

# *National Monuments*

## *A new focus in Natal<sup>1</sup>*

In recent years many changes have taken place in the approach which the National Monuments Council's Natal regional organisation takes towards the task for which it was created. It is undoubtedly not solely responsible for such changes which are, in addition to a product of the times, a result of close co-operation and exchange of ideas with others working in the heritage conservation field in the province and certainly many of the projects concerned have been initiated by organisations other than the National Monuments Council (NMC). The purpose of this paper is not to claim credit for projects which are not the National Monuments Council's, but rather to present what is happening in the field in which the Council operates.

By the same token this paper, while it does discuss certain aspects of the soul searching through which the Natal region of the NMC has been, is an attempt to show that real efforts are being made to meet the challenges of the time and to demonstrate that there are indeed some meaningful projects taking place in the field in which the Natal Region of the organisation operates and with which it has been closely associated.

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In our changing world the accusation of irrelevance is too frequently heard by architectural conservationists. To many and in light of past performance this may be a justifiable accusation, but what is important in this context is that it is one which most in the field are hard put to counter. It is often impossible in the light of difficult economic circumstances and changing political and cultural contexts to motivate the expenditure of vast sums of money on the seemingly élitist practice of saving beautiful buildings. This is undoubtedly the image of the discipline in the mind of a public which sees architectural conservation solely in the context of putting buildings on pedestals and recognising them as an art form in a great outdoor gallery. The initiated are aware that the concept of conservation of the cultural environment goes much further and that it is an activity which in the sense in which the term has been used to describe what has historically been the primary activity of the National Monuments Council, that is the declaration of National Monuments, goes beyond the realm of architecture and encompasses virtually any tangible aspect of human interest.

In early 1991 the focus of the press fell briefly upon cultural institutions and in particular the National Monuments Council. Much of the criticism of the

NMC was confused in that it failed to understand the Council's area of operation and in essence the difference between a 'memorial' and a 'National Monument' declared as such in terms of statute (ie: the National Monument Act). Confusions aside, in most instances the press examined the possible focus of the National Monuments Council in the future and what pattern recognition of cultural artefacts in the form of monuments might take under a new political system; compared this with the existing situation and in certain instances suggested likely National Monuments for a post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>2</sup> In the process sensitive questions were asked of, amongst others, members of the Natal Regional Committee of the NMC, and this brought home to the regional organisation the fact that the time had come to look critically at what it had for some time recognised as a problem regarding the relevance of much of the NMC's work in the province and possible means of addressing the issue now that the time for such action was ripe.

The result was a fairly unrefined statistical analysis of the 180-odd National Monuments in Natal (excluding those which fall under the Kwazulu Monuments Council) at that time. The study was intended only to lend some statistical support to a situation of which the Natal Region of the NMC believed it was already aware. (The fact that there are several declared monuments in Kwazulu which do not fall under the control of the National Monuments Council and that the Kwazulu Monuments Council takes a different approach regarding the number of sites it declares in its territory gives some indication of the extent of the problem involved in compiling a complete and accurate analysis for the whole of Natal.)

Other than for natural (eg: waterfalls, trees, etc.) and what were called industrial sites (essentially bridges), the analysis was done by race classification since this was the basis upon which criticism was being levelled at the organisation. The concept of analysis by this means is one which is fraught with dangers since in most instances it is difficult to assign 100% relevance to a particular racial group. As a rule what was felt to be the area of primary relevance was taken as the category into which sites were placed.

Another problem area was the analysis of monuments which were recognised primarily for their aesthetic value and not due to any historical or political connotation. In such instances (by far the majority) it seemed that while the relevant aesthetic values were of essentially European origin an important factor regarding relevance related to the environmental contribution such monuments made and the fact that most of these National Monuments contribute in some, one hopes positive, manner to the environment in which all South Africans work, if not live. A sub-division of the analysis thus separates monuments with strong political connotations from those with an essentially aesthetic connotation. The former category consists primarily of national monuments associated with Afrikaner Nationalism (another specific area of perennial criticism of the NMC). Monuments with strong imperialist connotations were more difficult to distinguish from those of great aesthetic value and this breakdown was not attempted.

