

Henri Comrie

*A sentimental architect laments the fact that in the digital age few students of architecture still travel sketchpad in hand*

# Beds are better in France

During the eighteenth century, *The Grand Tour* was established as an important cultural tradition in Northern Europe. For wealthy young men an extended tour abroad, and particularly of Italy, was considered necessary because:

... no reasonable man of Anglo-Saxon or Germanic stock has ever been wholly satisfied with his own civilisation. The Northern yearning for sun and grace has been pretty consistent (Burgess & Haskell 1970:5).

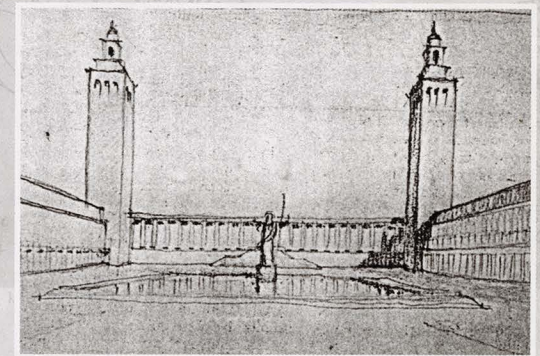
There were some mundane reasons too, such as the "fact that Tourists may pass over some juvenile years with the least mischief to themselves and others" (Burgess & Haskell 1970:7). *The Tour* yielded some delightful trivial information, such as the 'fact' that beds are better in France, as was discovered and recounted by the English Tourist Arthur Young (Burgess & Haskell 1970:10).

*The Tour* nurtured a fine tradition of architectural draughtsmanship. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century architects such as George Gilbert Scott and Karl Friedrich Schinkel embarked on *The Tour* and produced exquisite drawings that

captured Classical detail. Such was the influence of these drawings that prominent twentieth century architects, amongst them Philip Johnson, Charles Moore and James Stirling, continued to draw inspiration from them. The enduring significance is supported by the fact that a facsimile of Baron Isidore Taylor and Charles Nodier's *Voyages Pittoresques et Romantiques dans l'ancienne France*, first published in 1820, was made in 1979. Even Functionalists such as Adolf Loos, who famously declared that 'Ornament is Crime', studied classical precedent, not to see the detail of façades, but rather the appropriate proportioning of space.



Annotated drawing from Schinkel's *Diary of Journey to England* dated 1826 (Hazlett et al 1989)



Adolf Loos's study of the proportions of the square at Modena Park, Vienna dated 1922.

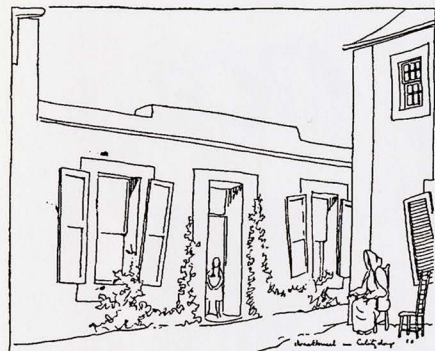
**Architects once knew how to see with their hands**

The advent of the camera and its widespread use contributed greatly to the diminished significance of drawing as a way of capturing the essence of space or architectural detail. Good designers realised that a loss of interest in drawing meant a loss of interest in learning. Le Corbusier, who practiced



between 1905 and 1965 and is widely considered the most influential architect of the twentieth century, urged colleagues to keep drawing:

