

Paul Kotze

***BLUEPRINTS in black and white: the built environment professions in South Africa – an outline history* by John Bizzell**

B*LUEPRINTS in black and white*, is intended as a brief history of the built environment professions in South Africa. Its aim is to assist in the understanding of the role of these professions in the South African society. The content of the book is broadly based on the assumption that South African built environment professionals have always reflected the dominant societal values and attitudes of the day.

The author, Mr John Bizzell, is an architect who graduated from the University of Natal. In the aftermath of the Rivonia trial he and his wife were forced into exile. They settled in Toronto, Canada. He received a Master's degree in Urban Design from the University of Toronto. After 1994 the couple returned to South Africa.

Broadly speaking, the content of the book is chronologically arranged from pre-colonial times up to the present. In each of the chapters a range of topics is covered. A constant attempt is made to discuss the issues relating to the physical development of the country against the background of the social and political processes operative in South African society.

The theme of *BLUEPRINTS in black and white* is a worthy area of study and the author has set high ideals for the book. The personal history of the author, in conjunction with the stated aims of the sponsors of the book, provide a broad position from which the subject matter is viewed. However, the contents of the book fall dramatically short of these ideals mainly due to the lack of a properly defined positional statement. It is difficult to ascertain what readership profile the author had in mind. Is it the general public, the interested professional or the serious scholar?

John Bizzell currently practices as an architect and project manager near Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

The book is reviewed by Professor CP Kotze of the Department of Architecture at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

If the work is viewed against the assumed requirements of such groups, it is severely lacking in all respects due the absence of any form of well-defined focus. It makes one wonder who would actually be interested in reading this book other than those who have commissioned the work. The narrative is descriptive and it rambles rather aimlessly through the subject matter. No serious attempt is ever made at analysis or comparisons to other situations or positions. The text is often pointless as it makes no real contribution to much of the more serious academic work which has been done in South Africa and elsewhere on the development of the South African physical landscape. It also seems that the author has hardly taken note of this body of work. Due to this oversight the author does not make a credible contribution to the debate. *BLUEPRINTS in black and white* is not groundbreaking work whereas it could easily have been just that, if the author had allowed himself a more critical position. Due to the lack of focus it does not address a perceived need, or niche, within the South African intellectual landscape on the built environment. The author dabbles here and there without ever making an in-depth observation or contribution.

The layout of the book is neat, but rather conventional with mostly small and sometime illegible illustrations and comments appended in the margins of the pages. It is not always clear why specific illustrations were chosen, as the illustrations do not always relate to the adjacent text. It is as if the images are used simply to fill up space. While on the topic of illustrations, it should be mentioned that the main image used on the book's cover has also been used by a major commercial bank to illustrate its advertisements for student loans. Such carelessness does not support the publication's credibility at that crucial moment of making a first impression. Furthermore, the author follows an unconventional referencing system that makes it difficult to trace sources. Thorough editing could have obviated this problem. Alongside the aforementioned illustrations, blocks containing snippets of information have been incorporated. Herein, as sometimes in the text, amazingly interesting and relevant pieces of information can be found. For the seriously minded reader this subtext can offer some rewards. In this way, the book might have value in that it points to work that still needs to be done.

In general, the content of the book is a valuable opportunity squandered. The Department of Public Works must have provided a sizable sponsorship to enable the production of this work. This in it self is a unique occurrence in South Africa, where such support is in short supply. However, the work generally fails to introduce any new insight to the debate on the production of the built environment in South Africa, mainly because it relies too heavily on 'accepted' concepts and myths without any rigorous analysis or comparisons.

Bizzell/*BLUEPRINTS in black and white*

BLUEPRINTS in black and white: the built environment professions in South Africa – an outline history

Bizzell John, 2002

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