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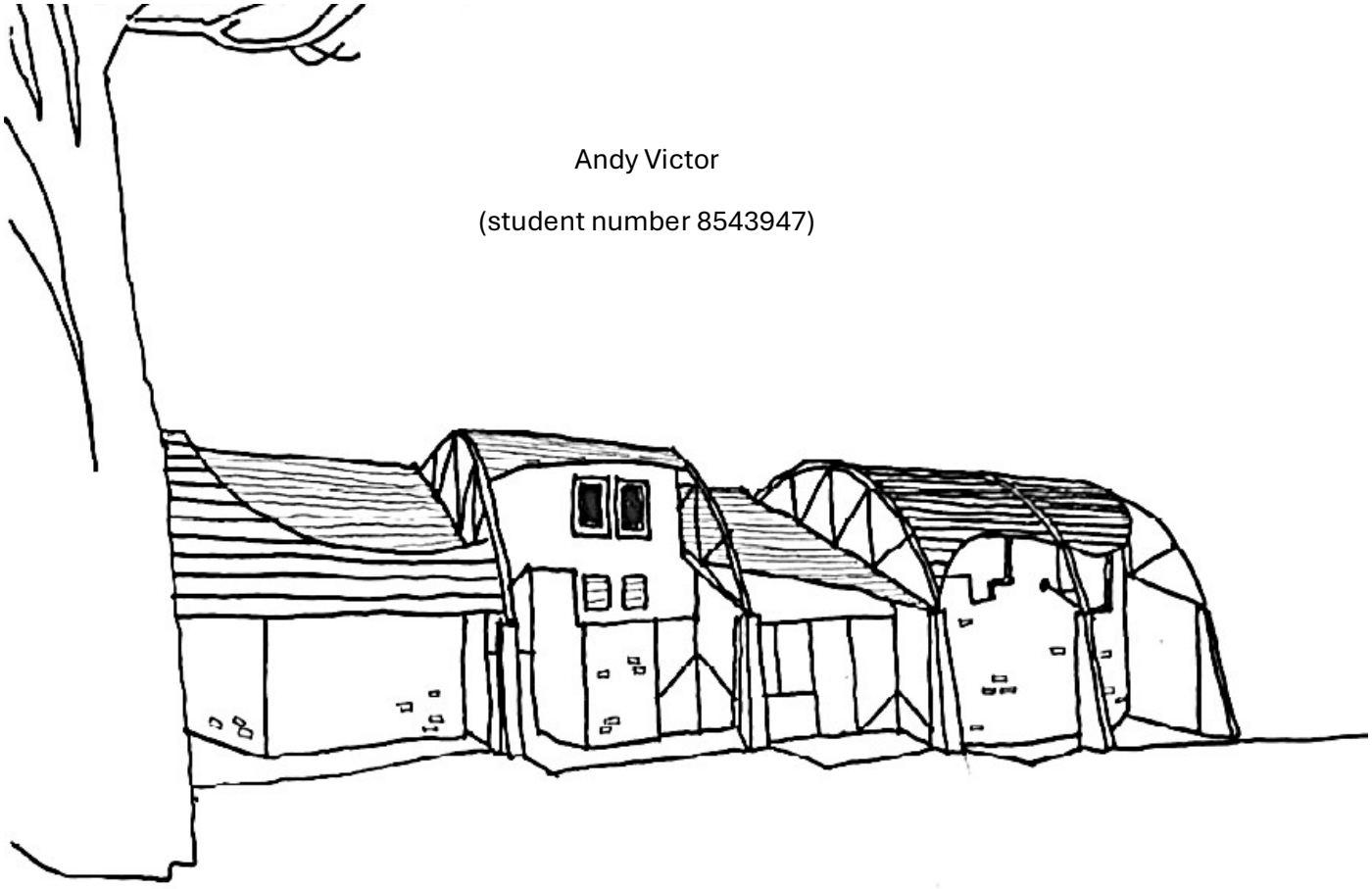
LESSONS FROM TRANSVAAL HOUSE:

BALANCING HERITAGE, CULTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Andy Victor

(student number 8543947)



Supervisor: Dr Sechaba Maape

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Urban Studies in Sustainable Energy Efficient Cities.

May 2025

DECLARATION

I, Andrea Victor, declare that this research report is my own unaided work, except where acknowledged.

It is submitted for the degree of Master of Urban Studies in Sustainable Energy Efficient Cities to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

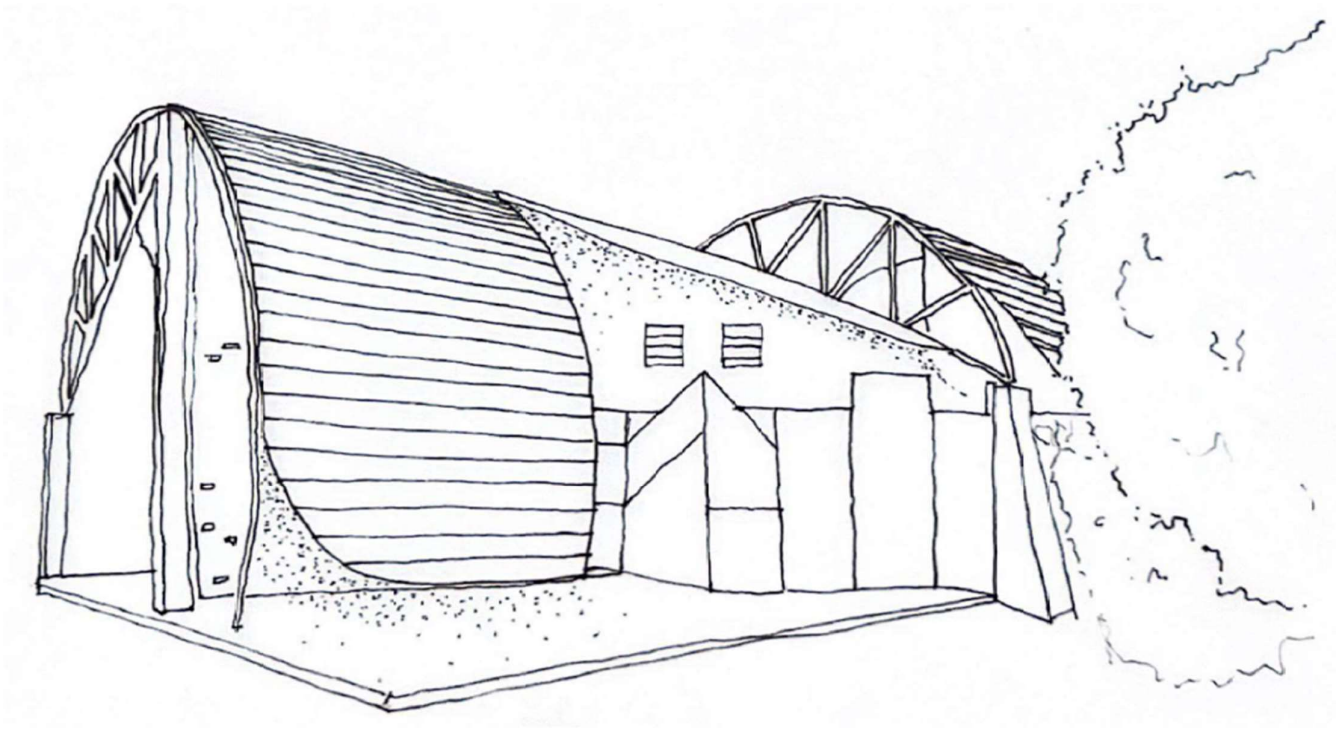
It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

Signature: 

Date: 25 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This research report investigates Transvaal House, a modernist home designed by Stanley Saitowitz during apartheid, as a lens through which to explore architectural heritage, cultural identity, and sustainability in post-apartheid South Africa. The study situates the house within its historical, social and political context, examining its design influences, including modernist principles and vernacular elements, and its role in reflecting and resisting apartheid spatial planning. Using qualitative data drawn from site visits, informal discussions, and reflective analysis, the research addresses the building's contested legacy and potential for adaptive reuse. Findings suggest that preserving Transvaal House facilitates critical conversations about history, race, and sustainability, transforming the building into a platform for inclusivity and learning. The research argues that Transvaal House's contested legacy is its greatest strength, enabling critical engagement with South Africa's architectural past while imagining a more inclusive and sustainable future.



South East View of Transvaal House

DEDICATION

this document is dedicated to:
those who walked before me
paving the way and leaving behind big shoes to fill
whose memory I strive to honour every day

the one who walks by my side, making this journey worthwhile

and those who will carry on after me,
fixing the world
through the paths they choose and the lives they lead
and who make me proud



Entrance to Transvaal House

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much appreciation to:

Professor Nnamdi Elleh for inviting me and including me, and reintroducing me to Brebnor House, for being available for stimulating, insightful and measured conversations, for telling me to look inwards. Thank you for gently convincing me that I am enough, for talking modernism in depth and with boundless passion, for discussing Negritude and colonialism and offering a whole new perspective that expanded my worldview exponentially, for being open and available and for generously making time, sharing your intellectual property and your personal library.

Dr Sechaba Maape who was a catalyst for this journey. Your refusal to translate challenged me to engage more deeply. You inspired me to try to understand how to navigate our shared landscape with sensitivity and awareness, despite gaps in age, background and experience. Thank you for encouraging me to excavate and review my long-buried Marxist and Feminist ideals. Thank you for your personal stories and point of view. Thank you for your insight, and for speaking candidly about the complexities of whiteness and Blackness, for pushing me to dig deep and explore. Thank you for sharing your refreshing take on architecture and the world.

To my classmates who taught me more than any library ever could, and who have given me hope for the future of this country.

To Jill for being there every step of the way, reading and correcting, expanding my vocabulary beyond bricks and mortar, and for showing me how to use commas for thresholds and brackets for shelter.

To Paul for the love and support, and for building a home, a family, and a life with me.

To Benj + Ruby, Eve, and Jonah whose leaving spurred me to embark on this folly, and who have no idea how much I appreciate them and how I remain in awe of each one of them.

To my teachers, passed and present, and all the ones on the way, intentional and incidental, I hope that in time the lessons that I have tried to share will find their place in the hearts and minds of those who will carry on this business of using space to build a better world far into the future.

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A NOTE



Transvaal House is also known as Brebnor House. It is a building with many layers and many stories. I am telling a small story of how I see it, today. There is the story of Scott and Linda – a love story of a young couple who decided to build a life, without children in a house with only one bedroom. There is the story of Scott who built the house. There are stories of the others involved in building this house whose names I do not know, and the futures and careers that emanated from this project for them. Or not. And then there is the love story between Scott and this House. He has cared for it and maintained it and perhaps prioritised it. He has built his life in it; or structured his life around it.

Figure 01:1 Linda Sontag and Scott Brebnor.
Photograph: Heather Dodd, 0ctober 2024

Linda has her story of her relationship with this house and why she chose to stay in it and why she chose to leave it. And why she chose to donate it. There is Scott's partner Lorraine who stays in the relationship but went to live somewhere else. There is the story of Stanley Saitowitz who took on a commission that his colleague did not want, and how this building became a place for him to begin his career. And why he chose to donate it. There is the story of many generations of young architects who have moved through this house and are still moving through it, who are inspired by it, love it, hate it, are perplexed by it.



Figure 01:2 Scott and Lorriane, Stanley Saitowitz, Nnamdi Elleh, Heather Dodd.
Photograph: Kathy Munro, November 2023.



There is the story of South Africa, of the social environment, of the politics, of inclusion and exclusion. There is the story of Stanley and Wits, of Heather and Stanley, of Wits and Nnamdi, of Heather and Nnamdi and how they managed to accomplish the donation of the House to Wits. There is the story which is yet to be written about what happens next. And there are a million other embedded stories that aren't mine to tell. This is only one tiny story that I am lucky enough to be able to recount. Every single person who has touched this house or been touched by it can tell you a story and that is where the magic of architecture lies.

Figure 01:3 Contemplative Scott.
Photograph by author, November 2023.

1. EXPLORING TRANSVAAL HOUSE

This research is centred on Transvaal House, a building that offers a platform to explore heritage, sustainability and culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite its modest size, this building embodies the complex legacies of South African history and presents an opportunity to examine the relationship between architecture, development, and cultural memory. Situated in Midrand, between Johannesburg and Pretoria, Transvaal House is located at the intersection of contrasting urban realities - gated estates and townships, industrial, retail and commercial development, dirt roads, highways, train tracks, and taxi routes - reflecting the spatial discrepancies that define South Africa. Designed by Stanley Saitowitz in 1978 and declared a National Monument in 1997 (Saitowitz, 2005), Transvaal House holds both personal and professional significance for me.

1.1 Background

Designed during a period of intense political turmoil in South Africa, Transvaal House reflects the complexities of its era. Apartheid policies deeply entrenched racial segregation and spatial inequalities, and Wits University became a centre of resistance (Le Roux, 2023), where students and academics grappled with the harsh realities of the regime. Engaging with architecture in this context involved navigating a world shaped by colonial and apartheid influences. It meant examining the ways in which architecture, modernism, and apartheid were intertwined, and considering how architects could contribute to creating inclusive and just spaces.

Globally, the late 1970s were marked by upheaval: the Iranian Revolution, the Vietnam War, the Camp David Accords, Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in the UK, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the beginning of Rhodesia’s transition to Zimbabwe. Despite this global instability, South Africa was economically prosperous, with an American dollar costing 65 South African cents (South African Reserve Bank). This wealth fuelled a building boom, making architecture a powerful political tool (Chipkin, 2008).

The built environment became a tangible representation of the oppressive social order. In this context, Transvaal House symbolises more than just a building; it embodies the tensions of the time. It reflects the social and political dynamics of apartheid South Africa and the global challenges of navigating cultural identity, land ownership, and architecture’s role in shaping society.

1.1.2 Architecture in South Africa around the 1970s

Architecture in South Africa cannot be disentangled from its cultural and political context. The legacy of apartheid is deeply embedded in the country's built environment, yet architecture also holds the potential to challenge these hierarchies and promote more inclusive narratives.

Before 1970, South African architecture reflected British imperial power through Classical and Beaux-Arts traditions. By the 1950s, Modernism took root, focusing on functionality and minimalism but often ignoring apartheid's social realities. Later designs were introduced that blended Modernist principles with African art, signalling a shift toward diversity in architecture (Marshall, 2001).

During the height of apartheid, a small number of architects began experimenting with more open, flexible designs that subtly critiqued the rigid spatial hierarchies of the time. Some, like Saitowitz, looked beyond European modernist ideals, engaging with local, indigenous traditions. Although this marked a significant shift, it was not without complexity, raising questions about cultural appropriation. Transvaal House reflects these tensions.

Post-1994, architecture in South Africa embraced Postmodernism, using local materials and motifs to reflect inclusivity and diversity. Buildings became symbols of reconciliation and a nation in transition, with architecture mirroring South Africa's political and cultural transformation.

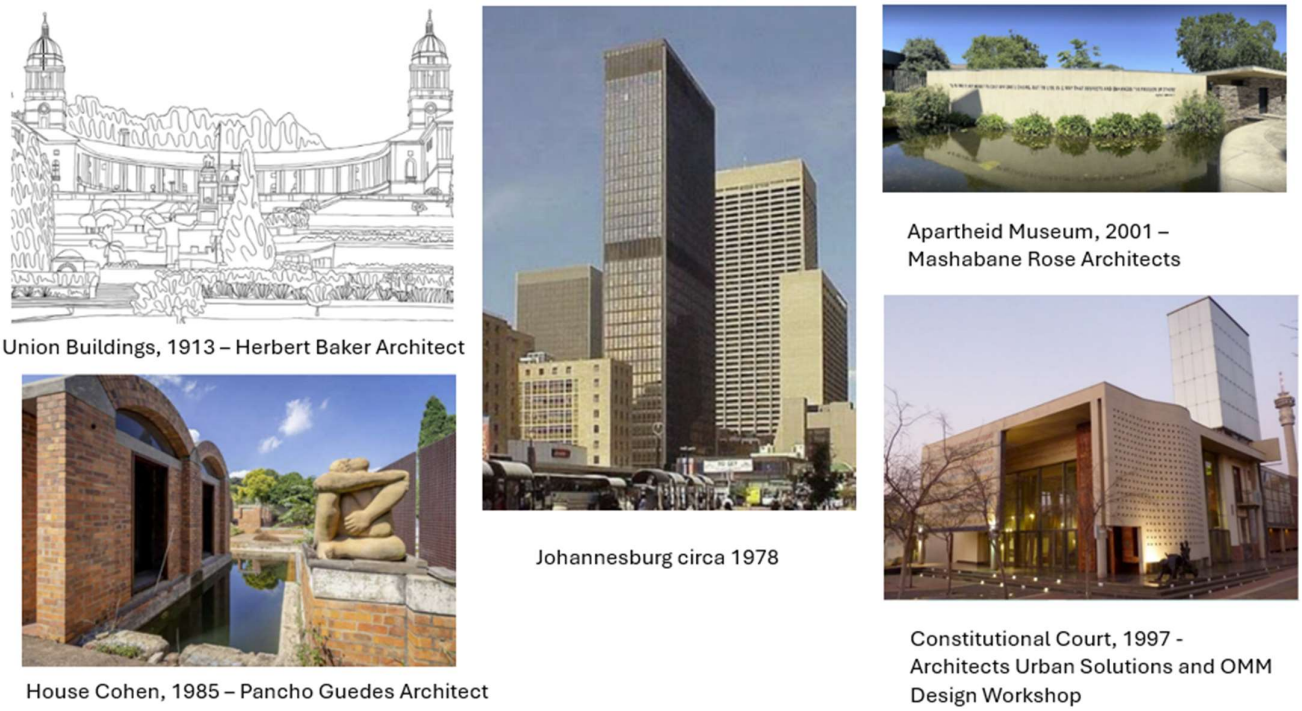


Figure 1:1 Buildings from Different Times.
(See Image Credits)

1.2 Problem Statement and Rationale

Transvaal House raises critical questions about whose heritage is preserved, how buildings with complex legacies can be adapted for modern use, and how architecture can navigate the tensions of post-apartheid South Africa. This research explores Transvaal House as a microcosm of South African architectural challenges, offering a lens through which to examine the intersections of cultural memory, sustainability, and identity in the built environment.

1.3 Aims

This research aims to examine the architectural, cultural, and historical significance of Transvaal House, exploring its potential to serve as a platform for dialogue about sustainability and social justice. It intends to contribute to an understanding of how architecture can engage with contested heritage and evolving societal needs.

1.4 Research Questions

Does the history of Transvaal House add to its value as a heritage site and what are the implications of protecting buildings with complex legacies in post-apartheid South Africa?

Sub questions:

- What are the challenges and opportunities in conserving modernist architecture while balancing sustainable design, adaptive reuse, cultural memory, and navigating the tensions between cultural appreciation and appropriation?
- What is the role that Transvaal House can play in encouraging dialogue around social justice, sustainability, and heritage?

1.5 Methods

The methodology for this research evolved significantly from its original proposal. While the initial intent was to conduct semi-structured interviews the actual process followed an organic and reflective trajectory. This change emerged as a response to the nature of the data available, the complexity of the subject matter, the layered social and political context of the site and the value of drawing on lived experiences.

The research was grounded in informal conversations with architects, academics, students, and heritage professionals. These exchanges allowed for flexibility in exploring nuanced perspectives, and

became a central method of inquiry, reflecting the study's immersive and context-sensitive orientation.

The research drew on reflective narrative analysis and autoethnographic positioning. As a trained architect and a Jewish South African with lived experience of modernist architectural education, my positionality shaped how data was gathered, interpreted, and framed. These reflections were not initially proposed as a method but became central to understanding the meanings embedded in Transvaal House and its reception. The method expanded to include a critical positional lens, enabling interpretation of architectural form, memory, and meaning.

Thematic synthesis was used to identify patterns and recurring concerns across the material collected. Themes such as contested identity, cultural appropriation, adaptive reuse, sustainability, and social inclusion emerged inductively through engagement with literature, conversations, and site visits.

Scenario exploration was used as a conceptual tool to help frame potential futures for Transvaal House, from demolition to adaptive reuse, and served as a means to evaluate how theoretical principles might play out in practice. This thinking was informed by professional experience rather than by academic scenario planning frameworks and is best understood as a design-based critical inquiry rather than a standalone method.

1.6 Theoretical Framework for Sustainable Architectural interventions.

Sustainability is a holistic concept that encompasses environmental, cultural and social dimensions. In the context of architectural interventions, it involves more than improving energy efficiency or reducing resource consumption. It requires acknowledging of cultural integrity and contested histories of heritage sites (Clarke et al., 2019; Noble, 2011; Rapoport, 1969). For Transvaal House, this means recognising its layered identity, including its association with Saitowitz's Jewish heritage, his engagement with Ndebele vernacular forms, and its construction during the apartheid era, and understanding that questions of whose narratives are preserved and whose are omitted are central to discussions about sustainability.

This expanded understanding of sustainability highlights the building's potential to serve as more than just a teaching tool for retrofitting or energy efficient upgrades. It can function as a space for critical

reflection on race, identity, and land ownership in South Africa. I have drawn on three core principles that guide sustainable interventions:

1.6.1 Adaptive Reuse

Adaptive reuse prioritises retaining and transforming existing structures to extend their lifecycle. This approach reduces embodied energy loss, preserves cultural narratives, and aligns with global movements towards minimising demolition and landfill contributions. It emphasises retrofitting and contextually responsive solutions.

1.6.2 Resource Efficiency

Resource efficiency entails strategies to optimise materials, water, and energy use. For heritage buildings, this might include integrating renewable energy systems, improving insulation, or employing passive design principles. Such measures reduce environmental impact without undermining historical authenticity.

1.6.3 Socially Inclusive Design

Interventions must provide equitable access to resources and opportunities, ensuring heritage sites become platforms for education, dialogue and community engagement. In the case of Transvaal House, socially inclusive design could mean repurposing the space for student housing, communal facilities, or educational programmes that acknowledge the building's complex past and serve a diverse community.

This theoretical framework informs the evaluation of various proposed scenarios for Transvaal House. By assessing each scenario using the above principles, it is possible to determine how effectively different interventions align with sustainable architectural practices.

1.7 Positionality

Growing up in a household with a modernist architect father, I was immersed in the ideals, artifacts, and conversations of Modernism from an early age. This upbringing, combined with my architectural education at Wits in the 1980s, shaped my understanding of the built environment and aligned my perspective with many of the modernist ideals embodied in this building. Many of Saitowitz's mentors were also my mentors, and my education at Wits mirrored his experience at the same institution a decade earlier. I first encountered Transvaal House as a student in 1987. Now, more than three decade on, it has been donated to Wits University, sparking interest in its future use as it transitions from a private residence to a more public role. These personal connections, intertwined with the

architectural and historical significance of Transvaal House, shape the lens through which I approach this research.

As a white, Jewish South African architect, my identity influences how I engage with this project. Like Saitowitz, I come from a community that has historically experienced displacement, which informs my understanding of land, belonging, and architecture. My position as a non-Black architect has led me to question my right to comment on the use of indigenous iconography. Conversations with my supervisor have reinforced the importance of critically examining the power dynamics embedded in South African architecture, particularly regarding cultural appropriation and representation. However, my experience of being peripheral gives me a unique perspective, enabling me to interrogate these issues with sensitivity.

The Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) serves as an ethical framework that underpins my approach to architecture. It highlights the responsibility of architects to engage with social justice and to use the built environment to address historical injustices. This concept resonates with Saitowitz's work, which critiques apartheid through spatial openness and flexibility. In this study, I reflect on how both Saitowitz's Jewishness and my own positionality allow for a critical engagement with South Africa's architectural landscape, particularly in relation to land ownership, identity, and the preservation of cultural memory.



Saitowitz's Kiddush Cup forms part of his Judaica collection

Victor Family Kiddush Cup handed down through generations

Figure 1:2 Kiddush Cups
(See Image Credits)

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. This Introduction outlines the research aims, methods, and theoretical framework, setting the stage for the study. The literature review examines key concepts, establishing a conceptual framework that weaves together heritage, sustainability, and cultural transformation. The Context chapter situates Transvaal House within its historical, social, and architectural significance, highlighting its complex and contested legacy. The Findings and Scenario Modelling chapter presents qualitative insights from site visits and informal discussions, alongside potential future scenarios for the building. The Analysis chapter critically evaluates the findings and scenarios, exploring their intersections with broader themes of heritage, sustainability, and architecture grounded in justice. The Conclusion ties together the insights from all chapters, synthesizing a cohesive vision for Transvaal House that balances its preservation with innovative, sustainable, and socially just pathways.

1.9 Timeline

To provide a comprehensive temporal framework for this research, the timeline on page 19 compares key moments in South African history, major architectural milestones, and the life spans of architects discussed in this thesis. The timeline situates Transvaal House within a context of human development, colonial expansion, industrialization, and political struggle.

The timeline also highlights the evolution of architectural practice in South Africa, from the early arrival of architects trained in Europe to the modernist experiments of the 20th century, showing how architecture has intersected with social and political currents. It notes pivotal moments such as the discovery of gold and diamonds, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, the impact of apartheid spatial policies, and the emergence of a post-apartheid architectural discourse.

By situating Transvaal House within this web of historical and architectural developments, the timeline provides a reference point for understanding the building's significance and its place in South Africa's contested architectural and cultural heritage.

1.10 Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on Transvaal House as a single, representative case within the spectrum of South African heritage architecture. While the research addresses issues of sustainability, social justice, and cultural inclusivity, it does not claim to provide a comprehensive analysis of all heritage buildings

or the full range of indigenous architectural traditions in South Africa. Instead, it concentrates on the specific historical, cultural, and spatial contexts of Transvaal House, primarily examining its legacy from the late 1970s to the present post-apartheid era.

The use of scenario modelling is similarly bounded. Although it offers a framework for envisioning potential futures for Transvaal House, this methodological choice is not intended to serve as a universally applicable tool for all heritage sites or architectural inquiries. The scenarios are developed and assessed within the unique constraints of Transvaal House's history, location, and socio-political milieu.

By limiting the geographic, temporal, and conceptual scope in this manner, the study aims to provide a focused and in-depth exploration of Transvaal House's complexities. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how one heritage building can illuminate debates around cultural memory, sustainable adaptation, and inclusivity in South Africa's evolving architectural landscape, without attempting to generalize beyond the specific context at hand.