In the case of battlefields, sites were allocated twice (that is to both the sides involved in the battle) it being a fairly simple matter to confirm relative equality of connection to two interest groups.

The survey was done using the Natal entries on the National Monuments Council's national computer database, 'Conserva'.<sup>3</sup>

The results of the survey (see Table 1) confirmed that there exist distinct gaps in the scope of current statutory protection of sites of cultural significance

	<b>Number of monuments</b>	<b>% of total</b>	<b>Interest group</b>
	161	88.0	White
	22	12.0	Political connotations
	139	75.9	Other white
	9	4.9	Indian
	7	3.8	Zulu
	0	0.0	Xhosa
	0	0.0	Coloured
	0	0.0	Sotho
	2	1.1	Immigrants
	8	4.4	Natural
	5	2.7	Industrial

**Table 1: Analysis of Natal National Monuments by interest group, February 1991**

in Natal. This did not come as a surprise, but the analysis did lend credence to claims and suspicions regarding National Monuments in the Province. Addressing the problem was of course the central issue and statistics tended to lend support to the strategy which was subsequently devised.

At its meeting on 7 August 1991<sup>4</sup> the Natal Regional Committee of the National Monuments Council adopted an affirmative action strategy aimed specifically at addressing the problems raised by the analysis of the current state of affairs.<sup>5</sup> In using the term 'affirmative action' the intention was not to set quotas for the declaration of national monuments relevant to specific racial groups (as is generally understood by American use of the term), but rather to change the emphasis of future operations of the region. The strategy attempts to ensure that the bulk of protections instituted in the future will adequately reflect the reality of cultural diversity in Natal and in addition introduces specific projects aimed at filling in existing gaps in the scope of present coverage. It is hoped hereby to gain relevance and credibility in areas where this is perceived to be a priority and where it is currently lacking. Ultimately the purpose must be to better fulfil the stated intention of the National Monuments Act that:

... the (National Monuments) Council shall ... preserve and protect the historical and cultural heritage, ... encourage and ... promote preservation and protection of that heritage, and ... co-ordinate all activities in connection with monuments ... in order that monuments ... will be retained as tokens of the past and may serve as an inspiration to the future ...<sup>6</sup>

and primarily to accomplish this in a manner relevant and applicable to all those living in Natal.

The strategy not only makes proposals regarding the manner in which this is to be achieved, but at the same time sets out a system whereby those whose interests have traditionally been a priority of the Natal Region will continue to be protected as and when those communities feel that it is necessary. To this particular end a system akin to the current catch phrase, 'privatisation', has been instituted whereby people, or communities, who wish to see sites of interest to themselves, but outside of the areas of designated regional priority, declared as National Monuments may still do so provided that they do the necessary research and provide the required documentation. This enables the Regional Committee and staff to examine cases, with little effort, and where appropriate make recommendations to higher authority regarding the institution of legal protections. This system has proved effective and in approximately 14 months of operation no community or person has yet objected to it. This procedure has an additional advantage in that the motivation of a community to protect a specific site may be gauged in this manner, it being fundamental to successful heritage conservation that an element within the community concerned be active in and demonstrate a desire to see a site retained as 'a token of the past'.<sup>7</sup> (This last statement must be qualified regarding communities amongst which the concept of heritage conservation has yet to be popularised and where its benefits to the community are not yet understood.<sup>8</sup>)

It has been recognised that the statistical situation with regard to the primary relevance of National Monuments in Natal will not change overnight. The current situation is the product of 60 years of activity and there are insufficient resources to effect changes which will be of immediately noticeable significance. This was an important motivation in adopting a strategy which commits the regional organisation of the NMC to a course of action which the Regional Committee believes to be necessary. It is hoped that implementation of the strategy will in the short term also demonstrate that there is a commitment to change.

As a rule the above mentioned factors are important for the following reasons: it is an unfortunate fact that in the present economic climate cultural institutions simply do not have the resources to immediately come into line with new trends regarding the physical manifestations of their activity (ie: what the public sees). There nevertheless exists a necessity to demonstrate by means of policy commitments, strategies and, most importantly, actions, that the thinking of the institution concerned is in line with changing social trends and those internationally accepted professional practices which for reasons of the country's past may have been ignored.

