

## *Sense or Fashion!*

### *Victorian Architecture in Durban*

*The Early and Mid-Victorian Period.  
Veranda Houses of Wattle and Daub.*

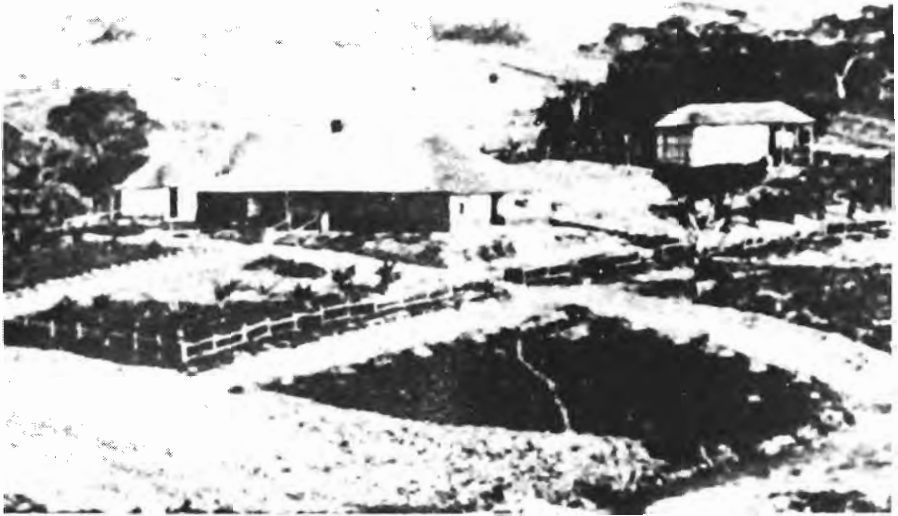
The earliest architecture of the city reflects a simple concern with the primary building problems of materials, construction and climate. The veranda house of wattle and daub was both the hallmark of this simple concern and indeed the standard building type of the first forty years of European settlement.<sup>1</sup> Its essential form was a long, narrow building, often one room wide, with encircling verandas which protected the wattle and daub walls, and a hipped roof of thatch. The materials were relatively easily available; a light woven framework of wattles from the surrounding bush filled in with mud mixture of “daagah” and limewashed; roof poles of a short length determined by the available coastal timbers; mangrove posts for veranda columns (appropriate as a precaution against white ants); thatching grass; limited windows and doors (often with calico in lieu of glass) and a floor mixed of antheap, dung and blood. The construction system could draw both on the well-tried techniques and skills of those who came from the south of England and, perhaps, from the indigenous abilities of local Zulu builders whose own architectural development included the same basic materials and skills.

#### *Architecture Appropriate to the Climate*

Climatically such veranda houses were exceptionally appropriate, having the veranda system to protect against sun and rain; a hipped roof construction to protect from strong coastal winds and providing a convenient set of spaces which were well-ventilated and which assisted the ventilation of the interior of the building. The high humidity of summer months and the low diurnal temperature variation of the greater part of the year, together with pleasantly cool winter days suggest an open construction type and a hybridised combination of light and heavyweight fabric. This combination was successfully achieved in the wattle and daub/thatch construction in combination with the earth flooring.

#### *Picturesque Buildings*

Beyond the pragmatic sense of these reasons and the fear of building more massive types on the sandy sites of the city and the high cost of brick, there is also a particular coincidence with an aesthetic idea. The notions of

