

# My Pretoria: An Architectural and Cultural Odyssey

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*My Pretoria, an Architectural and Cultural Odyssey* is a coffee table book, a collector's limited edition unlocking some of Pretoria's (Tshwane) (the administrative capital of South Africa) magnificent old edifices such as churches, mosques, temples, as well as educational and residential buildings etc. in the form of drawings. The book launch took place at the Hellenic Community Hall in Pretoria in July 2022. At the opening event, there was also an exhibition of some of the author's original drawings.

All the fifty-six illustrations of heritage buildings were created between 1979 and 1980 by the author, Eftychios Eftychis, a well-established architect and artist in Pretoria. Though the images were drawn more than four decades ago, the selected buildings exemplify their well-maintenance and preservation as captured at that time. Yet at present-day, due to neglect many of the structures are in decline, and, as the author states, "require urgent renovation" (p. xvii).

This special edition is dedicated to the author's wife, Dimitra (Loula), whom he describes as "a driving force in his life" (p. xii). The book has a dual aim: firstly, to artistically contribute to preserving visually the architectural creations of Pretoria, and secondly to evoke sentiments of nostalgia to those who have been living under the shade of the illustrated edifices and form part of the city's history.

The title of this volume, *My Pretoria, an Architectural and Cultural Odyssey* is well-chosen. Eftychios Eftychis, of Greek Cypriot origin, was born and raised in Pretoria, hence his closeness to his South African hometown. By defining his book as "... *an Architectural and Cultural Odyssey*", Eftychis expresses eloquently his blended South African-Hellenic cultural identity.

The term 'Odyssey' in the title, instantly caught my attention as it resonated Constantine

Cavafy's poem, *Ithaki*, which defines the joy of one's journey to be found not in reaching their destination but in the course of the journey itself:

“Το φθάσιμον εκεί είν’ ο προορισμός σου, Αλλά μη βιάζεις το ταξίδι διόλου ...”

(Arriving there is your aim...But don't rush the journey at all ...) (Ithaki),

*My Pretoria, an Architectural and Cultural Odyssey* takes the reader on an artistic journey which starts with the author's early life, sails with us through his student life, early career, his family life. Sharing his travel adventures, we arrive at the final section of the book, realising that viewing the artworks – is what we were 'destined for', i.e. to enjoy the journey without haste, aesthetically, scholarly and sentimentally.

As for the layout and design of “*My Pretoria...*”, realised by the author's son, Creon Eftychis, they are visually appealing, as they maintain a balance between a voguish styled journal and a classic publication. The typography and layout are professionally designed with a colour combination of black and white, highlighted by purple to strengthen the visual language of the book. The purple ink symbolises the beautiful Jacaranda trees of Pretoria whilst the black and white is a reminder of the political struggle between black and white in our multi-cultural, multi-lingual country. Apart from representing the beautiful Jacaranda trees which were introduced to Pretoria in the early 1800s, mostly for aesthetic purposes, the purple colour also complements the author's eccentric clothing, i.e., his “favourite Carnaby Street outfit of yellow bellbottoms” (p. 18), creating thus an imaginary contrast in visual colour.

The book is introduced by four highly distinguished specialists, Emeritus Prof Dr Dieter Holm Emeritus Head of the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria, Mr Leon Kok, political and financial reporter, news commentator, editor-in-chief and parliamentary correspondent, Mr Han Peters, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in South Africa, and by the Very Reverend Archimandrite Fr. Michael Visvinis, Dean of the Holy Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation of the Theotokos (Mother of God), Brooklyn, Pretoria. The opening section (pp. x-xxi) ends with the author's own voice, giving the reader a deeper understanding of the *why* and *how* he decided to transform his architectural sketches into a long-lasting publication, preserving them in his own way as part of an “Africana” shared cultural heritage, which now belongs to a diverse country. These sketches depict structures built between 1876 and 1933, the time when “Dutch and British colonisation had a huge impact on the architecture of the edifices in the urban landscape...” (p. xviii).