To return specifically to the activities of the National Monuments Council and the belief that protection of conservation-worthy sites via legislative means is too 'Eurocentric' a concept to survive the current era of change: it is true when examining statutory cultural conservation and its South African record that accusations of élitism, Eurocentrism and simple racism in past practice are as justifiable as they are for most other areas of state intervention in cultural, or for that matter any other area of human experience. To many the only means of countering such accusations has been to rush about searching for potential monuments which are 'relevant to Blacks'.

In Natal this has also occurred and several important pre-colonial archaeological sites are in the process of declaration as National Monuments. Among

these are the Shakan pitfall traps at the confluence of the Black and White Mfolozi Rivers and the Umhlatuzana Rock Shelter on the Mhlatuzana River south of Hillcrest.<sup>9</sup> Plans for a survey of all recorded archaeological sites in the province with a view to identifying sites which warrant statutory recognition are also in an advanced stage.<sup>10</sup> In the case of archaeological sites it is indeed more a case of recognition than protection since the National Monuments Act makes provision for very strenuous protection of all archaeological sites without regard to relative importance.<sup>11</sup>

While it is so that sites such as these warrant protection and recognition and may well be relevant to the neglected majority of South Africans, one very quickly runs into the problem that African culture does not leave behind it a record which is of a manifest material nature and which is as evident as architecture, the most obtrusive form which material culture takes in western and oriental cultures. It is apparent that, despite the fact that there may be a significant backlog in the protection of sites which readily exhibit evidence of cultures not previously concentrated upon in terms of legislative protection, there will never be the same volume and variety of sites exhibiting material evidence of African culture which are protected in the form with which we are familiar, that is as National Monuments, conservation areas, National Register entries etc. (ie: the various levels of protection of the built environment provided for by the National Monuments Act.)<sup>12</sup> This problem was one which, if at all possible, needed to be addressed by a strategy if the concept of cultural conservation by means of legislative protection is to enjoy any priority under a new political dispensation. The problem did, however, appear to be the apparently unavoidable one of retaining a majority of National Monuments which were only of primary interest to a minority of the population.

Of course the activities of the National Monuments Council in recognising and protecting sites do not focus solely on architecture and other forms of material culture. There is also a significant domain which is covered by statute and which is associated with occurrences or figures of historical significance.<sup>13</sup> This too represents an opportunity for extension into a realm deserving of recognition, but which to many still very much wears the cloak of controversy. Such are the sites associated with the 'struggle' or figures close to it.

The National Monuments Council has recently grappled with the issue of the Alan Paton papers and the Sol Plaatjie House.<sup>14</sup> There are many in Natal, to mention a few: Paton's birthplace in Pietermaritzburg; Albert Luthuli's birthplace at Groutville (which falls under the jurisdiction of the KwaZulu Monuments Council); the place at which Nelson Mandela was arrested near Howick and, as part of its strategy the National Monuments Council will in early 1993 conduct a survey of the many Gandhi sites throughout the Province. These sites too are of undeniable significance and will doubtlessly in time be recognised and adequately protected. One should not, however, be fool enough to believe that their recognition alone will win cultural conservationists a lasting place in the hearts and minds of compatriots.

The affirmative action strategy adopted by the Natal Region of the National Monuments Council makes provision for concentration on the types of activities outlined above and prescribes that no project which does not look at the contribution of all South Africans to the cultural mosaic or does not deliberately seek to fill the gaps revealed by statistical analysis can be sanctioned. It is with this in mind that as a matter of policy surveys of the building stock of urban areas in the province now look at all neighbourhoods, not just those which were formerly white group areas, and that buildings of

not just those which were formerly white group areas, and that buildings of significance to and of interest in all parts of a town should enjoy simultaneous protection of a form suited to their importance. Such survey techniques have become the primary manner in which the region identifies conservation-worthy sites.

