

# Looking Back, Standing Still, Moving Forward: Monument, Stadium, and Social Narrative in Contemporary South Africa

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Our place is changing in us as we stand,  
and we hold up the weight that will bring us down.  
In us the land enacts its history.  
—Wendell Berry  
*The Old Elm Tree by the River*

In South African history, monuments have contributed to both the development and implementation of the apartheid social framework, yet monumental architecture has also redefined the complex cultural narrative surrounding this contested history, offering a path to reconciliation. As spaces embedded with specific political and social meanings, both past and present monuments offer particular insight into South Africa's dynamic cultural and racial landscape, often helping to collect, embody, and communicate public memory and collective identity. Monuments can attempt to establish an ideological narrative, such as the towering *Voortrekker Monument* (1949) in Pretoria, which served as a foundation for the racist platform of the Nationalist Party. Others are social and educational spaces of celebration and remembrance, such as Freedom Plaza (2005) in Klieptown, which harkens back to both pre-colonial African history and the nation's new plural equality in the post-apartheid period. More recently, the stadiums for the 2010 World Cup represent some of the first non-memorializing monumental architecture since the first democratic elections almost twenty years ago. They are cultural monoliths of a traditionally egalitarian sport, built amid the tension and complexity of a racially charged society.

At its most basic level, soccer is a simple enough game: eleven players, one ball, and a singular objective to score more goals than your opponent. At global mega-events such as the World Cup, however, this game can encompass entire cultural, sociopolitical, and economic institutions, sparking political debate, infrastructural development, political posturing, and commercial investment for both international and host communities.<sup>1</sup> Sporting mega-events require mega-venues, and the host nation's commitment is also a pledge to create monumental architecture that fulfills the functional obligations while also representing the event itself and the nation as a whole.

For the nation of South Africa, mired in complex social changes since apartheid's demolition in 1994, hosting the 2010 World Cup represented an aspirational step into the global arena as it has attempted to overcome the segrega-

tion that has largely defined it as a nation over the past sixty years.<sup>2</sup> Yet in trying to write a new social narrative of a post-apartheid, post-racist nation, the country cannot overlook this complicated, living history. The stadiums built for the event, this collection of monumental architecture seen by a massive international audience, strike a balance between forgetting and remembering, looking back and forging ahead. These stadiums stand as some of the first monuments to a new vision of a diverse, global, and equitable South Africa. However, their designs provide an indistinct narrative, innovatively progressive and technologically state-of-the-art, but also containing architectural elements based on stereotypical patterns the nation has tried to overcome. Paradoxically, this incoherence actually reflects the modern nation's conflicted social climate as a developing nation still dealing with problems of poverty, high crime, and inequality.

South Africa's complex history, particularly its implementation of apartheid, provides a framework for its current and diverse social, political, and architectural climate. Photographer David Goldblatt graphically describes apartheid at its height, "To walk the streets or the veld, catch a bus, live in a house, rent an apartment, study, put a child in school, take a job, post a letter, go to a hospital, use a public toilet, enter a railway station, eat in a restaurant, buy a beer, travel, copulate, marry, pay tax, register a birth or death, bury a loved one, indeed to live in South Africa at all, required compliance with apartheid regulations."<sup>3</sup> While apartheid's structural racism largely defines South Africa's recent history, its roots go back to the fifteenth century.

A structural and social framework of "separate development," apartheid was characterized by strategic and systematic disenfranchisement and discrimination against non-white ethnic groups along racial lines, leaning heavily on colonial mythologies for validity in a time of increased societal modernization. In particular, it sought to control the lives of black Africans, who comprised over 80% of the total population, as well as the Coloureds, an ethnic group of mixed race descended from European colonial settlers, Malay and Asian slaves, and Khoisan indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Scarlett Cornelissen and Kamilla Swart, "The 2010 Football World Cup as a Political Construct: The Challenge of Making Good on an African Promise," *The Sociological Review, Special Issue: Social Scientific Analyses of a Global Phenomenon* 54, no. 2 (2006): 108-123.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Walker and others, " 'Win in Africa, with Africa': Social Responsibility, Event Image, and Destination Benefits. The Case of the 2010

World Cup in South Africa," *Tourism Management* 34 (2012): 80-90.

<sup>3</sup> David Goldblatt, *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* (New York: Monacelli, 1998), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Basil Davidson, *Africa in History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 266-269.

The establishment of the Cape Colony, inward expansion of the Great Trek, and the mining wealth for the South African economy provided an historical framework that molded and shaped white Afrikaner identity and polity along lines of extremist racism and oppression.