TIMELINE

(please note that this is an A3 page with a landscape orientation)

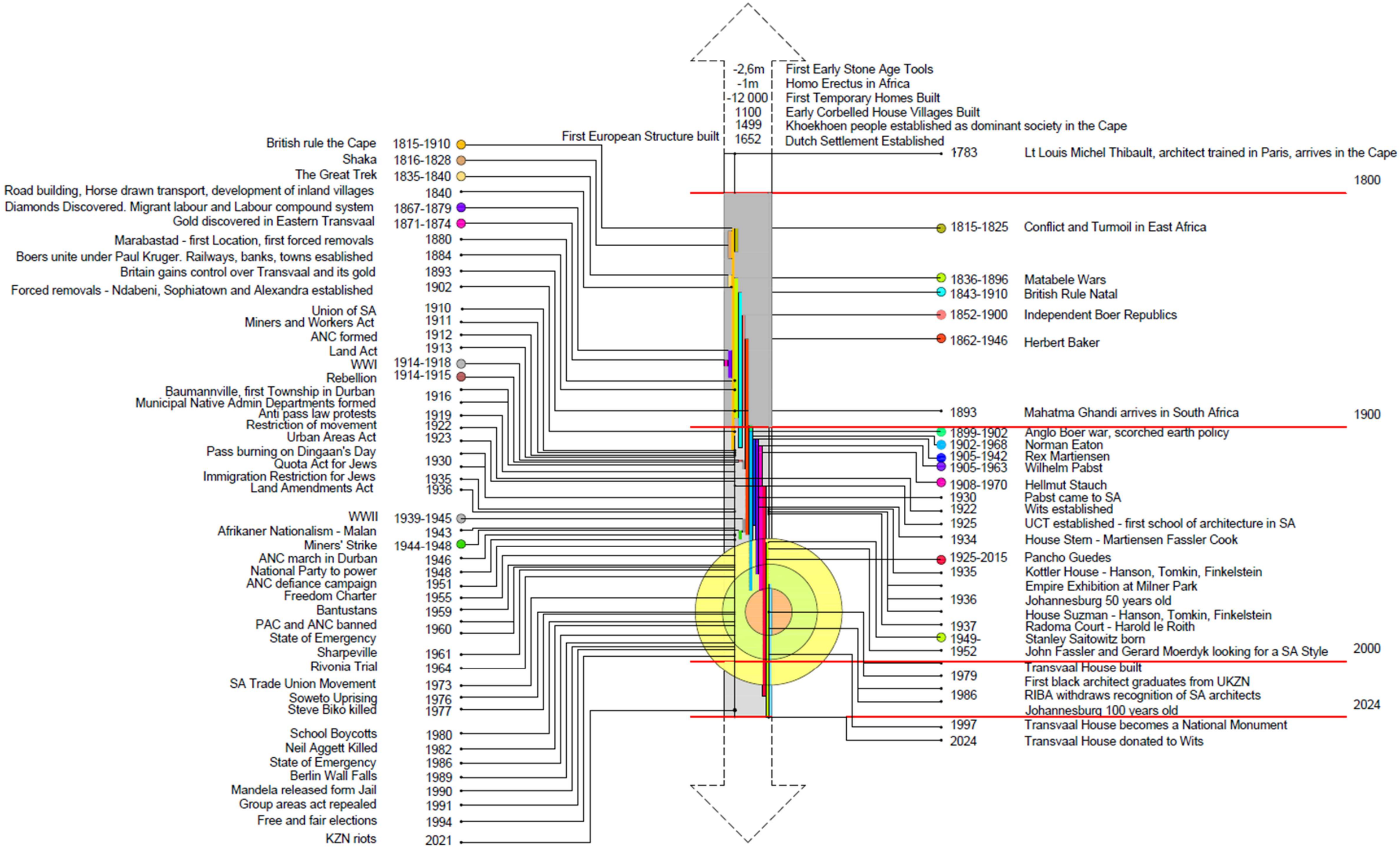


Figure 1:3 Timeline

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the search for a South African architectural identity by examining a range of perspectives on cultural identity, sustainability, heritage, and modernism. It considers how architecture in South Africa has navigated the intersection of global influences and local traditions, particularly under colonial and apartheid rule. A primary focus is on how these theories intersect to frame my analysis of Transvaal House as a site where these themes converge. I emphasise the need for sensitive heritage preservation that respects diverse cultural memories while addressing issues of authenticity, identity, and resilience in a post-colonial context. Authors such as Fathy (1969) and Rapoport (1969) establish architecture as a cultural expression rooted in the values and identities of the communities it serves, while others, like Marschall (2001) and Saitowitz (1996), reflect on the challenges and potential of incorporating indigenous influences within South African modernism.

Major themes include the negotiation between tradition and innovation, the need for culturally grounded sustainability, and the complexities of heritage conservation in a post-apartheid South Africa. These themes are central to my study, shaping the conceptual framework used to examine the contested heritage and potential of Transvaal House. Saitowitz's Jewish background introduces another layer, highlighting Jewish views on land ownership and the role of the Jewish architectural community in shaping South Africa's modernist landscape, while grappling with a marginal position in society. These elements inform Saitowitz's work on Transvaal House, which merges local vernacular forms with modernist ideals and questions of contested heritage.

Modernism's impact on South African architecture during apartheid reveals the ideological divides within the profession, as a handful of architects sought to balance progressive ideals with the restrictive and exclusionary policies of the time. This literature provides the foundation for my positioning, where I explore the tensions between architectural ideals and political realities as they manifest in Transvaal House. The value of heritage in this context becomes multifaceted: it includes both tangible and intangible elements, often creating contested sites that negotiate between historical preservation and the realities of an evolving society. This review engages with these debates by exploring how architecture in South Africa, particularly through the example of Transvaal House, embodies the ongoing dialogue between tradition and transformation, history and innovation.

2.1 The Search for a Southern African Architecture

The search for a South African architecture is tied to cultural identity, architectural ideals, and responses to contextual challenges. Fathy (1969) and Rapoport (1969) explain how people's culture manifests in their built environment, highlighting architecture as a confluence of social, cultural, and historical elements. Marschall (2001) identifies a cultural shift in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s where contemporary African art was introduced into architecture but critiques the concept of "Africanised" architecture as artificial, inauthentic, and irrelevant (Marschall, 2001:139). Saitowitz (in Belogolovsky, 2023) says the ideas pursued in the Transvaal House are lessons from local architecture. He avers that he learned extensively from indigenous African architecture and looked to global precedents like Machu Picchu for inspiration as an example of how architecture can be integrated with landscape, ritual and cultural meaning. This suggests that Saitowitz's approach was informed by an interest in place-responsive, non-Western architectural logics. Saitowitz (2024) said, "Pancho [Guedes] was an African architect – he had configured the modernist vision and blended it with Africa" He continued, "the biggest influence on me is Pancho…innovation and Africa …"

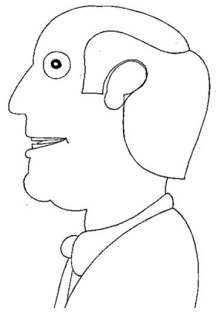


Figure 2:1Pancho Guedes (See image credits)

This section highlights the foundational debates in the search for a South African architectural identity and positions Transvaal House as a key example where these debates converge. It provides the basis for analysing how modernist and vernacular influences interact within the building and the tensions that arise from their integration.

According to Balzan (2019) despite Guedes' opposition to Portuguese control of Mozambique, he was not exempt from being perceived as a coloniser. Where Guedes developed his style there, Saitowitz turned to Ndebele architecture in the Transvaal. While this was an attempt to integrate local vernacular architecture, Saitowitz's whiteness positioned him within the structures of apartheid privilege and today the authenticity of his efforts can be questioned. Guedes instructed his students to examine suburban outbuildings as well as rural buildings to find a Transvaal Style (Saitowitz 1995). Saitowitz shares that there was a quest in the late 1970s for a "veld city parallel" to architecture in Europe and USA (Wagner (ed) 1995:19). Munro (2024) notes how Saitowitz consolidated Ndebele placemaking, Guedes's influence and the extended boundaries of available materials in Transvaal House. Britz (1982) argues that while a unique South African architectural style may be unnecessary,

an architecture that responds meaningfully to the local context is essential, allowing individuals to find meaning in their environments.

Marschall (2001) tracks the introduction of natural materials and climatically relevant architecture by Baker and Leith, and later Eaton's use of curvilinear forms, noting the influence of local Zulu beehive huts. A shift follows from Eaton's interpretation to the incorporation of contemporary African art which indicates a recognition of South African culture. Guedes continued creating bonds between art, craft and architecture. Attitudes shift from the use of patterns, surface decoration and uncontextualised elements to serious research of indigenous building traditions (*ibid*.) Marschall and Kearney (2000) write that Eurocentric design paradigms diluted the impact of uniquely South African architectural thinking, and it is essential to develop an architectural language based in African traditions to make the discipline relevant to South Africa's population.

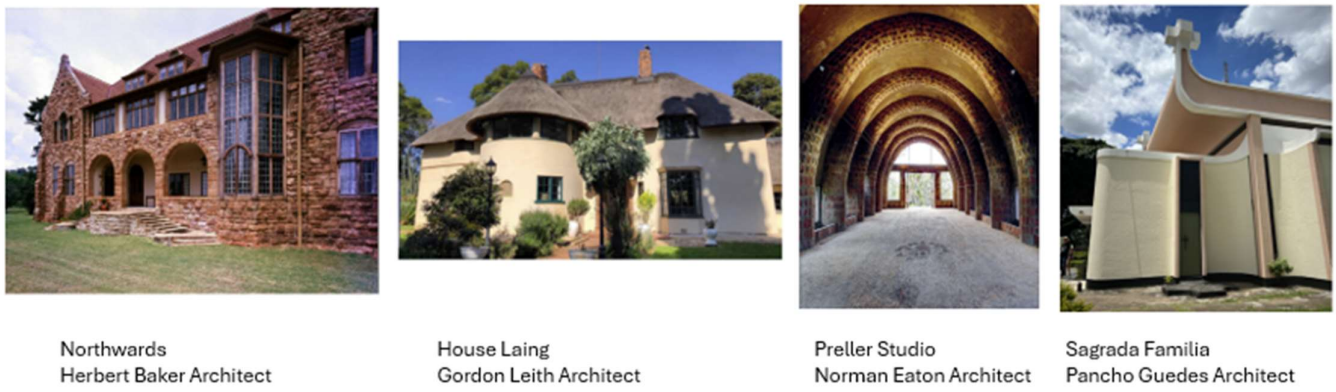


Figure 2:2 Baker, Leith, Eaton and Guedes (see Image credits)

Shortly after the completion of Transvaal House, an Architectural Student Congress called for accessible architectural education for disenfranchised groups and recognition of South Africa's place within the African continent, emphasising the role of architects in shaping the nation's future (Low,1986). The question of how architecture reflects or contends with these shifts today is central to the discourse. In his foreword to Noble's 2011 book, "African Identity in Post-Apartheid Public Architecture: White Skin, Black Masks," Borden wites that architecture emerges as "the product of a hugely complex intersection of ideas, groups, individuals, thoughts, intentions, propositions" (Noble, 2011: xvii). Borden continues, describing how architecture is "composed from attitudes, intentions, relations, politics, culture and people." (*ibid*.)

Meuser and Dalbai (2021) suggest that architecture in Africa be approached with solutions that reflect Africa but are not necessarily derived from indigenous vernacular building traditions. On a

global scale, African architecture has often been reduced to its vernacular forms, oversimplifying the diversity and richness of its styles and materials. Low (2021) observes that control over shelter production by local inhabitants remains a distinctive feature of African architecture. This emphasis on local participation resonates with Saitowitz, who advocates for designs that are rooted in local context and user participation (Saitowitz,2005).

In contemporary South Africa, tensions between historical injustices and future aspirations play out in architectural discourse. Judin (2024) notes the layers of history and memory within the built environment reflect the ongoing search for a distinctly South African architectural identity. The notion that place is relational and intertwined with social practices suggests a dynamic understanding of architecture. Instead of static monuments, South African architecture should embody the living, changing relationships people have with space and history, integrating themes of reconciliation and resistance. Elleh (2022) notes that architectural students in Johannesburg are currently questioning why African architecture is portrayed as consisting of indigenous settlements and dwellings.

Lipman (2009) observes that as long as the architectural profession is predominantly middle-class and white it will not be possible to recognise regional expressions. Noble (2011) emphasises the challenges of reconciling contemporary needs with African expressions while navigating the legacy of apartheid and colonialism. Noble stresses the struggle to define a contemporary architectural identity that authentically reflects cultural heritage. Drawing on Fanon's theory in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), which examines the duality of identity imposed by colonial structures, Noble differentiates between structure and surface elements of both buildings and society.

Martin Murray (2013) examines the intersection of collective memory and national identity. He raises the shifting nature of history and memory making processes, underscoring the ongoing struggle to construct a cohesive national identity amidst the complexities of South Africa's colonial and post-colonial history. Noëleen Murray (2013) notes the relationship between modernist architecture in South Africa and apartheid spatial planning and questions the heritage values of these buildings today. She discusses how apartheid influenced the development of architecture and urban planning in South Africa ethnicising the making of buildings and cities. Martin Murray (2013) raises the issues of apartheid in the spatial forms of South African cities underscoring the challenges of establishing a national post-apartheid identity grounded in cultural diversity.

Berman's (1982) insights on modernity highlights its ability to transcend ethnic and geographical boundaries, reinforcing the search for a local architecture that reconciles diverse cultural identities within a modern framework. In Saitowitz's search for a South African architectural identity, the relationship between modernism and local tradition are evident. He acknowledges the contributions of his South African roots in shaping his contemporary socially oriented architectural practice (Saitowitz,2005). His Transvaal House integrates influences from both indigenous African architecture and global design sensibilities, echoing the ongoing quest for authenticity in the built environment.

In placing Transvaal House within the search for a South African architectural identity, I have delineated three distinct phases. The early 20th-century influenced by British colonial style and the incorporation of Classical and Beaux-Arts traditions; the 1970–1994 period, marked by modernist architecture under apartheid, where some buildings became sites of contested heritage; and the post-1994 period, marked by transformation and optimism. By viewing Transvaal House through these stages, I try to clarify its role in the quest for a South African architectural style, blending vernacular influences and modernism. This understanding situates Transvaal House in the narrative of South African architecture and highlights the need to interpret it with an awareness of its historical context.

2.2 The Jewish Perspective

Saitowitz's architectural philosophy reflects Jewish traditions, particularly the idea of placelessness, which acknowledges the transitory nature of land and prioritises shared experience over ownership (Saitowitz, 1974, 2005). The Jewish view stresses the importance of events and experiences that occur within spaces rather than the spaces themselves. This perspective informs my analysis of how Saitowitz's Jewish heritage shapes his approach to Transvaal House, emphasising communal aspects over static ownership. Saitowitz's work reflects this understanding, aligning with the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), where architecture's role is to serve and uplift communities (Dorff, 2005).

In Jewish thought, land is understood not as a commodity that can be bought and sold but as a trust held in custodianship for future generations (Leviticus 25:23). In Jewish philosophy, the Jubilee Year is a sacred cycle occurring every 50 years, marked by land returning to its original owners, debt amnesty, and a societal reset to restore balance. This mandated redistribution of land emphasises communal stewardship, promoting equity and forbidding exploitation. These values are mirrored in Saitowitz's

architectural approach, which critiques architecture's complicity in settler colonialism by viewing the house not as a commodity but as a relational, communal device (Saitowitz, 1974).

Saitowitz acknowledges the influence of the diaspora on Jews, where communities are often defined by their shared values and customs rather than their geographic location. This aligns with the Jewish understanding of *makom* (place), which signifies a spiritual rather than physical location (Furuto, 2011). Saitowitz's approach to architecture reflects this diasporic sensibility, using architecture as a reflection of community, where the act of construction represents the joining of people, not just the creation of physical structures (Saitowitz, 2005). His modernist tendencies, such as a disinterest in ornamentation and direct expression of function, draw from Jewish traditions that discourage imagery and focus on ethical living over aesthetic display (Furuto, 2011). For Saitowitz, materials carry meaning and are chosen for their inherent properties, aligning with both modernist ideals and Jewish ethical teachings. Saitowitz's upbringing in a Jewish household shaped his architectural perspective, grounding it in ethics that informed his desire to create adaptable, transformative spaces that evolve over time, rather than static monuments (Saitowitz,2005).

Chipkin (2008) writes that the influence of Jewish architects and their patrons on Johannesburg's modernist character was profound. He notes that Jewish architects drew on modernist principles to challenge existing apartheid frameworks. Their Jewish clients, recently displaced from Europe, were upwardly mobile and actively supported these bold architectural visions. This relationship was unique for its time – although Jews were coolly tolerated in South Africa, they played a crucial role in shaping Johannesburg's modernist built environment.

This openness to modernism is rooted in the historical experiences of Jewish communities, who, denied citizenship and land ownership across various countries, developed a resilient approach to prioritising place and identity over permanence and possession. This perspective informed Saitowitz's interpretation of Jewish nomadic tradition (Saitowitz 1974) and adaptability, and is reflected in Johannesburg's modernist buildings, which embody a distinct client-architect relationship and varying intensities of modernity.

This section aligns with my positionality as a Jewish architect and how these ideas influence my conceptual framework. The themes of placelessness, stewardship and ethics guide my interpretation of Transvaal House as a contested space that can facilitate dialogue and transformation.

2.3 Modernism in South Africa

The evolution of twentieth-century South African architecture reflects the ongoing dialogue between Modernism and Postmodernism. While Modernism introduces technological advancements and functionalist principles, Postmodernism emphasises cultural diversity and contextual relevance. Modernism's paradoxical use as both a symbol of progress and a tool of apartheid control provides a critical lens for examining Transvaal House. Marschall (1998) observes that Modernist architecture became the default standard in South Africa from the 1950s to the 1970s, coinciding with the era of Apartheid. Berman (1982) highlights the inherent paradoxes of modernity, noting how Modernism, intended to embody progress and equality, was repurposed as a tool of oppression during apartheid.

Chipkin (2008:15) compares Johannesburg to Algiers as a "conformist colonial city with modernist infiltrations from Le Corbusier's atelier". Both cities developed European-style districts and adopted modernist principles as colonial instruments of spatial and social control. Chavez-Norgaard (2024:140) concurs, describing how monumental structures in Johannesburg embodied an "architecture of control", with buildings like Ponte City and the Carlton Centre symbolising the apartheid government's assertion of authority and a racialised vision of modernity.

As Enwezor (2001) notes, African modernism emerged from the ruins of colonialism as a counter-modernism, marked by a reflective awareness of African cultural values and a conscious subversion of European cultural imperialism. It became a synthesis of the International Style shaped through internal critique and adaptation. Wright (2001) expands on the hybrid nature of African modernism, describing how architects like Pancho Guedes merged Iberian influences with Pan-African symbolism, challenging the rigidity of the International Style. Chavez-Norgaard (2024) continues, arguing that this alternative view allowed for a local reappropriation of modernist principles, in a post-apartheid context, where structures like Ponte have evolved from symbols of control into spaces of reclamation and community.

Marschall (1998) and Mukasa (2021) offer contrasting views on how modernist architecture responded to local conditions. Mukasa argues that elements like screens and orientation adapted buildings to the local climate, while Marschall critiques the adoption of the International Style for failing to consider South African cultural and climatic specifics. Similarly, Berman (1982) highlights modernism's inherent paradoxes, with architecture often caught between ideals of progress and the social responsibilities ignored by apartheid policies.

Elleh (2021) clarifies how Habermas describes decolonisation as a series of developmental stages, highlighting the distinctions between old and new, cultural modernity, and social modernisation. Habermas warns that postmodern projects risk distracting from crucial decolonial efforts that prioritise reclaiming human habitats for those marginalised by modernity (Elleh, 2021). This concept resonates with the need to carefully consider the legacy of apartheid-era modernism, as these structures still bear the weight of collective memory and continue to influence Johannesburg's identity today. As Frescura (2021) cautions, the need to preserve and document South Africa's modernist architecture remains critical to providing historical context for future developments. Buildings like Transvaal House embody this legacy, showcasing modernist language, theory, and technology while serving as artifacts of their time.

The struggle between tradition and modernity has underscored much of South Africa's architectural evolution. As Bester (2001) notes, the country's post-apartheid identity is still under construction, attempting to reconcile a violent and fractured past with a hopeful, unified future. Elleh (2021) emphasises that colonial powers use architecture to create clear distinctions between colonisers and colonised, equating traditional African structures with primitivism. Fanon (1961) writes that colonial architecture is a tool for enforcing social divides and for creating a collective colonial memory, shaping African nations into exploitable entities under colonial influence.

Saitowitz (2005) acknowledges the influence of modernist architects like Le Corbusier, Wright, and Mies van der Rohe as well as his teachers from university in the 1970s. Transvaal House illustrates modernism's commitment to functionality and modularity, integrating grid systems and open aesthetics. Saitowitz later advances these ideas in prefabricated modular elements in his Garden Village project in Berkeley. Hays (1998) describes how Le Corbusier and the Modern Movement aimed for flexibility and spatial interchangeability through prefabrication, principles that informed Saitowitz's evolving approach. Saitowitz (2005) points out a divergence in architecture after a century of modernism - he suggests that architects can continue emphasising traditional forms and their meanings or shift their focus toward the exploration of space and the experiences it creates for inhabitants. He refers to the technical revolution, which is precipitating a transition from mechanical to electronic, where smart technologies enable worlds of heightened sensation with fewer material demands and a closer connection to nature.

This section underscores the contradictions in South African modernism, which I take forward to analyse how Transvaal House both embodies modernist ideals and challenges apartheid's spatial hierarchies.

2.4 Culture and Context

Historically, white architects in South Africa were tasked with designing facilities for black clients, using superficial ethnic styles that incorporated decorative patterns inspired by traditional dress, beadwork, and pottery (Noero, 1994; Marschall and Kearney, 2000). This approach, criticised for lacking depth and meaningful engagement with the cultural contexts it was meant to represent, failed to reflect the diversity of African cultures (Marschall and Kearney, 2000). This section provides a backdrop for exploring how Saitowitz's approach to Ndebele forms in Transvaal House can be critiqued as appropriation or appreciated as a sincere engagement with vernacular traditions.

Rapoport (1969) emphasises the importance of vernacular architecture in understanding the interplay between climate, materials, technology, and cultural preferences, showing how architecture is a cultural phenomenon shaped by socio-cultural forces, including beliefs, family structure, and local traditions. Building on this, Noble (2011) highlights how contemporary African architects are drawing from indigenous landscapes, crafts, and cultural traditions, emphasising the need to respect historical and cultural contexts, especially when designing in challenging environments.

Frescura (1981) offers a specific analysis of Ndebele housing forms, noting how the layouts feature courtyards to transition from public to private spaces, a planning strategy that influenced Saitowitz (Belogolovsky, 2023). Saitowitz (1995) compares the Ndebele use of cellular huts and courtyards to the solid and open spaces in Transvaal House, examining distinctions between public and private areas.

Benedikt (1993) contrasts Transvaal House with Ndebele homesteads, noting how the former uses industrial materials and emphasises contours, and has spread-out structures, whereas Ndebele precincts are tightly clustered, decorated, and organised around courtyards. He points out the use of available technology and material in both the Transvaal House and Ndebele homesteads. Frescura (1981) writes about the use of natural and found materials in vernacular architecture; similarly, elements of Transvaal House are scavenged objects and second-hand materials.

Van Vuuren (2008) highlights the intangible aspects of Ndebele architecture, such as memory, cultural identity, and the generational significance of murals painted by women, an aspect that Elleh (2022) describes as linking architecture with collective memory and community heritage. Martin Murray (2013) emphasises the siting of buildings and cautions against oversimplifying the complex historical processes involved. The focus on place-specific elements is echoed by Lipman (2009), who addresses the risks of dislocating architectural language from its context, considering physical factors and the lived experiences of those occupying the building.

Mukasa (2021) discusses the disintegration of indigenous architecture that historically used perishable materials, noting that this shift led to a cultural hierarchy favouring European styles. Educational models that exclude indigenous architecture reinforce this bias, creating gaps in Africa's architectural history. Architects like Saitowitz and Noero emphasise the need for contextually relevant, appropriate, and sustainable approaches to bridge this gap, advocating for designs that respond to the region's socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions (Noero,1994; Saitowitz, 1995). Marschall and Kearney (2000) argue that architecture must reflect the society it serves by integrating climate, economy, social structures, environmental factors, and cultural nuances to ensure social relevance. Lipman (2009) adds that architecture should embrace cultural diversity to promote mutual respect and learning. Similarly, M. Murray (2013) notes that indigenous South African histories and cultures are often minimised, suggesting that commemorative practices can serve to both remember the past and to symbolise an envisioned future.

Noble (2011:266) discusses how architecture in South Africa is intertwined with racialised identity, illustrating how the Constitutional Court's design successfully combines diverse elements to embody "unified diversity." This layering of differences creates a sense of inclusivity that marks the success of this building. Clarke, Kuipers, and Roos (2019) note that understanding a place's historical and cultural values is crucial when values are disputed. They advocate for the sustainable reuse of historical buildings with revised programs, adding that this approach ensures cultural continuity while allowing spaces to evolve. Both Munro (2024) and Clarke *et al*. (2019) stress that a place's historical essence lies in its envisioned future, which must be rooted in its present circumstances. Munro (2024) adds that heritage is both tangible and intangible, shaped by cultural customs, traditions, and diverse influences, exemplified by the layered cultural identity of the Transvaal House.

Saitowitz (1995) extends this by noting the Ndebele assimilation of street-lamps and airplanes into the artwork decorating the outside of buildings. Frescura and Myeza, (2016) state that architecture

has an unspoken and cognitive language that dictates its aesthetics and construction techniques. To grasp a people's material culture, one must possess a fundamental understanding of the language, customs and values. Elleh (2022) points out that the failure to pass down cultural knowledge through generations can disrupt identity as evidenced by the symbolic decisions behind some post-colonial monuments in Africa, like Nkrumah's Independence Arch in Accra.

Lipman (2009), Cooke (1986), and Frescura (2021) highlight the role of Regionalism in acknowledging the effects of capitalism, racism, and imperialism. They argue that regional architecture must maintain a connection with its context, aiming to create spaces that resonate with the signs and symbols of the communities they serve. Townsend (1996) affirms this approach, advocating for architecture that mirrors the socio-political and economic conditions of a region.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993) addresses cultural context and domination, describing culture as a historical product and a repository of values across nations and races. This perspective stresses the need for understanding cultural contexts to facilitate mutual respect. Berman (1982) broadens this view, linking South Africa's architectural responses to globalisation and modernisation, and examining the socio-political landscape shaped by capitalism. He introduces Max Weber's concept of modern society as an "iron cage" (Berman, 1982:27), suggesting that South African architecture negotiates capitalist constraints and the need for social transformation. Harney (2004) discusses Negritude and globalism, paralleling South African architecture's attempts to integrate local identity within global trends.
Judin (2024) argues that apartheid-era spatial logics persist within South African cities, with invisible walls reinforcing segregation and inhibiting inclusive urban growth. This legacy connects directly to modernist architecture, which, in some cases, solidified social divisions within urban spaces.

Saitowitz critiques contemporary architecture for losing touch with modernist principles of clarity and contextual awareness, an approach evident in his San Francisco Modern project, where he examines the layered heritage of modern buildings. This sensitivity to context is similarly evident in the 2631 Durant Avenue project, where elements of surrounding architectures are integrated, reflecting the contextual approach seen in Transvaal House. For Saitowitz (2005, 2023), architecture begins with the site, shaped by local geography, climate, culture, and resources to create buildings specific to their location. His EEERL Building in Berkeley continuously measures and adapts to its environment, reflecting this philosophy. Unlike conventional structures, EEERL functions as a "living laboratory"

(www.saitowitz.com, no date) where modular systems support ongoing testing and analysis, providing real-time environmental feedback.

Hays (1998) considers that culture influences every aspect of architecture, acting as both a community one identifies with and a heritage one owns. Architecture connects formal design with its social context, influenced by Marxist ideas of base and superstructure, serving as both a tool for social balance and a sensory study. This dual role makes architects political agents, constantly challenged to create innovative solutions. The emphasis on contextualism and cultural nuances forms a key part of my conceptual framework, where I analyse how Transvaal House balances (or fails to balance) these considerations.

2.5 Art and Patterns

Art and patterns play a role in architecture, reflecting the interplay of social, cultural, ritual, economic, and physical factors that shape human responses to varied physical environments (Rapoport, 1969). Patterns contribute to the sense of identity and continuity within built environments, offering a reflection of historical heritage and collective memory (Marschall and Kearney, 2000). William Morris ideas expressed in 1877, as interpreted by Smith (2006), suggest that art encompasses elements that provoke intellectual discourse and appreciation among educated, artistic individuals. Just as language evolves with complex layers of meanings and uses, so too does architecture, showcasing a rich history of innovation, specialisation, and transfer (Raymond, 1985).

Spence and Bierman (1954) discuss how Ndebele patterns draw from figurative and abstract aspects of their cultural experience, reflecting a people navigating between traditional and modern lifestyles. Van Vuuren's (2001) study shows urban influences as significant motifs in Ndebele art. Noble (2020) builds on this, noting how the Ndebele creatively blend old traditions with new imagery.

Spence and Bierman (1954) regard Ndebele buildings as "a masterpiece of … ingenuity in the face of an unprecedented cultural situation," (Spence and Bierman, 1954:35), where architectural patterns serve as a repository of cultural memory and link cultural heritage with architectural design. Similarly, Britz (1982) refers to Eaton's inclusion of African art in his architecture and the contribution Eaton's work makes towards an "honest South African architecture." (Britz,1982:67). Guedes (1962) notes that in Africa, there will always be a deep need for art, underscoring its cultural necessity. Patterns in African architecture are more than decorative elements; they carry symbolic meanings and express a

unity between art and life, as seen in fractal designs and tessellations that serve as cultural representations within the built environment (Meuser and Dalbai, 2021).

Noble (2011) explores contextualism in architecture looking at identity on a material level, and its entanglement with forms and patterns which carry historical implications of cultural associations. He discusses how motifs on building surfaces act as symbols of cultural heritage, blending design with identity and serving as visual representations of cultural memory.