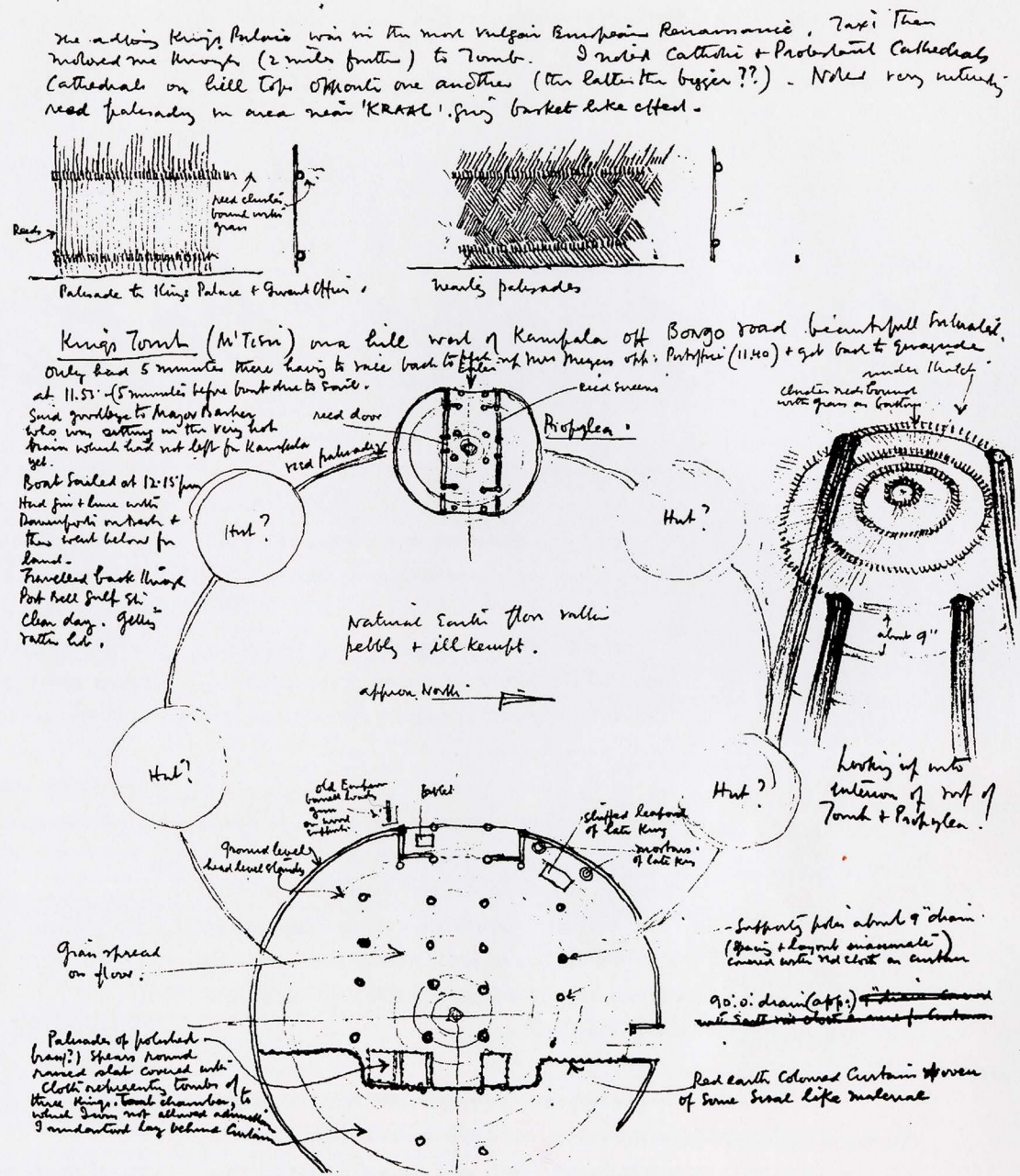
Don't take photographs, draw. Photography interferes with seeing, drawing etches into the mind (Foundation Le Corbusier 1981:12).



Drawing of a street scene in Calitzdorp by Barrie Biermann (Biermann 1955:70)

Le Corbusier provided solid backing for his argument. During his career he produced 73 notebooks containing over four thousand pages of notes and drawings. While his drawings seem far less eloquent than his buildings and paintings, they certainly contributed to developing his astute designer's hand. Producing a pretty picture was not the main purpose. He was a studious observer of delightful moments and spaces and drew, as he would take notes, simply to imprint some inspirational spatial idea on his memory.