Historian Nigel Worden traces the unique South African segregation from the original colonial settlements in the Cape through the inland conquest of the Boers and the rise of the politically powerful Afrikaner identity based on ideas of divine ordination and colonial mythology.<sup>5</sup> When the Dutch East India Company first landed at the Cape of Good Hope in 1487, voyagers were only seeking a temporary settlement on their way to the East Indies. As the colony grew in size and prosperity, the predominantly white Dutch settlers viewed this new land with increased ownership, despite the established native population. This sense of ownership, along with a fierce desire for autonomy, led to conflict when far-off British governance increased settlers' taxes and regulation.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, the settlers exited the Cape region in what is known as the Great Trek of 1836. In accordance with their newfound collective identity and language, they began calling themselves "Afrikaners." To survive the rugged conditions on the interior high plains, they relied upon their ingenuity, a strong Protestant-Calvinist faith, and ruthlessness towards the native populations they were displacing. These Boer (Afrikaans for "farmer") trekkers believed in a divine right to South Africa, their "promised land," and this worldview "encouraged them to build their farming economy and their social morals on the curious notion that all Africans, the biblical 'children of Ham,' were designed by God to labour as the white man's slaves."<sup>7</sup> This belief was reinforced after the decisive Afrikaner victory at the Battle of Blood River in 1838, where fewer than five hundred Boers defeated a Zulu army in excess of 15,000. Before the battle, the Boers had sworn a vow that if God provided them victory, they would build a church in His honor and celebrate the date as a holiday.<sup>8</sup> This covenant, and the annual celebration of it, became the basis for the Voortrekker Monument inaugurated in 1949 (Figure 1). Located in the seat of Afrikaner power and built a year after Afrikaner nationalists gained control of the government in the 1948 election, ushering in the beginning of formal apartheid and its systematic oppression, this monument proclaimed the singular Afrikaner identity and

ideological racist narrative of divinely ordained domination over the African people.<sup>9</sup> The Voortrekker Monument, the bastion of collective Afrikaner unity and identity in Pretoria, "had a historical status as the centerpiece of an orchestrated mass spectacle of Afrikaner unity and power."<sup>10</sup> Afrikaner leadership utilized the detailed symbolism carved into the *Voortrekker Monument's* marble interior as an embodied narrative of Afrikaner collective history and identity.<sup>11</sup> The structure itself was embedded with traditional, idealized symbols of Afrikaner culture, such as the ox wagon (*laager*) and materials from the Great Trek, scenes of everyday Boer farm and family life, and carefully crafted lighting shafts and openings connoting origin narratives of the Afrikaner carrying the "flame of civilization" into South Africa. This mythical symbolism helped bring a singular unity to the previously dissonant Afrikaner identity, creating a powerful political force leading up to apartheid's eventual implementation.

In essence, apartheid was inherently spatial, explained as the invisible barrier between races enforced through tightening social, economic, and spatial politics. The Group Areas Act (1950), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), and the Bantu Homelands Citizen Act (1970) used spatial factors to control the much larger black population.<sup>12</sup> Restrictions to mobility, employment, and land ownership for non-whites shackled Africans and Coloureds, who were unable to own property, get jobs, accumulate wealth, or organize in groups, among other restrictions. Resistance movements formed through groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), and historical events such as the Sharpeville Massacre (1960) and the Soweto Uprising (1976) brought increased violence and international attention to the nation's seething oppression. Eventually, the system began to collapse on itself. Economic levers from the mining industry, international sanctions in the 1980s, and constant pressure from internal resistance movements led to apartheid's eventual demolition. This decline culminated in F.W. de Klerk's release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 and Mandela's successful bid for the presidency in the first democratic elections in 1994.

Since 1994, South Africa has attempted to step out from the shadow of oppression and enter the modern, globalized world, becoming Africa's largest economy due to fabulous mineral wealth and massive growth in manufacturing, bank-

<sup>5</sup> Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 7-21.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson, *Africa in History*, 266.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>8</sup> The discovery of gold and diamonds and the subsequent explosion of the mining industry triggered a scaffolding of laws that began to restrict the basic rights of non-whites, due to the economic needs for controlling cheap labor and the tight asset regulations on the mining industry. These laws provided Afrikaners with a structural framework and political capital for their already-formulated worldview of domination over the native population. British annexation of the independent Afrikaner republics (largely to acquire access to massive mining profits)

led to the Boer War in 1899. Eventually, the fallout from the war led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Worden, *Modern South Africa*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Crampton, "The Voortrekker Monument, the Birth of Apartheid, and Beyond." *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 221-246.