Habermas (1983 in Foster, ed) refers to Max Weber's framework of cultural modernity, where art occupies a pivotal sphere alongside science and morality, embodying the cultural essence of society. Chipkin (2008) notes early examples of African-influenced designs in Johannesburg, such as Ndebele patterns on Hillbrow buildings, calling them "an early example of Afro-chic before its time" (Chipkin 2008:402). Noero (1994) critiques apartheid's false attribution of cultural identity to ethnic groups, which led white architects to use ethnic symbols in designs for black communities, imposing a superficial identity rather than engaging authentically with cultural representation. The misapplication of such motifs highlights the challenges of integrating cultural symbols meaningfully, without reducing them to stereotypes.

2.6 Heritage

Heritage conservation is a complex exercise, shaped by values, identity, and collective memory. John Ruskin argued in 1849 that historic buildings "belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all generations of mankind who are to follow us" (Smith, 2006:20). This perspective, which prioritises preservation as a duty to both past and future generations, reflects traditional Western approaches that emphasise tangible heritage (Smith, 2006). This approach excludes more diverse cultural experiences and overlooks themes of memory and identity (Smith, 2006). The heritage status of Transvaal House highlights this tension, where the building's heritage value is shaped by the era in which it was built.

The concept of heritage in Africa incorporates more temporal and cultural dimensions. Morojele (2021:147) highlights the African notion of time as a "distant memory," where understanding the future requires a grounding in the past. This concept is relevant in South Africa, where heritage reflects a layered history of colonialism and apartheid. As Judin (2021) notes, remnants of these eras still shape post-apartheid life, necessitating a careful negotiation of heritage sites with unresolved historical legacies. Transvaal House, a modernist building, designed by a Jewish architect positioned

on the margins of apartheid privilege, both challenges and embodies South Africa's architectural legacy.

Smith (2006) writes that heritage sites serve as focal points for negotiating overlapping identities based on nationality, social class, and community allegiance in a diverse society like South Africa. Heritage is not only a record of the past; it plays an active role in shaping identity, bridging diverse histories, and furthering a sense of belonging within communities. However, M. Murray (2013) warns of the challenges in balancing the preservation of historically significant yet contentious buildings, especially in contexts where heritage is entangled with past injustices.

In the post-apartheid era, Townsend (1996) notes that heritage conservation in South Africa has evolved to recognise sites significant to previously marginalised groups, thus rewriting collective histories. This approach creates a more inclusive view of heritage. Transvaal House illustrates how modernist architecture is often seen as aligned with colonial power structures but can be evaluated for its cultural and social relevance in a diverse South African context. Clarke *et al*. (2019) echo this, emphasising the role of adaptive reuse in enhancing both social and environmental resilience.

Noble (2011) discusses the complexities of cultural identity and heritage in post-apartheid South Africa, where architectural competitions reveal tensions around authenticity in African design. Noble argues that recognising historical difference as a resource is vital for shaping national identity, advocating for heritage practices that consider local aspirations over nationalist symbolism. Davis *et al*. (2024) note that, before 1994, heritage in South Africa was largely controlled by white experts, resulting in a narrow definition of heritage that prioritised colonial buildings. Today, they argue, heritage conservation must include indigenous knowledge to challenge colonial biases and celebrate the contributions of all South Africans.

Mason (2002) argues that heritage values are complex, influenced by social, economic, and political contexts, and difficult to assess objectively. He suggests that heritage values exist at the intersection of artifact and context, shaped by ongoing social and historical forces. Ginzarly, Farah and Teller (2019) add that community involvement is crucial to democratise heritage, as it often involves reconciling conflicts between official and local narratives. Özçakır, Bilgin-Altinöz, and Mignosa (2022) emphasise that heritage values are subjective, varying across stakeholders. They argue that heritage conservation's sustainability depends on aligning it with social, economic, and cultural considerations, allowing heritage sites to remain adaptable and relevant. Transvaal House

exemplifies this complexity in that its value is perceived differently by various communities, with some viewing it as a modernist artifact, while others see it as a symbol of contested histories.

2.7 Monuments

Monuments carry significant symbolic weight, serving as markers of collective memory and national identity. Smith (2006) describes monuments as markers of power and public memory, reflecting a society's values, achievements, and collective aspirations. However, decisions regarding a monument's conservation worthiness has historically reflected colonial biases, often excluding sites significant to marginalised communities (Townsend, 1996; Smith, 2006). Noble (2011) argues that post-apartheid decisions about heritage must reflect both historical struggles and the country's future aspirations for social justice.

N. Murray (2013) explores how monuments, museums, murals, and memorials facilitate conversations about the past, especially in post-apartheid contexts where history is actively reinterpreted to reflect contemporary values. Elleh (2021) asserts that monuments commemorating the end of apartheid symbolise justice, healing, and progress. However, he emphasises that the true memorials are individuals who embody these ideals. Monuments here are not static markers but rather dynamic reflections of collective memory, subject to ongoing negotiation (Van Vuuren, 2008; Judin, 2024).

Spence and Bierman (1954) and M. Murray (2013) raise dilemmas about preserving monuments associated with divisive histories. They question whether these structures should be preserved as reminders of injustice or repurposed inclusively. Similarly, Ginzarly *et al.* (2019) emphasise the importance of civic engagement in heritage planning, especially with monuments, as these structures often spark debate about national identity, authenticity, and ownership.

Elleh (2021) contends that monuments symbolise episodes from history intended to inspire societal progress by drawing lessons from the past. Monuments embody justice, healing, and a commitment to improve, serving as reminders of historical struggles and aspirations for a better future. Transvaal House was declared a National Monument by the Heritage Foundation in 1997. It incorporates both vernacular and modernist forms, adding layers of cultural identity. While some critique Saitowitz's engagement with vernacular elements as problematic, it underscores the house's role as a site for discussing authenticity, cultural integration, and collective memory.

2.8 Sustainability

Sustainability in architecture requires a holistic approach that balances environmental impact with cultural integrity. This section connects to the sustainability lens of my conceptual framework, where I explore how retrofitting and adaptive reuse can transform Transvaal House into a teaching tool for sustainable design while preserving its cultural memory. In South Africa, Noero (1994) argues that sustainability must be reconceived to encompass social resilience and equity. Berman (1982) highlights the importance of connecting with historical roots to advance empathy and awareness across social divides, which aligns with a culturally sustainable approach to development.

Clarke, *et al*. (2019) advocate for reusing existing structures and retrofitting them to reduce resource consumption and environmental impact, thus aligning with sustainability goals. Adaptive reuse enables a sustainable future by minimising new construction and preserving embodied energy. Heywood (2012) underscores the environmental advantages of learning from indigenous building practices, which achieve thermal comfort with minimal resources, promoting harmony with the natural environment.

Okba and Embaby (2013) agree that reusing old buildings aligns with sustainable principles, emphasising that heritage buildings, if retrofitted with minimal interventions, can maintain historical integrity while enhancing green performance. They highlight that rehabilitating heritage structures reduces demolition-related energy waste, and preserves the craftsmanship and passive design features inherent in older buildings. Gómez-Palacio (2024) notes that since 70% of existing buildings will still stand by 2050, retrofitting becomes crucial. Deep retrofits can lower operational carbon emissions by 50-75%, improve indoor air quality, and increase asset value, making retrofitting an effective strategy for sustainable development.

Marschall and Kearney (2000) suggest that culturally neutral architecture may be appropriate in post-apartheid South Africa until a new generation of Black architects can authentically address culturally specific designs. The notion of ‘cultural neutrality’ in architecture is problematic, as all design is shaped by cultural values, practices, and power structures. What is labelled as neutral may reflect dominant cultural norms risking the erasure of marginalised identities rather than promoting true inclusivity. The lack of representation among architects has historically led to a disconnect between designers and the communities they serve. Hays (1998) expands on this by emphasising that architecture is deeply intertwined with cultural and social identity, influenced by ideas of social

balance and Marxist theories of base and superstructure. Architecture, in this view, is both a sensory study and a political statement, making architects active agents in promoting social sustainability.

Saitowitz frames architecture as “human geography,” focusing on the relationships between buildings, natural resources, climate, and site-specific conditions (Benedikt, 1993:3). This approach at Transvaal House connects cultural sustainability to environmental practices by prioritising the natural and social context in design.

Cultural and social accessibility are integral to sustainable heritage, especially in diverse societies. Ginzarly *et al*. (2019) discuss participatory planning as essential for inclusive heritage management, though they caution that such processes may be influenced by power dynamics and market forces. They note that controversies often arise around heritage assets due to conflicting value systems, stressing the need for heritage sites to facilitate a sense of shared ownership. Mason (2002) emphasises that heritage values, shaped by social, historical, and spatial contexts, must balance cultural and economic factors, creating socially relevant, sustainable sites that reflect the needs of diverse stakeholders.

2.9 Conceptual Framework Diagram

The conceptual framework for this research centres on Transvaal House as a lens through which to explore the intersections of heritage, cultural identity, sustainability, and modernism. By examining themes such as contested heritage, cultural integration, Jewish identity, and architectural adaptability, the framework highlights the building’s potential to promote dialogue on social justice, climate resilience, and inclusive architectural practices in post-apartheid South Africa. The intended outcomes include promoting critical reflection, informing sustainable design practices, and inspiring future architectural solutions that balance cultural memory with contemporary needs.

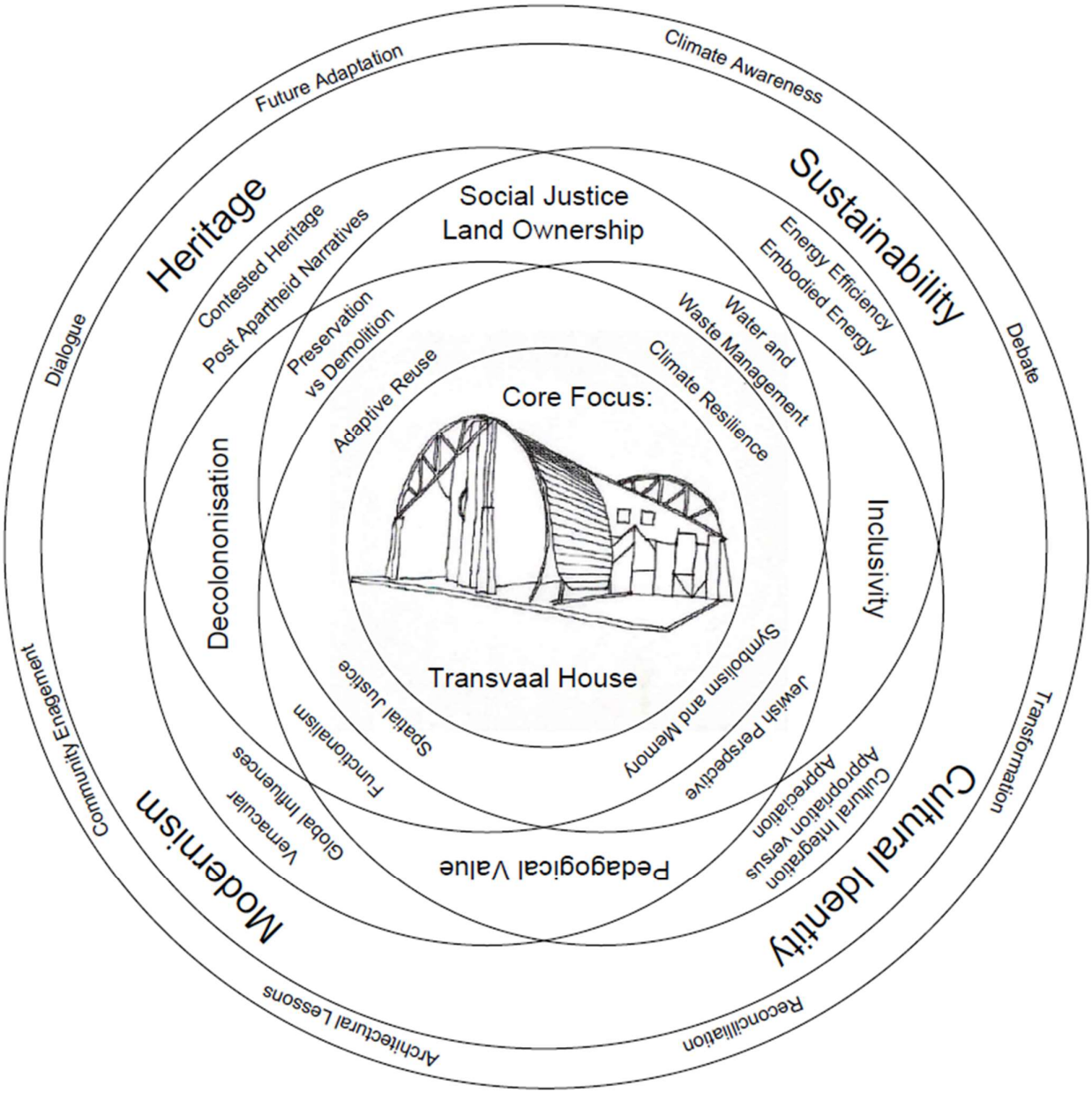


Figure 2:3 Conceptual Framework Drawing

2.10 Conclusion

In summary, the literature reveals the ongoing search for a South African architecture that is reflective of its complex historical landscape and is adaptive to current social, cultural, and environmental challenges. These theories and themes establish the foundation of my conceptual framework above. The discussions on modernism illustrate how the movement's ideals of progress and equality were often subverted under apartheid to enforce social and spatial divisions. Post-apartheid architecture, as noted by Berman and Marschall, grapples with a legacy that intertwines the ideals of modernism with the need for reconciliation and inclusivity.

Transvaal House stands as a symbol of this intersection between global modernist trends and local cultural integration. Its design, drawing from Ndebele forms and vernacular architecture, exemplifies the tension between appreciation and appropriation, raising questions about the authenticity of these influences. This reflects a theme in South African architecture, where efforts to include indigenous design elements can risk superficiality or misrepresentation. Transvaal House's contested heritage status allows it to serve as a space that encourages discussions on sustainability, adaptability, and the importance of embracing both tangible and intangible heritage.

In terms of sustainability, the literature underscores the importance of retrofitting heritage buildings and rethinking resource use to align with environmental and social sustainability goals. This approach connects with Saitowitz's architectural philosophy, which views buildings relationally, as defined by their relationships with climate, culture, and community needs. As Transvaal House illustrates, sustainable architecture in South Africa is about energy efficiency, stimulating inclusivity, preserving cultural memory, and creating spaces that resonate with the identities of those who inhabit them.

This literature review shows that the quest for a uniquely South African architectural identity is deeply intertwined with the country's historical, cultural, and social complexities. By examining how architecture has adapted and responded to these factors, we can better understand the critical role buildings like Transvaal House play in shaping the future of South African architecture as a reflection of its multifaceted past and aspirations for an inclusive, resilient future.

3. LAND, LEGACY AND LOCATION

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to place Transvaal House within its geographic, historical, and architectural context, linking it to local histories and to global movements in architecture. Details about the site, the building, the stylistic approach and the architectural influences are taken as data and will be presented in the following chapter. Understanding the context for Transvaal House provides insight into its role as a case study for contested heritage and sustainable design. Because Saitowitz designed this house in the 1970s, drawing inspiration from both international trends and local Ndebele architecture, attention is drawn to the tensions and opportunities of architecture in post-apartheid South Africa, where cultural merging and spatial justice are ongoing concerns. This chapter provides the foundational context necessary to address the research questions of this study, exploring how Transvaal House exemplifies the tensions between contested heritage, sustainability and cultural identity in contemporary South Africa.

While discussions around sustainability in architecture began to emerge as early as the 1970s, today's context of accelerating climate change and resource depletion demands sustainability be treated with a sense of urgency. This chapter will note how such objectives can be retroactively applied, encouraging discussion about heritage buildings and contemporary requirements.

The region has been a site of human activity since the Stone Age (Van Schalkwyk and de Jong 1998) indicating a history of land use by various peoples. In South Africa, any discussion about land is shaped by accounts of dispossession and forced removals, symbols of the country's colonial and apartheid history. This chapter acknowledges the people who lived there before the house was built and has a brief description of the history of this piece of ground.

3.2 Geographical Context

Transvaal House is positioned in Midrand, a zone that sits between the major urban centres of Johannesburg and Pretoria. It is located in suburbia, surrounded by a mix of land uses and urban developments, including industrial, commercial and residential buildings, highlighting its geographical liminality. The original plot, though now subdivided, remains comparatively larger than most properties in the surrounding area, reflecting the socio-economic disparities of the time it was built.

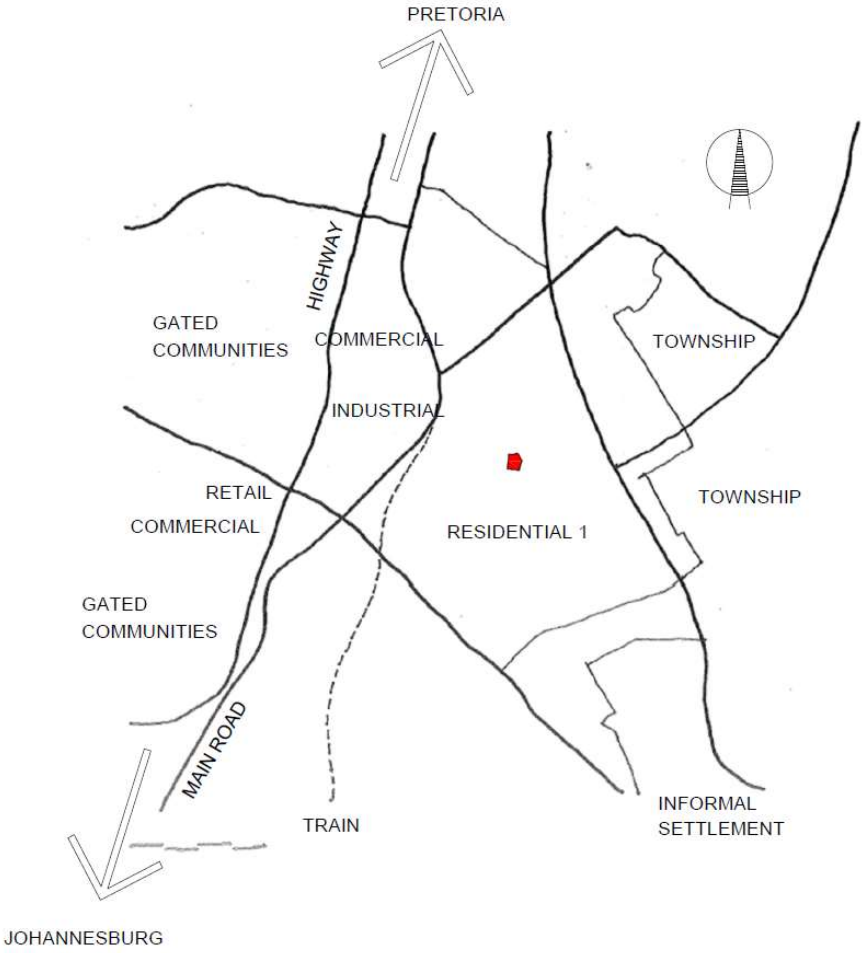


Figure 3:1 Geographical Context

The suburbs surrounding Transvaal House show the spatial contradiction, it is both connected and isolated, existing in close proximity to affluent gated communities, and also to informal settlements and townships. It is accessible via the Gautrain and minibus taxis, but it is not conveniently close to any amenities unless one has access to a car. This sharp spatial and economic divide is a reminder of the lingering legacy of apartheid-era urban planning, which intentionally segregated different racial and economic groups. The physical positioning highlights the dualities in Transvaal House, between the urban and the rural, the privileged and the marginalised, the global and the local.

Despite the suburban setting, the house's architectural dialogue is completely different to its immediate surroundings. It exists at the edge of two worlds: the built urban environment and the natural landscape. The use of raw, unrefined materials, the spatial interplay between solid walls and expansive windows, and the blurring of boundaries between interior and exterior spaces exemplify its attempt to engage with the site and acknowledge the natural landscape that exists there.



Figure 3:2 Repeated Geometry in Trusses and trees

3.3 Historical Context

Transvaal House was constructed during the late 1970s, in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising. At that time, Johannesburg was marked by heightened racial tensions, political unrest and widespread protests. The violent crackdown in 1976 on students opposing apartheid's oppressive education policies sparked a surge in anti-apartheid activism and deepened divisions between segregated communities. During that era, land ownership was entrenched along racial lines, with the government using spatial policies to enforce segregation and maintain control over resources. Architecture, like many other professions, became a tool for reinforcing these divisions. Buildings were designed with the needs of the white minority in mind, often oblivious to the cultural and social context of the country.

Stanley Saitowitz was part of the Jewish diaspora, a group that occupied a distinctive position in South African society. The generation before him had been dispossessed of their land in Europe due to their Jewish identity, a personal history that likely shaped Saitowitz's views on land tenure. Although Jewish people were classified as white under apartheid, they still faced forms of discrimination and were often treated like outsiders. This in-between status arguably influenced Saitowitz's architectural philosophy, particularly his indifference to land ownership, a stance that challenged the dominant belief that land was intrinsically tied to racial and economic dominance in South Africa. This rejection of territorialization shapes the way Transvaal House was designed and how it is understood today.



Figure 3:3 The News (See Image credits)

The house achieved its heritage status when it was declared a National Monument by the Monuments Council of South Africa in 1997. This designation is referenced in Saitowitz's publications (2005, www. saitowitz.com) and in the Heritage Portal's newsletter (Munro,2023). The Monuments Council ceased to exist in 2000 and was replaced by provincial heritage resource authorities, and I have been unable to gain access to documents which provide insight into the status allocated.

3.4 Land Acknowledgement

Looking forward, an important part of interacting with Transvaal House is the acknowledgement of the traditional owners and custodians of the land. This process is to honour and respect the historical connection of Indigenous people to the land. Apartheid land policies were a manifestation of

systematic injustice and racial discrimination. The Black population was forcibly removed from ancestral land across South Africa, and Midrand was no exception to this rule. The fertile land in this area was divided up into farms and allocated to white farmers. This dispossession stripped the Black South Africans that were living there of their homes, their livelihoods and their cultural and historical rights and ties to the land.

It is essential to carry out a cultural heritage survey of the land on which Transvaal House stands to be historically accurate and to acknowledge the land grabs which began during the 1800s. For the purposes of this document, I refer to four Heritage Impact Assessments that have been undertaken in the general vicinity around Transvaal House. Van Schalkwyk and de Jong (1998) include Brebnor House (another name for Transvaal House) in their document. They write: “Built 1978, blending elements of Ndebele culture with white South African Technology. Considered one of the 10 best-designed houses in the world.” (Van Schalkwyk and de Jong 1998:23)

3.4.1 A Brief History of the Area

Stone Age tools and artefacts have been found in the area and there is speculation that early San or Bushmen groups lived there, and then later only San. Van Schalkwyk (1998) deduced that the land was occupied intermittently, not permanently and people moved across it. Van Schalkwyk and de Jong (1998) maintain that the Midrand area was occupied by Iron Age settlers about 1600 years ago who probably spoke Tswana. The Bushmen and these settlers lived alongside each other for centuries.

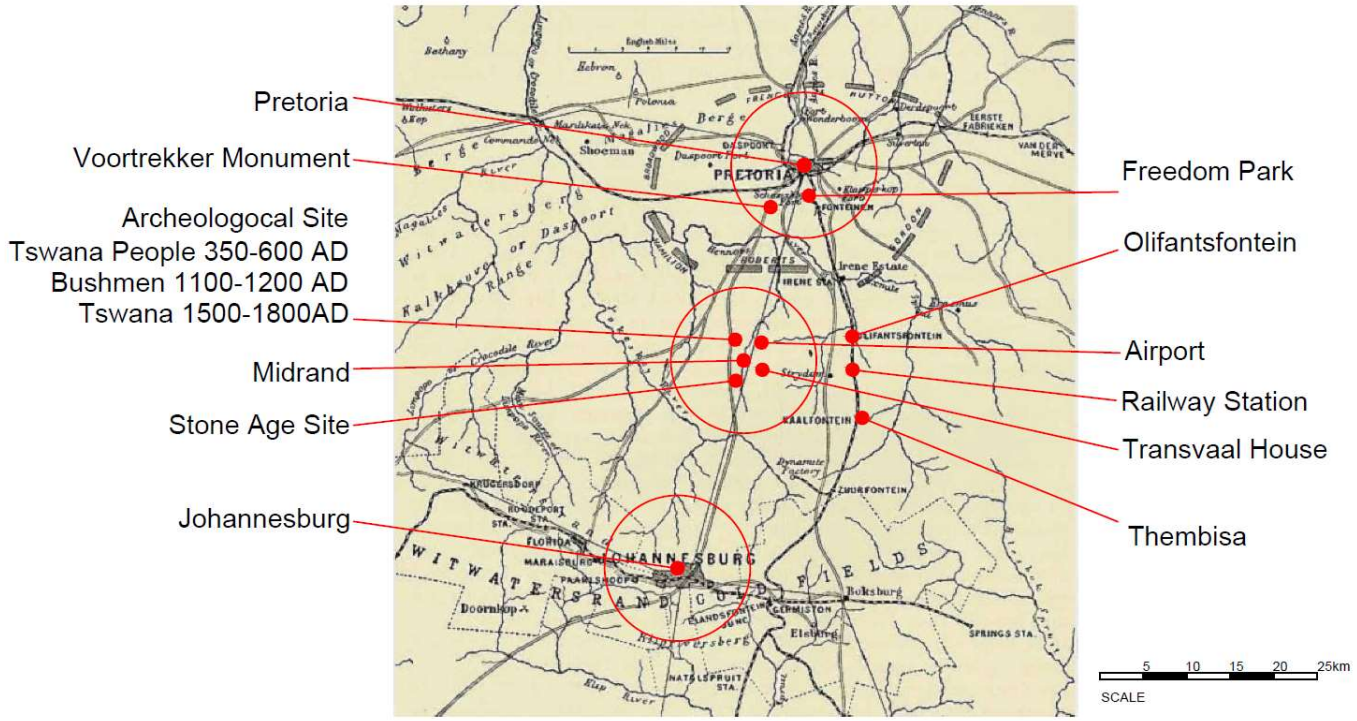


Figure 3:4 Historical Map - Johannesburg to Pretoria (See Image credits)

King Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele Nation, moved through Midrand area in 1820s capturing the land (van Vollenhoven and Pelser (2008), van der Walt (2023)). Mzilikazi dominated this territory until he moved further north in 1831. White settlers arrived in 1839 and set up farms in the area. (*ibid*.) Van Schalkwyk (1998) notes the building of the Halfway House Hotel in 1889 as a resting point for those travelling between Johannesburg and Pretoria. The railway station was established in 1892. Van Schalkwyk (2007) writes that in the late 1930s land was "obtained" to establish the airport (now Grand Central Airport).

Van Schalkwyk and de Jong (1998) describe a topographical map of 1975 which "indicated two locations at Olifantsfontein" (Van Schalkwyk and de Jong,1998:15), about 15km North West of Transvaal House, which disappeared when apartheid legislation was applied to the area. They assume that the people who lived there were relocated 10km South (without consultation) to Thembisa in the late 1950s. Van Schalkwyk and de Jong (1998) raise the issue that there is no comprehensive history of Midrand, and that there is a lack of community-based information based on both tangible and intangible history of the area.

Bonner and Nieftagodien (2008) agree that the land around Midrand was occupied since the mid-1800s by whites and was used for farming. They write that Ndebele people may have occupied the area but suggests that they lived further North nearer to Freedom Park and the Voortrekker Monument. Frescura (1981), Van Vuuren (2001) and Spence and Bierman (1954) all place Ndebele settlements further North than Transvaal House. Saitowitz recalls travelling north of Pretoria to look at Ndebele homesteads but he also references Ndebele ruins found on the site (Saitowitz 1995).



Figure 3:5 Historical Map based on Tomlinson Report. (See Image credits)

It is my understanding that the ruins found on the site were more likely to be the remnants of a farmstead that was there. Ndebele buildings were made from mud bricks which melt back into the earth with the rain. The ruin found on the site was described as being around 300mm high and very old, and the significance of acknowledging prior inhabitants of the land remains.

Acknowledging the past and present impacts of colonisation is a step towards reconciliation and healing and presents an opportunity to recognise the importance of Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and ongoing contributions. As this property is now owned by Wits University there is ample opportunity to engage in education about the history and culture of the people who once lived on this land and to raise awareness about the ongoing struggles and rights of Indigenous people in South Africa.