The well-known Pretoria architect Norman Eaton's years in practice coincided broadly with those of Le Corbusier, but Eaton clearly had a much more dextrous hand. For Eaton the underlying purpose was clearly the same: simply to see and remember things better. Eaton won a Rome Scholarship, which took him to Italy for a year during the 1930s. The Scholarship was a reinvention of the *Grand Tour*. Eligibility was, however, now based on merit rather than on wealth, and was open to young architects from the British Commonwealth on a competitive basis. The scholarship, which was recently reinstated in South Africa, requires students to remain in residency at the British School in Rome for a year and to produce a journal containing notes and drawings of space and life in the classic city. The luxury of spending a year sensing the deeply rooted spirit of place contributed greatly to the development of Eaton's seemingly effortless drawing technique.



A page from Norman Eaton's travel diary (Harrop Allin 1975:20)



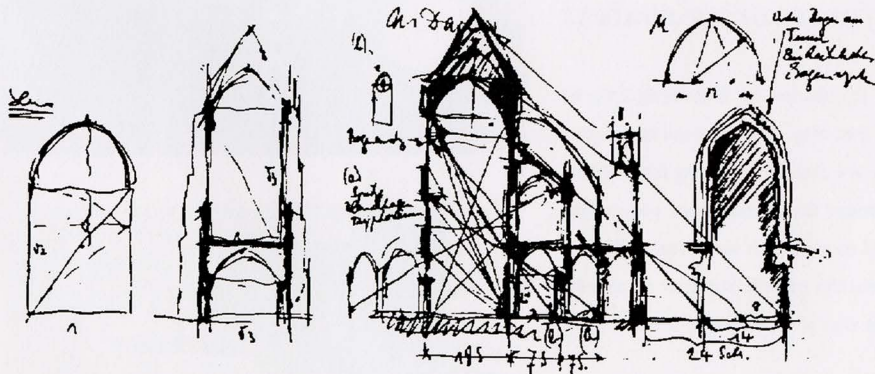
Cultivating the art of seeing with one's hands is clearly linked to the urge and opportunity to travel; the opportunity to travel is now greater than ever. South African graduates are allowed to work in England on youth visas and may use this as a base from which to travel to once inaccessible locations, while others have won scholarships to study abroad.

Despite these new opportunities, few other than Rome Scholars, who are expected to prepare journals as part of their commitments, still bother to draw. I have been pondering this fact and attribute it to:

- Firstly, the legacy of the post-Modern movement in architecture
- Secondly, the advent of the personal computer
- Thirdly, an inability to distinguish the merits of drawing as a way of seeing from drawing as a way of selling.

## Drawing with gloves on

An excerpt from Rob Krier's travel sketchbook; study of the proportions of Sens Cathedral (Krier 1988:258).

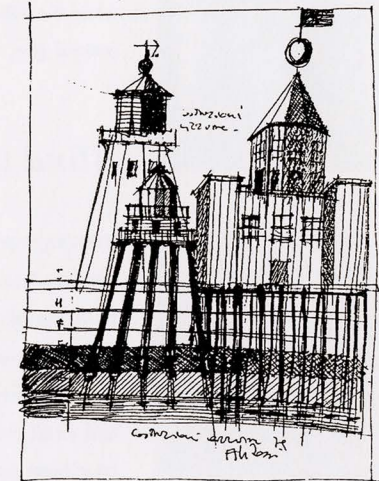


drawing skills. Postmodernism cultivated a derivative, formalist language in architecture. This era saw renewed interest in the drawings produced by *Grand Tourists*. Classical orders were rediscovered and reinterpreted in quirky new ways. Those at the forefront of the international debate knew how to draw: Rob Krier, Leon Krier, Aldo Rossi and Michael Graves. Everywhere students tried to copy their drawing styles. It would be fair to say that, at university, good marks for design projects were closely linked to the ability to render façades to a standard that would impress tutors. Rob Krier (1979: 169) notes:

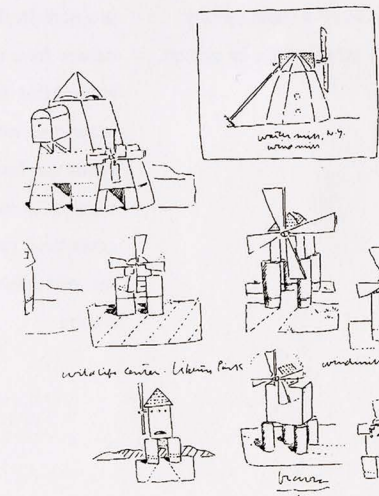
Planning and design is a craft, which is exercised at the drawing board. I know of no good architect that has drawn badly; and none who has failed to cultivate the art of drawing with the passion it deserves. The perfection of the spatial idea is directly linked with the perfection in drawing.