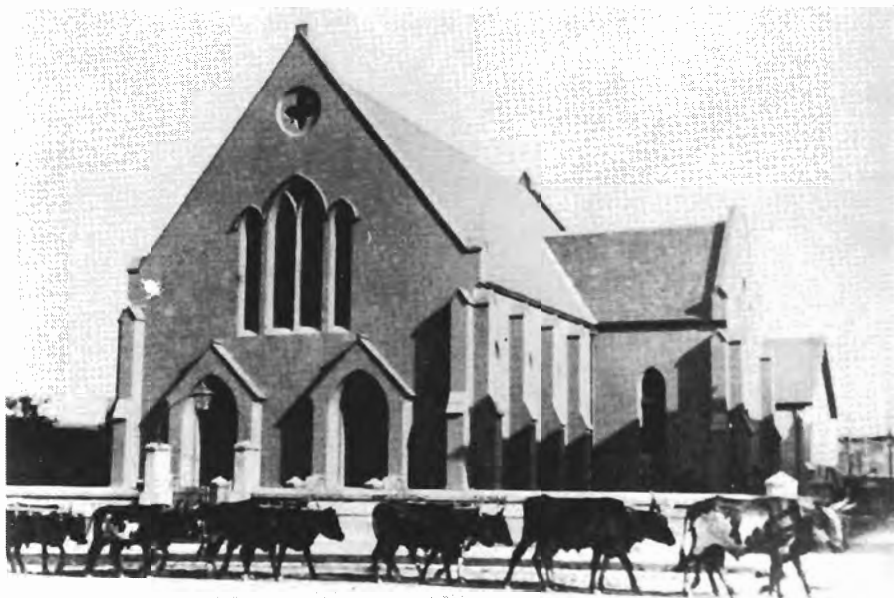


1. Wattle and daub homestead of Rev. Rolfe, Coedmore Estate, 1860s.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)

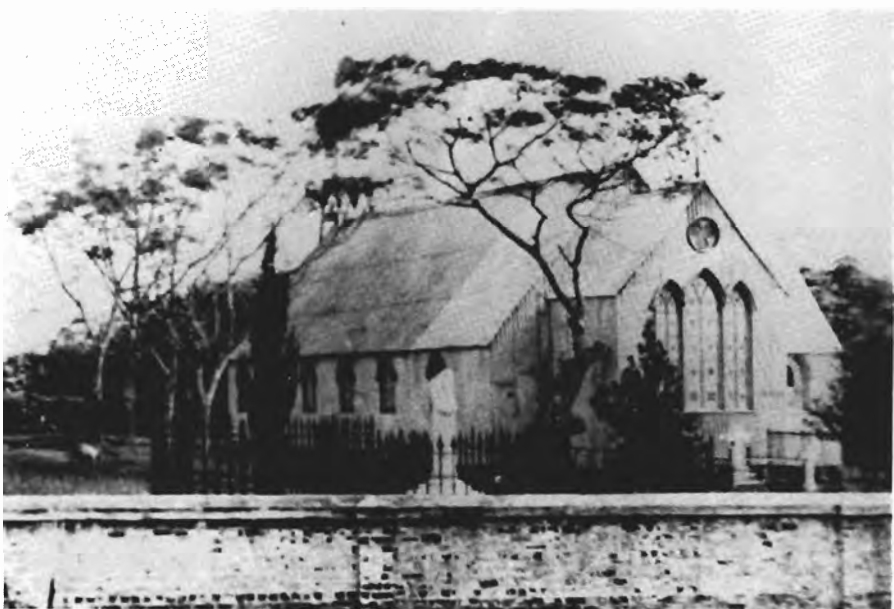


2. "Longlands", home of George Russell (c.1875). Note the canvas awnings to the veranda. These draped shapes became an intrinsic element of later bracket profiles.

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



3. Congregational Church, Smith Street (1870), by Rowland Ridgeway.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)



4. St Thomas's Church, Berea (1864).  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)



5. Seaview Congregational Church (c.1880). Now used as a church hall.  
(Photograph: Author's collection)



6. West Street between Field and Broad Streets in the 1880s. Note the verandas to this south side and the tower of St Joseph's Catholic Church.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)

the Romantic movement and especially the idea of the "Picturesque" led to satisfaction being derived in the creation of appropriate architecture: buildings which blended in a natural or rural way with their surroundings through form, colour and materials and which had about them a kind of rough or primitive "air". It is interesting that the Dutch and Americans also built in this manner along the coast.

### *Georgian and Regency Types*

In contrast to the wattle and daub veranda structures there is also evidence of other types which reflect the architecture of Georgian and Regency Britain and the Cape. These were of brick and mortar with vertically proportioned windows, slate roofs often with closely clipped eaves, gables and chimneys.

