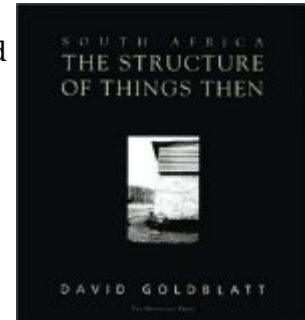


David Goldblatt. *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998. 260 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58093-026-0.



Reviewed by Robyn Sassen

Published on H-SAfrica (February, 2000)

Photography was only developed about 200 years ago and was viewed with suspicion as a creative outlet for much of that time. Yet it has developed a reputation and a body of approaches that today enables it to stand alongside older documentary media and art forms. Photographic criticism and theory broadly presents two commonly held approaches to the medium: one that tells stories or gives information and one that is recognised as autonomous art. David Goldblatt's photographs fulfill both of these expectations. On the one hand, they speak of individual and collective historical narrative. On the other, because of their internal subtleties and the decisions taken in their execution, they are fine art.

South Africa : The Structure of Things Then is a biography of South Africa from the 1960s until 1990. It embodies an overview of the changing and many faces of South African culture and history through its buildings. Many of the photographs that comprise this book have travelled to galleries in New York, Rotterdam, Berlin and Australia and continue to be represented in local state-run galleries. Thus, they represent art with

its own international recognition, beyond the reputation which this book under review will earn.

Goldblatt himself is dwarfed by the local and international reputation he has earned as a photographer. Modestly he speaks sparingly of the meticulous discipline and attention to detail and gesture intrinsic to his work. He has been involved in photography for more than 35 years, during which time his work has proved popular amongst various large art collectors. His approach to his subject matter is unique as it is characteristic.

To date, this is Goldblatt's biggest photographic essay, combining his work, thoughts and research. In this large-format publication, he straddles the defining margins of documentary photography and art. Besides filling the role of an exceptional coffee table book and trophy of South African culture and history, this book has other functions. It is an exploratory academic text that shows a deep commitment to factual accuracy and to the sometimes-idiosyncratic truths and reasons behind buildings' existence or demolition. It would be of value for the student of aes-

thetics, South African history, photography, and the lay reader, alike. Handsomely bound and elegantly designed, it is divided into three sections: the essays, the images and the captions, respectively.

The first image in the book is that of a vendor's cart 'Cafe-de-Move-On' (1964, Braamfontein, Johannesburg. Cover and frontispiece). Made of found materials like pieces of pressed-steel ceiling and corrugated iron it is constructed so that a speedy escape from authorities is technically possible.

'Cafe-de-Move-On' also sets the visual tone of the book. Like the other images, it is printed in lithographic duotone, combining black and white printing with a touch of a sepia/olive base for warmth and richness. From the original photograph to the printed image, a small percentage of quality and subtlety is lost, but the images have sufficient visual strengths to offset this potential loss. The subject matter is illuminated with palpably strong South African light that describes the diversity of textures and embellishment on its surface. The angle of approach presents it like a monument. But it is not an iconic statue created out of nationalistic pride or heroism. Rather, it is in memory of how such base improvisation was necessary to make sense of an apartheid-tainted existence. Goldblatt's approach to this political reality is sensitive as it is wary in contemplating the realities of apartheid discrimination and the ways in which people had to adjust in order to make sense of their lives with restrictions or bounty -- depending upon which side of the colour bar they found themselves.

Goldblatt begins the text with an introductory essay where he describes why he made this book. The narrative begins with the realisation of apartheid -- officially signed and sealed in 1948. From within his late-teen sensibility Goldblatt felt the need to look at what was happening, and to record it. Growing and working in a divided and dividing country, it took him close to 20 years to

come to acknowledge how the drama of South Africa had infiltrated his sensibilities. He was educated in religious coda ranging from the Judaism of east-European immigrant parents; to primary-school based Catholicism; culminating in University-taught rationalism. Consequentially he maintains a broad awareness of the diversity of religious belief and practise in this country. "If blind, unreasoning faith often repels me, it sometimes moves and always intrigues" (8).

An essay by Neville Dubow also forms part of the text. It considers the echo of actual structures in ideological ones, likening the relevance of Goldblatt's photographed structures to that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in its memorialising of apartheid atrocities as part of South Africa's inheritance : "[t]hey cannot be wished away, nor can they be ignored. There is much we can learn from them" (23).

This book aims to tell South Africa's story through its religious edifices from 1652 (the first record of white colonialist intervention into the land) until apartheid's demise in 1990. Goldblatt confronted South Africa in transition with his lens, rather than overt political gesture. The quiet incisive gesture characterises his work: light, shadow, contrast and composition makes these strong and often chilling indictments of the situation. He does not need to translate these images into words. They are like those of bloodied corpses and desperate tears, recorded by photo-journalists in the height of violent South African change.