Despite Krier's reference to space and his own advanced analyses of urban space, the overbearing impression today is that post-Modern architecture has been dominated by a rather banal façadism, creating an architecture that is only skin deep. Second-rate architects did a particularly bad job of interpreting the post-Modern language, not least in South Africa where the stick-on façades were not supported by public squares, high streets and forecourts as in Europe, but fronted onto blighted parking lots and highways. Genuine spatial exploration of positive public space was replaced by an exaggerated interest in the composition of the façade. The habit of copying and pasting post-Modern façades from imported journals far outweighed the urge to travel and explore the Classical roots. For the commercial architect practicing during the late twentieth century, it became all too easy to copy the masters: Rossi, Graves, Krier and Bofill. All the

grey-suited architect needed was someone in his office who could feign the drawing style of the European and American post-Modernists. Architects were drawing with imported gloves on and with a false sense of self-assuredness.



Typical sketches by Aldo Rossi (above) and Michael Graves (below) (O'Regan 1983:107; Wheeler et al 1983:237)





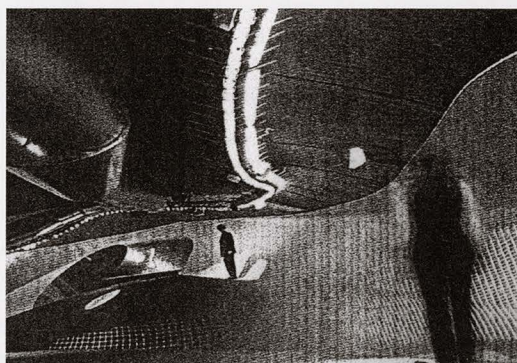
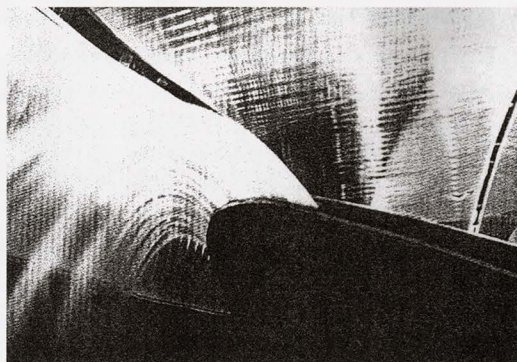


Lamentable late-twentieth century architecture (photographs by author).

Having passed through this phase, the legacy of weak late twentieth-century architecture has done much to discredit architectural drawing. We must, however, distinguish between drawing as a way of seeing and drawing as a way of selling. The one has a scholarly purpose and a long-term benefit, while the other mostly has the purpose of short-term commercial gain.

## Blind to context

Wearing imported, post-Modern gloves removed architects one step from the ability to see. Globalisation and the advent of the digital age removes them even further. The 'best' architects now have cinemas in their offices; they are effectively clad in cyber-suits and have lost the ability to listen, touch and smell the spirit of place. Hollywood and Garsfontein have been condensed into an indistinguishable continuum. What is missed is the fact that Africa is a humble and soulful place where we mostly still build in an age-old tradition of bricks and mortar. To avoid this reality, students adopt Nike and Vodacom as hypothetical clients for their thesis projects. In their minds, Sandton, Menlyn and the highway culture have manifested everywhere and become everything. In practice the symptoms of this ignorance are seen all around us, not least in the prevalence of such alien building styles as Tuscan and French Provincial. The intrusion of these alien variants of the bricks-and-mortar typology indicates how poorly we are equipped to sense and then sell the real spirit of place and our own rooted vernaculars to clients.

