis, the spatial separation shaped in terms of the Group Areas Act remains, despite the lifting of the legislation. This distance is difficult to counter; thus many of the student projects focused on the divide, with projects for the upliftment of the community, in which the historical townscape provided the context for the designs in conservation, restitution and re-building. Admittedly, it did take some time for the students to realise that they were, in fact, essentially dealing with what the Group Areas Act, 1950, had spared.

There are a great number of challenges facing the South Africa of today. One issue is racial and social integration, but for that to be effective, no act need be passed. Before the passage of the Group Areas Act, the Cape was without restrictions on ownership and occupation of land, and since 1994 the whole country enjoys such freedom. Within the small town of Richmond, perhaps the promotion of its remaining Karoo townscape alongside the festivals could serve as a basis for a peaceful and prosperous co-existence.

Walter Peters is an architect, architectural historian, conservator and editor of a professional journal. Before joining the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein in 2010, he uniquely rose through all academic ranks from Lecturer to Senior Professor at his *alma mater*, University of Natal, now KwaZulu-Natal, in Durban. He is the recipient of a Medal of Distinction of the South African Institute of Architects.

Bibliography

- A Christopher, *The atlas of apartheid* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994).
- C Jooste, Group areas. *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, Vol 5 (Pretoria: NASOU, 1972).
- E Kahn, Apartheid or separate development. *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, Vol 1 (Pretoria: NASOU, 1970).
- Gabriel Fagan, Brakdak. *Flatroofs in the Karoo* (Cape Town: Bree Street, 2008).
- Nigel Worden, *A Concise Dictionary of South African History* (Cape Town: Francolin, 1998).
- Hans Franssen, *Old Towns and Villages of the Cape* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2006).
- Walter Peters, Karoo. In Paul Oliver (Ed) *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*. Vol 3: Cultures & Habitats (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), p2160.
- Walter Peters & Kobus du Preez, K (Eds) *Richmond 2013. A research study by students of the University of the Free State*. University of the Free State, Department of Architecture, 2013.

Endnotes

- 1 Walter Peters & Kobus du Preez, K (Eds) *Richmond 2013. A research study by students of the University of the Free State*. University of the Free State, Department of Architecture, 2013.
- 2 It was the imperial approach to naming towns in the colonies after a precedent in the motherland, but in this case, somewhat stretched, to the father-in-law of the incumbent governor, Sir Peregrine Maitland, the Duke of Richmond.
- 3 In 1857 the DRC church of the Cape had formally separated its white and coloured congregations, with the latter renamed *sendingkerk* (mission church) (Worden). This is the reason many Karoo towns sprout both a DRC church and a deferring DRC mission church. Little could be found on the original mission church of Richmond.
- 4 Nigel Worden, *A Concise Dictionary of South African History*, p.54.
- 5 The same was done for the new legislative assembly building of the Northern Cape Province in Kimberley, and though understandable, should one not capitalise on the best location, now that all of town is accessible to everyone, instead of reinforcing apartheid planning?