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2007-02-15T13:10:51Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2014

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Abstract:

THE POLITICS OF ORNAMENT

Modernity, Identity, and Nationalism in the Decorative Programmes of Selected South African Public and Commercial Buildings 1930 – 1940

FEDERICO FRESCHI

Abstract

This thesis interrogates the extent to which the façades of, and decorative programmes in, selected South African public and commercial buildings erected during the decade 1930 – 40 may be understood as important indexes of the various ideological, social and historical concerns underpinning the construction of an imaginary of national belonging during this period. In the context of rapid urbanisation, burgeoning industrialisation, and rampant capitalism that characterise the period, issues of nationalism and political power are brought into sharp relief, with three political agendas competing for dominance: Afrikaner nationalism at one extreme and British imperialism at the other, with, from 1933 to the end of the decade, the insipid 'South Africa First' nationalism of the Smuts-Hertzog 'fusion' government occupying a highly contested space somewhere between the two. I argue in this thesis that the rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' that informs the fusion politics of the 1930s, and particularly its expression in the decorative programmes of public buildings provides for a more nuanced reading of the political and cultural landscape of 1930s South Africa than has been the case to date, where the focus has tended towards deconstructing the cultural nationalism of the 1930s in terms of the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. Moreover, it also serves as a compelling reference point against which to assess contemporary South African attempts to re-narrate notions of nationhood, and the extent to which difficult arguments around ethnicity, autochthony, and the construction of imaginary new 'publics' are articulated in post-apartheid public architecture.

Chapter 1 is a review of the literature that informs this thesis; both as regards the art historical discourse on South African inter-World War art and architecture, as well as theoretical issues arising from writing on nationalism, national identity, and the role that art and architecture plays in evolving the nation code. In Chapters 2 and 3, I consider the ways in which the notions of identity arising from fusion politics are played out in the decorative programmes of two significant public buildings, South Africa House in London (1933) in Chapter 2 and the Pretoria City Hall (1935) in Chapter 3. I argue that both these buildings are classic examples of the manifestation in architectural terms

of the hybrid identity being forged by the centrist 'South Africa first' ideologues, in so far as their decorative programmes express an uncomfortable alliance between the entrenched values of British imperialism and a burgeoning Afrikaner nationalism.

In Chapter 4, I contrast the decorative programme of the headquarters of the new Afrikaner insurance companies SANTAM and SANLAM (1932) with that of the new corporate headquarters of the Commercial Union Assurance Company (1932), a British owned firm that had had a presence in Cape Town since 1863. The differences in effect of the decorative programmes of these two buildings serve to illuminate the extent of the ideological posturing of *volkskapitalisme* and its construction of a 'modern African/Afrikaner' identity within the imperialist heartland of Cape Town. These debates are brought into sharp relief by the third example discussed in this chapter, the Old Mutual building (1940), the decorative programme of which effectively conflates these concerns with modernity and nationalism in order to construct a hybrid 'South Africanism' that neatly elides Boer and Brit imaginings.

In conclusion, I show in Chapter 5 how the post-apartheid South African situation presents an interesting case study in terms of constructing an imaginary of national belonging rooted in similar notions of 'unity in diversity'. Examples here include important national architectural commissions like the legislature buildings for the newly constituted provinces of Mpumalanga (1999) and the Northern Cape (2003), as well as the new Constitutional Court in Johannesburg (2004). In this chapter, I interrogate these debates, and conclude by pointing to parallels with the case studies from the 1930s. The post-1994 examples in question have been widely celebrated as exemplary of a new and appropriate response to the challenges of public building in democratic South Africa. I suggest, however, that the lessons of the 1930s should serve as a reminder that the ostensible dichotomy between 'good' (civic) and 'bad' (ethnic) nationalism is perhaps not as natural and obvious as it may appear, and that both are equally problematic.