Any further work carried out on this site must involve consultation with the communities in the area. It will be a process to identify affected communities and to understand who the correct people are who represent those communities. Once this has been established it will be possible to make informed

decisions how best to use this land in ways that can be mutually beneficial to both the university and the community.

3.5 Architectural Context

3.5.1 Modernist Context:

At the time of Transvaal House's construction, modernist architecture in South Africa was complicated by its use in apartheid infrastructure. The apartheid government often employed modernist principles to design state buildings, inadvertently creating a tension between modernism's detachment from politics and its use as a tool for political control. Transvaal House, though a product of modernism, exists in this complex space which blurs the lines between innovation and complicity.

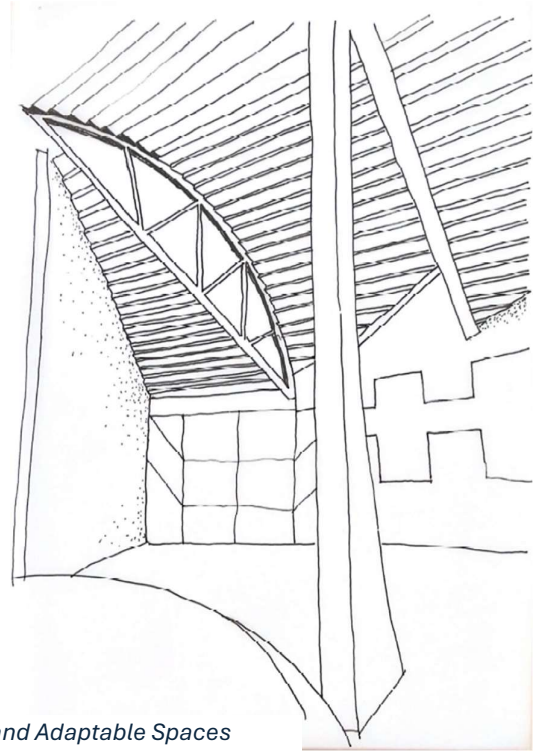


Figure 3:6 Flexible and Adaptable Spaces



Figure 3:7 Materials and Textures, Trunks and Columns

Principles of modernism include the rejection of unnecessary ornamentation, the celebration of structural honesty, and the belief that form should follow function. This movement also championed the use of modern materials like steel, glass, and concrete to create functional spaces that respond to the needs of modern life. Modernist architects sought to create buildings that were efficient, flexible, and reflective of the time's technological advancements. Transvaal House embodies these principles through its clear, unadorned lines, its openness to the surrounding environment, and its structural experimentation, particularly in the separation of the roof from the walls, which aligns with modernism's challenge to traditional building techniques. The references to the client/builder and architect collaboration and the use of in situ materials speaks to the modernist ideals of embracing diversity in construction

methods and materials. The abstract tensions within modernism, its ideals of progress juxtaposed with its complicity in the apartheid built environment, provide a critical lens for examining the dualities embodied in Transvaal House.

3.5.2 Vernacular Influences:

By incorporating Ndebele motifs, Saitowitz acknowledges the sophistication of indigenous design and seeks to merge local and international architectural vocabularies. This integration places Transvaal House within the context of debates around cultural appropriation. While he sought to incorporate African cultural elements into the building's design, critics, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, argue that such acts often veer into cultural appropriation, diluting the local heritage by blending it with Western influences. Questions arise about the power dynamics inherent in borrowing from indigenous cultures, especially in a country like South Africa with a history of colonialism and apartheid.

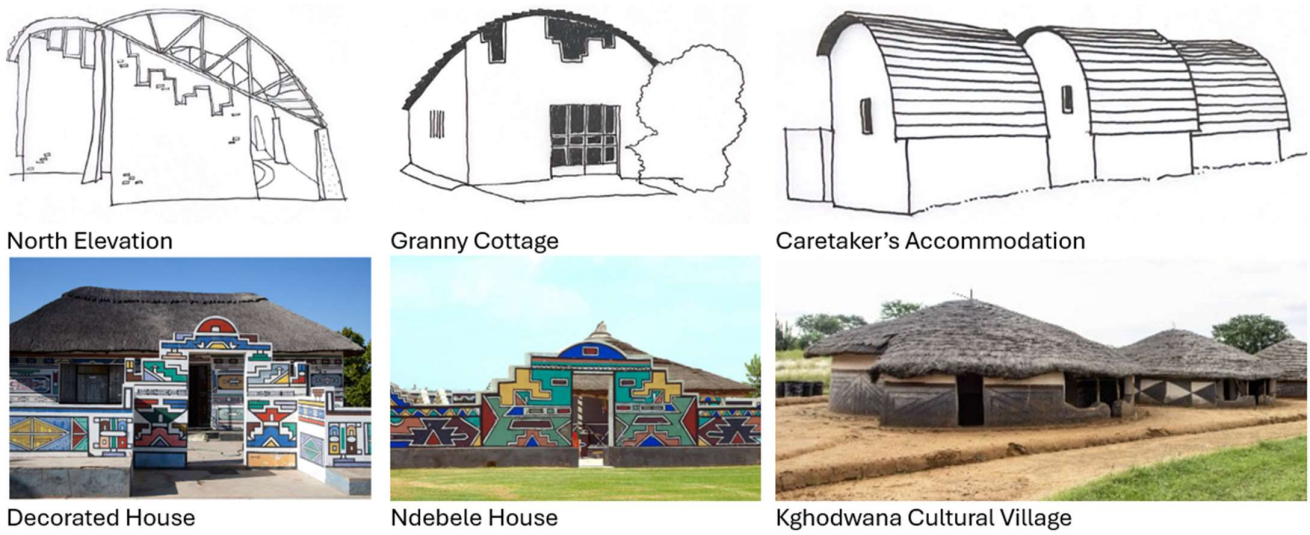


Figure 3:8 Local Inspiration (See Image credits)

3.5.3 Transvaal House:

Dr Heather Dodd played a pivotal role in ensuring the building's preservation when she heard of Scott Brebnor' s intention to sell his home. It was Brebnor's idea to gift the building to Wits. Through Dodd's efforts, the generosity of Stanley Saitowitz and Linda Sontag, and the negotiations led by Professor Nnamdi Elleh with the university senate and administrative structures, the house was donated to the Wits School of Architecture and Planning. Brebnor (2024) says, "nothing is allowed to change, obviously", and he hopes that the School of Architecture and Planning will take care of it in the future.

Transvaal House displays a fusion between European Modernism and South African conditions, using local materials and construction methods to achieve international design objectives. The curtain walls are a clearly modernist feature which allow for large windows that flood the building with natural light. The way internal and external space flows fluidly is both a feature of modernism and of Ndebele place making where private enclosed spaces are joined by open courtyards. This free flow of air and space, and the abundance of natural light is also energy efficient. The floating roof highlights the structural innovation and reinforces the flexibility and fluidity of modernist spaces. The use of locally sourced materials, including second hand objects reflects both the modernist and Ndebele ethos of resourcefulness, and sustainable building practices. This merging of styles raises questions about cultural appropriation and illustrates how modernism in South Africa was shaped by local histories and social conditions.

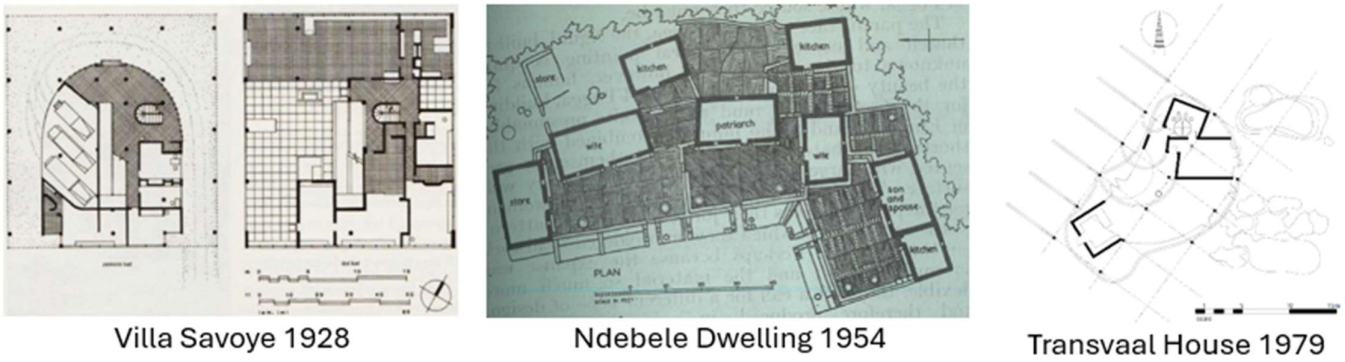


Figure 3:9 Three Plans (see Image credits)



Figure 3:10 Transvaal House

In this way, the house participates in a conversation about modernism in South Africa, a movement shaped by the social and political conditions of the 1970s. Saitowitz's design for Transvaal House was an ideological response to the apartheid regime, challenging the traditional architectural language associated with the colonial power structure. At the same time, Saitowitz's work also speaks to the debates in South Africa about collective memory and identity. As Berman (1982) points out, earlier modernists "found themselves by forgetting: the modernists of the 1970s were forced to find themselves by remembering." (Berman, 1982:93), while M. Murray (2013) highlights South African debates concerning what is worthy of remembering, the significance of collective memory, and what is better forgotten.

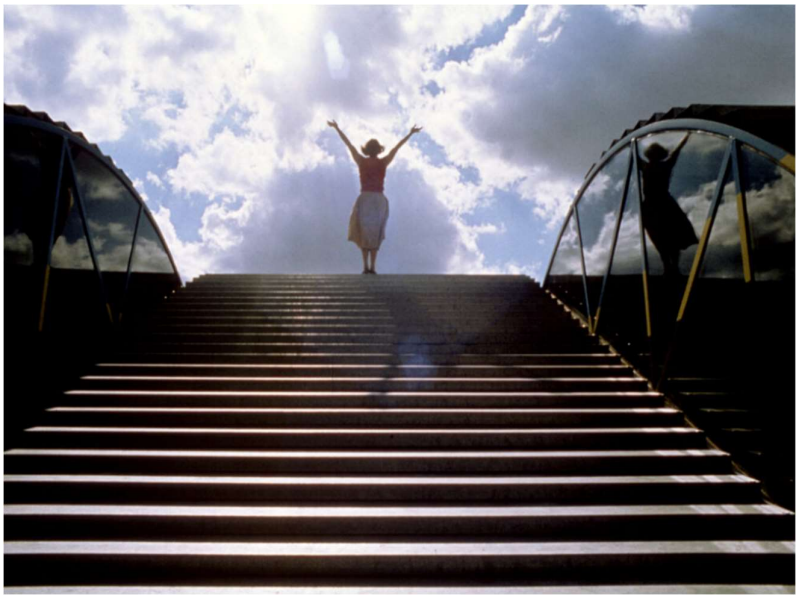


Figure 3:11 Roofscape. (See Image credits)

3.5.4 Buildings from the same time:

The following buildings were erected in South Africa around the same time as Transvaal House and give insight into the architectural climate of the 1970s. By situating the building in the context of the '70s, this chapter highlights how its design choices reflect the possibilities and limitations of its time, shaping the building's contested legacy today. This period saw diverse structures reflecting the influences that architects were responding to. Modernist principles were evident in the tall buildings, brutalist buildings were also going up, characterised by their heavy raw concrete forms that conveyed strength and authority. Some architects were experimenting with vernacular themes, using local patterns and geometry. This era was the peak of the apartheid building boom. Architecture was shaped by European and American aspirations but was also tied to the apartheid regime's goals of control, segregation and material domination. Grand, imposing buildings projected the ideology of the state reinforcing power structures of the time.

Figure 3:92 Eleven Buildings 1972 to1984. (See Image credits)

3.6 Cultural and Social Context

The architectural and political climate of the 1970s in South Africa was deeply polarized. It was a time when white students and intellectuals were questioning the apartheid state, and this dissent was finding expression in art and architecture. Wagner (1995) describes Saitowitz's work as a response to the conditions of a police state, where white students were being detained, and creative individuals like Saitowitz turned to architecture as a form of resistance. His design for Transvaal House, while outwardly modernist, became a subtle form of resistance, rejecting the status quo both ideologically and architecturally.

Saitowitz, in his search for what he called an "equal opposite," (Wagner, 1995:23) found inspiration in the philosophical writings of Norman Brown, who advocated for the idea that real revolutionary power lies in creative endeavours rather than political divisions. The construction of Transvaal House is, in many ways, an embodiment of this belief, where the boundary between art and architecture blur, and the very process of building becomes a form of rebellion.

Saitowitz explains how he took lessons from the local vernacular, noting that he sees no conflict between vernacular architecture and modernity. He refers to Ndebele patterns as the inspiration for the fenestration on the house. Incorporating indigenous motifs in modernist architecture raises important questions about whether such designs genuinely reflect local cultures or whether they perpetuate a form of appropriation that reinforces colonial hierarchies. Saitowitz's attempt to balance these influences in Transvaal House speaks to the architectural and cultural tensions of his time, navigating between the inclusion of vernacular traditions and the critique of the power structures that allowed such appropriation to occur.

The building's location highlights apartheid's spatial policies, where land ownership was closely tied to identity and privilege, with the state using land as a tool of oppression. Saitowitz's challenge to the notion of land ownership is central to understanding the cultural and social context of Transvaal House. Saitowitz's objection to conventional land ownership reflects both his questioning of capitalist and colonial structures and a Jewish perspective that emphasizes stewardship of land over possession. Rooted in a history of displacement, this view values community and ethical responsibility over territorial claim, aligning with Saitowitz's belief that detachment from land could disrupt the hierarchies sustaining racial inequality.

3.7 Environmental and Sustainable Context

When Transvaal House was built awareness of environmental issues was growing, but the modern concept of climate change was not as widely recognised as it is today. While sustainability was not a focus in itself, architects were expected to make sensible and resource conscious decisions. Saitowitz naturally incorporated such decisions into his design process. The design of Transvaal House provides a foundation for retrofitting it to align its features with contemporary sustainability objectives amidst South Africa's ongoing resource challenges.

At the time of Transvaal House's construction, building regulations and by-laws did not enforce energy-efficient practices or water-saving designs, but certain sustainable choices were made as a matter of common sense. Windows that could open freely to provide natural ventilation were standard, unlike the sealed, climate-controlled buildings that became popular with advancements in technology. In a way, the simplicity of these early design decisions anticipated modern sustainability goals, and as we contend with the unintended consequences of highly technical solutions, it seems we are returning to the basics where architecture embraces natural light, ventilation, and resource efficiency as it did when Transvaal House was built.

Transvaal House embodies both the strengths and limitations of the architectural thinking of its time. While the original design aligns with some aspects of sustainable architecture, it lacks modern systems that could further reduce energy consumption or maximise resource efficiency. This presents an opportunity to retrofit the building with new energy efficient technologies, allowing it to adapt to the country's present needs.

3.8 Conclusion

Transvaal House was designed at a pivotal moment in South African history, and the building embodies a response to the prevailing architectural norms and the oppressive realities of apartheid. Its modernist and vernacular elements reflect both an adherence to international design standards and an engagement with local materials and cultural motifs.

This chapter provides the backdrop for understanding the themes surrounding Transvaal House. The building's history, architecture, cultural significance, and potential for sustainable development are viewed within the context of South Africa's climate at the time the building was built. As debates around land ownership, cultural appropriation, and environmental responsibility continue to shape

the field of architecture, Transvaal House stands as a focal point for these discussions, embodying the challenges and opportunities of the South African architectural landscape.

In conclusion, Transvaal House stands as a significant artifact. Its status as a national monument reflects the ongoing negotiation between what aspects of heritage deserve preservation, what should be remembered, and what might be best forgotten. By examining the building through the lens of both local and global architectural movements insight is gained into the dialogue between cultural identity and spatial justice in a post-apartheid context.

The potential for retrofitting Transvaal House emerges as an opportunity to align its historical legacy with contemporary sustainability goals. This chapter has illustrated that while the conversations around sustainability in the 1970s were formative, the current urgency for sustainable design necessitates a re-evaluation of heritage structures like Transvaal House. The future of this building hinges both on its preservation as a monument and on its capacity to adapt and serve as a model for inclusive and environmentally responsible architecture, inviting ongoing dialogue about the intersection of history, culture, and design.

4. LAYERS, NARRATIVES AND PERSPECTIVES OF TRANSVAAL HOUSE

Transvaal House has been a presence throughout my career both personally and professionally. It represents a convergence of architectural innovation and social complexity, making it an ideal focal point for this research. My relationship with the house is shaped by early exposure to architecture, a childhood influenced by late 20th century Jewish architects, and a deep connection to modernist culture.

This chapter presents the data gathered from informal conversations, site visits, seminars, workshops, and reflections. These data sources inform the themes explored in my analysis, and this chapter sets the foundation for their critical examination in the following chapter. Key aspects of the site, including the layering of materials, the interplay of interior and exterior spaces, the patterns and placemaking inspired by Ndebele architecture, the terraces along the contours inspired by Machu Pichu. These insights reveal the building's architectural integrity, cultural relevance, and the tensions surrounding its preservation and repurposing. It considers my personal and professional contexts, including my position as a white, Jewish architect in South Africa, which influences how I interpret this building and its legacy. This chapter connects to the conceptual framework, drawing on themes of modernism, heritage sustainability and identity to guide the analysis in the following chapter.

4.1 Personal Context and Initial Encounters

I first encountered Transvaal House as a student in 1987. Modernist architecture was already ingrained in my upbringing as my father was part of a cohort of Johannesburg architects whose buildings all reflect strong modernist influences. Growing up in Johannesburg during the 1970s, I experienced architecture as a way of life. Weekends were spent on building sites and meal-time conversations revolved around the alignment of brickwork and how to maximise natural light. These early lessons now inform my understanding of Transvaal House’s carefully considered fenestration and structural logic.



Figure 4:1Kell Ann Heights, Germiston. Christelis and Stanley Victor Architects

Decades later, learning that Transvaal House had been donated to Wits University evoked a rush of nostalgia and initiated a series of conversations about its architectural and cultural significance. The Head of School, Professor Elleh, said: “I fell in love with the place. I understood what it could do, what it means to conservation, to teaching.” Reflecting on the building’s transfer to the University, Heather Dodd (2024) described the event: “A wonderful discussion between Scott Brebnor and his former wife, Dr Linda Sontag, who facilitated the idea, … proving how strong a place this house has had in people’s hearts over such a long period of time. Now it’s time for Wits to take the spirit of the house into a new role in the school.” These conversations highlighted the role of memory and identity in how heritage buildings are perceived and valued. Dodd (2024) noted: “The house has been gifted to Wits University through a generous donation facilitated by Scott Brebnor, Dr Linda Brebnor and Stanley Saitowitz.”

Saitowitz recounts how Scott (Brebnor) heard about a house Stan Field was designing around some boulders on a site and approached him. Field did not have capacity to take on the project, he offered it to his young colleague, Saitowitz. There are themes in Field’s House Miller in Khyber Rock, which are developed in Saitowitz’s work. House Miller’s curves, the boulders, the authentic approach to materials and the open-plan spaces echo in Transvaal House.



Figure 4:2 House Miller (Stanley Field Architect) and Transvaal House (Stanley Saitowitz Architect) (See Image credits)

4.2 Informal Conversations and Insights



Informal discussion about Transvaal House has been central to my data collection process. These conversations ranged from casual dinners with colleagues and academics to seminar debates on heritage and sustainability. We discussed the building's future, shared stories, and debated the implications of its design. The informal nature of these discussions allowed for an honest exchange of ideas, critiques, and personal anecdotes, which have shaped my understanding of the building's place in architectural history and contemporary discourse.

Notably, my conversations with Saitowitz provided firsthand insights into his design philosophy and his evolving perspectives. He spoke about the unique working partnership that brought the house into being "from sketches and metaphor to it being made, fabricated by Scott [Brebnor]." Saitowitz reflected on the challenges of blending modernist principles with vernacular traditions, navigating the complexity of being a politically conscious white architect resisting an overtly immoral government. At the same time, he grappled with his identity as a Jew in environments where Jews are often unwelcome, all while remaining steadfast in his commitment to creating spaces that contribute positively to the world.



Figure 4:3 In the Library with a 1974 Dissertation.
B. Mphuti, K. Chiya, H. Dodd, A. Victor, H. Judin, S. Saitowitz.
Photograph: Nnamdi Elleh

4.2.1 Seminar and Workshop

Two events hosted on-site by the Wits School of Architecture and Planning shaped my data collection. The Heritage and Sustainability Inaugural Workshop (November 2023) and the Reflection and Discussion Seminar (February 2024). These events provided structured, yet open platforms for exploring Transvaal House's legacy.

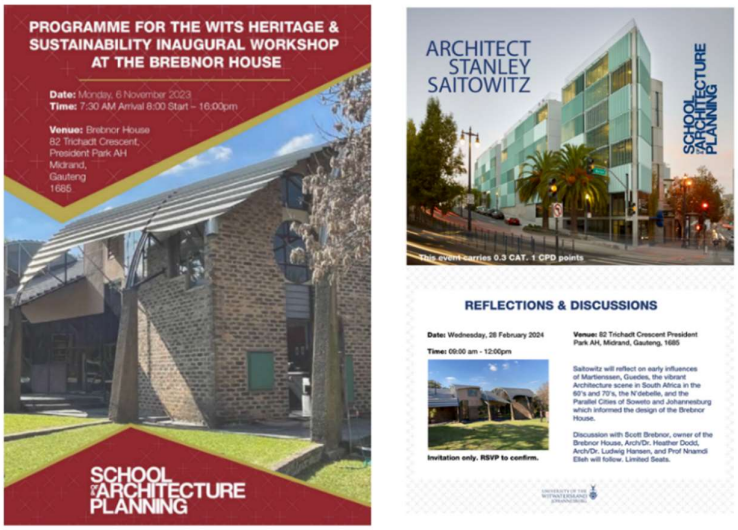


Figure 4:4 Events at Transvaal House

The first workshop explored the intersection of heritage and sustainability. A discussion at this seminar which focused on the building's heritage value clarified key aspects for me. The heritage specialists emphasised the authenticity of the design and the materials, and the importance of preserving the building exactly as it stands. The owner was adamant about maintaining the house in

its original state, as he had done for five decades. An academic from the Bartlett School of Architecture suggested that there is greater value in repurposing old buildings rather than constructing new ones. This approach aligns with global movements toward sustainable architecture, where buildings like the Tate Modern serve as case studies in adaptive reuse. In contrast, some younger voices questioned the relevance of preserving Transvaal House, arguing that its heritage might be inconsequential to contemporary communities. The generational divide underscores another tension in architectural heritage – the balance between preserving the past and addressing present needs. The discussions revealed diverse opinions on heritage and sustainability.

Another Bartlett School professor raised the idea that the value of heritage buildings may lie in the exchange of the building. She discussed a case in Melbourne where the true value was found in the sale of a building with contested heritage and the proceeds were used to fund much needed community initiatives. These conversations indicated to me that while sustainability is an important lens, heritage cannot be detached from social justice and cultural context.



Figure 4:5 Two Professors and a Place to meet

At the second seminar, discussions centred on the architectural landscape of Johannesburg in the 1960s and 1970s. The question of whose heritage the building represents became crucial. A young architect of colour present asked: “Why are you guys looking at Africa? Is it…a kind of desire to assimilate and ground yourself in Africa. What is the point of you…who are white guys in Africa looking

at this stuff. Why?" These perspectives highlighted the generational and racial divides within the architectural community, challenging the idea that all heritage is worth preserving equally.

A pivotal moment arose when Saitowitz spoke about the Ndebele ruins that once existed on the site. The origin of the ruins was discussed at length, and as noted in Chapter 3 of this document it emerged that there was a greater likelihood of the partially demolished buildings being old farm buildings than of being a deserted Ndebele homestead. Saitowitz's reference to Ndebele placemaking (as a source of inspiration to him) provoked a strong reaction from a few of the architects in the audience, who accused him of ignoring the history of displacement and colonialism that underpinned the site's development. A participant challenged Saitowitz to: "Give us the back story of the Ndebele ruin, what happened to the building and the people?" This sparked debate about cultural displacement and post-colonial issues. This encounter brought into focus the complex intersections between heritage, memory, and power in the architectural profession. It was at this moment that I realised this topic must be explored further and that these debates are exactly where the value lies in keeping this building as a monument.

The debates reveal the evolving understanding of architectural and spatial justice, particularly regarding the use of heritage sites like Transvaal House. The Head of School said', "Archaeology of memory is what we are engaging in here." The stories and debates collected from these seminars have been pivotal in modelling scenarios regarding the preservation and repurposing of the building, with an emphasis on sustainability and inclusivity.



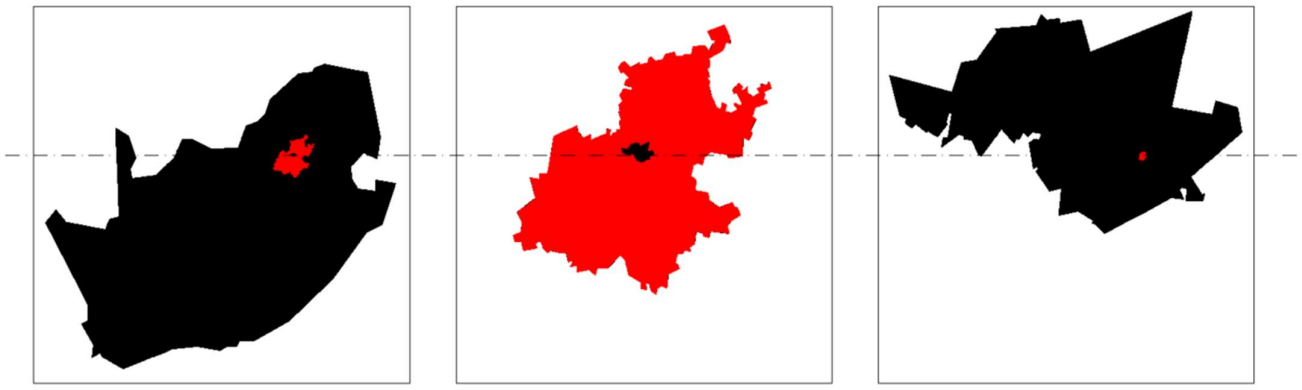
Figure 4:6 Reflecting



Figure 4:7 Now and Then in Transvaal House.
Saitowitz looking at Saitowitz.
Saitowitz and Dodd, Dodd and Saitowitz.
Saitowitz discussing the Caretaker's Cottage and references to Machu Picchu

4.3 The Building

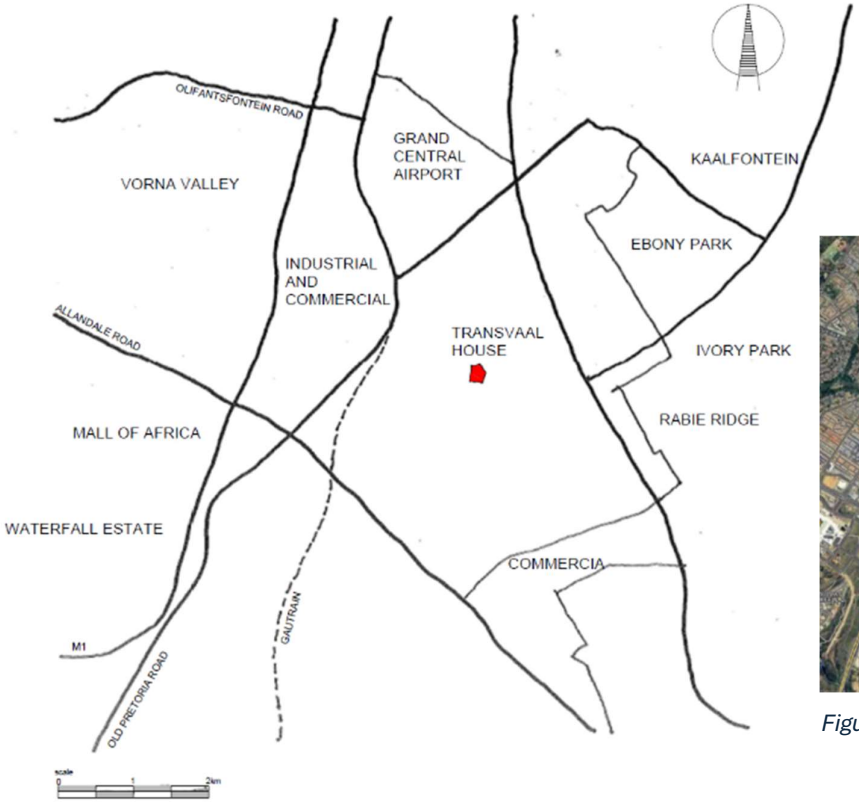
4.3.1 Location and Site



Gauteng, South Africa | Midrand, Gauteng | Erf RE/201, Midrand

Figure 4:8 Location

Transvaal House is located in President Park, Midrand. Grand Central Airport is to the north, there are warehouses and factories between the highway and the Old Pretoria Road, Vorna Valley townhouses and the walled Waterfall Estate is to the west, on the other side of the Gautrain. Commercia informal settlement is on the south, and townships lie to the east. Access is mainly by private vehicle. Midrand Gautrain station is 2.5km away and mini-bus taxis operate in the area. It takes about 45 minutes to travel between Wits campus and the site by car, and about 90 minutes using public transport.