The opening of the book is followed by two main sections, *My life in Pretoria* (pp. 1-27) and *The Built Environment* (pp. 29-139) which are further divided into sub-headings,

starting from: *Early Life; Back to My Roots; World of Learning and Work; Family, House, Home; Adventure and Creativity.*

In this section, the author introduces us to his Greek Cypriot family, starting with his life's foundation years. Eftychis' father Euripides, immigrated to South Africa in 1934 but returned to Cyprus to marry the author's mother, Katina in 1946. They settled in Pretoria and as so many Greek emigrants at the time, his father too, opened his first café, the Union Café. The business later moved to Brooklyn where his father established the Brooklyn Terminus Café. This café was a hub frequented by high VIPs which included, cabinet ministers, ambassadors, doctors, lawyers. The author shares interesting facts and happenings relating to the South African social-political conditions of the time. For instance, while in exile King George II of Greece and his brother, Crown Prince Paul with his wife, Princess Frederica with the rest of the family, came to settle for a while in South Africa during the Second World War (Rand Daily Mail, 1941, p. 7; Fourie, 2013, Mantzaris, 1978, pp. 52-53). As they were touring the country, Eftychis's father, as one of the Pretoria Greek community members, was invited to attend the welcoming ceremony of the exiled royal family, hosted by the Prime Minister and General, Jan Smuts (p. 5).

It was in 1942, here in South Africa (Cape Town), where the youngest child of Crown Prince Paul and Princess Frederica was born. With General Smuts as her godfather, the young princess was symbolically named Irene (in Greek Peace), a ceremony that took on a most important role in the Greek Orthodox socio-religious events. As a matter of interest, in 1889, businessman, Alois Hugo Nellmapius bought two thirds of the Doornkloof farm (outside Pretoria) and renamed it 'Irene Estate' after his own daughter, Irene. In 1908, General Jan Smuts bought one third of the original Doornkloof/Irene farm, making his permanent home for more than 40 years. The house, declared a national monument in 1960, today is known as the Smuts House Museum. After his death, General Smuts' ashes were scattered on Smuts Koppie near Doornkloof (Heathcote, 1999, p. 266).

Concerning the social-political tensions in South Africa around 1953, the year when Eftychis was a boy of merely six years, one of their customers, the Russian ambassador, came to bid them farewell, because the South African Government had closed down the Russian Embassy (p. 4). All these socio-cultural events are relevant because, pedagogically both directly and indirectly through narratives, have played a significant role in shaping the young Eftychis's personality and his socio-cultural value system.

The author had identity insecurities and experienced cultural clashes just as many immigrants' children do. His insecurities started at an early age at school when his fellow mates made stereotypical remarks about his Greek family's roots, which linked to their

business and daily life made the author wonder about his identity. Was he a Greek, a South African or rather neither, but just an “uitlander”, as many had labelled him (p. 6). This part of the author’s narrative is extremely relevant regarding the childhood of those with parents who had emigrated especially from Southern Europe countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Italy, as they tried to adapt in a highly segmented South African socio-cultural structure. Luckily, today South Africa as a most diverse country, accepts and fosters multicultural communities.

To make things worse, on 10 September 1966, ten days before Eftychis’s nineteenth birthday, Prime Minister Hendrick Verwoerd, the father of Apartheid was stabbed to death by the Greek-Mozambican, Dimitri Tsafendas. Eftychis remembers vividly how “all café owners were forced to close their shops for fear of retaliation and damage to the property” (p. 6). It was not an unusual happening to have riots in South Africa, in fact, during 1915 to 1917, violent riots, instigated by the Boers and the British, broke out against Greek shop businesses, because Greece remained neutral during World War I (Chrysopoulos, 2022).

Regarding his escape from the world of reality through his art, Eftychis had the privilege of being taught both art theory and practice by the renowned South African artists, Walter Battiss and Larry Scully during his high school years, and of course not forgetting his Italian teacher, Auntie Delia who had been his private art teacher for not less than ten years. Battiss’s vibrant use of watercolours and his love for Greece and islands, as well as Scully’s abstract approach to art, succeeded to motivate Eftychis to becoming a better creative thinker and inventive artist and architect (p. 7). Eftychis’s designs reflect his ancient Greek, Danish and Finnish inspirations as well as his art teachers’ stylistic influence in terms of applying vibrant colours, scale and harmony.

