

***“To live in the hearts of those we left behind is not to die”*: Continuity and conformity in vernacular architecture at Genadendal Mission Station, South Africa**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issues that are conveyed by settlement lay-out and the meaning of space at the first mission station in South Africa, Genadendal. A historical archaeology approach was used to collect data and analyse the remains building structures, materials and settlement lay-out that have survived at Genadendal in an attempt to make a case for a “Genadendal identity” and explain the cause for its continuity. The paper argues that the study of architectural structures and settlement lay-out from an archaeological perspective can be viewed as an exercise in studying metaphors since the functional aspect of architecture is a result of “conscious reactions to physical needs” at a given time as Gribble (1998) writes. Such reactions are inevitably and subtly encoded in buildings and use of space. In addition, the paper demonstrates that the inhabitants of Genadendal mission station developed and exhibited a “Genadendal identity” through employing unique architectural techniques and conforming to a set of rules that the missionaries prescribed.

Background of the Mission Station

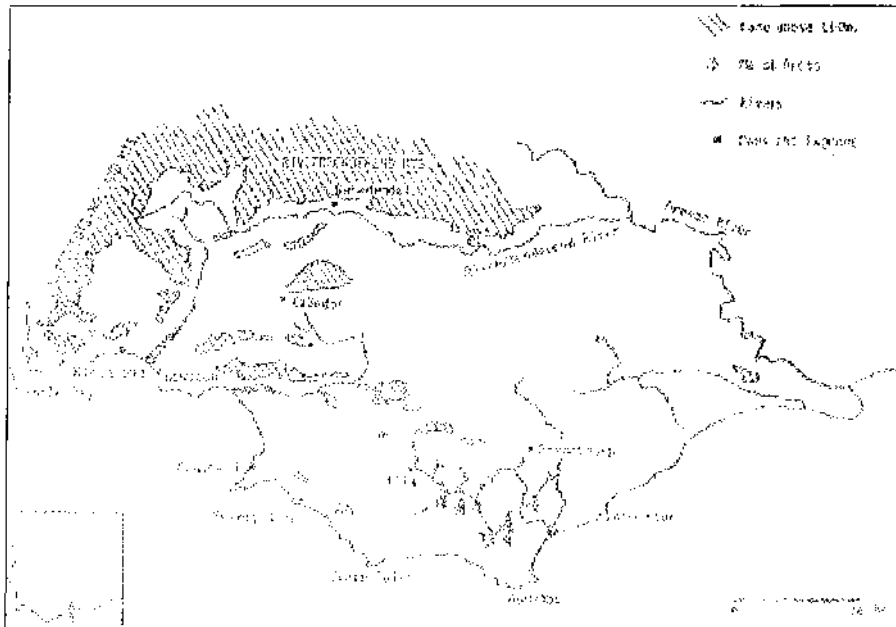
Genadendal mission station is located in the present day Caledon district of the Western Cape. It is the first mission station in South Africa (Humphreys, 1989). It dates back to 1737, when a Moravian missionary, Georg Schmidt established himself among the Khoi of the Overberg. Schmidt was responding to the spiritual starvation of the Khoi that had been noted by two messengers that had passed by the Cape on their way to India who “... witnessed the miserable state of the Hottentots and summoned the faithful in Europe to their aid” (Gribble, 1988, p.3). The Khoi had by then been displaced by the colonists as they expanded their farming interests in the area. They had either been incorporated into the work force or pushed off from their grazing lands. Thus, Schmidt found a ready audience among a community that was economically marginalised and on the verge of extinction. Elizabeth Elbourne (1995, p. 65) aptly explains why perhaps it was relatively easy for Schmidt to be accepted among the Khoi when she wrote:

“Societies in a state of profound crisis-dissolution even are far more prone to seek expiation and meaning systems than are stable, well-functioning communities”.

