

## *Indian Townscape Features in Pietermaritzburg*

Indians have made a notable yet largely unacknowledged contribution to the townscape of Pietermaritzburg. Although only the unobservant are unaware of the existence of temples and mosques, townscapes are more, much more, than merely the sum of such parts. Prominent buildings in combination with one another and with gabled houses and stores, and bonded together by colours and vegetation, create a particularly sensuous townscape. But rarely in South African towns and cities have Indian features been allowed to blossom fully or remain *in situ*. Restrictions on Indian dwelling and trade as well as expropriations and relocations have produced a continuum of Indian townscape cells ranging from areas in which the Indian imprint is still clear, to areas in which the odd palm tree is the only relic of the former Indian occupation of that area. This paper focuses on four Indian townscape cells in Pietermaritzburg: lower Longmarket Street; upper Church Street; Pentrich and one block along Commercial Road.

### *Lower Longmarket Street*

This area constitutes one of the finest, most vividly Indian areas in Natal. By the late 1870s a number of ex-indentured Hindu families had taken up residence in this area. A number of barracks were erected to provide humble accommodation — the barracks of six rooms built *circa* 1883 by the Natal Land and Colonisation Company is the sole survivor (Plate 1). Across



Plate 1: Former Indian store and barracks on lower Longmarket Street, 1985.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



Plate 2: Hindu temple compound in the foreground with Moslem structures in the background.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

the road a religious compound developed. A wood-and-iron temple, large enough for only one person, made its appearance in 1890, and was followed in 1909 by a modest temple in the form of a Victorian veranda house. The tower of this Mariaman Temple was designed by K. Reddy, the master temple builder. Reddy was also employed, along with the other notable Natal temple builder K.R. Pillay, for the construction (from 1908-1915) of the adjacent Shree Subrahmanya Temple within the same compound. Both of these are South Indian temples, which in addition to the shrine and tower, feature an external altar defined by a Kodi, or flagpole. A number of minor temples, palm, banana and temple trees (*Michelia champaca*), the firewalking pit, peacocks and a two metre wall complete the enclave (Plate 2). One can wholeheartedly concur with the following statements and sentiments: 'the experience to be encountered in and around these temples must always outweigh the written word and photographic image' (Mikula, Kearney and Harber, 1982, p. 4); and 'it is to be hoped that with a little more general awareness, it may well be possible to retain some of the better buildings for posterity. This is important for they have much to offer in their rich architectural concepts which may well be considered as traditional of Natal as Cape Dutch is to the Cape' (Mikula, 1983, p. 15).

Diagonally across the street from this twin temple compound stands the Shri Vishnu Temple and School. This temple caters for Hindi-speaking Hindus who are followers of Vishnu and therefore stands testimony to the linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the Indian settlers. The Shri

Vishnu Temple (Plate 3) is strikingly different from its neighbouring temples. It is a freestanding, or North Indian, temple surrounded by an arched veranda. A pair of royal palms flanks the entrance path, as do the red flags which are raised on bamboo poles to a minor deity. Although lacking the blending of sculptural and architectural features of some other temples, the bulbous dome, the mould of which was made with mealie stalks and bamboo, is a masterpiece of folk architecture attributed to 'one named Mistree'.

The domes and arches of the Shri Vishnu Temple mirror the Moslem features of the Habibia Soofie Musjid Mosque (1909) and the Nizamia Society Madressa (1942) which stand on either side of the Longmarket-East Street intersection. Within walking distance we therefore have a remarkable cross-section of Indian religious architecture. The juxtaposition of these styles may well be unique both in and to Natal, for only in this province were religious structures, of places widely separated in India, obliged to be close neighbours (Plate 4).



Plate 3.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



Plate 4: Temple tower and minaret  
from Bengal Alley.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

*Upper Church Street*

By the 1890s several substantial Moslem traders had set up shop in upper Church Street. E.C. Rawat's building at 69 Church Street is still standing but is now used as a warehouse. Partially hidden by Rawat's is the Surat Suni Mosque which was completed in 1903 (Plate 7). The mosque was founded by Amod Bayat who traded at 47 Church Street. Bayat imported builders from India and they were responsible for his fine store (Plate 5) and the mosque.