### *Translation into other Materials*

These two types, initially clearly opposite as "pragmatic" and "iconic" design solutions have in them the seeds of the subsequent evolution. On the one hand the veranda house would be translated into brick and slate or brick and iron or wood and iron and indicate a strong desire on the part of architects and builders to depart from "a primitiveness" and to decorate and embellish the form and the elements.<sup>2</sup> The Georgian or Cape type would be softened and made more "appropriate" through the addition of verandas and hipped roofs or given the individuality of a setback from adjacent neighbours.

### *Revived Styles*

During the 1850s a further thread in the architectural web was added with the importation of the Revived styles, both Classical and Gothic. The Classical idiom was deemed suitable for commercial buildings. Even more appropriate was the model of the Renaissance facade. Often they had Doric columns, basket arches, plastered walls and verandas treated as colonnades or arcades. They, too, have had a long vernacular evolution through to the street frontages of the 1920s. Corners at main intersections were acknowledged with concave or convex chamfers and elevational terminations with quoining. Details such as plastered mouldings were crisply exaggerated for effectiveness in a sunlit environment. The early 1860s show a distinct interest in arched voids within plastered walls.

### *Early Churches*

The earliest architects such as Upton, Ridgeway and Holmes were more confident in this idiom than in the Gothic Revival, though the "appropriateness" of this Revived style was considered necessary for most of the early churches of the town, and thus they were required to design with buttresses, pointed arches and label mouldings.<sup>3</sup> These early churches were ambitious projects, seldom completed and always plastered to protect the poor quality of local brick. Their sculptural qualities were reinforced by their open, public siting. At least one "dissenter" temple was erected in the style of the Classical Revival and stood curiously as a neighbour to a manse built as a wattle and daub veranda house.



7. Portsdown House (1865). Designed by R.S. Upton for Hugh Gillespie. Now St Andrew's Centre.

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



8. Overport House (1860), the home of William Hartley.

(Photograph: Brand Family collection)



9. "Nithsdale", corner of Teignmouth and Horseley Roads, Umbilo, c.1895.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)



10. Myers Brothers, corner of Gardiner and Smith Streets, c.1885.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)



11. T.A. O'Flaherty's house, Broad Street, 1889.

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



12. The first Town Hall (1885) by Philip Dudgeon, with the Market Hall (1876) by Rolls and Collins and the two-story Railway Station by Street-Wilson (1895) in the background. Photographed in 1901.

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



*Prefabricated Gothic*

An interesting alternative of this early period was the importation of prefabricated Gothic church buildings. One such, with a corrugated iron roof and walls on a timber stud frame was sent out from England by a kind benefactor for use by St Thomas Parish on the Berea.<sup>4</sup> It was complete with tower, triple lancet windows, rose window and only lacked buttresses which would have been difficult to translate into iron. The building itself went through various unusual changes but was an important local predecessor of many "wood and iron" buildings erected as places of worship thereafter by suburban communities, both Christian and non-Christian.<sup>5</sup> It was quite common for such communities to outgrow these origins both in size and aspirations and several examples are still found surviving within religious groups but now used as halls or for other community functions.

*Sense and Fashion Integrated*

In the 1860s and 1870s several buildings were built in the city which show a fascinating series of attempts to integrate the sensibility of the veranda concept and the fashionable requirements of European styles. At times first-floor balconies were added to commercial facades with parapets, arcades and classical trim. In other cases single-storied commercial buildings developed verandas which sheltered the sidewalks, were supported on slender cast-iron columns and boasted striped "awning-like" roofs and parapets with nameplates.<sup>6</sup> The first substantial public building erected on the Market Square in 1865 — the Court House, was also a serious effort to combine wide overhanging eaves, a ground floor veranda, hipped roofs and central ventilating lantern with classical window mouldings and quoining, all set within an axial composition. Two substantial villas of the period show two different directions that such an integration of ideas could take. Overport House (1860) combined curved iron roofs to verandas around the house (which also possessed an asymmetrically located tower) with pointed arches.<sup>8</sup> Curved sun-control hoods, timber decorative sun panels and a tiled court with fountain were further climatic concessions while a "Gothic" hall with hammerbeam trusses and a reused medieval window were the climax of the design. Portsdown House (1865) resolved the integration by using a classical colonnade as a veranda to the ground floor of what was otherwise an acceptable English idea of an Italianate villa. Later, a light-weight iron veranda was added to the first floor to complete the effect.<sup>7</sup>