By 1806, the mission station which until then had been called Baviaanskloof (after the Baviaans River that runs to the east of the church centre) was already flourishing to such an extent that the Governor of the Cape was so impressed upon visiting it, that he decided to call it Genadendal, meaning a ‘valley of grace’ (Balie, 1987). The name was adopted later to refer to the official residence of the post-apartheid South African President in Cape Town.

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Location map of Genadendal Mission Station (After Humphreys, 1989, p.2)

Diaries of missionaries, travelogues and maps of the mission station reveal a wealth of information that Historical Archaeologists can use in conjunction with the artefacts to trace the development of a Genadendal identity. A study of maps and plans of the early 19th Century Genadendal reveals that there have not been considerable changes to the original plan of the settlement except for expansion. The centre of the mission station is situated at the northern end of the valley. The dry slopes on the east and west of the valley were reserved for residential purposes for other inhabitants of the mission station than the missionaries. A few indigenous converts who were not missionaries but had a higher status, for example teachers, resided at the centre of the mission station together with the missionaries. From such a configuration within the landscape archaeologists can infer patterns of social stratification. This division of land into family plot indicates a response to the 19th Century world view of a shift in to what Deetz and Winer referred to as "oppositional mediation" from public to the private. Thus the Khoi who used to live in groups had to adopt an individualistic way of life once they joined the mission station. They were at the same time considered as the underclass and hence the location of their houses far from the elite.

The planning of sight lines ensured easy access to gardens and other facilities that were provided at the centre of the station. Houses were built along streets that ran parallel along the contours of the mountain. This set up, with buildings on the dry slopes and reserving wet fertile valley for cultivation suggests that the missionaries had not only strategically and symbolically located the werf¹ but also responded to the physical constraints that the landscape posed.

¹ The term werf is used in the South African context to refer to a space around a homestead or farm yard

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The valley is viewed as a sustainer of physical life for the inhabitants. It can be argued that the location of the centre in the fertile valley is symbolic. Symbolism is revealed when the idea that buildings and town plans can be read as metaphors is taken into account (Hall, 1991, Gwasira, 2001). All the houses in the village (on the dry slopes) at Genadendal face the church and the valley as if it was a continual reminder of the sense of community that the religious centre provided. The location of the centre in the valley can be interpreted as symbolising the part played by religion in sustaining spiritual life of the mission station. In addition the placement of buildings at the centre demonstrated that topography can influence the meaning of space. The water mill is a point in case whereby for its effective functioning it had to be situated as near to the base of mountain as possible so that the wheel could be turned by the gravitation of water. On the other hand the *werf* itself illustrates that the European concepts of building combined with the African landscapes and resources to create a unique cultural landscape. The idea of the *werf* is associated with the German idea of the 'Angerdorf' (Le Grange, 1990). It is argued by Le Grange (ibid) that the irregularity of buildings that is common at the *werf* with their gables facing an open central area could have been influenced by the Western Cape farm *werf* or the German Angerdorf. The emphasis on furrows at the *werf* also points to European concepts of town planning. The earliest recorded furrow at Genadendal was dug by Georg Schmidt (Kruger, 1966). The furrows were dug to supply water for the gardens and the water mill and to demarcate the boundaries of the church centre. A comparative study of Dutch colonial towns of South America and South Africa by Hall (1991) shows that early Dutch towns were built around water. In cases where towns could not be designed around water furrows were made to channel water from the mountains as was the case in Cape Town where water was channelled from Table Mountain. At Genadendal water was channelled from the Sonderend Mountain. The desire to build around water even to an extent of channelling it from the mountain through furrows indicates the role nostalgia played in the creation of the mission station. The early missionaries relied on memories of their home villages and tried to remodel the African landscape based on memory and nostalgia. The naming of some mission stations such as Wuppertal for instance reveals such nostalgia since it is named after the North Rhein Westphalia town in German which was the centre of the Rhenish Missionary Society.

