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N G KERK WELKOM-WES: REFORMING UNITY TEMPLE

PART 1: WHAT THE BUILDING WANTS TO BE

BY **WALTER PETERS & PAUL KOTZE**

ABSTRACT

Fifty years ago an early design by one of South Africa's most influential architects of the 20th Century was accepted for a new church at Welkom in the Free State. Although mired in controversy virtually from inception, the NGK of Welkom-Wes ranks as one of the key Brutalist buildings of South Africa and best known buildings of the late Roelof Uytenbogaardt, yet it is recognised mainly from photographs as he never wrote about the church.

The NGK of Welkom-Wes is generally acknowledged as being based on Wright's Unity Temple and this article will focus on the innate capacity of adapting that concept for a church of another denomination 60 years after the prototype. As an architectural biography, the article aims at de-mystifying the genesis, design and construction of the church, perhaps equally reviled and admired.

INTRODUCTION AND SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

The origins of the Welkom-Wes congregation of the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK) is intimately linked with the discovery of gold in 1946 on the farm Welkom in the north-western Free State, when in 1948 the massive in-migration saw a town by the same name being proclaimed at the hub of six mines and given full municipal status in 1961 (SESA, 1975: Vol 11).

Churches follow people. The first congregation of the NGK in Welkom had already been established in 1950 and Welkom-Wes was the third, a daughter congregation (*afgestig*) of the second, Bedelia (*Gedenkblad* [vii]). The pace was phenomenal, founded on 29 July, 1963, the inaugural clergyman was called on 19 August, the building committee established on 19 September, and the architect who was appointed on 8 October presented his proposals for unconditional approval six weeks later on 20 November (*Gedenkblad* [vii-ix]). However, from that moment on, the realisation of the building became as unconventional as its design.

The proposals were an affront to the congregation whom the clergyman had to pacify by resorting to a mixture of faith and culture (*Gemeente Nuus*, No.2, December 1963), while members vented their protest by absenting themselves from services (*Loutergoud*, undated but probably 1964). To exacerbate matters, the building was estimated at R75 000, one-and-a-half times the budget, and when in April 1964 three tenders for the construction were opened, the architect recommended the lowest (*Notule van Kerkraadsvergadering*, 21 April, 1964). As this tender was woefully too low (Uytenbogaardt Papers: Slingsby to Daly & Neumann, 7 Feb 1966), eight months' into the contract, in January 1965, the contractor was put on terms, whereupon by riposte, he filed for bankruptcy. For the clergyman and the fledgling congregation these were trying times indeed.

A CHURCH BUILDING FOR THE NGK

The NGK, the largest of three reformed churches of the Afrikaans community of southern Africa, is Protestant and Calvinist in orientation. Each congregation consists of a *kerkraad* (council) containing the *dominee* (clergy or *dominus*, abbreviated ds.) with elected *ouderlinge* (elders) responsible for matters of faith and worship and *diakens* (deacons) charged with the wellbeing of parishioners and fellowship. This complement should have direct external access to the *konsistorie*, literally the meeting of the *kerkraad (Encyclopedie van Het Christendom* cited in Koorts: 1974, 108), but usually the space so designated. It is also here that the *kerkraad* assembles before a service to ceremonially enter what is referred to as the *liturgiese sentrum* (liturgical centre) consisting of the pulpit from which the *dominee* presides and two stalls of pews, those on the left reserved for *ouderlinge* and on the right for *diakens*. Whether permanently placed in the liturgical centre or not, the communion table is set only for the quarterly *nagmaal* (communion) service and, likewise, the font for baptisms. There is no altar, a lectern has no fixed place in the service and, with the exception of weddings, aisles serve to facilitate seating without processional purpose.

The reformed churches emphasise the word *sola scriptura*, thus facilitating hearing of the spoken word is a central requirement. Early in the 20th Century, architects such as Gerard Moerdijk had transformed this imperative by way of auditorium designs with raked seating often radiating from the pulpit, which in the 1960s Johan de Ridder had rendered wedge or fan-shaped in both plan and section in a typology, which due to its profile became known as *kappiekerk* (bonnet church) (Fig 1), usually with detached spires (Le Roux: 2008). This and the rectangular hall typology promoted by Hans Koorts, was the concurrent context for the design of reformed churches (Koorts: 1974).

1 Church of the *Gereformeerde Kerk*, Parys. Architect Johan de Ridder, 1955.