*Gables and Verandas*

If the wattle and daub veranda house epitomises the earliest architecture of the settlement then the gabled veranda house symbolises the architecture of this "second phase" as it represents an integration of two worlds and their ideas. The veranda survived at one or two sides but its horizontal emphasis was counter-balanced by a gable or gables with bay window, ventilator and decorative bargeboards.<sup>9</sup> A simple and effective design resolution of a vertical element contrasting with a horizontal one; main entrance at the visual fulcrum and principal room acknowledged from the street. This asymmetrical type has interesting "Picturesque" ancestors and continued the "plastic" irregularity of the small villa conceived as an appropriate foil to a



13. Gardiner Street from the Jetty with Dick King's statue in the foreground. On the right the famous Marine Hotel by W.E. Robarts (c.1887) and on the left Twine's Hotel (c. 1890).

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



14. The intersection of West and Gardiner Streets from the Market Square. The Natal Bank (1902) by W.E. Roberts, occupied the prominent site in the town.

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



The Masonic Hall, Smith Street, Dunbar

Published by W & A. Fyfe & Co., Dunbar

15. The Masonic Hall, Port Natal Lodge, Smith Street (1894). W. Street-Wilson and A. Fyfe.

(Photograph: Author's collection)



16. Entrance gates, Mitchell Girls' High School (c.1890).  
(Now used as a teacher's training college).

(Photograph: Author's collection)

natural environment. Many varieties were possible, however, within the type: width of veranda and gable could vary; two verandas at the corner could be balanced with two gables flanking so that the asymmetrical idea could be extended to more than one view; square and polygonal bays with a variety of roof treatments either separate or integrated could provide additional projections and modulations; the whole compositional idea could be treated within a single-storied house and eventually possibilities existed for extending the veranda itself past the gable.<sup>11</sup> Evidence exists that it was quite common to mix plaster and facebrick panels in external walls so as to heighten the irregular feeling and the irregularity could extend to the infill of the gable and treatment of the ventilator. The long duration of this type and its many vernacular variations in different parts of the city and among many different peoples point to its remarkable success.

### *Public Buildings*

The late Victorian period shows evidence of further architectural experimentation in the interplay between the veranda idea and stylistic trends brought from Britain by immigrant architects. Philip Dudgeon, in particular, found no difficulty in integrating simple verandas into a hospital building at Addington in a revived Classical style (1878). The Classical style was, of course, considered appropriate for public use as it had been for commercial purposes. Dudgeon also used a continuous pavement veranda to unify two disparate buildings of Greenacres emporium in West Street.

Street verandas did provide a sense of relationship to streetscapes composed of very different buildings but in the case of public and municipal buildings, recourse was made to a peristyle or colonnade idea rather than a veranda for this permitted a closer relationship to a masonry architecture in, say, a revived Flemish Renaissance Style. This revived style, or the Free style which developed out of it, consisted of brick walls either with patterns of brick or plastered mouldings, and sometimes horizontal bands, prominent gables and tower projections. Vertical windows, cupolas and ventilators provided a balancing vertical accent while corners and pavilion ends were projected boldly.<sup>10</sup>

### *Eclectic Essays*

These were often strong urban statements, quite individualistic in their streetscape role, eclectic essays of stylistic elements and unselfconsciously providing a clear sense of place at intersections and the corners of city blocks. The local fascination for corner acknowledgement which had commenced in the 1860s in a modest way had now become a powerful characteristic of the age and the city. The complex and irregular form and silhouette of the Victorian villa had, as it were, arrived in West and Grey and Smith Streets. Thus the emerging visual image of the City (and one which the later Edwardian period would develop even further) was of a collection of sculptural compositions, quite significantly separate at their roofs, while at street level light-weight verandas provided a sense of continuity.<sup>12, 13</sup> Architectural decoration was a veritable encyclopaedia of past styles freely interpreted. Numerous examples were built with little or no



17. Girls' Model School, Gale Street (1896) by F.M. Kent.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)



18. Durban High School (1894) by W. Powell.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)

19. A garden elevation of the original Musgrave Road Methodist Church by W.E. Robarts (1893).  
(Photograph: Author's collection)



20. The minaret of the Grey Street Mosque (c.1897 and 1902).  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)

integration of the veranda idea but contributed to the variety of architectural form. The first Town Hall (1885), the Smith Street Masonic Lodge (1893)<sup>15</sup> and others achieved Ruskinian "preciousness" by their setbacks from adjacent buildings, in combination with a vigorous clarity of style and the use of intersecting geometrical forms.