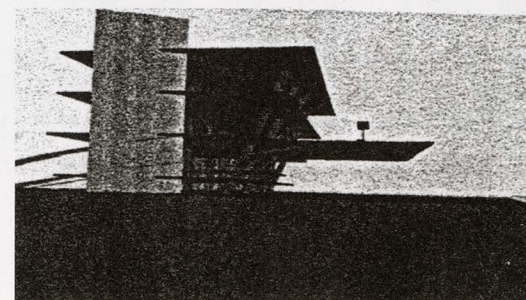
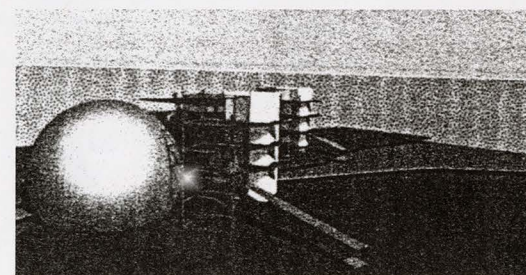
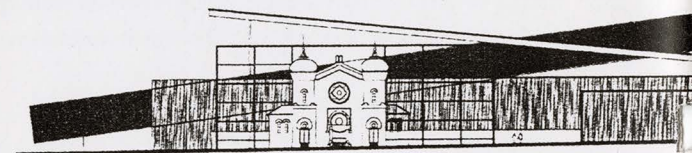
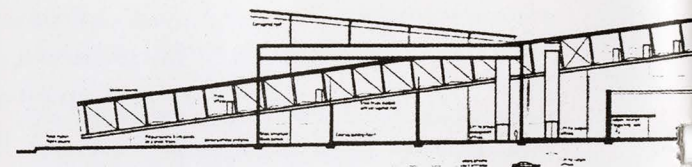


Virtual world conceived through fibre imaging (van Cleef 1997)

## A weak alibi for ignoring context

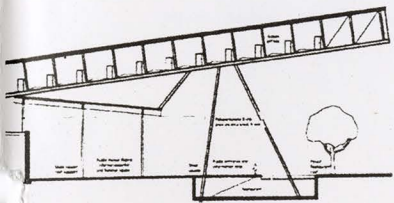
Students often respond to criticism for embracing a sterile design culture by saying that they do not intend to practise in this country, that they are actively preparing for an after-life in Europe and the United States. But there, too, people still build with bricks and mortar, with some steel and glass added to the mix. Despite the naiveté, students do at least intend to travel towards that afterlife, but it is more likely

that it will be with a digital camera rather than a sketchpad in hand. When I visited Mies van der Rohe's seminal Barcelona Pavilion in 1990 there were at least a dozen students of architecture 'seeing' the God in the details, 'with their hands'. When I returned in 2003, well into the digital age, visitors were all snapping away with cameras, and this was not only the Japanese!

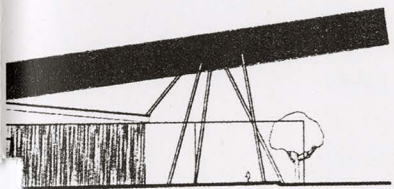




Clients play no small part in blinding architects. They are more often than not convinced that computer-generated presentations of proposed buildings are vastly superior to the handcrafted variety. Few ever consider how the cyber image often mutates into bad architecture. There is no link between being able to stage a computer fly-through and being able to design. The packaging has become vastly superior to the content. All this has conspired to kill off the century old architectural drawing as we know it; now both as a way of seeing and a way of selling.