<sup>10</sup> Annie Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Crampton, *Voortrekker Monument*, 221-246.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Peters, "Apartheid Politics and Architecture in South Africa," *Social Identities* 10, no. 4 (2004): 537.

ing, and technology. Yet the nation has struggled with issues of crime, xenophobia, corruption, lack of affordable housing, power shortages and other issues more often associated with less developed nations. Even with Mandela's positive vision of a "Rainbow Nation," apartheid's spatial effects linger through the separation of communities, contested history, and complex political environment. Hence, historical commemoration through monuments becomes both a curatorial act in writing past narratives and a directional gesture about the nation's future.

Post-apartheid attitudes toward public architecture, including monuments and memorials, are particularly fractious in South Africa. Because of this, very few monuments have been built to explicitly represent a new, post-apartheid South African narrative. However, the Freedom Plaza (2005) in Kliptown stands as one of these examples of attempts at architectural monumentality and memory (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> The winning design "joined large-scale urban strategies with symbolic interventions," and attempted to feature the authentic nature of the site and surrounding community for its "complex, fragmented, and hybrid character."<sup>14</sup> The final design combines the symbolism of x-shaped interventions (relating to the mark black South Africans made on their first ballots in 1994) with public spaces based on strong geometric shapes; a circular tower referencing the ancient empire of Great Zimbabwe; and functional programming of market, museum, and income-producing rental units utilized to both accommodate existing small businesses and theoretically incentivize increased economic growth.

These recent monuments, while scarce, offer glimpses of the historical circumstances and complexity of collective memory as the narratives surrounding those physical structures change over time. Traditionally, monuments are public structures built to commemorate a past event; they are physical reminders of a shared cultural heritage. For this nation in particular, Sabine Marschall, a professor in South Africa, states, "the term 'monument' is often understood to refer to a historical building...on the basis of its age and its architectural merit or cultural significance."<sup>15</sup> She points to a distinction between "monument" and "memorial" in that "triumphalism and celebration [are] key features of monuments, whereas memorials are about healing and reconciliation,"<sup>16</sup> even though the terms are often used interchangeably. Though these two types of spaces are often difficult to distinguish, art historian Arthur Danto declares, "Monuments make

heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honour the dead. With monuments we honor ourselves."<sup>17</sup> Monumental architecture is focused outward rather than inward, more celebratory and self-aggrandizing than introspective and healing. Monuments are public spaces embedded with specific meaning, rather than open to introspection in the way of memorials and museums. Thus, the design decisions of monumental architecture carry narrative implications that are similar to the curatorial decisions for museum exhibitions and memorials.

Hence, the stadiums built for South Africa's 2010 World Cup can be accurately labeled as monuments, since their scale, social context, and the cultural rhetoric surrounding their construction (along with the political discourse about the mega-event itself) places additional meanings on their physical, technological, and metaphorical structures—meanings beyond just an arena to watch soccer matches.<sup>18</sup> The stadiums are transitional structures designed to facilitate South Africa's attempted conversion from a nation recovering from its past to an influential global power, affecting both the local stakeholders and outsiders (the "Other") with their representative qualities concerning the culture and social narrative they commemorate. The stadiums physically represent the country's capacity to move past its traumatic history. Architectural historian Federico Freschi of the University of Johannesburg rightly states that the 2010 World Cup stadiums are South Africa's first true monuments since apartheid. He claims that while the stadiums are "constructed to meet particular economic or social objectives, [they also] have powerful political effects."<sup>19</sup> In South Africa's case, the connection with sporting monuments lends additional weight due to the historically racial divide between sports, with soccer functioning largely as the sport of choice among blacks, as opposed to the predominantly white sports of rugby and cricket. For observing nations, elevating soccer to the global stage within this dichotomy gave credence to South Africa's attempt to recognize equality in a racially charged environment, while also affirming a traditionally egalitarian sport through governmental investment and support.

Of the ten total venues used for the event, the renovated Soccer City Stadium in Soweto and the five new stadiums constructed for this global event—Green Point Stadium in Cape Town, Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban, Nelson

<sup>13</sup> Freedom Plaza commemorates the historic meeting and ratification of the Freedom Charter in 1955. The plaza was built as a monument to the local community's historical influence in the resistance movement. South Africa's current Constitution (ratified in 1994) draws heavily from the original Freedom Charter.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Alfred Noble, ed., *African Identity in Post-Apartheid Public Architecture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 182.

<sup>15</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials, and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South-Africa* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Danto, *State of the Art* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 112.

