



# Reverence

Veteran South African architect Peter Rich talks about the essential understanding of culture in architecture that is primarily a reflection of values of people, in conversation with IA&B.

*Image: courtesy Peter Rich Architects*

By studying indigenous tribes, especially the architecture of the Ndebele, Peter's designs are rooted in Africa and show a profound African understanding. The architecture of the practice is extremely diverse due to each project being specially formulated for the specific site in which it is located. His practice has been awarded many awards such as in the World Architecture Festival in 2009; The Fassa Bortolo International Prize for Sustainable Architecture, Silver Medal, Ferrara, Italy, 2011; The Earth Awards, London, 2010; Holcim Acknowledgment Awards, 2008, etc. His work is intense, sensitive and remarkably responsive to its context.

**IA&B: You have played several roles - a practitioner, a professor, a facilitator and an activist. How have these helped you develop a better understanding of architecture?**

**PR:** By getting off the professional and academic pedestal, and engaging people with deference as to their culture, who they are (their story), and what I can learn from them - what they can teach me, I became better equipped to translate their (the other cultures) needs into an appropriate built form. Through the human factor, I became a better architect in translating and interpreting the needs of the ordinary people I was designing for.

**IA&B: What, according to you, is the relevance of regional identity and social practices in architecture?**

**PR:** A Ndebele matriarch said to me upon my enquiring as to the source and influence on her aesthetic decisions - made through sculpture and paint

adorning the courts of her homestead - in order that it functions as a stage set for rituals to be performed representing the rites of passage:

".....We see what we want to see - and make it our own....."

Through seeing and observing their own and other cultures' images and usage of space, an image is translated by the women into something, that by virtue of its new context and re-interpretation, acquires a distinctive and different symbolic meaning. This is what 'good' architects do - an appropriate regional or hybrid architecture which gains acceptance. It is important for the designer to respect the nuances of order, hierarchy and space usage in their social practice.

**IA&B: You have previously stated that "A house is not a home unless it is a village". Can you please elaborate?**

**PR:** This is a quotation which I coined as an outcome of my work amongst living Indigenous African cultures. I observed that to a Western mindset, the house and home were viewed and thought of as an object. To an African, the concept of home was not an object but a holistic vision of the entire designated landholding; the perimeter fence, the approach, the maize fields, the graveyard, the refuse heap, the cattle byre, the arrival area onto which the courtyards of the homestead fronted, and the ordered labyrinth of courtyards and detached pavilions which constituted the homestead. Hence, "to an African - a house is not a home unless it is a village".

**IA&B: Your work is recognised as a fusion of modernism and tradition. How is the understanding of such an approach born?**

**PR:** I was privileged, as an undergraduate, to receive an excellent Western history of architecture education from many brilliant teachers i.e. from the Egyptians to modernism, inclusive of more recent movements. Nurtured on Le Corbusier and Aalto, South Africa has a proud tradition of good modernist architects with the banner being carried by a high concentration of talented Jewish architects between the two World Wars. Corbusier paid homage to them in a letter to South African architects who had visited him. This letter was published in the first edition of Corb's *Qevre complet*. My surrogate father and mentor Pancho Guedes fostered my interest in contemporary African art and architecture (which, of course, was ignored in our colonial society and teaching). I went out as an activist on a voyage of discovery on what it meant to be African; an architect with the same curiosity as Rysard Kapuchinski has as a journalist. Synthesis in this climate came through doing - my 70s/80s house addition Westridge house in investigating Adolf Loos's *Raumplan* alongside Ndebele spatial ideas of diagonal extensions, is a testimony to this.

**IA&B: Do you think travel is important in architecture? How have your travels influenced your work?**

**PR:** I am an architectural 'junkie'. I benefit immensely from visiting and experiencing great architecture across the world. It is an essential part of my personal growth and pleasure. It is not just buildings, but a fascination with cultural diversity.

**IA&B: Do you think your sketches are an account of how you perceive and understand the world? Can you please elaborate?**

**PR:** "Sempere vedare" Leonardo Da Vinci - "to see with understanding". You hold the autobiography of who you are in the palm of your hand. "Through drawing you synergise with the databank of your mind - the thinking hand," wrote Juhani Pallasmaa. Without drawing how do you access this resource? Linked in your intuitive 'source', coupled with reason and common sense, you have a winning combination.

**IA&B: Does art significantly influence the tribal vernacular architecture of Africa? How so?**

**PR:** Ndebele women, although illiterate, are extremely advanced and knowledgeable about architecture and art. The plan is in their mind. Through personal adornment of the body and an innate anthropomorphic knowledge, they are very versed in the lessons of Classicism. They make design and compositional decisions as though they had Palladio's *Quattro Libri* with them.

**IA&B: Your work displays a commitment to the creation of architecture that is uniquely African. Which of your projects do you think represents your manifesto the most appropriately and why?**

**PR:** The Kemp House in Natures Valley is my favourite built project in this regard - three detached pavilions linked by a covered verandah. The checker board of the pavilions defines outdoor spaces and articulates rooms i.e. a morning court, an arrival street court and an inner court. There are diagonal extensions of space at the corners of the inner court. It is a prime example of served and service-space articulation. This design idea of checker-boarding and creating spaces between has permutated through my recent work, too; Chicago office refurbishment, *Learnt in Translation* Exhibition layout and the new Capital City plan for Ramciel in South Sudan.

**IA&B: From your studies on the tribal settlements in Africa, do you feel the need for better education of architectural practitioners/audience? How can this be achieved?**

**PR:** I had, by virtue of my age, access to living peasant cultures - who are masterful at sustainability; making good, common-sense use of what they have (materials and skills in response to climate). In education, we need to get back to basics, in addition to the teaching of common sense and the grammar of our discipline so we can talk its language; history of architecture of the western world and an expanded teaching of architectural history in the context of where the formal school is located.

**IA&B: Understanding of culture or vulnerability of ecology, which do you think is a more pressing concern? Why so?**

**PR:** Both. As it is in the vocabulary of peasant vernacular architecture - a complete synergy between the two. Ecological, common-sense sustainability should be a given, as should be a profound deference to the culture you are designing for. ■