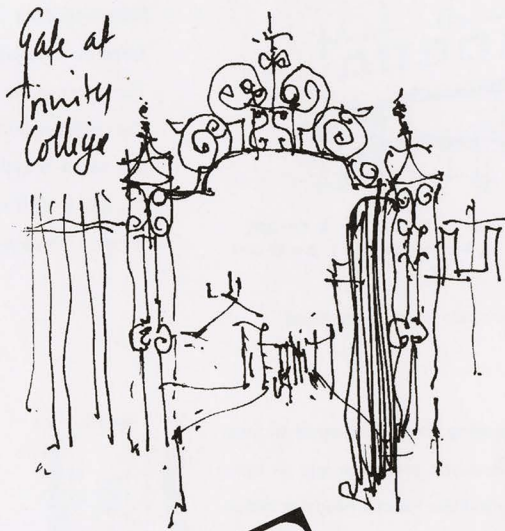
first design proposal\_ section



first design proposal\_ elevation

Examples of 'globalised' student work presented at the University of Pretoria's architecture school during recent years. 'Essence-a-conciliation between context and abstraction' (above two figures) by Rohan Nothnagel (2002) and Niketown, Johannesburg (left two figures) by Georg van Gass (1999).

## A sentimental architect



Sketching in Pisa, 1991

By now the reader will have realised that this text has been written by a sentimental architect who remains fond of travelling, sketchbook in hand; an endangered species that still believes that architects need to be able to see with their hands, to be life long students of good architecture and delightful spaces made by others.

I am the son of a land surveyor who surveyed dams in far-flung locations before they were constructed: Makwassi, Carolina, Jozini, Midmar, Orania. My siblings and I were on our own barefoot *Grand Tour* very early on in life. My mother is a Dutch immigrant who told tales of far-off places and my father is the son of a Scottish immigrant. I collected stamps

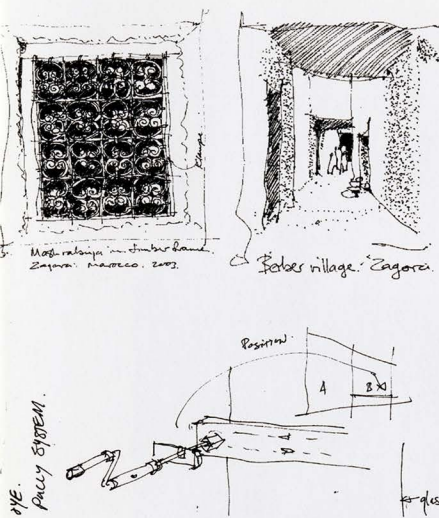
that, for a child, become windows on a beckoning world. These facts and events fuelled the imagination and led to an ingrained resistance towards being grounded in any one place for too long.



Sketching the Gate at Trinity College, Oxford 2002

Stamps became small windows on a beckoning world.





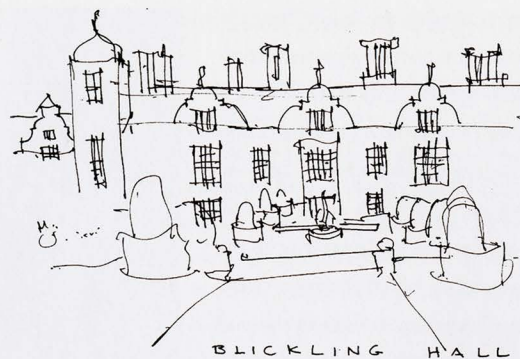
An assortment of sketches made by the author while travelling in Morocco and France, 2003



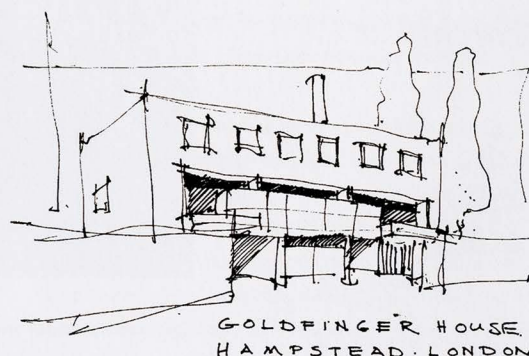
A study of the bathroom at Villa Savoye, Poissy, France designed by Le Corbusier (sketch dated 2003).

