SOPHIA GRAY MEMORIAL LECTURES AND EXHIBITIONS.

Presentation by Paul Kotze

When one reflects on the history and possible impact of the Sophia Gray Memorial Lectures and Exhibitions started by the Department of Architecture of the University of the Free State 37 years ago, the impact of such a small and not so unique act comes as a bit of a surprise. The memory of making that proposal in that staff meeting is so vivid that one feels that it all happened this morning. Only two colleagues, Gert Swart and Jan Ras, supported the proposal. During this meeting the decision was made to name it after the first architect who practised in Bloemfontein. From the research done by the author Karel Schoeman for his book on the history of Bloemfontein we learnt that this person was Sophia Gray. It also needs to be noted that, in some of the lists of the chapels built and designed by Sophia Gray the Bloemfontein chapel is not mentioned. There is a sad reason for this. When the chapel was in the process of being constructed, it became one of the targets of an attack by the Basotho Nation on the settlement of Bloemfontein. During this attack it was partially demolished, and what was remaining of the chapel is now the Apse of the Anglican Cathedral of the city.

Sophia Gray was born in 1814 and moved with her husband to South Africa who was the first Bishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa. Sophia Gray is viewed as the first female architect in South Africa, and when we make our view a bit bigger, she is also viewed as one of the first female architects anywhere in the world. She was not a formally trained architect, but during that time there were very few formally trained architects as the process to become an architect worked very differently. She was involved with the process of building approximately 58 churches for the Anglican Church. Most of the drawings she produced is in the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand. When one is looking at her drawings, it is interesting to note that the drawings she made before she came to South Africa focusses on small chapels in the northern parts of the United Kingdom, while the drawings she made in South Africa mainly focuses on the landscape. She also commuted through the country on horseback and, for example, did trips from Cape Town to Durban. Some of her most impressive drawings are the views of the Durban harbour area. Her drawings have been exhibited twice, once in the Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town and once in the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein. When it was exhibited in Bloemfontein it was accompanied by photographs of most of her chapels in South Africa. Both she and her husband are buried in Cape Town.

A shortened version of the criteria of the selecting the laureates are as follows;

- To nominate the architect or the group of architects invited, the staff of the Department of Architecture of the UFS must be convinced that he laureates have made a fundamentally positive contribution to the praxis of architecture, the theoretical or historical debate within the profession or the professional matters; those invited should have a sense of responsibility for the effects that their creations have on the well-being, quality of life and the advancement/development of the general community. The laureates must have a connection to the Southern African region.

- By means of the lecture and the exhibition attention must be drawn to the architectural heritage of the City of Bloemfontein or the rest of South Africa.
- It should serve the community. The lecture and exhibition is viewed as one of the many ways in which the University of the Free State and the Department of Architecture engage with and assist the larger community.
- Above all else, the intention of it all is to introduce the standards, innovations and inspirations of the best of the best of the architectural profession to the students. By means of this event the students can learn about and be inspired by those architects who make an excellent contribution to the quality of life of the community and to the profession.

The first invitee was Dr. Doreen Greig. She was invited due to the publication of her book on the career of Sir Herbet Baker. She declined the invitation due to ill health. Then we invited Ms. Mira Fasler Kamstra. She accepted the invitation in good faith even though she might have known very little about the Department of Architecture at the UFS. The professionalism and the poetic beauty of her lecture and the quality of her and Marcus Holmes' work set the example and standard for all the other laureates to follow. The other name that needs to be mentioned in this regard is that of Jan Ras. His ability to organize an event with a respectful beauty and meaning also set the example to follow. It was Jan who organised the military band who announced the arrival of Mira and Marcus at the event, Jan made the decision of the venue, namely the historically important Old Presidency and, above all, it was Jan who also organised a cake baking guild to provide the refreshments that were served afterwards. The exhibition only lasted one night.

The venues chosen afterwards continued to draw attention to the buildings of cultural, historical and architectural value. As the audience grew a larger venue had to be found. Now the venue is a conference centre that used to be the old Synagogue of Bloemfontein. The Oliewen House Art Museum now hosts the exhibition that usually lasts for one month at a time. It is the only art museum in South Africa that consistently has architectural exhibitions. The audience started with 55 people and now it is a few hundred. The lecture and exhibition have been repeated in Cape Town, Pretoria and Durban. The Milde McWilliams Memorial Lecture and Exhibition of NMU and the Roelof Uytenbogaardt Memorial Lecture and Exhibition of the Urban Design Institute of South Africa follow a similar pattern.

There have been several people beyond Jan Ras and Kobus du Preez who have been doing all the background work to keep it all going. They might be 'nameless' but they deserve everybody's' respect. So must all the laureates who have made the fundamental contribution to give this series of lectures and exhibitions the value it has received our respect. Hopefully, the next generation will also become aware of the potential value it might have for them.

To conclude, I would like to express a few wishes. I am not involved in the Sophia Gray Memorial Lectures and Exhibitions anymore, so I hope that I do not overstep any boundaries by expressing these wishes.

- It all started as a very small event to inspire the students, for them to be also introduced to the best of the best of the architectural profession, for them to understand that it is human beings like all of us who enable this kind of influential quality in the built environment and for them to understand that it is always the next generation who will be able to understand and who will be inspired by the achievements of the older generation.
- I hope that it will never be forgotten that the next generation is the most important people in the audience.
- I hope that the lectures will be published again, like it has been done before. If it is not published, it never has happened. If it is not published, we will not be able to contribute to our understanding of the value of architecture and the built environment in the quality of life for everybody leading a 'normal' life. If it is not published, it also has no chance to have any relevance and influence outside the boundaries of South Africa.
- My last wish is that those who make the choice of who to invite to be the laureates shall not forget the many colleagues who have emigrated and who have been able to achieve very impressive and influential careers outside of South Africa. I mention this in relation to the reality that I observe when I have a look at where the students are from whom I could learn so much at both the Department of Architecture at the UFS as well as the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. When one does a simple calculation the reality that comes forward is that approximately 45% has emigrated and surely this percentage could be applicable to all the architectural graduates of South Africa. I also mention this in relation to the deep appreciation that previous laureates, like Dr Jack Diamond, Dr Hentie Louw, Mr Stan Field and Prof Stanley Saitowitz expressed when they presented the lecture and exhibition. They were all united in that they felt that it gave their careers value and meaning when they received this kind of recognition from the country of their birth.