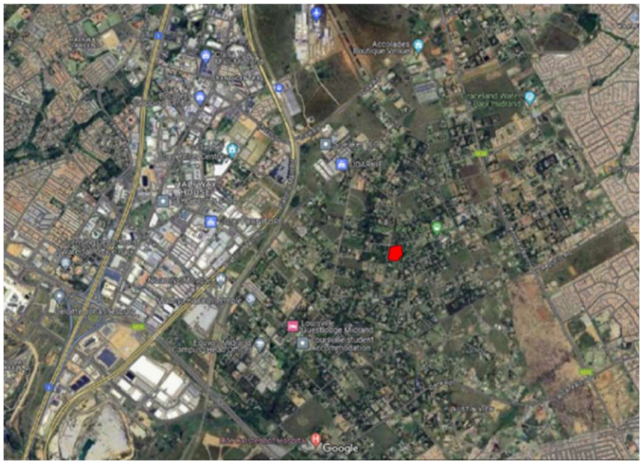


Figure 4:9 Spatial Disparity (see Image credits)

Figure 4:10 Location Plan

4.3.2 Architectural Significance and Historical Context

Transvaal House was commissioned by a white couple who had the means to buy a large plot of land and build their dream home at a time when black South Africans were prohibited from owning property. This raises questions about spatial justice and highlights the socio-political contrasts. The building represents a particular moment in South African architectural history, one in which modernist ideals intersect with the socio-political landscape of a segregated society.



Figure 4:11 Transvaal House. Photograph: Stanley Saitowitz. (See Image Credits)

When Transvaal House was built, it was surrounded by veld, but the surrounding area has developed and is now dense and diversely populated. The house was originally sited on about 6 acres of land (2.4ha). Saitowitz (2024) described how the horizon was visible from the site, the area was sparsely built, and there were more dogs and horses than humans. The original site is outlined in red below, and the current site is hatched.

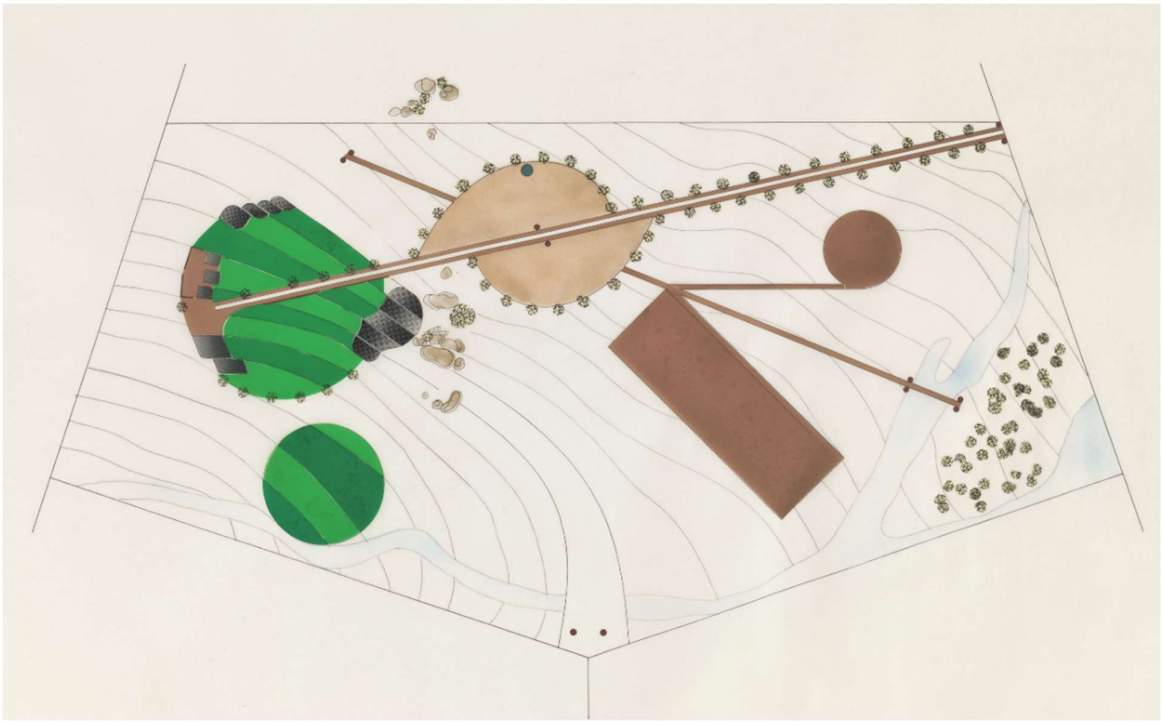


Figure 4:12 Site Plan. Drawing: Stanley Saitowitz. (See Image credits)

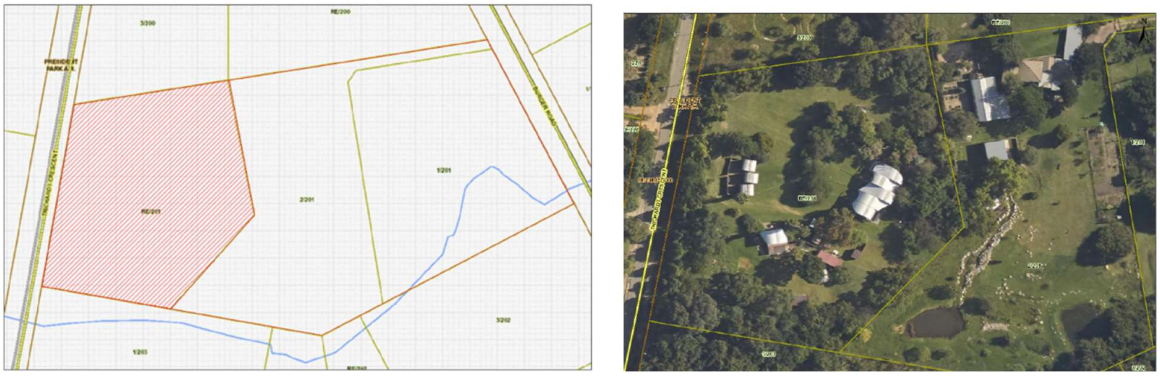


Figure 4:13 Site Plan. City of Johannesburg: Corporate Geo-Informatics Property Report, 12 March 2024.

4.3.3 Modernist Approach

The design of Transvaal House reflects the core principles of modernism, particularly the emphasis on simplicity, functionality, and the rejection of ornamentation. Saitowitz's approach was influenced by modernist ideas of "less is more," as articulated by Mies van der Rohe, and "form follows function," attributed to Louis Sullivan. These principles manifest in Transvaal House through its clean lines, visible structural elements, and lack of decorative features, where the structure itself becomes the primary expression of form.



Figure 4:14 Transvaal House

What makes modernist ideals particularly relevant in this discussion is the rejection of traditional building methods in Transvaal House. The roof is not supported by the walls, it was constructed first, and the walls are later added without being load-bearing. This allows for adaptability in how the internal spaces are used, aligning with Le Corbusier's vision of open, flexible spaces. The illustration shows a traditional house built in the 70s in suburbia, and Saitowitz's use of the same pitch, with a completely different interpretation of the roof construction and language.

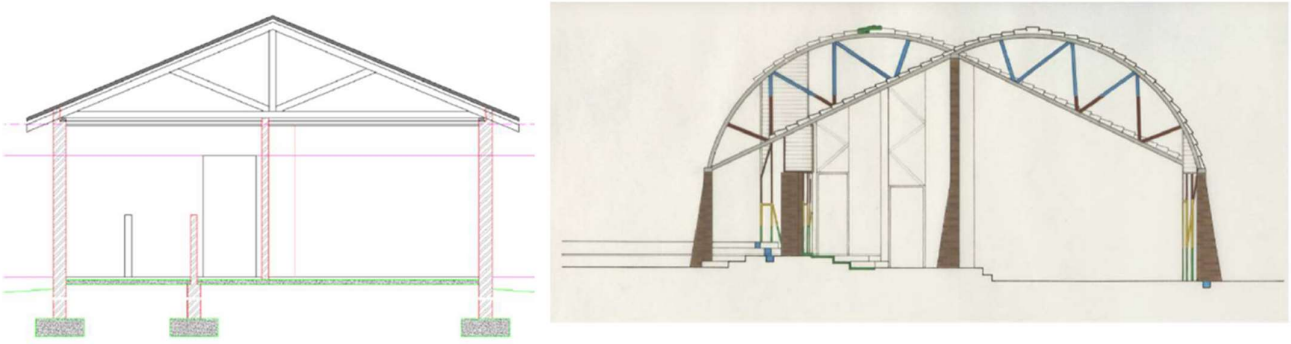


Figure 4:15 Comparing Sections (see Image credits)

4.3.4 Vernacular influences

While modernism was the guiding framework for Transvaal House, vernacular influences play a role in the design. Saitowitz's incorporation of Ndebele geometric patterns into the windows and the layout of interconnected courtyards, specifically in the Caretaker's Cottage, draw from local architectural traditions, reflecting his appreciation of the sophistication inherent in Ndebele architecture.



Figure 4:16 Traditional Openings and Fenestration reflecting Ndebele geometry (See Image credits)

Saitowitz states that he learned from "the architecture of the African countryside" (Saitowitz, 1996: 58). This acknowledgment of local practices represents an attempt to bridge the gap between European modernist ideals and African architectural forms, illustrating a divergence from European ideals with an adaptive approach in an attempt to incorporate local cultural elements in a new architectural language. Discussions reveal that while some view Saitowitz's efforts as a meaningful cultural merging, others interpret the use of vernacular elements as a token gesture that does not fully engage with or represent the local culture.

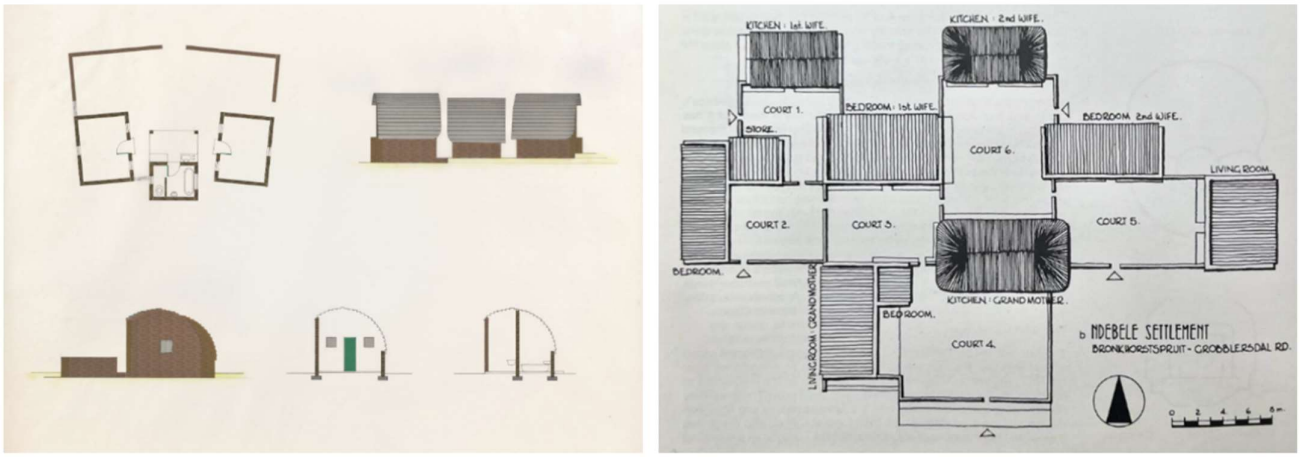


Figure 4:17 Drawings comparing the layout of The Caretaker's Cottage and an Ndebele Settlement (See Image credits)

By incorporating vernacular elements and rejecting traditional styles associated with colonial architecture, Saitowitz uses buildings as a form of subtle resistance against the dominant cultural and political forces of the time. This was reinforced by his stance that the struggle lies beyond political divisions and that real power lies in creative projects.

The modernist approach provides architects like Saitowitz with a framework for creative freedom and cultural experimentation, yet its application in South Africa remains controversial. There is tension between modernism's legacy and its adaptability in post-apartheid South Africa. This critique broaches a question about the role of architecture in addressing social justice.

4.3.5 Design and Construction

The design and construction of Transvaal House reflects a collaborative and unconventional process. Saitowitz and the client actively engaged in a hands-on approach where Brebnor became the builder of his own home. This method was cost-effective and aligned with modernist ideals of breaking down boundaries between design and construction.



Figure 4:18 Under Construction (See Image credits)

Brebnor describes the use of local, readily available materials, with some elements, such as second-hand doors and locally sourced sand for making mortar, contributing to the construction. He says that everything in the house was available from the local hardware store or manufactured on site. The hand-cut insulation for the roof and a round kitchen window that was salvaged and repurposed, further reflected the modernist ethos of innovation and practicality. This process of incorporating found or accessible materials aligns with modernist ideals of celebrating the materiality and function of elements in their raw state.



Figure 4:19 Under Construction (See Image credits)

4.3.6 Cultural Merging or Appropriation

While Saitowitz intended to incorporate local aesthetics, critics have pointed out that such adaptations, when executed by white architects during the apartheid era, can be seen as cultural appropriation. At the second seminar, Saitowitz (2024) said that the images below: “blew my mind because these people were taking our culture and translating it into their own and I thought – how do we do the same? For me, that’s what this house represents. Taking the Ndebele and putting it into the Western architectural tradition.” He was immediately challenged with this question: “Who are *these people*? Who is *our own*, and how are you using the word *culture*?”



Figure 4:20 Ndebele Murals incorporating City Life (see Image credits)

The risk lies in using symbols of a marginalized group without fully engaging with or understanding the deeper cultural and historical significance behind them. This raises questions about the appropriation of Ndebele patterns in a private residence constructed for a white family. Some participants argued that this reflected a deeper issue of cultural exchange, while others viewed the use of these elements as superficial, driven by a modernist fascination with "otherness" while ignoring the power dynamics that shaped apartheid-era South Africa.

4.4 Professional Encounters

In addition to informal discussions with colleagues, I've had the opportunity to engage directly with Stanley Saitowitz, which added another layer to my understanding of the building and its architect. Our conversations ranged from reminiscing about his early work, including his dissertation, to discussing his ongoing relationship with architecture and its global context, and contemporary Jewishness. I also spent time with him and other academics reflecting on Transvaal House's future.



Figure 4:21 Stanley Saitowitz and his Dissertation in the Wits Architecture Library. (See Image credits)

4.4.1 Conversations with Students

As a practicing architect I have mentored many students over the years as they have passed through my practice, building relationships where they have come to me for help throughout their studies and early careers. I am witnessing how architectural education in South Africa is attempting to navigate the legacy of apartheid.

One first-year student recently came to me for help with a project on Transvaal House. He shared that his lecturer had referred to the building as an example of "what not to build." I found this disturbing coming from a teacher, as there are lessons available in the most unlikely places. I was saddened at the arrogance of young professionals who dismiss buildings which may be seen as old, or dated, or perhaps irrelevant. When I attended the students' presentations, I was struck by the lack of depth in their work. The critiques from the young members of staff seemed to reflect a surface-level understanding of the building's architectural and historical significance. This highlighted a troubling gap in the transmission of architectural theory and critical thought between generations.

4.5 Reflections on Heritage and Identity

My own position as a Jewish South African architect has been an ongoing source of reflection. The intersection of my professional identity with my personal history complicates my relationship with post-apartheid architectural discourse. In discussing the building with Saitowitz and others, the question of Jewishness and belonging repeatedly surfaced. Because my grandparents, like Saitowitz's, found refuge in South Africa, the experience of outsider status continues to inform how I navigate conversations around architecture, land, and heritage.

Recent global events have provoked a rise of antisemitism in academic spaces, reminding me that, despite our contributions to the profession, Jewish architects often remain separate - integrated into, but still apart from, mainstream narratives. This separation extends to our interpretation of buildings like Transvaal House, which carries layers of memory, not only as a modernist artifact but also as a symbol of the cultural and historical complexities that we as Jewish architects must continuously negotiate.

4.5.1 Engaging with Current Perspectives

My enrolment in this academic course has exposed me to a new generation of interdisciplinary professionals with diverse viewpoints. Although my interviews have been informal, engaging with architects, developers, town planners, academics and fellow students has enriched my understanding of Transvaal House and its place within contemporary architectural discourse. Reflecting on my own educational background during apartheid, I recognize the limitations of my perspective. The experiences of my generation, marked by privilege and only partial awareness, differ from those of the current generation grappling with post-apartheid realities. The critique of Transvaal House by younger architects, influenced by limited exposure to the building's theoretical and historical context, highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of architectural heritage. This disconnect underscores the need for architectural education to bridge the gap between theoretical and historical contexts and contemporary practice.

4.6 Conclusion

The data gathered for this study does not stem from traditional interviews or surveys. Instead, it emerges from a network of informal but insightful conversations with people who interact with Transvaal House in different ways. These conversations reveal the layers of the building's significance, from its modernist legacy to its contested place in contemporary South African society. My

relationship with the house, as an architect shaped by the same modernist ideals that produced it, and as a white South African growing up during the apartheid years, is both personal and professional, and the data collected here reflects that duality. I believe that the future value of Transvaal House, whether it remains preserved or is adapted to new uses, is its ability to continue to provoke debate.

5. TRACING LEGACIES, SHAPING FUTURES: FINDINGS AND SCENARIO MODELLING

5.1 Complexity and Contradictions in Transvaal House

Transvaal House embodies the ideals of modernism while reflecting the social and political dynamics of the time in which it was built. Although Saitowitz resisted apartheid's segregationist policies, his work occurred within a system that limited marginalized voices. Research into the social, historical, and architectural contexts has identified tensions related to cultural appropriation, ongoing effects of apartheid land ownership, and the building's potential role as a resource for sustainable practices and education.

The building's design and its implications during apartheid-era South Africa are examined. Themes include the tension between cultural appropriation or appreciation, representation, sustainability, and the building's status as a National Monument. Any contemporary discussion of architecture must address sustainability concerns, particularly in relation to this building which is a heritage building and can be used as a teaching tool.

Transvaal House was built during a time of fear, anger, and resistance in South Africa. Wits University, where Saitowitz was involved, experienced an atmosphere of intense friction between activism and oppression. People disappeared under suspicious circumstances, and trust was scarce. I believe it is important to keep Transvaal House as a reminder of what was happening at the time. It holds the tension of history, the silent stories of a country that was burning under its own weight.

5.2 The Site

In his 1974 dissertation, Saitowitz discusses detachment from land. He notes that his indifference to land as a white South African undermines the role of architecture in claiming space and controlling territory. Paradoxically, the historical context of land ownership entrenched along racial lines is reflected in the construction of Transvaal House on a large plot of land during a period when Black South Africans were systematically deprived of land.



Figure 5:1 Under Construction (See Image credits)

The original six-acre plot, once isolated, is now surrounded by urban development, reflecting rapid changes in spatial configurations. The house is positioned in the midst wealthy estates, informal settlements, industrial areas, and transport routes highlighting complex issues of wealth distribution and ongoing spatial inequalities.



Figure 5:2 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2019, 2023 (See Image Credits)

The separation between the main house and the caretaker's quarters, with trees planted between the two, physically and symbolically reflects apartheid-era attitudes towards race and class. This spatial design choice highlights how architecture and landscape were used to maintain social divisions.

5.3 Jewish Architects

Being Jewish in apartheid South Africa added another layer of complexity. Families like Saitowitz's, and my own, faced social exclusion, being barred from schools, sports clubs, and other social spaces. Saitowitz, like many Jewish architects, carried a dual experience of being part of white society while remaining apart. As "a somewhat outsider student," (Le Roux, 2023: 98), Saitowitz's experiences may have shaped his willingness to engage with diverse architectural influences, including the vernacular architecture of local marginalised communities. His interest in Ndebele architecture reflects an openness to non-Western forms and recognition of their cultural significance
Many Jewish architects, including Saitowitz, embraced modernism as both an ideological choice and reflection of European roots. Today, Saitowitz is being questioned why he, as a white man, was looking to vernacular forms. These inquiries challenge the legitimacy of his engagement with indigenous architectural traditions and underscore the tension between his historical position as an 'outsider' and his present-day perception as a white architect who operated in a colonial framework.

5.4 Modernist Approach

The design of Transvaal House is grounded in modernist principles of functionalism, simplicity, and the use of local materials. The collaboration between Saitowitz and the owner exemplifies the fluid relationship between architect and client. Brebnor, who owned and built the house, worked closely with the architect throughout the construction process. This partnership allowed for flexibility and resourcefulness. Local materials were sourced and used, and second-hand elements were integrated into the design. Saitowitz (2024) recounts how he personally laid the brickwork to the caretaker's cottage to achieve the pattern he had envisioned. The hands-on approach is typical of modernist innovation and practicality.

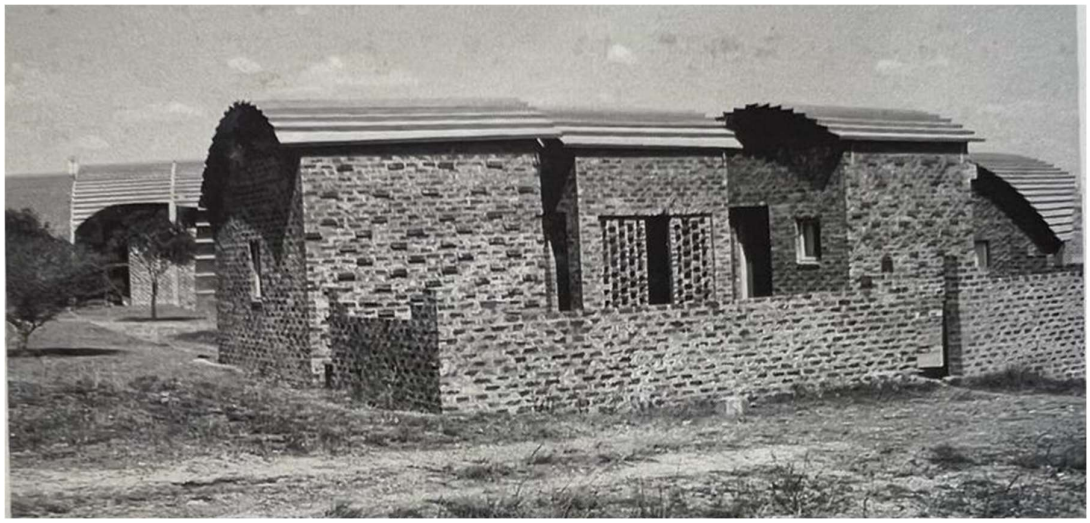


Figure 5:3 Brickwork (See Image credits)

This approach also reveals contradictions: the house's innovative design occurred in a context of socio-economic disparities, with opportunities for modernist experimentation primarily serving privileged white communities.

5.5 Cultural Appreciation or Cultural Appropriation

One of the most contested aspects of Transvaal House is the use of Ndebele references. Some see Saitowitz's incorporation of Ndebele motifs as an homage to local vernacular traditions, while others view it as an exploitation of indigenous culture, revealing a tension between cultural appreciation and appropriation. This debate highlights the complexity of using architectural elements from marginalised cultures in projects shaped by a history of racial inequality. The appropriation of Ndebele elements without fully addressing the power dynamics that shaped apartheid-era South Africa underscores issues of representation in architecture.

5.6 Sustainability Lessons

Energy efficiency and sustainability are central to the future potential of Transvaal House. The house's use of local materials is a positive aspect in terms of reducing embodied energy, but opportunities for improving its energy performance and environmental sustainability remain. Transvaal House can be easily upgraded to improve thermal comfort, which would contribute to both energy efficiency and environmental education. It could serve as a teaching tool in the context of retrofitting existing buildings to meet modern energy standards.

Enhancing the building's insulation, improving window glazing, and integrating solar energy could significantly reduce its carbon footprint. The clerestory windows all face north-east, but the ground level windows are oriented East-West. If the building had been slightly reorientated to face North, it would have achieved better thermal comfort, benefitting from the North sun all day, and from the morning and afternoon sun through the clerestory.

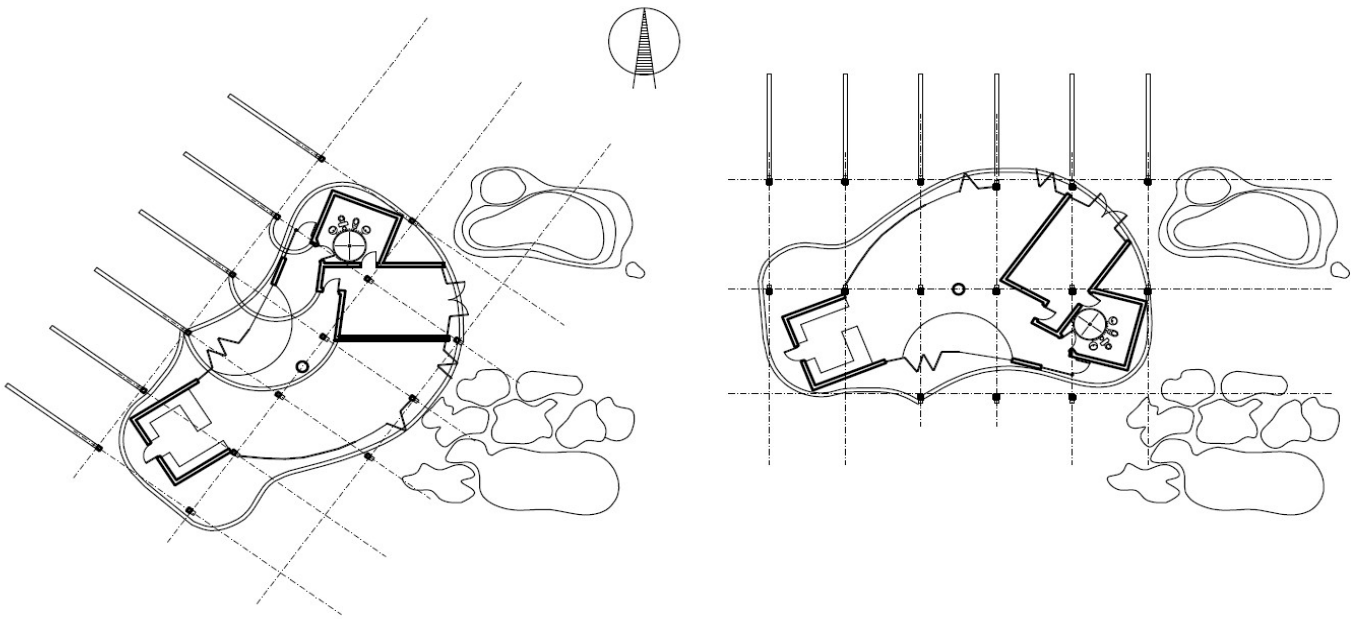


Figure 5:4 Rotated and Flipped

The high water table on the south end of the site offers opportunities for experimentation with water strategies. This feature could be leveraged in numerous ways, from irrigation to water recycling, providing lessons for sustainable design. The small channel, surrounding the house does serve a functional role in water collection, even though it is a tripping hazard. The inhabitable roof spaces offer another dimension of potential, providing both an additional experiential layer for users and an opportunity to rethink how architecture can engage with the landscape.