Historical archaeology

Historical archaeology as a sub-discipline of archaeology has its roots in Europe and America. It has, however, been practised in Africa since the Second World War (Ponsansky and Decorse, 1986). The definitions of historical archaeology that were posited in the infant stages of the discipline appear to be limited. What seems inescapable in the earlier definitions such as that of Deetz (1977) and Schuyler (1978) is their reference to the impact of European material culture on indigenous people. James Deetz (1977, p. 5) defines it as "... the study of the spread of European material culture throughout the world since the fifteenth century and its impact on indigenous people." Schuyler (1978, p. 28) takes a similar view that presents historical archaeology as "... the study of the material manifestation of the expansion of European culture into the non-European world starting with the 15th century and ending with industrialization or the present depending on local conditions." Both definitions are challenged by the results of the very discipline that they define. Historical archaeology does not only study the impact of European culture on indigenous people. More often it has worked to reveal that cultures have had an influence on each other. In the case of Genadendal mission station a new identity was

¹ An Angerdorf is a village that has been planned and built around a communal open space.

created through the admixture of European building practices and locally available raw materials. Both definitions ignore the fact that there were adaptations that can be read in the archaeological record. Stressing the impact of European material culture on the rest of the world ignores that fact that material culture was not “transplanted” and that there was “acculturation” as Ponsansky and Decorse (1986, p.1) argue. Other scholars such as Beaudry (1995) have suggested a definition of historical archaeology that is site specific, arguing that definitions such as that of Schuyler (1978) do not take into account the diversity of sites and material culture. The definition preferred in this study is that of Martin Hall (1996, p. 255) “... a branch of archaeology in which material culture is studied in conjunction with documentary sources.” This definition does not assume that the society being studied was literate and neither does it assume a cut-off date for the advent and terminal date for historical archaeology. Instead it recognizes that where documentary evidence exists it can be combined with material culture to study the values of past societies. In the study presented here dairies of missionaries, sites maps, plans, diagrams, paintings and published literature such as journals articles and novels were used in conjunction with building structures to establish the reasons behind the apparent continuity and conformity in vernacular architectural style at Genadendal.

What makes vernacular architecture useful in studying the values of past societies is that building structures are “... immediate products of their users,” Gribble (1988, p.3). Change happens at a slow rate which results in information being preserved. Therefore we can learn a lot about the values of the people who used the buildings.

The development of a Genadendal architectural style reveals that there was a process of alienation from familiar architectural designs on the side of both the missionaries and the indigenous people. When the Khoi and the ex-slaves were incorporated into the life of the mission station they had to adopt new building styles such as rectangular shapes of houses and not circular huts. The European missionaries on the other hand had to rely on their memories of the built environment in Europe because they were physically alienated from the building processes that were taking place in Europe⁵. The isolation led to the emergence of a style of architecture that is synonymous with the western Cape – Cape Dutch architecture.

Data collection

The main aim of the field work was to record the building materials that were used at Genadendal. The field work was done in three phases. The first visit confirmed the need for detailed documentation of some disused private houses. Houses that were documented were selected due to the fact that they were dilapidated and no longer inhabited. Despite being dilapidated the selection criteria was also influenced by accessibility and the state of preservation-for a house to be considered in the study it had to exhibit original architectural features.

Four methods of documentation were employed in the field work. Slide and print photographs of buildings and other structures were taken. Some video footage was recorded and it proved to be very useful because some features that had to been captured on photographs during the second field trip were recognised in the footage and documented during the third and final field trip. Scale drawings of building foundations were made and a site documentation form was designed and used. Finally material culture

⁵ See also Greig (1971), Winer and Deetz (1990) for a discussion on the alienation processes

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that was found in the Genadendal museum was documented as well. Information was collected from the seventy-six graves that were in missionaries' cemetery. This information was used to test Campbell's (1816) assertion that missionaries had a particular way of burying the dead which was gender and age based. The data was analysed using the Excel spreadsheet programme.