Eventually my family settled in Pretoria in 1978. Here I studied architecture from 1986 to 1991. In 1989, halfway through my studies and once again itching to get onto the road, I left the Transvaal (now Gauteng) to work in London for a year and to travel the European continent. Schalk Le Roux and Roger Fisher, then both younger lecturers in the architecture school at the University of Pretoria, urged students to travel, and gave us the unusual opportunity to submit travel journals for design exams; a very radical idea at the time. It was still the dark days of apartheid when the world was an intimidating, often hostile place for a young Afrikaner from Pretoria. Every foreign border was approached with a mixed sense of excitement and foreboding. That sabbatical radically changed my view of the world and inspired a new, relativistic design sensibility. After having glimpsed the outside, I worked tirelessly at obtaining a scholarship to study abroad; a vision that took another decade to be realised. There were many failed attempts and close misses.

Eventually I won a Commonwealth Scholarship that took me to the United Kingdom for three years of full-time study from 2000 to 2003. Professor Richard Hayward, my mentor in England, noted that we make sense of the world through what we know and that travelling helps infinitely in doing so. He assisted in obtaining funding for me to undertake a fresh series of visits from Oxford to Peru, Australia and Malaysia. Before I left for England in 2000 I escaped the Highveld once more and worked in Swakopmund, Namibia, during 1992 and 1993, then straight to Johannesburg to study urban design in 1994 and after that back to Pretoria to teach in the architecture school at the University. The moves were disruptive but inspired a better understanding of the spirit of place and the meaning of context. I consider this awareness an essential tool for the practice of architecture. Without understanding context we become formalists and plagiarists.



Façade study: Blickling Hall, Norfolk (sketch dated 2002)



The Modernist Erno Goldfinger's own house; Hampstead, London (sketch dated 2003)

Through the process of travelling I have developed an insatiable appetite to escape domestic prejudice and to temporarily find inspiration beyond the hearth. Nothing makes one more acutely aware of the idiosyncrasies of one's own country or city. In dour England I began to yearn for sun and smiles; in Peru I was reminded of the messy vitality of my own country; in Morocco I was reminded of how the African sun etches strong shadows against muted backdrops. I re-confirmed that beds are better in France.

During the course of my studies in England I travelled widely and made every excuse to resume my open-ended *Grand Tour*, later attracting the nickname Sinbad from teachers and colleagues. If the lowdown of my travels sounds like vanity suited to a Waterkloof tea party, it at least indicates that I have earned one of the cloaks of a *Grand Tourist* identified by Sterne in 1768 (in Burgess & Haskell 1970:15).

Thus the whole circle of travellers may be reduced to the following heads:

Idle travellers

Inquisitive travellers

Lying travellers

Proud travellers

**Vain travellers**

Splenetic travellers

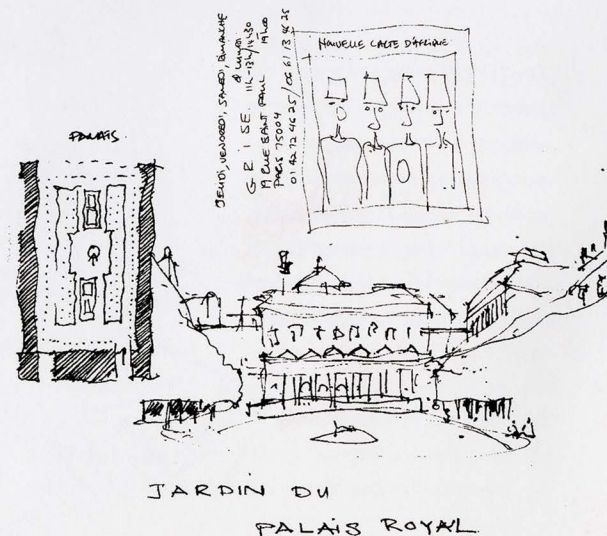
The delinquent and felonious traveller

The unfortunate and innocent traveller

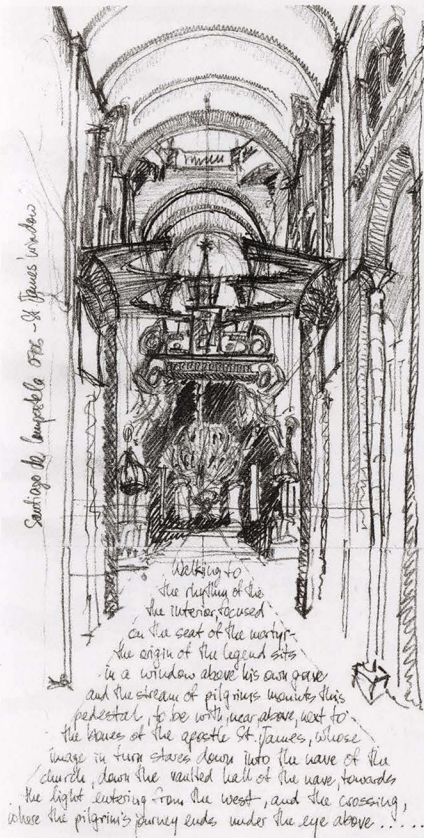
The simple traveller

And last of all The Sentimental Traveller

(from: *A Sentimental Journey*, 1768)







Henning Rasmuss: Santiago De  
Campostela Nave (undated).

Left: Sketches of the Gardens at the  
Palace Royal and of a painting of a  
Mauritanian men seen in a shop in the  
Marais Quarter, Paris (2003).

## Evidence of a circle of travellers

Fortunately, I am not alone in my quest to find freedom from domestic prejudices and to be idle and inquisitive. I include a selection of sketches I have stumbled across in journals or begged from architects for the purpose of animating this text. I find them inspirational because they say something about the unique interests of the architects and about their view of the world. They prove that, despite the distractions of managing offices and the threat of being blinded by the digital age, some architects still have the urge to travel and develop the skill of seeing with their hands. Despite most of them being guilty of acquiring their drawing skills in the post-Modern era, they are all architects who have not confused the art of drawing as a way of seeing with the secular art of drawing as a way of selling. Call them idle, delinquent or sentimental if you like; it is, however, no coincidence that they routinely produce quality architecture.

To be fair, travel only really becomes viable after university, or does it? A year out before and/or in-between studies seems like a good idea. It can provide opportunities for students to inspire each other rather than relying on the coded messages that are often presented in academic environments. We need to find ways to inspire students to do this, to earn the right to ignore what teachers profess. However, to be able to do this they must realise the value of being able to see with their hands.

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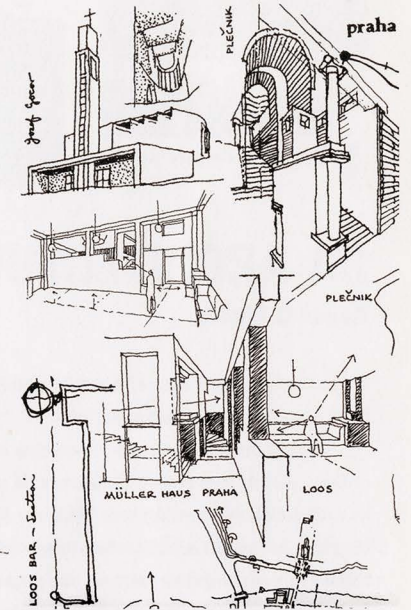
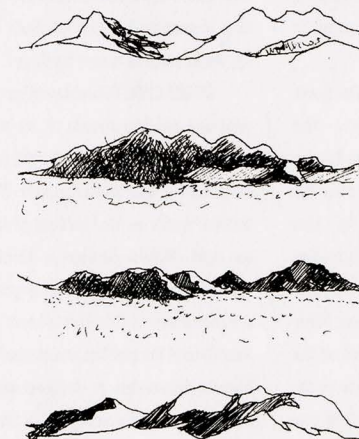
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Illustrations: All illustrations by the author unless indicated otherwise.



Ora Joubert: St Petersburg Cathedral  
(undated)

Thorsten Deckler: shadow and light in the  
Namibian landscape (undated)



Peter Rich: An Eastern European Pilgrimage  
(Rich 1993)

Thorsten Deckler: Rio de Janeiro Favela  
(undated)