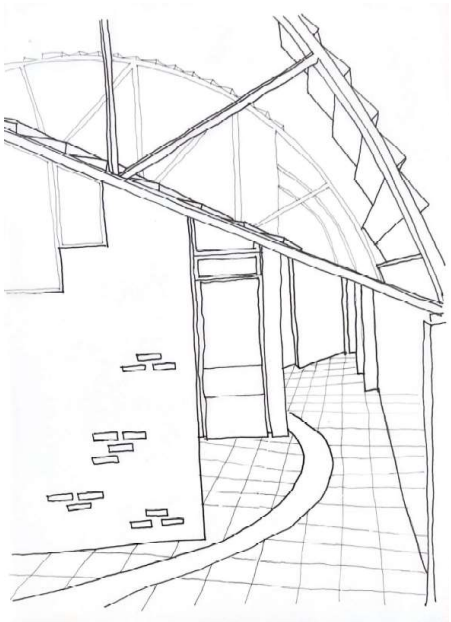


Figure 5:5 The Moat

5.7 Reflections on Student Engagement

In observing a recent first-year architecture project presentation, I found myself disheartened by the lack of engagement with the nuances of Transvaal House. The students were tasked with designing a character for their projects, and many presented anthropomorphic superheroes. In contrast, for me, the cover-model of the house is the Q-decking creatively used on the roof, while the real superhero is the basic brick which is versatile enough to craft forms and portray different architectural languages. The students' work, arguably, missed the cultural and historical essence of the building. I found little evidence of any real connection to the significance of the structure, prompting me to question what, exactly, I had hoped to see.

I had hoped for recognition of the house's construction details, such as its curtain walls and floating roof, an intentional design choice that reflects modernist influences. I wanted to see an awareness of materiality and the impact on energy usage reflected. An evaluation of these principles should consider how the building's siting was affected by the boulders on the site, potentially compromising its thermal performance. The integration of Ndebele placemaking was noted, but I did not see any attention paid to the terracing techniques and references to Machu Picchu. I had hoped to see an attempt at understanding how the building's design bridges local vernacular and global architectural practices, and how this could be capitalised on in a contemporary context.

5.8 Strategic New Scenarios

The purpose of modelling scenarios in this study is to explore and evaluate potential futures for Transvaal House in a structured, evidence-based manner. By engaging with the contradictions and nuances identified in the data, this framework allows for a critical assessment of various possibilities, balancing historical significance with contemporary needs and priorities.

As an architect with decades of professional experience, I bring an applied understanding of architectural theory, design, and sustainable practices to this exploration. My expertise allows me to critically analyse the building's existing conditions, assess its potential for adaptive reuse, and propose interventions that are both feasible and meaningful. Architecture is not merely about constructing physical spaces; it is also about responding to context, history, and societal needs. This professional lens informs my approach to scenario modelling, ensuring that the recommendations are grounded in both practical realities and theoretical insights.

The future of Transvaal House presents a range of opportunities that address its architectural heritage and the issues of sustainability, social justice, and cultural identity. Transvaal House is undeniably valuable, and the challenge lies in determining where this value resides and how best to use the existing structure. These options explore various scenarios for repurposing Transvaal House.
The development of this site is unique due to its wide array of sensitive and significant factors. The complex issues surrounding land ownership in South Africa are acknowledged, particularly in relation to apartheid spatial planning and land tenure. However, until a different approach to land custodianship is considered, the proposals that follow are for how the property can be utilised in the present.

The building was originally designed as a private residence, but it is now part of a university campus, offering an opportunity to reimagine its role, transforming it to meet contemporary standards of social justice and inclusivity. Architecturally, the site bridges modernity and indigenous traditions, and environmentally, it provides a forum to explore materiality, energy efficiency, and the application of technological advances over the last fifty years. This section explores a few scenarios for the future of Transvaal House, each offering opportunities for its use and impact. The options under consideration include demolishing the building and salvaging materials, establishing a green energy plant, creating a school of landscape architecture, and developing student accommodation on the site.

5.8.1 Relocating Transvaal House to SFMOMA

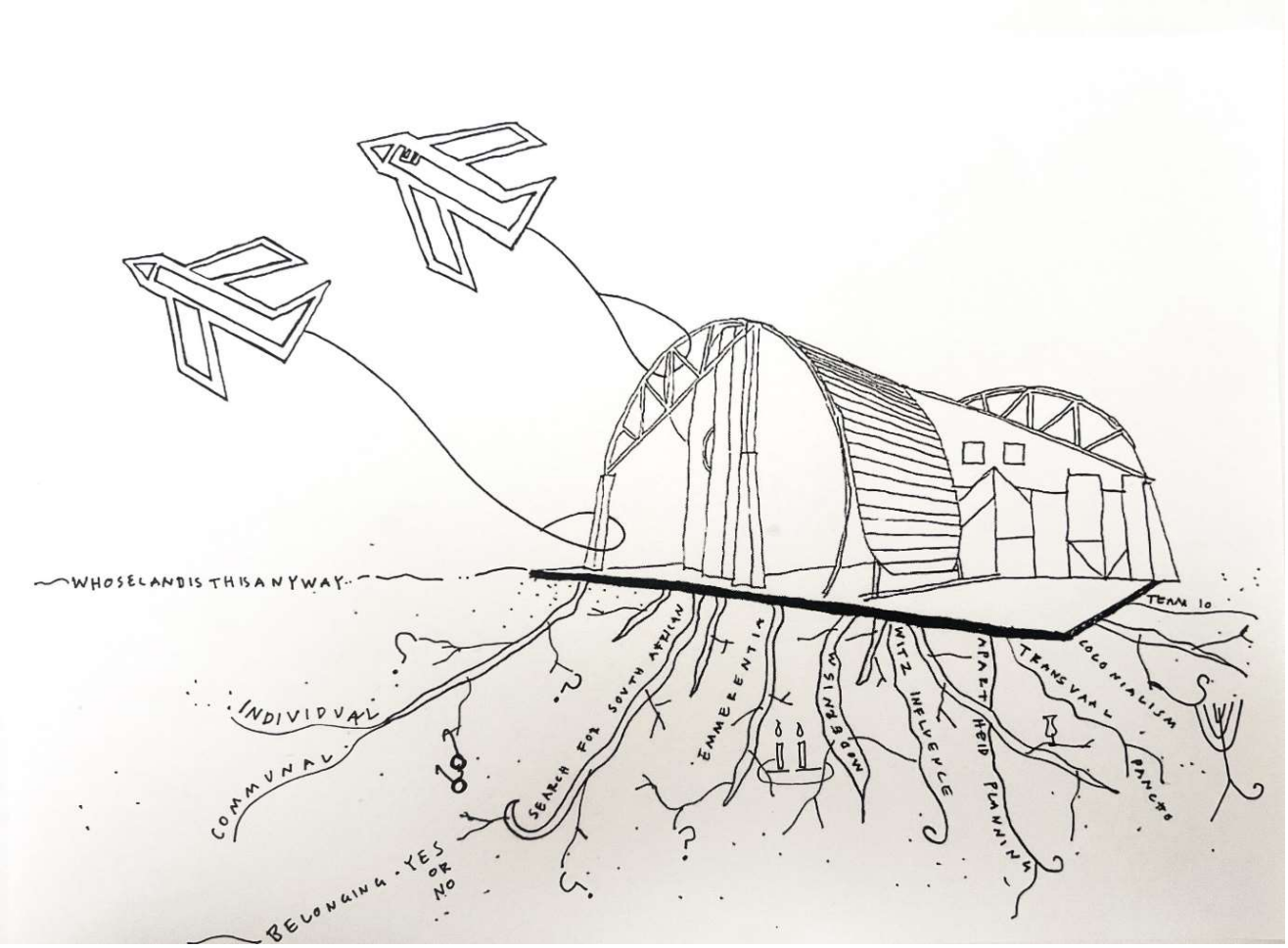


Figure 5:6 Planes and Roots

One proposed scenario is to relocate Transvaal House to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). As a modernist work by Stanley Saitowitz, moving the building to SFMOMA would secure its preservation in an international context, offering public engagement. The museum already holds Saitowitz's drawings of the house, and showcasing the building there could elevate it as a significant example of modernist South African architecture. Being in a public open space, this would enable architects, historians, and students from around the world to learn from its design.

5.8.2 Demolition and Sale of Land and Materials

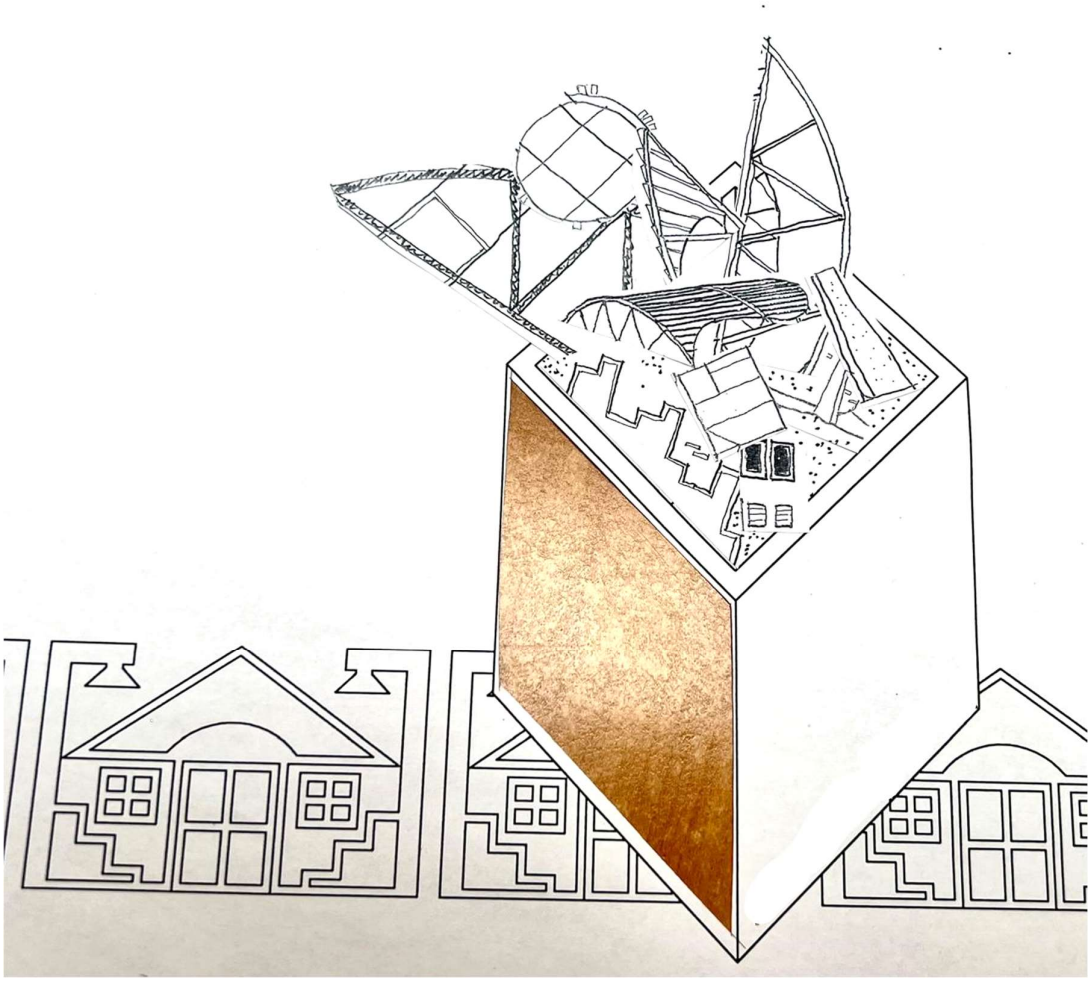


Figure 5:7 Packing up

A second scenario is to demolish Transvaal House, sell the land for redevelopment, and salvage the materials for reuse. This approach aligns with sustainable construction principles by recycling materials, potentially generating financial returns. However, demolition would lead to the permanent loss of a significant piece of South African architectural heritage. The building's physical presence, along with its value as a learning tool, would be erased, and the opportunity to repurpose it in would be lost.

Saitowitz's 1974 dissertation offers insights into this dilemma, suggesting that buildings must evolve with time and changing needs, and in some cases, demolition might be a natural trajectory in a building's lifecycle. He further emphasises that a well-designed object should be capable of being destroyed well, aligning with modern green building practices that focus on the end-of-life fate of materials. However, while this idea offers a practical solution, it overlooks the deeper cultural and historical significance of Transvaal House, which extends beyond its physical structure.

5.8.3 Renewable Energy Plant



Figure 5:8 Panels and Turbines

The site could be redeveloped as a renewable energy production plant, which offers the potential for long-term environmental benefits. This option aligns with global efforts to reduce carbon emissions and transition toward sustainable infrastructure. A green energy hub could serve as a model for sustainable urban energy solutions and provide significant research opportunities.

The existing structure of Transvaal House can become the research laboratory. The building, which has long been noted for its thermal discomfort, presents an opportunity to study energy-efficient retrofitting solutions. Interventions such as upgrading the glass, improving insulation, and enhancing energy systems for lighting, heating, water and waste management could make the building greener while preserving its architectural form. The site could integrate renewable energy systems like small wind turbines and solar photovoltaic panels, allowing the building itself to function as a live experiment in sustainability.

5.8.4 School of Landscape Architecture



Figure 5:9 A House in a Garden

This scenario envisions the site as a research and teaching hub for urban farming, water management, and renewable energy, offering academic opportunities while engaging the neighbours. Establishing a School of Landscape Architecture here could expand the curriculum of the Wits University School of Architecture and Planning, addressing educational and societal needs by focusing on sustainability, food security, and landscape design. This initiative could introduce courses on plant management, sustainable food production, organic waste processing and the logistics of food distribution.

The site presents an opportunity for cultivating food and makes space for hands-on learning. Its proximity to religious buildings, schools, and informal settlements offers the potential for community outreach, particularly in addressing food security. The existing house could serve as the core of the development, perhaps being used as a greenhouse or a classroom, supporting practical learning and demonstrating sustainable architecture in action. This option stresses the adaptability and multifunctionality of spaces, ensuring they meet various community and individual needs, reminiscent of the concepts in Saitowitz's 1974 Dissertation.

Incorporating elements from Ndebele cultural practices, such as the use of outdoor spaces for communal activities, would create a vibrant, adaptable campus environment. Graduates from architectural schools, especially those familiar with Ndebele cultural traditions, can bring these practices into contemporary design, enriching the architectural language. This aligns with Saitowitz's belief that architecture should amplify voices and experiences that have often been silent or suppressed, creating spaces that not only reflect historical resonance but also embody forward-thinking functionality.

5.8.5 A Self-Sufficient Sanctuary for Students and Staff

Transforming the site into accessible housing for students is probably the most viable option. The creation of a student community using the house and the natural landscape results in a space that balances access to accommodation with preservation of the past. In this proposal, Transvaal House remains as a physical and symbolic reminder of its time, offering a deliberate choice of what to remember and how to move forward.

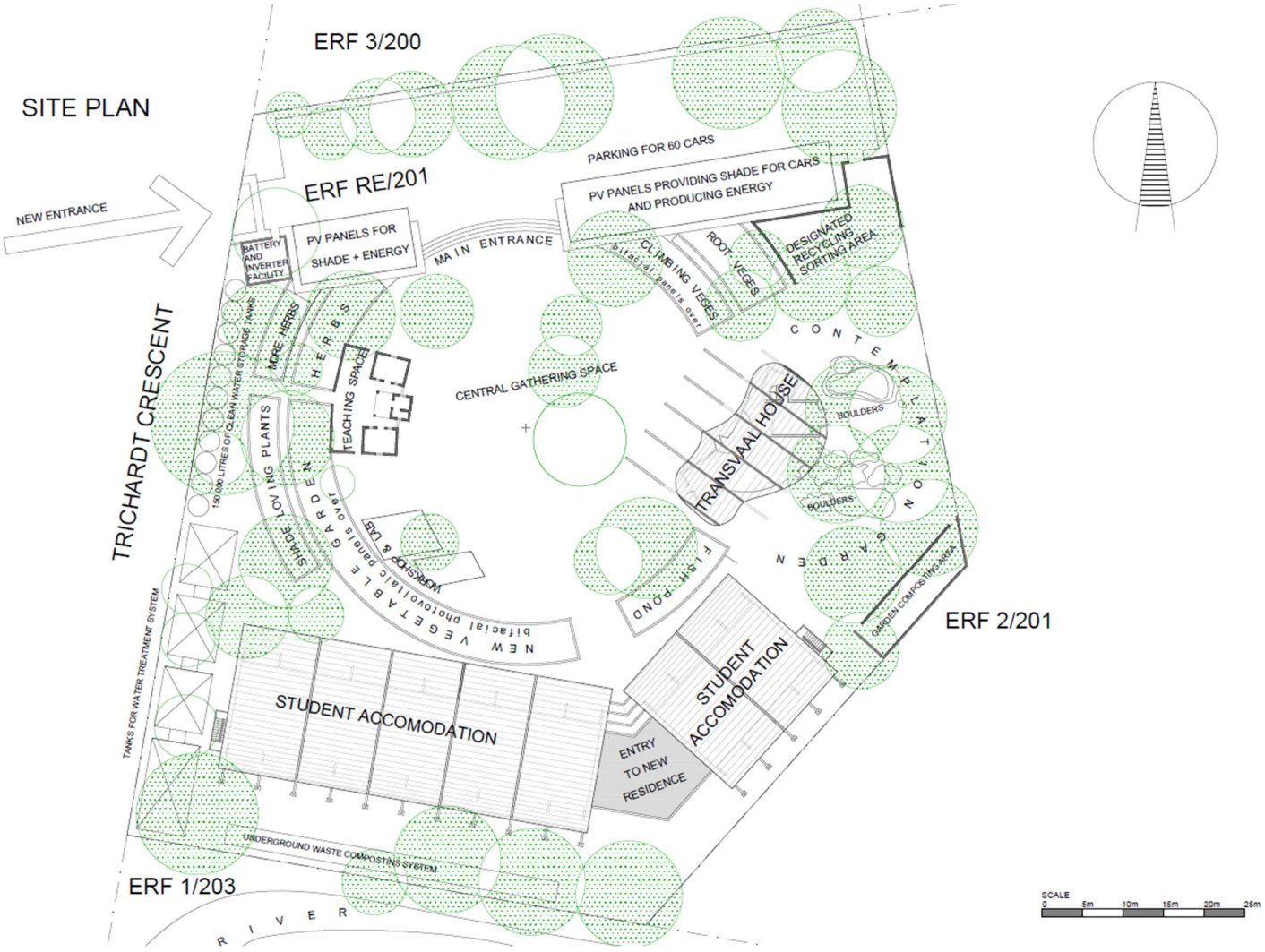


Figure 5:10 Proposed New Site Plan

The journey begins at the gatehouse, marking a transition from the complicated outside world to the tranquillity and inclusivity of this development. The site is structured in concentric layers, each with its own distinct purpose. A parking area serves as a liminal space, shaded by photovoltaic panels that generate energy. From here, one moves from the primary entrance, through a secondary threshold into a central courtyard, which is a communal space for gathering, interaction and relaxation.

At its core, Transvaal House serves as the focal point. It is repurposed as a hub for discussion and engagement, maintaining its role as a space for critical thought. The original outbuildings become teaching facilities, and the granny flat becomes a space for workshops and laboratories. The garden around Transvaal House is designed as a contemplative space, where one can experience the iconic boulders, and the shade of the indigenous trees, inviting moments of reflection on the past and the future.

The second layer, encircling the courtyard consists of food producing gardens. Food grown on-site minimises reliance on external resources, reducing the carbon footprint associated with transport, packaging and storage. The gardens grow a diverse array of vegetables, herbs and fruit, prioritising seasonal and indigenous crops. Permaculture principles ensure that every element of the garden has multiple functions. The fishpond produces nutrient rich water that naturally fertilises the plants while purifying water for reuse. The lifecycle of the fish complements the garden's productivity with adult fish providing a sustainable protein source for residents.

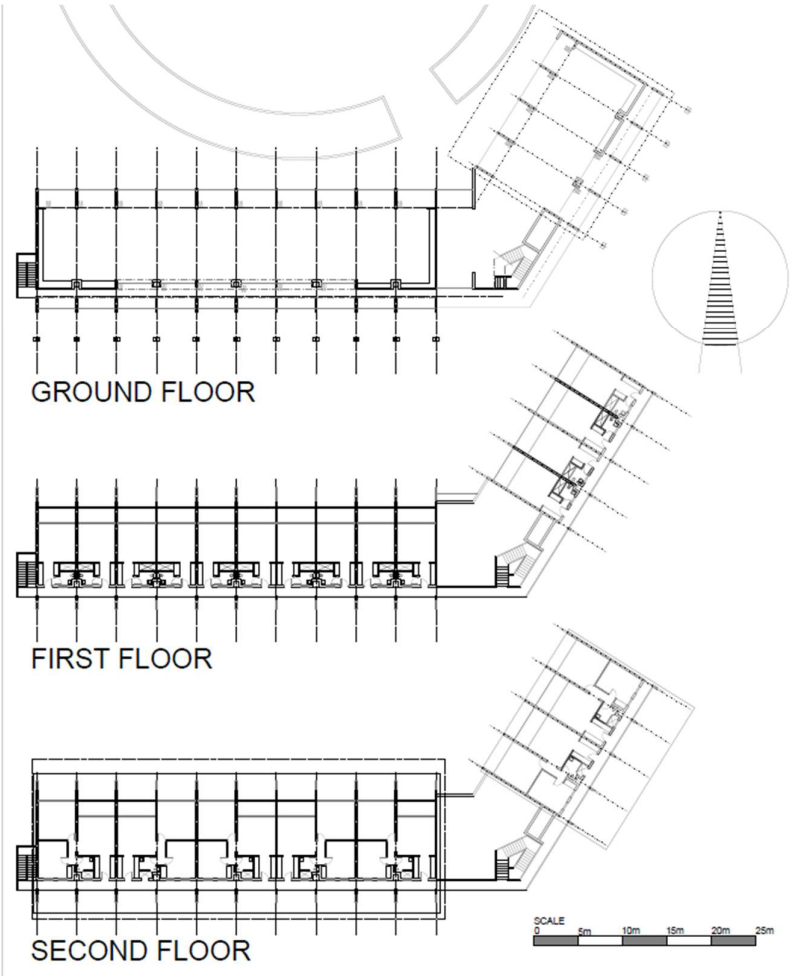


Figure 5:11 Sketch Plan

Positioned on the south side of the site, and orientated north, the new building forms a minimalist backdrop to the courtyard activities. Its clean, unadorned design reflects modernist principles, and an awareness of climate and environmental responsibility. Acting as a living machine, the building sustains itself and its inhabitants, emphasising functionality, flexibility and harmony with nature.

The ground floor plan is open and flexible with sliding folding doors ensuring seamless connection between inside and outside. This level functions as a dynamic, adaptable space for communal activities, and provides quiet private areas for studying. The first floor accommodates fourteen studio apartments and second floor houses seven two-bedroom apartments. These spaces offer varied living arrangement, catering to individuals, families, and those wishing to share. All units face the gardens, benefitting from natural light and passive solar heating.

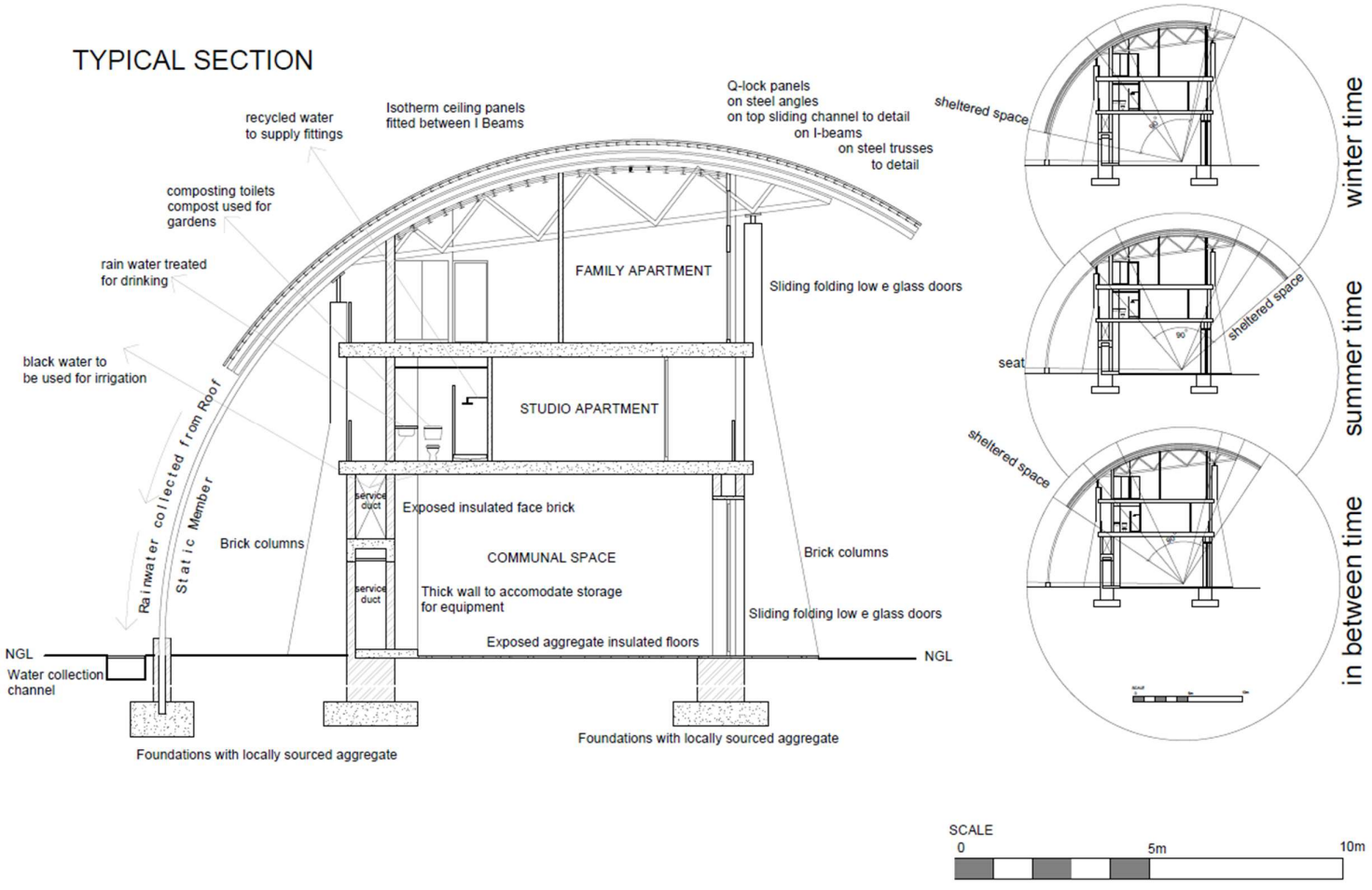


Figure 5:12 Proposed Section

Forms, shapes and locally sourced materials, echo the textures and tones of Transvaal House. The thick southern walls house services and equipment, for both thermal and operational efficiency. The shape of the columns, and the barrel-vaulted roof are inspired by the original house. The roof is a dynamic, responsive element. It is entirely supported by the columns and free of the walls. The roof moves in response to weather conditions, with sensors that monitor the internal and external temperatures, triggering the roof to slide and adjust, ensuring optimal comfort for occupants and energy efficiency.

The new building is designed for a digital age, using sensors to collect and process data to optimise performance, reduce carbon emissions and resource wastage. The spaces are digitalised to accommodate a generation of digitally native students.