<sup>18</sup> Scarlett Cornelissen, "More than a Sporting Chance?: Appraising the Sport for Development Legacy of the 2010 FIFA World Cup," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2011): 503-529.

<sup>19</sup> Federico Freschi, "Dancing in Chains: The Imaginary of Global South-Africanism in World Cup Stadium Architecture," *African Arts* 44, no. 2 (2011): 42-55.

Mandela Bay Stadium in Port Elizabeth, Peter Mokaba Stadium in Polokwane, and the Mbombela Stadium in Nelspruit—stand as cultural monoliths of sport, as well as architectural monuments to a “new” South African identity. While some aspects of these stadiums pander to the colonialist and tourist tendency toward more stereotypically “African” imagery, this group of monumental structures seeks to explicitly embody, through the built environment, the goal of elevating South Africa onto the global stage.

Even though each stadium contains its own distinct sensibility, they can be defined as a singular critical set due to their common timeframe, context, and function; they were built specifically for a single event, completed simultaneously, and commissioned by a single entity. Their various design successes and inadequacies as monuments, paradoxically, also represent accurately the complex culture of post-apartheid South Africa. Several threads weave through the stadium designs: the growing desire to present a uniquely “African” visual identity, a sense of locality and regionalism, memorial representation of the freedom struggle, and the celebration rather than the conflicting nature of diversity. They are aspirational structures and “the grandeur of their scale, coupled with the sculptural monumentality of their sophisticated, highly engineered forms are an optimistic expression of the ostensibly mature, modern, and globalized identity of the post-apartheid, postcolonial state.”<sup>20</sup> While their modern forms are, in part, due to strict specifications set by FIFA (soccer’s global governing body), all the designs attempt to engage a uniquely African sense of place, and for the most part, do not subvert this emerging identity with clichéd cultural expressions.

In the design for Green Point Stadium, sited in the shadow of Cape Town’s picturesque Table Mountain (Figure 3), Freschi notes the German firm Von Gerkan, Marg, and Partner’s (GMP) restrained response to the massive structure, which could dominate an established natural skyline.<sup>21</sup> As a design solution, the stadium’s gentle rolling profile offers a subtle resemblance to Cape Town’s recognizable landscape. The delicately translucent metal skin provides protection for the inconsistent Cape weather patterns, allowing the structure to glow at night and reflect the harsh sun during the day. Similarly, the Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban (Figure 4) and the Nelson Mandela Stadium in Port Elizabeth

(Figure 5) both indicate a sense of architectural regionalism moderated through their identity in local areas.<sup>22</sup> In Durban, a seaside town on the eastern coast, a tremendous white arch dominates the structure’s sleek façade, in possible reference to ocean waves or ship’s rigging, or even the more formal qualities of a sea vessel. In Port Elizabeth, white structural membranes contend with the shorefront stadium’s high winds while connoting abstracted forms such as the seashell or the protea, the national flower. While there has been criticism of FIFA’s infusion of overt symbolism of the Mabhida arch by stating that this form “represent[s] the unity of this sport-loving nation,”<sup>23</sup> the design’s regionalist aspects are successfully restrained, based in both function and context. Overall, “an abstract sense of regionalism is thus quietly incorporated into the overriding narrative of high-tech monumentality,”<sup>24</sup> successfully incorporating local materials and color palettes while refraining from overtly symbolic imagery.

However, in Peter Mokaba Stadium in Polokwane (Figure 6) and Mbombela Stadium in Nelspruit (Figure 7), the success and coherence of their designs are undermined by overtly stereotyped “African” visual references. The selected motifs actually degrade the designs by invoking traditional colonial and tourist perspectives rather than functionally-based solutions, and undermine the overall sense that these stadium-monuments are representative of a new South Africa. The giraffe-like structural features and zebra-stripped seating pattern in Nelspruit, based on animal patterns found in nearby Kruger National Park, along with the baobab-based imagery of the Polokwane stadium, are defined by the design teams with “African” colonialist rhetoric. They pander to the “tourist gaze,”<sup>25</sup> recalling stereotypical attitudes about “wildness” and the “exotic” rather than positively contributing to a decidedly modernized and complex national identity. These design decisions clearly attempt to communicate with World Cup tourists, rather than local citizens and communities. Interestingly, the Nelspruit stadium is the only structure in the group with a lead design team based on the African continent.<sup>26</sup> This observation presents a broader criticism of South African architectural practice, that while contemporary South African architecture attempts to move forward in its own unique ideas, visualizations, and material understandings of “Africanness,” architecture within the country

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>22</sup> On critical regionalism in architecture as place-specific architecture, which emerges from the architects’ critical response to physical, social, and cultural specifics of the given locale (“region”) see: Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, “The Grid and the Pathway. An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis, with a Prolegomena to the History of the Culture of Modern Greek Architecture,” *Architecture in Greece 15* (1981), 164-178; Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 16-30.

