BANTU DWELLINGS

A paper to be read at 1st. International Congress of Art Critics by Betty Spence, architect and art critic from South Africa.
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Architecture in South Africa falls into three completely unrelated groups. Most conspicuous and least interesting is the contemporary work This resembles closely the new growth about any European town with the disadvantage that, since ourtowns are new, it is not confined to the circumference only but penetrates to the centre. On the whole it is eminently unattractive though the number of well designed buildings is growing. These; though good, have nothing of any particular interest to offer, no peculiar South African characteristic.

The second group is that of the Cape Dutch houses. This really delightful architectural development is already world famous and I need not say more about it here than that, even after two months in Paris, I still feel it fully deserves the praise which has been lavished upon it.

The final group and the one to which I have devoted this paper is that of the building of the Bantu people. I am not sure whether this ca technically be termed architecture - it is perhaps too unconscious - but that it is beautiful there can be no doubt.

Imagine a country very beautiful,but infertile, with rock crowned mountains falling to rounded foothills, rare scrub-like trees and a sparse covering of grass, all glittering under a semi-tropical sun; At first it seems uninhabited but on closer scrutiny one can distinguish small clusters of huts on the crests or slopes of the foothills. Of a dusty brown colour they melt into the country side. Each one of these groups or kraals represents a family unit - a man his two or three wives his children and his cattle. The actual size of the kraal varies with th wealth of the man and the consequent number of wives he can afford.

The approach to the kraal is through an opening in the ring of huts

In the centre is the enclosure, fenced with stones or logs of wood, where the cattle, the family wealth, are herded at night. About it, rising from the hard-caked, redish brown earth are the semi-spherical huts of thatch and the reed screens protecting the entrances and yards of the dwellings. Each wife has her own apartments - sleeping hut, open yard and often subsidiary cooking and storage huts. The area between the cattle enclosure and the huts is the ndaba where the general meeting and discussion relating to the whole group take place.

The hut form is a simple half sphere with only one low opening as a door. There are no windows. Ventilation takes place easily through the thatch. The construction is perfection in terms of the material employed A circle of sapplings is planted and bent into a semi-spherical frame-work. A layer of previously prepared grass mats is laid over this as a base for the thin layer of thatch. Finally a cobwebb-like network of grass cords terminating at the crown in a handsome top-not keeps the thatch in place.

Inside the huts are dark. They are used only for sleeping and for protection against inclement weather. The mudplastered floor is free of furniture. Beds consist of grass mats, similar to those used for the roof, which are rolled up during the day. Articles are stored hung to the framework or slipped into the thatch. There are no internal partition but by tradition the hut is zoned, one side to the man the other to the woman, the back is dedicated to the ancestors and, in the centre, is the hearth for the occasional fire.

The dwellings I have described are those of the Swazi; a tribe closely akin to the Zulu, but in essence they are similar to those of other Bantu peoples in the Union. The group of huts is often more complex extending in size, in some cases, far beyond the family to the dimensions of a village but in all types the circular but is the basic

unit. The construction varies. In some districts more permanent building materials, such as mud and stone, are used for hut and yard walls. These huts have rounded or conical thatched roofs often with wide eaves shading the wall below. Whether of mud, stone or wattle and daub - that is a reinforcement of wattle branches coated both sides with mud - the walls are always coveredwith mud plaster carefully smoothed and often decorated with geometrical designs. Sometimes these are in coloured earths - yellows and whites and terra cottas, or sometimes they are finger paintings done in the mud plaster before it has dried. Irregular patterns of semi-circular fan shapes, diamonds and various types of zig-zags cover the walls.

I find this type of construction more ~~xxxxxxx~~ attractive than the completely thatched huts; because, I suppose, it is more akin to our own of bricks and mortar. I remember a particularly delightful group of huts in the Northern Transvaal. It was at the foot of one of the always surprising heaps of/boulders which stand out of the flat plain in this part of the country. Closely packed with conical thatched roofs were linked in an intriguing unity by low screen walls of reddish earth. Here and there a dark green blotch of scrub bush, retained to give shade in one of the yards, stood out in contrast. In the centre, a climax in beauty, the chief hut dominated the kraal area. Raised on a low base of compressed earth it was circled by a peristyle of timber poles supporting the vast cone of thatch. This, perfectly proportioned, sloped to eaves well below eye level. and cast a rich, inviting shade on the red mud walls of the hut proper beneath.

Today there are very few Bantu dwellings completely free from European influence. Gradually the circular hut is being superceded by rectangular buildings. Windows have appeared, fitted as a rule with wooden shutters rather than glass, and doors are of a reasonable height

The best of these hibrids are of mud with traditional screen walls and have retained much of the charm of the original Bantu dwellings. Inside however, there are two or three rooms of cramped proportions too often stuffed with Victorian beds, tables and sideboards.

Indeed, charming as they are these buildings are of the past. But it is cruel that a people who spontaneously produce such natural beauty must, when they come to European towns, live in the sea of deadly, similar, ugly little houses we provide for them. If we could take a leaf from th e Bantu notebook and introduce into our own monotonous suburbs the charm which makes the circular hut beautiful however often it is repeated, we would have solved the major contemporary architectural problem.