By the 1930s an imposing row of store-dwellings had made their appearance (Plate 6). More than a dozen other Indian stores lined upper Church Street, Indian families lived in semi-detached houses on Raven,



Plate 5. Amod Bayat's store in the 1890s — demolished in 1976.

(Photograph: Bayat family)

Deane and Wilson Streets, and along with the mosque and M.O. madressa a jama'at, or Moslem community, flourished.

Demolitions and aluminium face-lifts have masked many features, and of course relocations have dismembered the community, but the advent of free trade areas and, hopefully, an increased awareness of this area's characteristics may well recreate the earlier Moslem ambience.



Plate 6. An imposing row of Indian stores in upper Church Street, c. 1938.

(Photograph: *Natal Witness*)



Plate 7: Rawat's Building and the entrance to the mosque in upper Church Street, 1985.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

*Pentrich*

Indian settlement in this area mirrored the larger Natal sequence. By 1900 Hindu gardeners were occupying rectangular plots which gave them access to the Umsindusi floodplain. Moslem traders followed soon thereafter. Relocations in accordance with the Group Areas Act have changed the occupants of the houses, but the gables, the arched verandas, the palms, the banana and the mango trees remain as a distinctive Indian stamp, particularly in Topham and French Roads.

*Commercial Road*

In 1894 a visitor of Maritzburg described the view from atop the Town Hall as follows:

From the four turret windows we obtained magnificent birdseye views in different directions. Just below us was the Market Square, crowded with wagons and long teams of oxen. In the opposite direction stretched a long narrow street, with crowds of Indian and Kafirs constantly passing. It was called Commercial Road, our guide said, but Arab-street would have been a more suitable name, for most of the low, dark shops seemed to be occupied by Indian traders, dressed in flowing robes (Thomas, 1894, p. 12).

The City's 1900 Valuation Roll reveals that rows of small 'Arab Stores' dominated the block between Church and Pietermaritz Street. Along the eastern front of that block stood a row of fourteen such stores. S.H. Mahommed's store at 197 Commercial Road had both living rooms and a



Plate 8: Commercial Road between Church and Pietermaritz Streets. c. 1930, with Arab stores on the right.

(Photograph: *Natal Witness*)

mosque upstairs. Across the road Parker, Wood & Co. had a row of six 'Arab Stores' as their neighbours (Plate 8). These stores were however soon replaced by European stores, the Magistrate's Court and the Grand Theatre. In 1930, the occasion of the opening of the Grand Theatre produced the following descriptions of the Church Street/Commercial Road area:

Only a few years ago the property on which the new buildings now stand was something of an eyesore. Many of the shops were owned by Arabs, and they were nearly all ramshackle affairs . . . The site next door to the corner shop was formerly occupied by an Indian mosque. It is not so many years ago since men sleeping in the neighbourhood were roused in the early morning by the priest's call to prayer . . . About six years ago the mosque was burned down in mysterious circumstances, and the old priest perished in the flames. Farther down Commercial Road was a group of small Arab stores. Some of these were appropriated, at a later date (*Natal Witness*, December 15, 1930, p. 4).

### Conclusions

The four cells which have been described present a cross-section of Indian religious, occupational and residential activities. Although a city cannot stand still, much of the relocation and appropriation of Indian activities has been unnecessary, and has severed communities from the townscape cells which they have created. Clearly, townscapes are held together by people, and townscapes in turn help to bind communities. Not surprisingly, therefore, the quality of community life, as well as the building fabric which reflects that quality, has suffered. Consequently, it is insufficient merely to plead for the conservation of what few historic Indian townscape features have survived. Rather our concern must encompass the life and well-being of the community itself. Have our twentieth century planners laid out and brought to life areas comparable to our nineteenth century relics? If not, then an appreciation of the past, and of how townscapes and communities nourish each other is not an elitist pastime but a fundamentally important concern.

### REFERENCES

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