Much thought has gone into setting up projects which deliberately seek to broaden the scope of the NMC in Natal. Many of these have been undertaken in conjunction with colleagues at other institutions, most notably the KwaZulu Monuments Council and the Natal Provincial Museum Services. Natal has for many years been unique in the level of co-operation which exists between its two monuments councils and the Provincial Administration and, apart from the more obvious advantages of co-operation, joint projects have enabled the institutions concerned to overcome certain of the administrative, political and geographical divisions which exist in the region.

The problem of architecture as a transient cultural manifestation in the purely African context has been dealt with at some length in this article and one of the most interesting projects which has recently been undertaken and to which it is hoped there will be an ongoing commitment in the future, is an oral history survey which identifies sites of significance which are not in a built form or necessarily of historical significance. This joint project has concentrated on analysing the strength and importance of oral traditions which are associated with identifiable places. Such a 'place' may be a rock, tree, pool or other manifestation upon which a community places significance and which is as a result considered to be conservation worthy. The project took the form of an oral history survey of the Stanger area and several such sites were examined, the strengths of the tradition attached to them were tested.<sup>15</sup> South Africa is full of places such as these and, if conservation is to work at grassroots level, and if cultural conservationists believe that oral tradition is a cultural manifestation worthy of attention, there is a duty to identify and protect such sites, thereby assisting to perpetuate traditions which are under severe threat in urban areas.

Despite all that has been said so far and even if oral history does present a possibility for creating a broad scope of sites protected in terms of the National Monuments Act, this may still be insufficient to justify a commitment on the part of a government or society to conservation of the form under discussion. In short it is essential that it is realised that it is probably only in economic and social terms that the continuation of such activity can be motivated on a meaningful scale. There is nothing new in realising the economic potential of conservation-worthy structures in a first world sense and Natal, as elsewhere, has for many years seen business exploiting conservation potential for its own gain and using historic buildings as an economically viable alternative to new construction. (The 'Workshop' and Exhibition Centre in Durban is a good example, as is the soon to be undertaken Colonial Building project in Pietermaritzburg.<sup>16</sup>) This is particularly so in the current hard times and is something which the NMC has always encouraged. The problem is, however, to demonstrate that conservation of, in particular, the built environment can hold economic and social benefits for the vast masses of the population of this country.

Tourism is an obvious means of doing this, but its promotion does not to any great degree depend upon the conservationists themselves. As has already been mentioned, rehabilitating and finding new uses for existing properties is an increasingly popular practice the economic soundness of which is difficult to ignore, but tourism and rehabilitation, while they may stimulate architectural

conservation in monetary terms, are probably not sufficiently close to the interests of the vast majority of South Africans to mean anything more than does the erection of a brand new building.

It seems that there will have to be more innovation than this and that conservationists must strive to tie such projects in with the direct interests of the community in whose areas a particular project takes place. In Natal nature conservationists have had limited successes in this regard and certain museum conservation projects (namely those at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift) have tied their development to self-help community projects. In architectural conservation few such projects have got off the ground, but the following three cases do give some idea of how buildings with significant conservation value can play a significant and meaningful role in projects which involve social upliftment. They also illustrate how this can be accomplished without necessarily adding to costs and often with very real financial advantages or benefits in terms of the quality and size of facility relative to finances available for investment.

### ***Girls Collegiate School, Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg***<sup>17</sup>

The restoration of the old Girls Collegiate School in Pietermaritzburg was one of the first such projects in Natal to incorporate a significant conservation aspect and although not without its funding difficulties has thus far been successful. It is an unusual project in that it ties the conservation of an important group of buildings, formerly an exclusive 'young ladies' school, into a socially contradictory though reconcilable context: the development of building skills among the less privileged sectors of our society. Academic restoration of a type and quality rarely seen in South Africa is taking place on the site. This has to a degree only been so due to the fact that the time constraints of a normal building project do not exist on a site where the training of builders is uppermost in the mind of the sponsors (various foreign and local institutions). It is also interesting from an affirmative action point of view that many of the trainees on the site are women. When the restoration of old Girls Collegiate is completed in 1993, the buildings will become a basic skills training centre for those of a similar background to the people currently working on the project. It might be hoped that the builder training project will be moved to another site with a conservation focus.