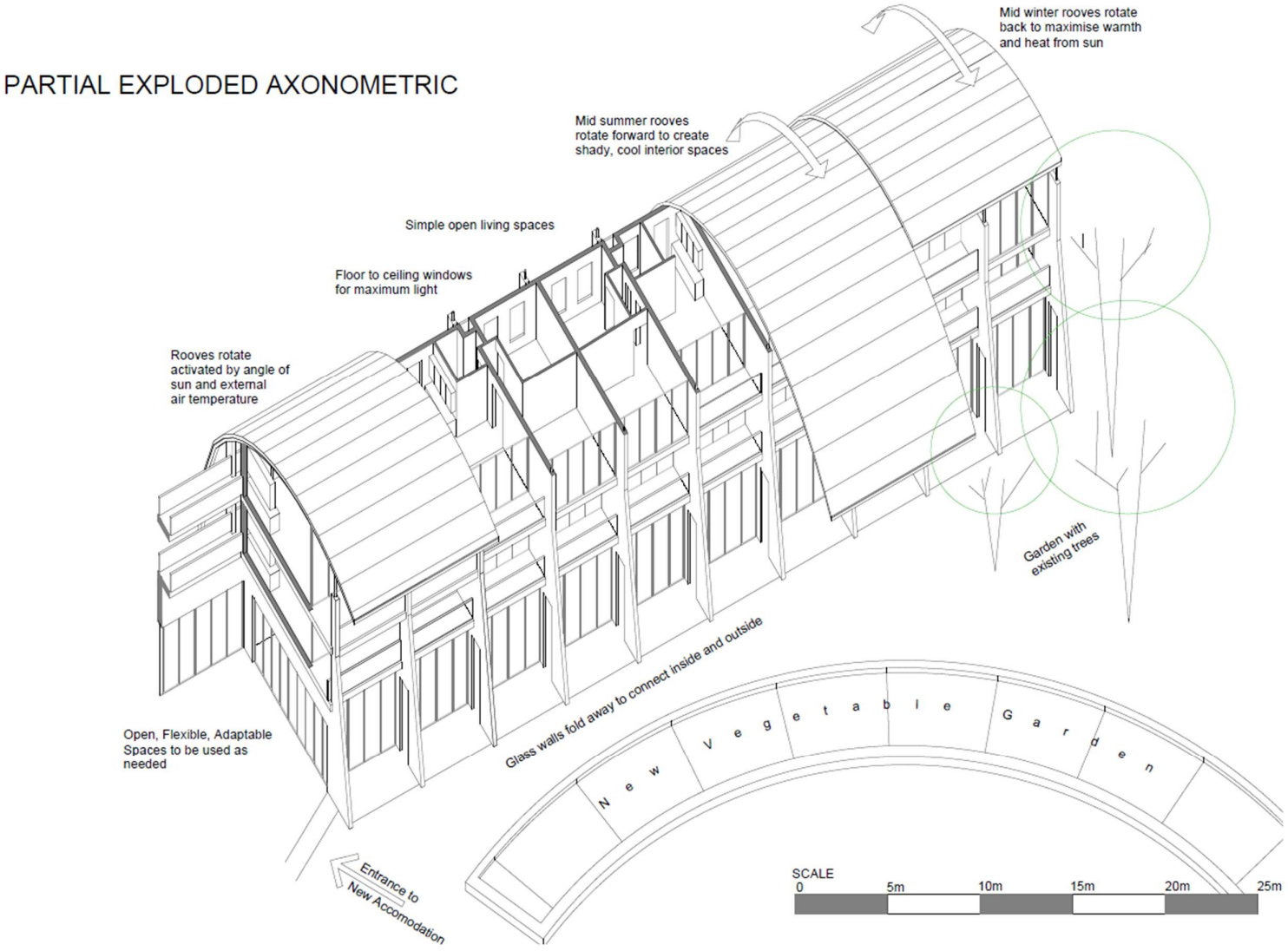


Figure 5:13 Partial Axonometric

The Utilities

The outermost layer houses the utilities adjacent to the street and the parking lot. Photovoltaic panels, including the bifacial ones shading the food gardens, generate renewable energy that is stored in an on-site battery room. This energy powers the buildings, water systems and irrigation. Any surplus energy is fed back into the grid.

A waste management system is proposed, with a waste sorting station facilitating recycling and appropriate disposal. Organic waste, including food scraps and garden trimmings, is composted and returned to the gardens, closing the nutrient cycle. Toilets are connected to an underground composting system, generating fertiliser. Surplus food is either sold or distributed to minimise waste and support the local community.

As the site slopes north to south, water is directed to flow downhill where it is harvested. Rainwater, grey water and black water are collected and processed through treatment systems. Potable water is stored in dedicated tanks, while irrigation water flows back into the garden using gravity, making the site independent of municipal water sources.

5.9 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter reveal a series of intrinsic contradictions within Transvaal House and its historical context. The architect's modernist approach, intended as progressive, was deployed within an oppressive political landscape. His engagement with indigenous architecture, while seemingly forward-thinking, can be perceived as cultural appropriation, and his personal cultural identity as a Jewish man did not prevent him from being viewed today through the lens of white privilege and colonial frameworks. Similarly, the house's integration into its natural surroundings and its reference to African spatial arrangements coexist with the reality of deeply inequitable land ownership and racial divisions inscribed into its use of space.

These contradictions are themselves a major finding, reflecting the layered complexities that shaped the building's conception and reception. In response to these issues, a range of future scenarios has been proposed: relocating the structure, demolishing it and salvaging materials, repurposing it as a renewable energy plant, establishing a school of landscape architecture, or building student accommodation on the site around it.

Each proposal demonstrates a potential way forward. Across these scenarios, adaptive reuse consistently emerges as a recurring theme, positioning Transvaal House as more than just a historical artifact. In considering how best to preserve, transform, or reinterpret the building, stakeholders are drawn toward options that responsibly balance heritage value, environmental responsibility, and community engagement. Approaches that integrate student housing with green infrastructure, agricultural elements, and educational exhibits exemplify this synergy, ensuring that the building can function as both a repository of past lessons and a resource for future-oriented practices.

By acknowledging these possibilities and understanding the building's multifaceted legacy, it is clear that Transvaal House holds significant value as a platform for ongoing discussion, collaboration, and learning. The next chapter will examine these issues further, providing deeper analysis and interpretation of the data and scenarios explored here.

6. REFLECTIONS AND REALISATIONS

This chapter analyses the findings to explore the relationship between architectural legacy and contemporary relevance through the lens of Transvaal House. It examines how the building serves as a case study for achieving a balance between heritage preservation, contemporary sustainability practices, and the promotion of social justice, while reflecting on debates about architectural commemoration and the role of architectural practices in addressing past injustices. It also considers the development of a South African architectural style that aims to go beyond cultural divisions, prompting questions about whose histories are being preserved and celebrated, and why certain buildings are chosen over others.

6.1 The Site

Saitowitz argues that land ownership is a fundamental tenet of capitalism. This dynamic reinforces how architecture in South Africa has become a tool for both control and resistance, where land is a source of creative expression and an instrument of oppression. My experience is that as a Jewish South African, one's grandparents were dispossessed of land in Europe and there is no guarantee that our grandchildren will be welcome here in the future. The connection of diasporic Jews to the land they inhabit, therefore, is often transient, illustrated by Saitowitz's own decision to establish a life in California after the completion of his Master's degree at Berkeley.

Conversations about land tenure, land allocation, and the way apartheid-era land policies continue to echo in South Africa's spatial configurations are ongoing. When looking at the current locality plans, the rapid encroachment of urbanization becomes evident. What was once considered "the countryside" between Johannesburg and Pretoria is now a densely populated and highly desirable area, strategically positioned in the heart of Gauteng. The site of Transvaal House benefits from major transport routes, including highways and rail lines, making it accessible from both cities.

Interestingly, the house occupies a central position, not just geographically between Johannesburg and Pretoria, but also figuratively, surrounded by distinct socio-economic zones. To the west, exclusive estates signify wealth and luxury; to the east, high-density townships and informal settlements reveal the region's sharp social divides. Between these extremes lie industrial zones and suburban developments, bound by the area's transport arteries. The original plot was eventually subdivided into three sections, yet the house is still surrounded by open land, creating a contrast to

the density of the nearby townships. This spatial dynamic highlights issues of wealth distribution and access to land. While the original owner claims the house was built on a shoestring budget, the size of the land and its location indicate a form of relative wealth, showing the contrast in past spatial policies. The site's proximity to both affluent estates and struggling townships underscores the complex socio-economic fabric of the region.

6.2 Jewish Architects

Jewish guilt is real and pervasive, driven by a sense of collective responsibility shaped by the trauma of the Holocaust. We grew up hearing the stories of relatives who had been silenced and persecuted during WWII. These memories instilled a belief that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There were heated debates within our community, as some individuals advocated for change and active engagement, while others perceived the necessity of remaining inconspicuous to safeguard their well-being. By the 1970s, while some Jews were accepted into the broader social fabric, many still retained a sense of distance.

Jewish architects' embrace of modernist architecture was a reflection of their European roots, and an ideological choice. Modernism appealed to those who sought a new social order that transcended the rigid structures of the past. For many Jewish architects, modernism symbolised a more inclusive, even socialist, vision of the future. It offered a framework for reimagining space and society, responding to European trends while advocating for progress, equality, and a redefinition of architecture's role in shaping society. Architectural choices were weighed down by the guilt and privilege we carried. We had to question where we were building, for whom, and why. Architecture became a form of resistance; the act of designing a building with separate entrances for different races forced us to confront the role our work played in reinforcing or challenging the apartheid regime.

Saitowitz's engagement with vernacular architecture raises questions about cultural appropriation today, as even though Jewish architects had a certain distance and perspective, the work still existed within the context of white dominance over Black cultural narratives.

6.3 Modernist Approach

Saitowitz's approach was enabled by his creative freedom to challenge conventional building forms and experiment culturally. The building reflects modernism's commitment to innovation, progress,

and functionalism. Its open, interconnected spaces and use of local materials are emblematic of a desire to push boundaries in architectural design.

While modernism seeks to transcend cultural and political divisions, its application in Transvaal House risks reinforcing those divides. The era and spatial context complicate the reception of Transvaal House, as it is perceived differently depending on who is looking at it. While modernist ideals, at the time, aspired to serve the broader society, in practice, these designs were often reserved for wealthy white communities, standing in contrast to the informal settlements and townships that housed the black majority. In this way, Transvaal House, with its innovative design and modernist approach, highlights the disparity between those with access to creative and economic freedoms and those excluded from such opportunities during that era.

6.4 Cultural Appreciation or Cultural Appropriation

This debate raises questions about how cultural heritage is used or misused in modernist projects and whether this appropriation erases or honours the traditions it seeks to reference. The architectural profession must navigate these complexities to create spaces that are both reflective of and respectful towards South Africa's diverse cultural heritage. Transvaal House visually recognises local traditions but also participates in the systematic inequalities of its time. The evolution of the building's role will influence whether its legacy becomes one of exclusion or a symbol of transformation and inclusivity.

One cannot ignore the fact that much of the heritage discourse surrounding Transvaal House has been shaped by predominantly white architects and heritage practitioners. The underrepresentation of Black architects in shaping narratives around buildings like Transvaal House has limited the scope of conversation and critique, raising questions about whose voices are heard and whose heritage is preserved in the built environment.

My own research highlights this gap, as much of the available data on Ndebele architecture comes from white academics observing black cultural practices. This challenge underscores the issue of cultural appropriation in architecture – where architectural forms of marginalised communities are incorporated into mainstream discourse without their creator's voices being adequately heard. Ensuring that vernacular and local contributions are not simply tokenised remains a challenge. This is relevant to the ways in which Ndebele art and architecture has been referenced in contemporary

design. While there is limited literature written by Ndebele architects, authors like Sifiso Ndlovu and Noma Tsitsi Ngwenya (whose stories are informed by her background as a trained Town Planner) offer nuanced perspectives on how cultural narratives shape the built environment. Although I have not formally referenced their works as they are fiction, I have included them in the wider reading scope of my research as they highlight cultural identity in spatial planning.

6.5 Sustainability Lessons

The decision to position the building was driven more by the presence of the boulders on site than by considerations of optimal passive energy design, a choice that continues to affect its thermal performance to this day, impacting the personal relationships of the inhabitants due to the resulting discomfort. Scott's partner Lorraine (2024) explained that she moved out due to the uncomfortable temperature extremes, and Scott's refusal to allow any modifications to the house. Her departure testifies to the tangible consequences that architectural decisions can have on everyday life.

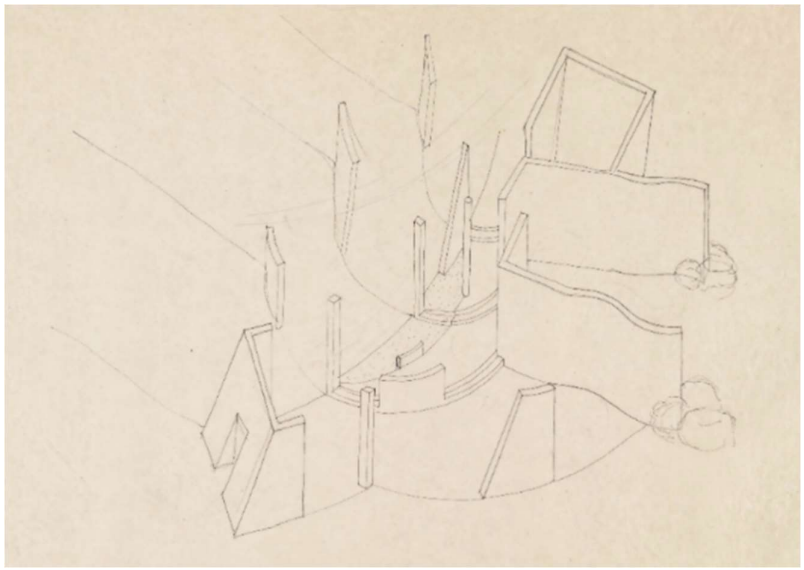


Figure 6:1 Working with the boulders (See Image credits)

Transvaal House offers the opportunity to blend modern sustainability practices with indigenous cultural references, creating an environment that simultaneously respects heritage and meets contemporary needs. Reusing materials reduces waste and also draws a subtle parallel to traditional crafts that find new value in discarded objects. Incorporating solar panels, wind turbines, and greywater systems can improve environmental performance without erasing the building's historical identity. Elements like the fenestration patterns, contrasting open and closed spaces, and references to Ndebele colours and motifs suggest that modern interventions can learn from vernacular designs, adopting their spatial sensibilities and symbolic resonances. In this way, Transvaal House becomes a site where old and new, sustainable and historic, local and global, remain in ongoing dialogue.

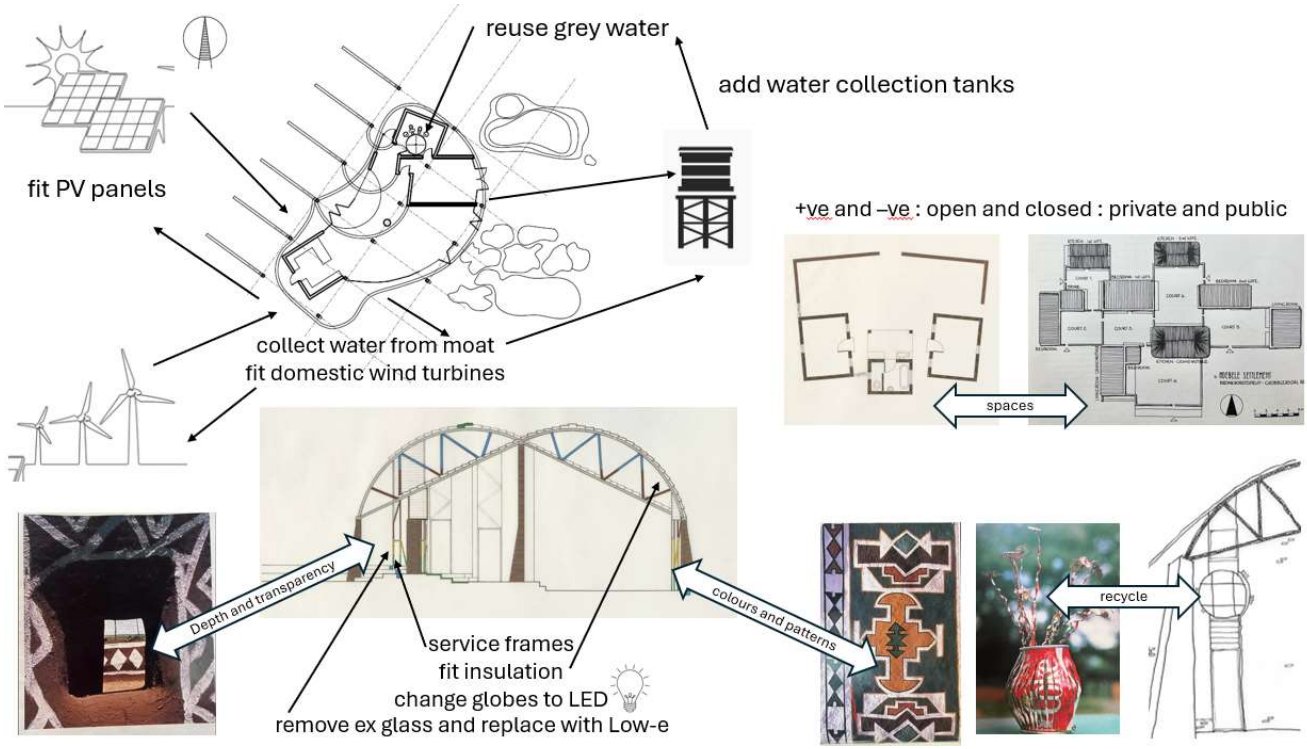


Figure 6:2 Ideas and Interventions (See Image Credits)

6.6 Reflections on Student Engagement

The lack of engagement with the context in which the house exists represented an oversight in the students' work. The house cannot be separated from the era of its construction. Critical events in were happening at that time in South Africa – the country was suspended from the United Nations General Assembly in 1974, the Soweto Uprising occurred in 1976, in 1977 the Black Consciousness movement was banned and Steve Biko was murdered. The absence of any acknowledgment of this pivotal moment in South African history feels like a significant missed opportunity to link the building to the social and political tensions of its time.

6.7 Shifting Landscapes

This generational disconnect was also apparent at the symposium held at Transvaal House. The room was filled with people from different generations, backgrounds, and experiences, all grappling with the house's legacy. The layers of misunderstanding and contradictions present in the discussion exposed a microcosm of the overlaps and gaps in South Africa's architectural and cultural discourse. And yet, within this discord, there was appetite and opportunity for authentic progress.

Architecture at the time Transvaal House was built was inherently political. There was a lot of money being spent on development and the rand was strong relative to the dollar. Although there was plenty

of work for white architects, there was a sense that the system was cracking. Architecture became a lens through which the fault lines became visible as every architectural decision was laden with meaning. During that era, design was burdened with implications, every line mattered. It was physical, tangible, and it was resistance. Each stroke of the pencil was an intentional act, and in those lines lay the possibility of supporting or challenging and reshaping a system of injustice.

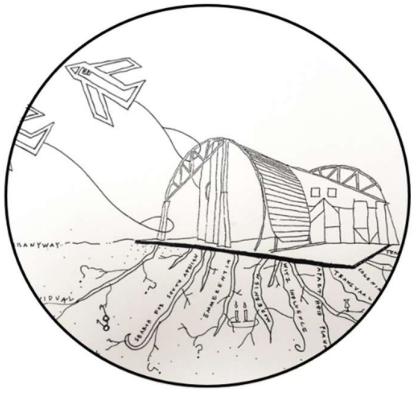
South African architecture had evolved from mainstream classical styles influenced by Baker and Lutyens which were imposing and disconnected from the African landscape. Later modernism took hold, it was the age of the apartheid building boom, there was money (for whites) to build up the (separate) cities, and lots of opportunity for development. Modernism's ideals were hopeful - architecture was seen as a way to create a better world. The buildings that were erected then were clean, functional, designed with precision. But the buildings reinforced segregation, keeping people apart rather than bringing them together. After 1994 architects reevaluated South African architecture, rejecting apartheid monuments, in order to memorialise the struggle for a free South Africa. Transvaal House, once innovative and exciting, internationally recognised, became a relic of an oppressive past. Contemporary South African architects must now find a sustainable, authentically indigenous architecture.

The aspirational ideals of a collective, Marxist vision have largely given way to individualism, where personal responsibility overshadows social engagement. While architecture retains the potential to challenge and resist injustice, it is imperative to reclaim this capacity. A deeper consideration of purpose in design is necessary. Buildings can, and do, serve as powerful social commentaries and agents of change.

6.8 Scenario Modelling

At the outset of any construction or repurposing project, possibilities seem endless, and opportunities for innovation abound. One challenge is adapting the structure from an analogue, mechanical age to the contemporary digital era. Transvaal House expands these possibilities exponentially, because it has access to the creativity and energy of engaged minds of the university's faculty and students.

6.8.1 Exporting Heritage



Alignment with Findings and Contradictions: Relocating Transvaal House aligns with one of the contradictions highlighted in the data: modernism's dual role as both progressive and oppressive. Although its international recognition as a modernist building would be celebrated, it risks ignoring historical complexity. Decontextualising the building risks detaching the vernacular influences from their cultural origins, turning them into aesthetic artifacts devoid of their deeper significance.

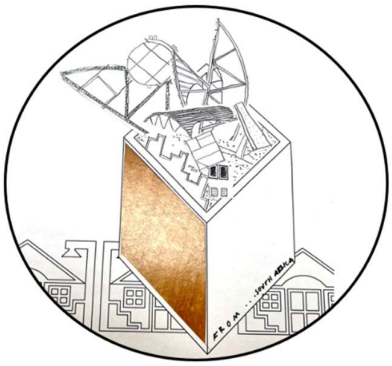
Heritage Implications: While relocation preserves the building's physical structure, it strips it of its connection to the South African landscape and political history. The house's design is rooted in its original site, drawing on local geography, cultural influences, and the historical tensions. Its placement in a foreign context would reduce it to detached artifact, and Transvaal House's current role as a space for reflecting on South Africa's complex past would be diminished.

Sustainability Implications: Relocation requires dismantling, transporting, and reconstructing the structure, expending considerable embodied energy. This conflicts with principles of sustainability and would be a missed opportunity to explore sustainable practices in its current environment.

Social Justice Implications: Removing Transvaal House from its South African context removes its relevance to conversations about land ownership, apartheid spatial legacies, or the integration of modernist and vernacular traditions in South Africa.

Relocation prioritises international recognition at the expense of local relevance. While it would preserve the structure and elevate its status globally, it would disconnect the building from the socio-political and cultural complexities that make it meaningful. This scenario reinforces tensions between preserving physical heritage and maintaining the integrity of the narratives it embodies.

6.8.2 Trading History for Land



Alignment with Findings and Contradictions: This scenario aligns with Saitowitz's notion that a building's lifecycle should include the possibility of being "destroyed well." The building's physical destruction may seem practical, but it conflicts with the nuanced layers of heritage and identity it represents.

Heritage Implications: While the heritage value could be visually documented the experiential aspect of standing inside the space would be lost forever. The building's demolition would also undermine the intentions of the donors, who envisioned it as a lasting resource.

Sustainability Implications: Demolition wastes embodied energy. The energy invested in deconstructing would outweigh any potential benefits gained. Current trends in sustainable architecture emphasise adaptive reuse over demolition, as maintaining existing buildings typically reduces environmental impact.

Social Justice Implications: Demolishing Transvaal House forfeits its potential as a platform for dialogue, erasing opportunities for critical reflection on the building's contested legacy. Conversely, the process of deconstruction itself could provide educational opportunities. Sustainable demolition practices, material reclamation, and the repurposing of architectural elements would provide invaluable lessons to students and professionals.

While demolition may align with the idea of buildings evolving to meet changing needs, it contradicts the principles of adaptive reuse and sustainable architecture. The building's significance and its capacity to provoke debate make its preservation a more compelling option than its destruction.

6.8.3 Powering a new Chapter



Alignment with Findings and Contradictions: This scenario addresses the building's thermal discomfort by proposing energy-efficient retrofitting. The contradiction lies in balancing the preservation of architectural heritage with the integration of advanced green technologies. While modernism values innovation, the house's layered history, risks being overshadowed by a singular focus on sustainability.

Sustainability Implications: A renewable energy centre would turn the structure into a teaching tool. The site's area offers space to support a solar energy plant capable of producing approximately 1MW of power. This could be fed back into the grid, or wheeled, demonstrating practical applications of green infrastructure. There would be enough left-over space on site for subsistence farming, decentralised waste processing, and water management systems, creating a comprehensive sustainability hub that would provide long-term educational benefits. One notable challenge is the distance of the site from the university, which would increase travel-related carbon emissions. Retrofitting the house aligns with principles of circular economy and demonstrates how historical buildings can adapt to contemporary sustainability challenges.

Social Justice Implications: Beyond its function as a clean energy station, the site could support innovative projects such as decentralised energy storage or even cryptocurrency mining using green energy. These developments could offer opportunities to engage with cutting-edge technologies in a transparent, decentralised system. While these ideas push the boundaries of the site's potential, they also reflect the importance of exploring new frontiers in sustainable technology.

Heritage Implications: This scenario preserves the physical structure but its reinterpretation as a green energy laboratory may dilute its cultural and historical significance.

Transforming the Transvaal House site into a green energy laboratory offers an appealing balance between preserving the building's architectural form and advancing sustainability goals.

6.8.4 Growing Knowledge, Grounding Heritage



Alignment with Findings and Contradictions: This scenario builds on Transvaal House's potential as a teaching tool for sustainability and its capacity to address contemporary societal issues. Saitowitz's work highlights the value of spaces that transition from private to public use. A school designed in this context could incorporate these privacy gradients, with a progression from community spaces to more private areas within the school. In turn, the produce and benefits generated by the school could flow back into the community, mirroring this spatial transition.

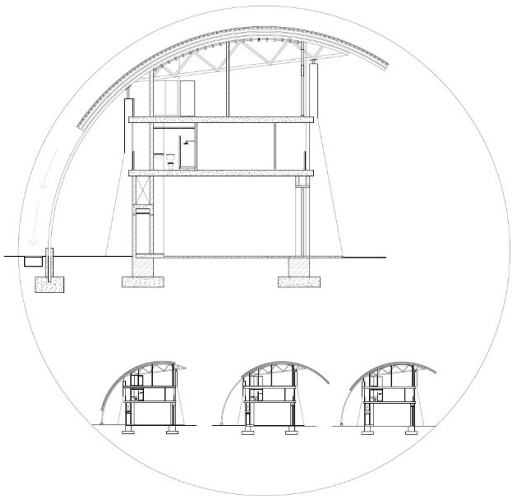
Sustainability Implications: This scenario is strongly aligned with sustainability principles. By focusing on urban farming, water management, and renewable energy, the School of Landscape Architecture can serve as a model for sustainable practices. The adaptive reuse of the house as a greenhouse or classroom ensures the preservation of embodied energy within the structure.

Social Justice Implications: The school can engage with the local community and address issues like food insecurity. The site's proximity to informal settlements and schools creates opportunities for community outreach. Careful planning is required to ensure that the school does not become an isolated academic enclave disconnected from its surrounding context.

Heritage Implications: Repurposing the house as a greenhouse or classroom preserves its structure but may overshadow its historical identity if not thoughtfully contextualized.

A School of Landscape Architecture exemplifies adaptive reuse, sustainability, and inclusivity. It transforms the house into a dynamic teaching environment that balances academic and community needs.

6.8.5 Sustainable Student Life



Alignment with Findings and Contradictions: This scenario strongly aligns with the research findings, addressing sustainability, heritage, and creating spaces for inclusive dialogue. By transforming the house into a communal hub within a student housing project, the proposal reflects Saitowitz's emphasis on spaces for collective activity, cultural exchange, and responsiveness to the environment. The adaptive reuse of Transvaal House ensures its continued relevance, while accessible housing challenges past spatial injustices.

Sustainability Implications: A comprehensive and innovative approach to sustainability, addressing energy efficiency, waste management, and water conservation is proposed. Photovoltaic panels generate renewable energy, reducing reliance on fossil fuels. The energy-efficient design of the new building, including dynamic roofing systems and passive solar heating, minimizes energy use while maximizing comfort. The integration of rainwater harvesting, greywater recycling, and composting toilets supports water conservation and reduces dependence on municipal water sources.
The permaculture gardens and fishpond provide sustainable food production, reducing the carbon footprint associated with food transportation and packaging. The adaptive reuse of the house minimizes embodied energy loss, and the inclusion of innovative technologies ensures that the site remains at the forefront of environmentally conscious architecture.

Social Justice Implications: This proposal directly addresses social justice issues by providing accessible housing and creating a sense of community. The site which was once reserved for a couple now benefits a larger, more diverse population. The auxiliary spaces assure interaction and collaboration. The accommodation layout accommodates a range of living arrangements, supporting diverse needs.

Heritage Implications: Transvaal House remains as a central element of the site, ensuring its historical and architectural significance. It serves as a focal point for reflection and discussion, maintaining its role as a symbol of South Africa's architectural and political history. The new building complements the house's design, echoing elements of its original aesthetic and materiality. By

maintaining its physical and symbolic presence, the project demonstrates how heritage can coexist with innovation.