<sup>23</sup> Freschi, *Dancing in Chains*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>26</sup> R&L Architects, headquartered in Cape Town, led the design for Mbombela stadium in Nelspruit. Although this stadium was the only one with an African-led design team, the Peter Mokaba stadium design was led by UK-based AFL Architects in conjunction with Studio Prism, a firm with offices in Polokwane, Johannesburg, and Pretoria. Freschi, *Dancing in Chains*, 51.

still struggles with integrations of history and modernity. Architects themselves remain largely members of the upper classes, raising questions of access, diversity, and process to the highest circles of architecture, an ironic dichotomy that represents a lingering microcosm of segregation. In order for monumental architecture in South Africa to be successful long term, both local and international design teams should utilize a more inclusive approach, adequately responding to local and international audiences and stakeholders.

Soccer City, the largest stadium, was a massive renovation of an existing stadium outside Soweto, rather than one built specifically for the World Cup itself (Figure 8). While containing assigned symbolism in its visual reference to the African calabash pot, this structure combines historical elements with modern technology in a successfully subtle and holistic way. The façade is built of alternating steel and concrete panels, patterned and located for air circulation, but intentionally aestheticized to refer to the flickering of a calabash as it glows in the fire. Freschi claims that the rounded form, the irregular exterior glass, concrete cladding, and the lighting features “combine to create a monumentally sculptural form that has a particular African cultural resonance, but without resorting to cheap, touristy clichés.”<sup>27</sup> Beyond its successful integration of materials and functionality, the stadium’s location near soccer-crazed Soweto relates the importance of the project’s local investment to the citizens of Soweto and South Africa, solidifying their historical and modern relevance.

Innovatively progressive and technologically state-of-the-art, these stadiums were explicitly built to propel South Africa’s world entrance as a global economic and cultural leader through design excellence and modern technological prowess. Yet some of these stadiums also contain stereotypical elements based on patterns of colonialism and exclusion that the nation has spent over fifteen years trying to overcome, thus providing a somewhat indistinct narrative that reveals a nation conflicted with issues of inequality, globalization, and domestic conflict. While the historical proximity of apartheid’s trauma implicitly infuses a distinct racial context to South Africa’s architectural environment, monuments must respond to the past without reinforcing outdated colonial rhetoric. As the most globally influential structures since the end of apartheid, the stadiums represent a changing South African identity: incongruent and diverse, yet unified through significant shared experience. Indeed, much of the topic’s contemporary history is literally being built, as current designers continue to shape the nation through their interpretation of the past. South Africa has no simple solutions, clear objectives, or conclusive remedies. Even with its inequality, violence, and poverty, it is still harshly beautiful as it shakes off the ashes. How does one record historic events in a country where no one remains untouched by trauma? — by continuing to build, to question, to forgive, and above all else, to remember.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 53.



Figure 1. Gerard Moerdijk, architect, *Voortrekker Monument*, Pretoria/Tshwane, South Africa, 1937-1949.





Figure 4. gmp International GmbH – architects and engineers in consortium with Ibholo Lethu Consortium, Moses Mabhida Stadium, Durban, South Africa, 2010. Photo credit: Marcus Bredt. Used by permission.

◀[facing page, top] Figure 2. StudioMAS (SM), architect/design, Walter Sisulu Square, Kliptown, South Africa, 2003-2005.

◀[facing page, bottom] Figure 3. gmp – von Gerkan, Marg and Partners Architects in cooperation with Louis Karol and Point Architects and Urban Designers, Green Point Stadium, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Photo credit: Bruce Sutherland. Used by permission.







Figure 7. R&L Architects, Mbombela Stadium, Nelspruit, South Africa, 2010.



Figure 8. Design by Boogertman & Partners in conjunction with HOK Sport (now Populous), Soccer City Stadium, Soweto, South Africa, 2010.

◀[facing page, top] Figure 5. gmp International GmbH – architects and engineers in consortium with: ADA Architectural Design Associates, Dhiro Kalian; Dominic Bonnesse Architects; NOH Architects, Gapp Architects, Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium, Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 2010. Photo credit: Marcus Bredt. Used by permission.

◀[facing page, bottom] Figure 6. Design by AFL Architects in conjunction with Studio Prism, Peter Mokaba Stadium, Polokwane, South Africa, 2010.