This clarity was considered to be both severe and conservative in comparison to the more flamboyant urban statements described above.<sup>14</sup>

### *Polychromous Schools*

The period of colonial simplicity<sup>16</sup> where pavilion forms, ground floor verandas and hipped roofs were used as architectural solutions to schools and institutions now gave way to many eclectic variations of High Victorian polychromy. Polychromous irregularity of material, colour and texture in brick, stone and plaster went hand in hand with complex forms, curvilinear gables and elaborate details. Turrets, ventilators and cupolas added visual interest to interesting roofscapes of iron and zinc which were often pyramidal compositions of hipped shapes. The adventurous architecture of the Boys'<sup>19</sup> and Girls' High Schools<sup>17</sup> are ambitious expressions of exuberant attitudes to a world of learning. In the case of D.H.S. by William Powell (1895) solid arcades were mixed with lightweight verandas. The Renaissance Revival types did provide an easy reference for invention and allowed the resolution of providing fenestration systems of different types for the great variety of accommodation essential in such structures.

### *Churches and Mosques*

With the improvement of facebrick by this time, polychromous design ideas, especially of a horizontal pattern, could be applied to Gothic Revival church forms.<sup>21</sup> Plinths, window sills and cornice lines could run through to balance the vertical emphasis of buttresses and pointed arch windows. Ridge ventilators with fleches and wide eave overhangs were integrated as climatic concessions while sometimes pivot-hung windows allowed good ventilation. The Musgrave Methodist Church (1893) shows an interesting integration of a louvered system to the gables as suncontrol devices and decorative relief.<sup>19</sup> However these were comparative rarities and the norm of the time was a red brick, Gothic Revival type often with a cruciform plan, basilican section and exposed trusses as variations of a hammer beam type.

The two early Mosques of the city were quite different in design. The Grey Street Mosque<sup>20</sup> had two prominent minarets, one smaller, with a court yard which opened onto Grey Street while that in West Street (1885) was rather like a large, square, cast-iron bandstand of the period with a pavilion roof.

The majority of these religious buildings continued the early tradition of being established as freestanding structures on relatively open sites and where they have towers or minarets they perform a useful landmark role within the townscape.

### *Industrial and Utilitarian Structures*

Increased industrial activity at the end of the Victorian period brought with it the erection of numerous buildings of a utilitarian nature: factories, mills, sheds, workshops, warehouses and railway stations. Firstly, we can detect an unfettered use of bold and simple geometrical forms.<sup>22</sup> Large



21. Umbilo Wesleyan Church (1904) by Buckle and Kirby.  
(Photograph: Local History Museum)



22. The Queen's Warehouse (or Bondstore), Point Road (1902) designed by the engineers of the Natal Harbour Department.  
(Photograph: Author's collection)





23. The Alice Street Power Station (1899).

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



24. Tower Buildings (c.1885) at the West Street Bridge.

(Photograph: Local History Museum)



25. Hostel for the Eastern Stevedoring Company (c.1890), Point Road.

(Photograph: *Natal Illustrated*, 1906)

curved roofs with ventilators; rigorous sets of end-gables to repetitive, pitched roofs; continuous bands of fenestration as direct expressions of internal ventilation and illumination requirements.<sup>23</sup> Structures made use of the new materials or techniques, especially corrugated iron sheeting and cast-iron. Often hipped roof forms were employed and with masonry walls, a limited application of Classical trim. Castellated towers and buttresses<sup>24</sup> were the exception however, in masonry structures, where the more readily available model was a Romanesque one. This was usually carried out in brick rhythms of arches tied with string courses and plinths and a bold emphasis given to openings in echoing arches or stucco rustication. Simple and effective design solutions also appeared to house more unusual functions; coaling bins and plague house at the Bluff; palm house for the Botanic Gardens (1898) and a stevedoring hostel at the Point. (c. 1890)<sup>25</sup>

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