With reference to the influences on his early life and later his married and family life, while reading through the sections *Back to My Roots*; *World of Learning and Work*; *Family, House, Home*; *Adventure and Creativity* (pp. 9-27), it is evident that Eftychis developed more strength to mature his artistic talent. He wanted to show that one’s heritage is important on the journey from the past to the future, as one’s past also influences how one perceives the world around them. Through his humbleness, endurance, and strength, I believe, the author became more empathetic and aware of the importance of the environment in everyone’s life.

Moving to the second section, *The Built Environment* (pp. 29-139), we find a well-balanced sequence of drawings of heritage buildings in Pretoria, purposefully divided into categories of representative types rather than chronologically, i.e., *Government Buildings*, *Commercial Buildings*, *Places of Worship*, *Places of Learning*, *Residential Buildings* and ends

with *Parks and Recreation Buildings*. This section – the emphasis being on the drawings – opens up with two maps, one of *Pretoria Central Business District* and the other of *Greater Pretoria*, to give the reader a better understanding of the structures' placement and how the buildings link with one another, followed by many heritage landmarks.

Each panoramic page has a drawing accompanied by a short, informative text about the heritage site, highlighting the different styles of architecture used to create porticos and façades, cupolas and turrets, galvanised roofs, pediments, pillars and columns, and mouldings and finials, which were created in the past by different regimes. Furthermore, the author provides the reader with factual information by adding some interesting historical points on events linked to a specific building (e.g. seat of government, museum, train station etc.)

If I had to select one as my favourite drawing, it would be the *Burgers Park Curator's House* in Jacob Maré Street (now Jeff Masemola Street) (Figure 1) (p. 127), designed after a Victorian red brick façade with typical tiled roofs by Van der Ben, and built by Simon, in 1892. This heritage building is decorated with some curvy-linear Art Nouveau features which include fish-scale patterned metal roof, hat-shaped turrets, ornate wooded brackets and oval shaped windows makes it one of my favourite buildings (p. 126).



**Figure 1:** *Burgers Park Curator's House*, (p.126), drawing by Eftychios Eftychis. The building is in a good condition and unoccupied, today a national monument.

Paging through the visually rich artworks of the *Places of Worship* (pp. 78-95) makes one realise that South Africa is indeed home to multi-diverse groups of people, a fact that defines the country as a multi-coloured mosaic of multi-religious and multi-cultural particles. The impression is overwhelming as one looks at the meticulously and detailed hand-drawn sketches of Churches of Protestant denominations, a Roman Cathedral, the Queen Street Mosque and the Old Synagogue, built by various communities, demonstrating thus collective commitment towards their second country and freedom of cultural identity. Yet, in my opinion, this collection would have been more complete had the author added a depiction of the Mariamman Temple as it is one of the architectural jewels of Pretoria. Located in the historical district of Marabastad, the Mariamman Temple was built for the Tamil Community in 1928. Today, compared to the rest of the building sites, it is somehow isolated from the inner-city and therefore seems somehow deserted.

The historic artistic narration, and to many readers also nostalgic, continuous as the author guides us from *Places of Worship*, to *Places of Learning* (pp. 97-105), with buildings that have hosted and educated thousands of young South Africans towards responsible citizenship. The section is followed by the *Residential Buildings* after which the author concludes his guidance with *Parks and Recreation Buildings* (pp.135-139). At this point, the reader can assess the value of Pretoria's infrastructure through which architectural art has been trusted to successfully combine three most vital elements in a human life: a. the physical, in terms of safety and permanence; b. the spiritual, in terms of inspiration and faith; and c. the intellectual, in terms of a human value system, developed since childhood at the proper educational environment.

There is a wide range of sources substantiating the given information and for further research on the architectural history of Pretoria. The book ends with the final section which presents, in alphabetical order, a scholarly detailed index of names, places and other information associated with each relevant topic.

*My Pretoria, an Architectural and Cultural Odyssey* will appeal to everyone with an interest in the heritage buildings beyond Pretoria's outskirts in other South African cities too. It is aesthetically a pleasing volume that enriches the collection of books about Pretoria, firstly as a carrier city of an important heritage legacy, and secondly by setting the city as a socio-political centre globally significant where human values have prevailed and upon which the future of the new, rainbow nation has been designed, built and publicly

manifested by any new political leader.

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