Description of material culture

This section describes some of the distinctive and common building materials and other features that were documented during the field work. Only one of the dilapidated buildings is described in detail below, however, the structure of this building is the most common among the houses that are found on the eastern slopes of the valley. It is representative of other buildings that were documented; therefore the data drawn from it will be used to reach some generalisations about the building culture among the indigenous converts at Genadendal.

Building structure

The original building was a single rectangular structure to which partitions were added at a later stage. The walls that divide the kitchen from the sitting room and the sitting room from the bedroom had collapsed probably due to the fact that it was not reinforced by the original walls. The fact that the section where the partition was attached to the original wall was white washed indicates that the partition was added after the original wall was completed. There is no evidence of the wall having been keyed in or reinforced into the original wall, which would suggest that both walls date to the same period of construction. The appearance of the white wash under the partition wall forms part of the stratigraphy of the building because all the inside wall of the building were painted orange at the time of the research. However, only the original wall had a white wash coat under the orange paint since the area of the original wall that was exposed by the collapse of the partitioning wall was not painted orange, it points to a later addition of both the partitioning walls and the orange paint.

Window construction

The houses on the eastern slope have three windows each, two on the front façade and one at the back. The front windows give the building a symmetrical façade, which is one of the main characteristics of the Cape vernacular architecture. The windowsills are narrower on the outside than they are on the inside and this had an effect of illuminating the rooms during the day as the day light was captured through the smaller "entrance" angle at the outer end of the windowsill and distributed in the rooms through the larger angles on the inner end of the windowsill. The windowsills for the houses have similar oblique angles to those of public buildings such as the church. The only difference was observed in the size. While the windowsills of houses in the village measured 300mm deep the church ones were 500mm. The window frames were made out of wood and were joined by using the mortise & tenon joint and the mitre joint which were further reinforced by wooden dowels. Wooden lintels were used above the windowsills and then some plaster moulding of 50mm thickness was constructed around the window frame. Finally an iron window stay was fixed on the outer edge of the window and it was used to prop the window when it was open.

Door construction

The door frames of the houses in the village were also constructed out of wood using the mortise and tenon joint. An inner frame that was constructed using the mitre joint was attached to the outer frame using wooden dowels and iron nails. Iron hinges were then

used to fasten the door to the frame. A wooden latch was fixed on the inner side of the door and was used for locking it. It is possible that the iron nails and hinges were made at Genadendal since documentary sources such as Kruger (1966) mention that the mission station had a thriving black smith project.

Roof construction

The rafters of the roof were constructed using gum poles that were strengthened by using wooded dowels. The triangular construction of the rafters gave the buildings a pitched roof which is one of the distinctive features of the Cape vernacular architecture. Purlins were constructed out of reeds. Different types of grass were used for thatching the buildings at Genadendal. Important buildings that are found at the *werf* were thatched using *Vleiriet* which was brought from Mamre and Elim and this type of grass can be used without replacement for between seventy and ninety years (Balie personal communication, 1996). Buildings in the village were thatched with *Rogstrooi* which is commonly found around Genadendal and has a thatch life span of seven years. The houses in the village had ceilings that were constructed of Spanish reed (*Aruno donax*). The upper side of the ceiling was plastered with cow dung mixed with mud and that provided the floor for the loft.

Gables

One of the distinctive features of the Genadendal architecture is the presence of gables. Archival research revealed that three types of gables were used since the establishment of the mission station but currently only two still exist. The first chapel that was constructed by Marsveld, Schwin and Khünell in 1793 had stepped end gables (Gateway, 1991, p. 62). This type of gable is no longer present in the settlement. No building that possesses such a gable could be found during the survey. The second type is the 'hol-bol' or "leg-of-mutton" gable that was common in the 19th century at Genadendal but it is now less common. It was built above the door and thatched and the most prominent building that still possesses this type of gable is the Herrnhut house that is located at the centre of the mission station, which, is now part of the mission museum. The third type, triangular gable, was mainly used on private building in the village. A common feature of the triangular gable on houses in the village is that it was constructed at the two ends of the house and on one end it supported the chimney.