During the 1980s, South Africa was in a vicious state of change. Goldblatt's images of this time in his book are mainly uninhabited by living creatures. In filming the edifices instead, he touches on the boldness, explicitness, sometimes-black humour and, at other times, profound poignancy in recalling ghastly injustices or poor taste.

There are different layers in South African violence: structural violence that was necessary to

maintain the institutional fabric of an apartheid society; active and reactive violence that resulted from resistance to the structural violence of the state. It was in the former level of violence that Goldblatt made his most profound photographic statements. The violence infiltrated into the life structure through the commonplace elements of architecture, condoning the mindset that governed, indoctrinated and contorted the concept of human rights.

This violence is exemplified in the image of 'Tahera Karbelkar's *voorkamer* before its destruction under the Group Areas Act' (Johannesburg, 1976 plate 84). A simple, domestic image, it evokes 17th century Dutch painting. It speaks of tranquillity, humility and peace yet, as its title and history inform us, days after it was photographed it was transformed into useless shards of crockery, wood, and plaster. On a more tacit level 'The Gereformeerde Kerk, inaugurated on 13 June 1959' (Totiusdal, Pretoria, 1983. pl. 139) is shown to comprise a metonymic megaphone between the preacher and God himself and stands as an audacious and violent testimony to its community's feelings of superiority, chosenness and dominance in the country.

Goldblatt's text veers cleanly away from voicing political judgement on the different cultures represented: the oppressed; the oppressors; those who felt that their architectural symbolism was wide-ranging and subtle; and those whose symbolism was something endemic to the use-value of the structures themselves. These political values are evident in the work: the photographer's relationship with his subject can never be neutral. "What might be seen as detachment is a coded form of involvement-that borders on obsession" (27). He focuses on many South African cultures: Khoikhoi, Afrikaner, Xhosa, Indian, and Jew. He sees them not as isolated entities but as deeply rooted in their histories and the changing faces of South Africa. Intertwined with the vagaries of money-making and the perceived need

to oppress and abuse others in the name of opportunity, apartheid business formed a key role in the development of the socio-cultural identities of the different architecture. Money as well as pigment determined the extent of permanence to which these structures could look forward.

Many of the images are about Afrikaner Protestantism. Goldblatt explains this apparent unevenness by considering the effect which this denomination and its policies had on the developing country and on the way in which industry, governmental control and oppression was rendered and upheld. Goldblatt's sympathetic consideration of Afrikanerdom is resonant of his upbringing. Before he became a professional photographer, Goldblatt worked in his father's store, where he was able to see the Afrikaners in their local surrounds and hear the spoken Afrikaans with all its inflection and melody. He developed a love and understanding for them as a "warm, lusty -honest people" (28). This was a feeling that Goldblatt continues to exploit through his intense awareness of, and attention to detail of the Afrikaner edifices and artefacts. This interest is most profoundly exemplified with the documentation of the architectural changes in fashion during the 1970s and 1980s where phallic outward-thrusting metaphors became actualised in eccentric brick, steel and mortar structures. These buildings broke with previously established church design and tell of the hubris of a single denomination in a country politically hopelessly one-sided.

Beyond religious and otherwise public edifices, there are other structures in this book. These are the private spaces which people live in and with. The images of these buildings and their history --those which were torn down in the name of apartheid, those destroyed in its wake -- also brings to bear on an untold history of South Africa, which is as disturbing to read as much of it is to look at.

Goldblatt's text is easily digestible yet refreshing. He encapsulates the troubled nature and history of this country through succinct writing, mixed metaphors and dry humour. Dubow's essay offsets the introduction in examining ideological content as well as formal elements of the work. It considers the images in terms of formal aesthetics and ideology. It points out how the order of the images is presented in terms of thematic content rather than chronologically. These themes range from philosophical constructs of transience/permanence and possession/dispossession to more tangible levels of continuity such as the presence of barriers and boundaries, monuments and memorials.

The images themselves have no overt need of academic analysis and interpretation. They capture emotion, history, fact, and pain in very distinct or deeply subtle ways. The images constitute the biographical nature, story and central kernel of the text and are complemented by the captions, which detail their origin and history.

These captions give the images historical relevance and depth and serve didactic roles as well as give greater significance to Goldblatt's views and standpoints. They boast a diversity of authorship as well as sources, from accepted and serious academic publications to interviews with members of the communities concerned and minuted records from church- and synagogal committee and congregational meetings.

To the lay reader, the complexity and sheer quantity of text may be off-putting. But a work of this nature must be considered in entirety and the unadulterated beauty of many of the images, even without aesthetic input and value judgments, makes this a remarkable conversation piece as well as a collector's item. In every respect, the acquisition of a piece of work containing photographs of this type of quality of image and accuracy of reproduction is tantamount to owning not only a piece of South African history, but a piece of South African art and heritage as well.

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Citation: Robyn Sassen. Review of Goldblatt, David. *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

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