### ***The old Merchiston Boarding Hostel, 231 Prince Alfred Street, Pietermaritzburg***<sup>18</sup>

Another interesting project of similar nature concerns the building situated at 231 Prince Alfred Street, Pietermaritzburg. This building, formerly the boarding hostel of the Merchiston School and then used by Grey's Hospital before it moved to new premises, was in the latter part of the 1980s used by riot police units before being abandoned by its owner, the Natal Provincial Administration. As a result of years of neglect and abuse the building was condemned, but being older than 50 years of age the owner was required to approach the Natal Plans Committee of the National Monuments Council for a demolition permit. The application was unsuccessful since it was felt that the building was one of some quality and that possibilities for its rehabilitation hence warranted investigation.

The provincial authorities undertook to attempt to find someone who was prepared to take on a rehabilitation project and the success of this endeavour resulted in the building being let out on long lease to a trust which runs a

therapy centre and specialist toy library for disabled children. The trust has at its own cost renovated the structure and uses about twenty-five percent of the available space for its own purposes, letting out the remainder to tenants whose rents repay the loan which was required to fund the work which has made the building usable. Ultimately it may be expected that rents will help to fund the trust itself, or that additional space will be at the disposal of the trust as its activities expand. While this project was not without its problems regarding structural complications and resultant additional expense during rehabilitation, the trust has acquired for itself a facility which had it attempted to build new it would have found to have been far beyond its very limited means. The conservation of this structure has also contributed to the long term financial wellbeing of an organisation which has an important social mission which is relevant to a variety of communities.

### ***24 Morling Street, Howick<sup>19</sup>***

A third case concerns a house on the lower part of Morling Street in Howick. This National Monument formerly housed the Howick Museum which in mid-1992 moved to new premises close to the Howick falls, a more logical location for an institution aimed at the town's tourists. Lower Morling Street has in recent years seen a change in use from an area of middle-class housing to taxi-commuter oriented commercial usage. The house, which is opposite the magistrate's court, no longer lends itself to the cultural use for which it was restored.



The settler home, Morling Street, Howick: National monument,  
formerly a museum, presently a clinic.

*(Photograph: FGG Architects)*

At the time of the museum's move the Howick Municipality was looking for a location on which to erect a new community clinic and the site occupied by 24 Morling Street seemed ideally suited to this purpose. However, there was considerable concern that such a project on this particular site would have to involve the demolition of a national monument, an occurrence which was unlikely to be sanctioned by the National Monuments Council. In the event it was ascertained that this would not be necessary and a new clinic facility has been successfully erected behind the existing structure, visible sections thereof, while of modern design, forming a successful foil to the existing building which is now used as offices for clinic staff. While certain aspects of the design of the new section of this building may have required additional expense in order to make it compatible with the national monument to which it has been attached, it would seem that this was compensated for by the additional space provided by the existing building.

It is so that all three of the above-mentioned sites are owned by second or third tier departments of government and this would seem to indicate that generally this type of project is only viable if supported by that sector of the economy which can afford to sponsor conservation projects without counting the cost in terms of profits which might have accrued had the sites concerned been developed differently. This is essentially a problem of the existing system for architectural conservation which does not make allowance for financial and planning incentives to private sector developers who incorporate a conservation element into development projects (ie. tax rebates, bulk transfers, zoning relaxations, etc.). While this might seem to influence the relevance and viability of the types of projects described above, this does not necessarily impact as badly on the idea of socially relevant conservation as might at first appear. Quite simply it is probably most important that it is the politicians which control the public sector bodies to whom such projects are attractive who understand that conservation indeed has a social role to play. It is after all the politicians who through their elected offices can facilitate social upliftment by encouraging this form of conservation and, most importantly, can justify the projects in terms of the facilities provided.