Leg of mutton gable at the entrance to the Genadendal mission museum (photo: G. Gwasira)

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Paint

Although houses in the village are now painted in different colours there is documentary evidence that they were all once uniformly white-washed⁴. The diaries of W.J. Burchel (1822) and J Campbell (1816) both note that the cottages were white washed as described above. At one of the dilapidated houses it was confirmed that under the orange interior paint it was white washed. A second test was done during the cleaning of a foundation of another dilapidated building and once more some collapsed plastered white washed wall was encountered at a depth of 15 cm from the current ground level. The use of white wash extended to the cemetery where all graves dating to between 1801 and 1939 are white washed except for the seven recent graves (dating from 1940-1983) where granite slabs have been used instead of the traditional brick construction. The earliest grave dates to 1801. A cemetery is a very important source of information for archaeologists and historians. It is a miniature representation of ideologies and as A.J. Christopher (1995, p. 38) has argued cemeteries "...reflect the historical experience of the population." At the Genadendal cemetery one can gain information such as mortality rates among the children of missionaries, epidemics, gender and age based division in the society and links to patterns of construction⁵.

Bricks

Only sun-baked bricks were used for constructing buildings in the village and for earlier graves in the missionary cemetery (1801-1939). The bricks were moulded with clay that was not kneaded and this was evident on buildings where the plaster had eroded exposing some pebbles in the bricks. Some bricks were on display in the mission museum, which were collected for preservation purposes after the demolition of part of the mission tea room exhibit the same traits. The bricks used for construction had a volume of 1840 cubic centimetres each.

Mortar and plaster

There was no evidence of the use of cement for the construction of the village houses. The mortar used was made out of clay. The clay was of a special kind that, according to oral tradition, was collected from the Khoi grazing lands that were situated near the eastern compound of the mission station (Balie personal communication, 1996). The same type of clay was used for plastering the houses; however the plaster was made out of kneaded clay since it is smooth and has no pebbles in it. According to Balie (personal communication, 1996) horses and cattle were used for kneading the clay.

Discussion

The similarity that is exhibited in the physical attributes of buildings at Genadendal suggests that there were some "rules" that had to be adhered to during planning and construction. Some level of uniformity had to be achieved. Architectural remains of settlements and their lay-outs encode information about the thought processes that went into the fashioning of such settlements and even rules that were followed. "If we [can] decipher the grammar, metaphors and the symbolism that is embedded in the large artefacts then we can understand their meaning" (Gwasira, 2001, p. 88). This section discusses the patterns that can be deciphered from the Genadendal building culture and illustrates how such patterns helped to model the landscape that confronts us today.

The use of the same type of building materials and following the same building plans described above points to a creation of an identity that was based on uniformity. There is conformity in the use of building materials such as sun baked-bricks and lime white wash

⁴ For a description of the houses at Genadendal see also Gateway magazine October 1991, p.61

⁵ The first part of the title for this paper is drawn from an epitaph on one of the earliest graves at Genadendal

for painting the walls. The conformity suggests that there were some rules and regulations at the mission station. The use of rules coupled with the availability and the affordability of buildings allowed the missionaries to create and maintain order and regularity. Order and regularity were maintained through strict prescription of and adherence to architectural designs (Japha et al., 1993). On the other hand the missionaries were involved in the trade of raw materials such as timber. According to Lichtenstein (1812) the missionaries had permission from the British government to cut down company woods. They ensured the conformity to the use of specific building material by giving the money and other incentives for buying the building materials. Trade in building materials was also between the missionaries and the local farmers in commodities such as wheat straw which was used for thatching some of the houses (Japha, 1993). When the missionaries Marsveld, Schwinn and Kühnell resumed Georg Schmidt's work in 1792 there were already thirteen farms established around Genadendal (Bredenkamp and Pludernann, 1993) so there was easy access to wheat straw.