This proposal presents a viable future for Transvaal House, transforming the site into a dynamic space for learning, living, and reflection, ensuring its continued relevance in a changing world.

6.9 Conclusion

Transvaal House stands at the intersection of history, heritage, and architecture, offering an opportunity to engage with its layered narratives while addressing modern challenges. The analysis of potential futures reveals adaptive reuse as a sustainable, socially just strategy. Each scenario illuminates the contradictions inherent in the site: modernism as both progressive and complicit, Ndebele references as both engagement and appropriation, and ongoing tensions around land ownership.

These scenarios show that Transvaal House is more than a static heritage object; it is a site of pedagogy, dialogue, and collaboration. Balancing sustainability, inclusivity, and historical reflection ensures it remains a living, dynamic place bridging past and present. The analysis emphasises the importance of approaching this decision with intentionality, using the lessons of the past to inform sustainable, equitable design interventions. The ultimate recommendation integrates the strengths of multiple scenarios, advocating for a future that preserves the building's legacy while adapting it to contemporary needs. Transvaal House, through this lens, becomes a narrative and strategic tool for transformation.

6.10 Critical Reflections on the Building's Performance and Legacy

Transvaal House invites critical scrutiny as both artefact and provocation. From my professional standpoint, it is bold, conceptually rich, formally rigorous, and deeply expressive of its historical moment. I think it is an extraordinary building. Its geometry is unique and evocative, and the spatial experience evokes something almost liturgical in its procession, light, and volume. The interplay of mass and void and the carefully orchestrated transitions between inside and outside reflect a degree of spatial poetry different to other domestic buildings.

There is remarkable attention to detail and a non-conformist thought process that sets this house apart from the architectural mainstream of the late 1970s. The architect's willingness to engage with

metaphor, memory, and abstraction resulted in a building that was grounded and transcendent. I admire the use of simple, affordable, and accessible materials to create a deeply considered space. The building's feel, the light that animates its interior, and the sense of quiet drama in the spatial sequence continue to move me, even after repeated visits.

I wish that young designers and academics would pay closer attention to the care, time, and precision evident in the crafting of this building, the commitment to detail, the conceptual clarity, and the deep engagement with meaning and material.

Its practical performance is less convincing. The building’s thermal comfort is compromised, and the house is difficult to live in. It falls short of current passive energy design strategies, yet its design anticipates the values of contemporary sustainability, its compact footprint, modesty of materials, and adaptability, suggest potential for sensitive retrofitting.

7. PRESERVING HERITAGE, ENVISIONING FUTURES

This research has revealed the complexity embedded in Transvaal House and its potential as a site of critical engagement. Tensions between heritage and innovation, identity and authorship, and appreciation and appropriation have been uncovered, allowing for a nuanced synthesis that informs the conclusions that follow. This chapter draws together the insights developed throughout the research report and offers a vision for how contested heritage sites can support inclusive, sustainable futures in South Africa.

Transvaal House embodies the dualities of South African architecture: modernism as both progressive and complicit, cultural exchange as both appreciation and appropriation, and land ownership as both a site of privilege and a source of dispossession. These dualities give the building its significance.

Transvaal House stands at the intersection of history, heritage, and contemporary challenges. It is a product of its time yet provokes strong and opposing reactions accentuating its relevance. The building invites reflection on land ownership as both a site of privilege and a source of dispossession, connecting generational and cultural perspectives in ways that are personal and political. What one may view as homage or innovation, another may perceive as appropriation or erasure, highlighting the subjectivity inherent in interpreting heritage and architecture.
Post-apartheid South Africa's built heritage is inherently contested, as scholars like Townsend (1996) and Noble (2011) have observed. Following Townsend's (1996) insight that conservation must now "recognise sites significant to previously marginalised groups", this study finds that Transvaal House's fraught history can become a strength rather than a liability. Preserving the house has facilitated critical conversations about race, history and sustainability, turning its contested legacy into a platform for inclusivity and learning. The debates it provokes (over land, identity and power) align with Noble's (2011) call for heritage practices to balance historical inequalities and the aspiration towards a just society. Transvaal House thus illustrates how heritage sites with difficult pasts can be leveraged to engage diverse communities, echoing Murray's (2013) analysis of monuments as spaces for reinterpreting history in inclusive ways.

Transvaal House also embodies the dualities of South African modernism highlighted by Marschall and Berman. Its design fuses the clean functionalism of 1970s modernism with motifs drawn from local vernacular forms. This mirrors Marschall's (2001) observation that mid-century architects began

introducing African art into modern design, warning that such “Africanised” architecture could risk appearing insincere and culturally detached. Here Saitowitz’s own stance is instructive: he insists Transvaal House’s elements were “lessons from local architecture” (Belogolovsky, 2023) rather than superficial ornamentation. At the same time, Rapoport (1969) and Noble (2011) remind us that vernacular forms carry deep cultural meaning, shaped by climate, materials and tradition. Transvaal House thus sits at the crossroads of these debates: its terraces and motifs explicitly reference Ndebele courtyards and murals (as noted by Saitowitz and Frescura) but also raise questions of cultural appropriation versus respectful adaptation. In this sense the building enacts Marschall and Kearney’s critique of apartheid-era design (that white architects applied decorative ethnic symbols without genuine engagement), yet it also offers a counterpoint by provoking precisely the dialogue about authenticity and integration that scholars like Noble (2011) and Spence & Bierman (1954) deem necessary.

A uniquely Jewish philosophical perspective underpins this analysis of stewardship and placelessness. As noted in the literature review, Saitowitz’s own Jewish heritage informed his architectural approach: communities denied land ownership valued belonging and cultural identity more than ownership or permanence. This ethos resonates with the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and with Rapoport’s (1969) idea that architecture embodies the culture of its people. In practice, this translated into viewing the house more as a responsibility to the community than as private property. This report describes how themes of placelessness, stewardship and ethics in Jewish thought guide our interpretation of Transvaal House as a contested space that can facilitate dialogue. In other words, a building owned “by all generations to follow” (to borrow Ruskin via Smith, 2006) demands an ethical, community-focused approach. This aligns with Berman’s (1982) insight that modernity should heal social divides by “connecting with historical roots”. Transvaal House, as both modern artifact and vernacular echo, becomes a venue for that cultural repair - a kind of shared “human geography” (as Saitowitz himself phrased it in Benedikt (1993) where multiple identities can meet.

Closely linked to heritage and identity is sustainability through adaptive reuse, a constant theme of this research. By treating Transvaal House as a candidate for sensitive retrofit, the conclusions reflect Clarke et al.’s (2020) and Heywood’s (2012) advocacy of reusing existing structures to reduce environmental impact. Proposals like converting the house into an environmental-learning space preserve its embodied energy while making it relevant to contemporary needs. This approach echoes Noero’s (1994) argument that sustainability must include “social resilience and equity”. As Okba and

Embaby (2013) point out, retrofitting historic buildings can marry conservation with green performance. In academic terms, the findings therefore support Clarke's idea that adaptive reuse can enhance social and environmental resilience. Noble's emphasis on using heritage to forge identity is instructive here, by retaining Transvaal House's layers of meaning a more nuanced, sustainable narrative is built for future generations.

Finally, the research shows how inclusive, dialogical design can bridge the divides identified in Chapter 2. Ginzarly et al. (2019) argue for civic engagement in heritage planning, especially for charged monuments, to mediate debates over identity and ownership. Similarly, Mason (2002) and Ginzarly (2019) emphasise that conservation must reconcile official narratives with community memory. In practice, the Transvaal House scenarios were developed with such principles in mind, envisioning the house as a place of learning rather than a closed museum. This reflects Rapoport's long-standing view of architecture as a cultural process and Noble's call for heritage practices grounded in local aspirations. By framing Transvaal House as a site for dialogue, the conclusions contribute to debates on how contested sites can foster reconciliation (as M. Murray (2013) suggests) rather than erase difficult histories.

Although the research did not follow a conventional linear methodology, the significance of the findings was assessed in relation to the original research questions and aims. These included exploring the architectural, cultural, and historical significance of Transvaal House; understanding its potential as a platform for dialogue; and examining how adaptive reuse can balance heritage with sustainability. By reflecting critically on the themes that emerged the study synthesised insights that respond to these aims. While the path was less formal than initially intended, the rigour lies in the thematic coherence, the consistent return to key questions, and the layered reflection that connects practice with theory. This approach reflects a form of architectural inquiry that is iterative, situated, and contextual.

In conclusion, this study connects its empirical findings back to the literature on heritage, modernism, and sustainability. It confirms Marschall's and Chipkin's insights on South African modernism's contradictions, reinforces Rapoport's and Noble's emphasis on vernacular meaning, and extends Jewish ethical perspectives on place-making into the realm of architectural stewardship. The report argues that adaptive reuse and inclusive design, advocated by Clarke et al., Noero, and others, can reconcile heritage preservation with contemporary needs. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about whose heritage we honour and how.

There is a need for future research to integrate diverse perspectives, particularly from historically marginalised groups, to enrich discussions of heritage preservation and cultural justice. Future scholarship can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of architectural narratives in South Africa. Transvaal House exemplifies the transformative potential of architecture to challenge, inspire, and repair.



Figure 7:1 West Elevation of Transvaal House

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Saitowitz, S. and Wagner, G. 1995 Stanley Saitowitz: a house in the Transvaal. Princeton Architectural Press. New York

Figure 5:4 **Rotated and Flipped.** Drawings by author, 2024

Figure 5:5 **The Moat.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 5:6 **Planes and Roots.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 5:7 **Packing up.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 5:8 **Panels and Turbines.** Collage by author, 2024

Figure 5:9 **A House in a Garden.** Collage by author, 2024

Figure 5:10 **Proposed New Site Plan.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 5:11 **Sketch Plans.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 5:12 **Proposed Section.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 5:13 **Partial Axonometric.** Drawing by author, 2024

Figure 6:1 **Working with the Boulders.** SFMOMA Transvaal House, Halfway House, Transvaal, South Africa, Sketch, 1976

Figure 6:2 **Ideas and Interventions.** Collage by author, 2024

Section available at: SFMOMA https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Stanley_Saitowitz/.

Coke can and Ndebele Mural: Saitowitz, S., 1995**.**

Site Plan. Stanley Saitowitz: a house in the Transvaal. Princeton Architectural Press. New York

Figure 7:1 **West Elevation of Transvaal House.** Drawing by author, 2024

10. APPENDIX 1 – ETHICS CLEARANCE

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE PLANNING

6 August 2024

Victor,Andy Sue

8543947

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Balancing Heritage, Intersecting Cultures and Sustainability: Lessons from Transvaal House

This letter serves to confirm that the Ethics application for the above titled study has been approved. The researcher has been granted clearance to proceed with the research study or project.

Protocol/clearance number is: **SOAP049/05/2024**

Yours sincerely

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11. APPENDIX 2 - KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

This glossary provides definitions of key terms used.
These terms are included to clarify recurring concepts that carry layered, contested, or discipline-specific meanings. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research these definitions support clearer understanding. The terms are arranged thematically in an order that reflects how they appear and how they are conceptually developed in the report.

Contested Heritage

Heritage that holds multiple, often conflicting meanings for different groups. It reflects histories of power, exclusion, and identity, and is frequently subject to debate over whose narratives are preserved and legitimised. In post-apartheid South Africa, contested heritage sites often embody unresolved tensions between colonial, apartheid, and contemporary values.

Adaptive Reuse

The process of repurposing existing buildings for new functions while retaining aspects of their historical, architectural, or cultural significance. It is a sustainable alternative to demolition that respects embodied energy and contributes to cultural continuity.

Modernism / Modernist Architecture

An architectural movement characterised by minimal ornamentation, rational planning, and an emphasis on function over form. In the South African context, modernism also carries political weight, having been used both to express progress and to serve state agendas during apartheid.

Vernacular Architecture

Architecture rooted in local cultural traditions, climate, materials, and social practices, often developed without formal architectural training. Vernacular design reflects the collective values and needs of a community and contrasts with universalising modernist approaches.

Cultural Appropriation

The adoption or use of elements from one culture by members of another, especially when the dominant group borrows without proper acknowledgement, context, or reciprocity. In architecture, it raises ethical questions about authorship, power, and representation.

Cultural Justice

A concept referring to the equitable recognition, representation, and protection of diverse cultural expressions, especially those historically marginalised. In heritage and architecture, cultural justice involves acknowledging whose histories are preserved and whose are erased.

Heritage

The legacy of physical structures, landscapes, and intangible cultural practices inherited from the past. This study focuses particularly on built heritage, architecture that carries symbolic, historical, or social meaning, and how such meanings evolve or are contested over time.

Sustainability

Used here in its broadest sense: environmental (energy efficiency and resource conservation), social (equity and access), and cultural (preservation of identity and memory). Sustainable architecture attends to all three dimensions to ensure resilience over time.

Embodied Energy

The total energy used to extract, process, transport, and assemble building materials. Recognising embodied energy supports arguments for retaining existing structures as a form of environmental responsibility.

Tikkun Olam

A Hebrew phrase meaning “repair of the world.” In this thesis, it frames an ethical approach to architectural practice, one that prioritises social responsibility, collective care, and environmental stewardship.

Stewardship

The act of caring for buildings, land, and cultural assets with a sense of responsibility to future generations. It implies custodianship rather than ownership, resonating with both environmental and ethical dimensions of architectural practice.

Place-making

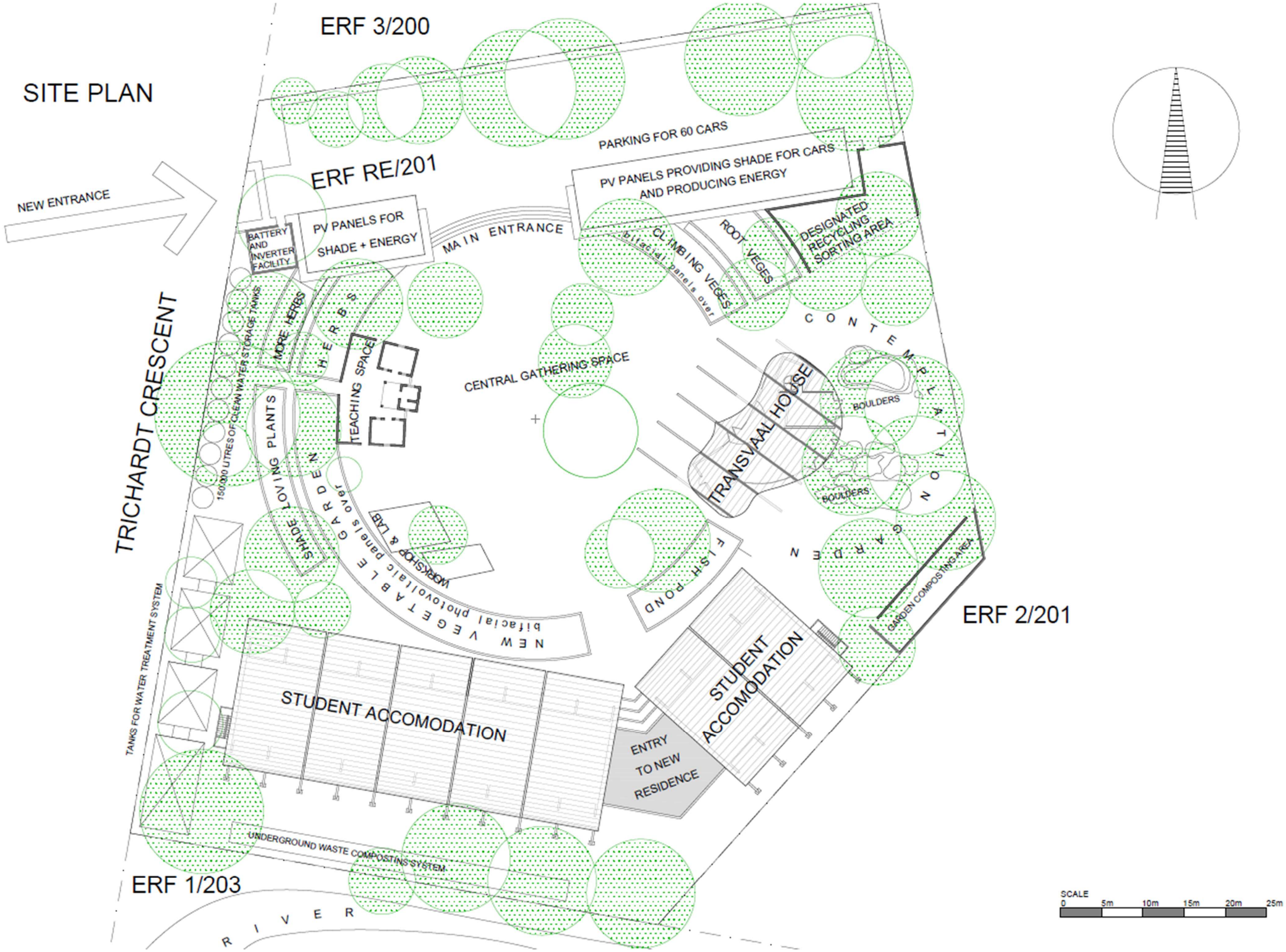
A process of shaping meaningful, inclusive spaces through design, memory, and use. It recognises that architecture contributes not only to physical form but also to cultural identity and collective experience.

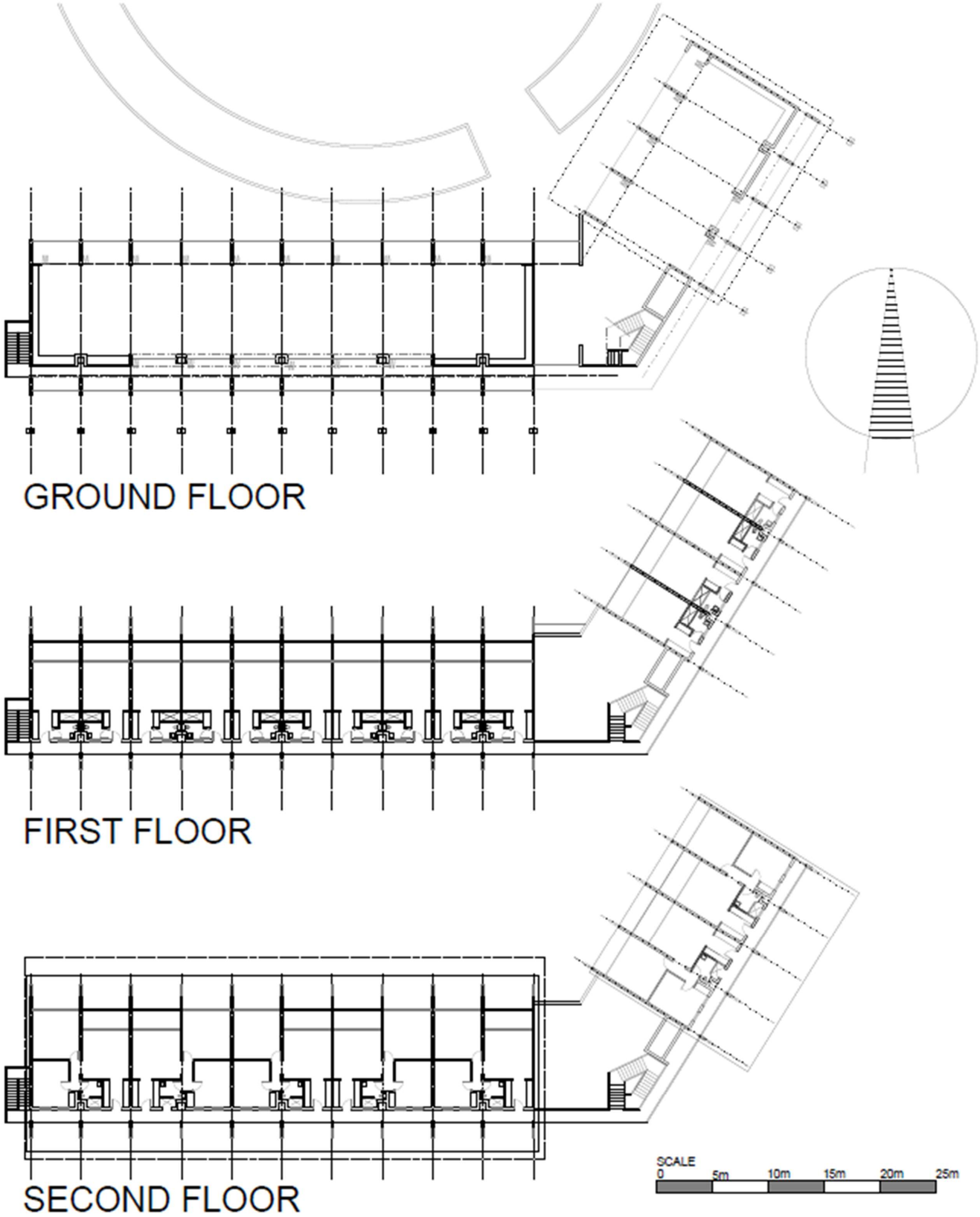
Appropriation vs. Appreciation

A distinction critical to the interpretation of cultural referencing in design. Appreciation involves respectful engagement and contextual understanding, while appropriation risks reducing cultural forms to aesthetic gestures, often reinforcing existing power imbalances.

12. APPENDIX 3 – PROPOSAL FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE TRANSVAAL HOUSE PRECINCT

Please note – this and the following pages are A3, with a landscape orientation

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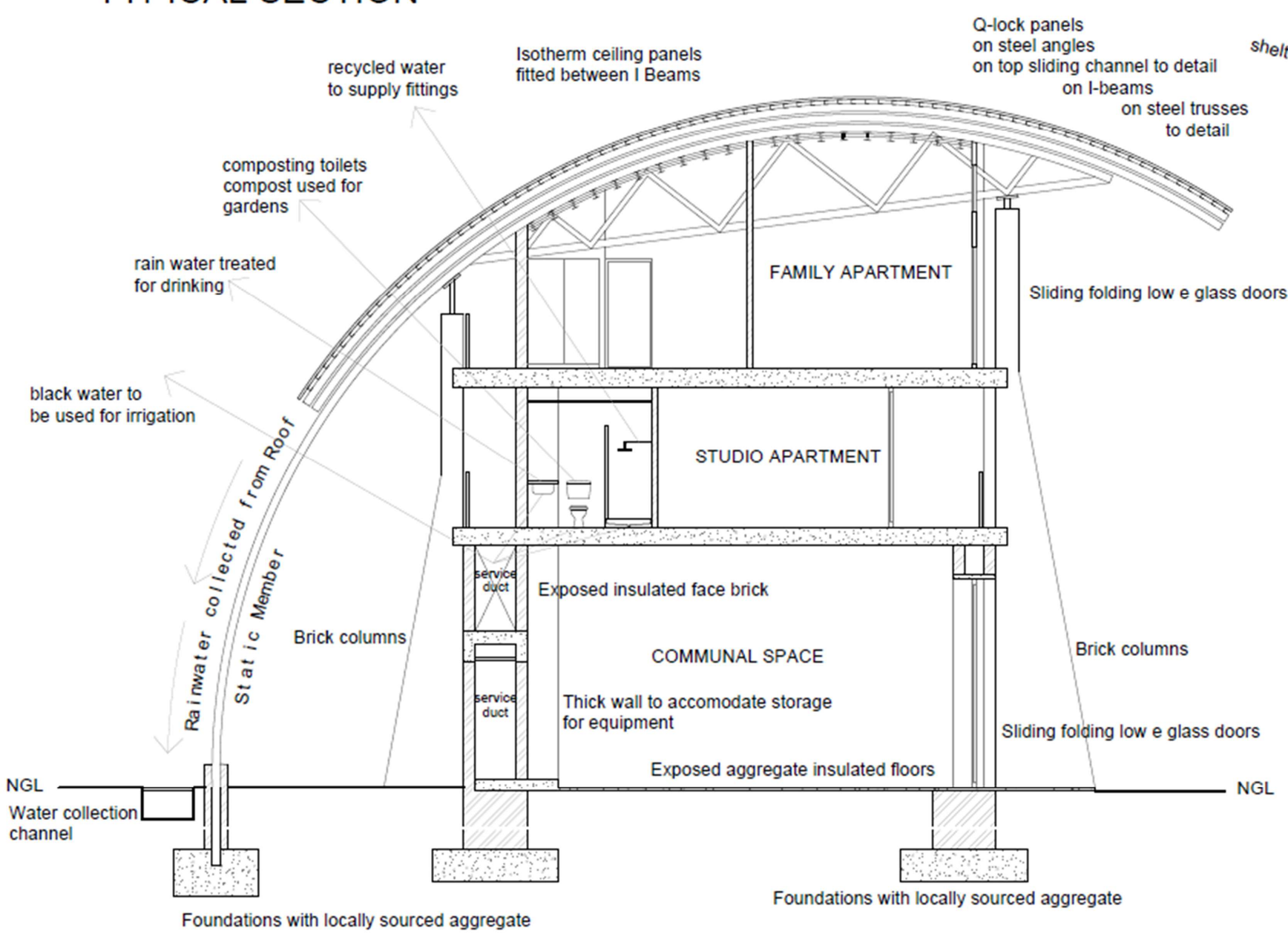

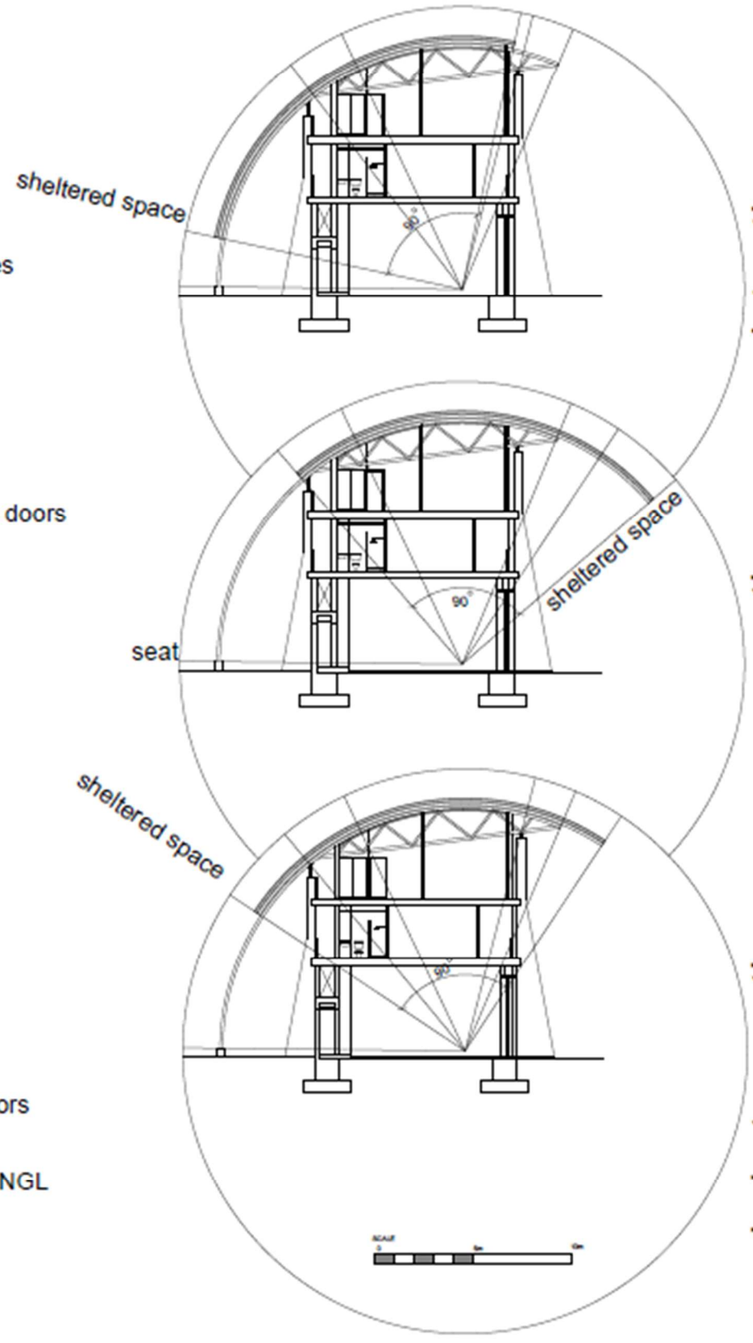

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PARTIAL EXPLODED AXONOMETRIC