In conclusion it would seem that if the continued practice of architectural conservation is to be justified in the 'new' South Africa, architectural conservationists are going to have to look for innovative projects like old Girls Collegiate, or the Howick clinic and will have to find and encourage organisations to take them on. Unfortunately there cannot be too many projects of this specific type and innovation will have to include other methods of proving that architectural conservation can be reconciled to the basic needs of communities and does not of necessity have to compete for scarce resources. It is probably only by showing the masses of this country what architectural conservation can do for their personal upliftment that the battle to win a place in the new society can be won. In order to succeed conservationists will have to rid themselves of many of their preconceptions concerning what may now be regarded as conflicting cultural values and their beliefs as to what is within the realm of possibility. In Natal the NMC and its associates have taken the first tentative steps in this regard and it is still too early to say how successful they have been. If they do succeed, and that is not a foregone conclusion, cultural conservation in the form in which it is practised by organisations like the National Monuments Council may yet become a vehicle of cultural reconciliation and a means of sharing cultural resources in a new South Africa.

## NOTES

1. This article is a revision of a paper presented at the conference of the Southern African Museums Association, held in Durban in June 1992.
2. *The Weekly Mail*, 'Demolishing the Monument Myth', May 3 to May 9, 1991, p. 10; *Business Day*, Thursday, June 20, 1991, pp. 8–9; *The Natal Witness*, 'Try a shebeen crawl to find your heritage', Thursday, August 1, 1991, p. 13.
3. NMC — Natal Local Area Network, Rapid File computer database: *File: Conserv2.rpd*, records of national monuments declared before 31 July 1991.
4. NMC — Natal Office: 4/4/3/2/2, *Minutes of the Natal Regional Committee*, 'Minutes of 7 August 1991', Item 91/9: Strategy for Affirmative Action in the Natal Region, p. 7.
5. NMC — Natal Office: 9/P, *Administration of Conservation*, 'Strategy for Affirmative Action in the Natal Region'.
6. *Statutes of the Republic of South Africa*, Issue No. 25, 'National Monuments Act No. 28 of 1969 as Amended', (Pretoria: Government Printer), p. 115, Section 2A.
7. *Ibid.*
8. That is essentially those communities at which aspects of the strategy under discussion are aimed.
9. NMC — Natal Office: 9/2/419/1, *Lower Umfolozi: Shakan Pitfall Traps, Umfolozi Game Reserve*; *Ibid*, 9/2/403/2, *Camperdown: Umhlatuzana Rock Shelter*.
10. NMC — Natal Office: 9/4/2, *Archaeological Sites and Objects*, 'Comments on Archaeological Occurrences'; *Ibid*, 'Statutory Recognition of Archaeological Sites in Natal: A Survey of Existing Site Reports at the Natal Museum'.
11. *Statutes of the Republic of South Africa*, Issue No. 25, 'National Monuments Act No. 28 of 1969 as Amended', (Pretoria: Government Printer), p. 135, Section 12(2A)(a)e).
12. *Ibid*, p. 123, Section 5(9); *Ibid*, p. 177, Section 5(c); *Ibid*, p. 135, Section 12(2A)(f).
13. *Ibid*, p. 115, Section 2A.
14. NMC — Head Office: 9/4/5, *Antiques*; NMC — Northern Cape Office: 9/2/049/45, *Kimberley: Sol Plaatjie House, 32 Angel Street*.
15. NMC — Natal Office: 9/2/418/5, *Lower Tugela: Shaka sites, Shakaville*, 'Research Project on King Shaka Sites', Brooks H M.
16. NMC — Natal Office: H13/13/3/2/1, *Durban: The Workshop*; *Ibid*, 9/2/436/11, *Pietermaritzburg: Colonial Building and old Umgeni Magistrates Court, 241 Church Street*.
17. NMC — Natal Office: 9/2/436/41, *Pietermaritzburg: old Girls Collegiate School, cnr Burger and Gutridge Streets*.
18. NMC — Natal Office: 9/2/436/12, *Pietermaritzburg: Edugro Centre, 231 Prince Alfred Street*; *Ibid*, H13/56/4/1, *Pietermaritzburg: old Merchiston School*.
19. NMC — Natal Office: 9/2/417/9, *Lions River: 24 Morling Street, Howick*.

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