The mission station was designed to be a self-sufficient and self-contained entity. The residents were taught agricultural production and had vocational training in woodwork and smithing. Such skills were necessary for survival at the mission station and to a greater extent for establishing a building culture that is unique to Genadendal. The development of a Genadendal building tradition was dictated by the availability of raw materials and the processing of building material such as wood and iron nails. The missionaries controlled the availability of such material thus making sure that residents conformed to the building tradition. Making the mission self-contained and self-reliant enforced conformity. In "orderly" way of life was thus established and this extends beyond the geometric arrangement and architectural design prescription to include other forms of social symbols such as the dress code as revealed in earlier paintings of the inhabitants. The quest for order was enforced in such a way that at gatherings the residents were expected to gather according to gender as noted by Lichtenstein during his visit in 1803 (Lichtenstein, 1812) that females occupied the right hand side of the church while males were on the left. The same arrangement can be observed in the missionary cemetery. Burchell (1822) observed too that gender division was practiced even at religious gatherings. During the field work for this study it was confirmed that gender division was practiced during church services still continued. The female congregants sat on the right hand side of the aisle while their male counterparts sat on the left hand side. The same order is continued on in the cemetery as well. An aspect that this research did not focus on but which might be interesting to investigate is whether or not the gender division extended to private dwellings.

The results of this research supported Gribble's observation that the functional aspect of architecture is a result of "... conscious reactions to physical needs..." (Gribble, 1998, p. 6). Architectural landscapes should not be taken at face value because they encode valuable information which can reveal the "... dialectics of power, dominion and resistance..." that characterize the period in which they were fashioned (Gwasira, 2001, p. 88). Therefore, the study of architectural structures and landscape can be viewed as a study of metaphors. In the process the researcher is constantly reminded of the problem of the gap between the overt that is expressed by buildings and the underlying meaning which has to be "dug" out. One can successfully search for the underlying meaning by analysing the materials that were used in construction of buildings and couple that with examining the power relations between the building commissioners, the builders and the users of the buildings. The interplay of these actors leaves a signature on the buildings and the cultural landscape that a historical archaeologist can investigate in an effort to understand the meaning of buildings and space.

This study demonstrated that the uniformity that is apparent in the buildings of Genadendal was influenced by the commercial interaction between the missionaries

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and the "underclass"⁶ and the application of strict regulations. The enforcement of rules created a structured society at Genadendal. Missionaries had direct control of the form of settlement and housing. For a person to settle permanently at the mission station they had to be a baptized member of the congregation and that was the criteria used for allocating residential and gardening plots. The Khoi had to undergo a period of probation and then confession before they could be baptized (Kruger, 1966). When a plot was allocated to a congregant only a rectangular house was to be built within a prescribed period of one year and the rectangular houses distinguished converts from the unconverted who continued to live in hemispherical structures until baptised (Balie, 1987, Japha et al., 1993). In 1828 the missionaries prescribed that the houses were to be 6.0 x 3.6 metres in size which was later revised in 1847 to 13.0 x 8.0 metres (Japha et al., 1993). The houses from the village that were included in this study conform to the building measurement regulation of 1828 and that is evidence for continuity. Therefore missionaries controlled the construction of both the public and the private space. Applicants for plots had to sign an agreement as proof of their commitment to the prescribed regulations (Japha et al., 1993). A "western" landscape was created by arranging the houses along streets that were planned in a grid form.

This study led to a couple of conclusions and highlighted some of the problems and advantages that are associated with practising historical archaeology. The study demonstrates that there is a great potential for historical archaeological research at Genadendal. There is a need for the documentation of the early buildings which are rapidly being lost either due to construction of "modern" structures or deterioration. Much emphasis has in the past been placed on rehabilitating important buildings that are found at the werf (Le Grange, 1990, Le Grange, 1991, Japha et al., 1993). Focusing on important buildings means conserving the history of the elites while the history of the ordinary people will be lost. It is therefore important that more archaeological research is conducted in the village.

One problem that may be faced by historical archaeologists who wish to work on slave material culture in the Cape is that it is difficult to identify slave material culture because slaves in South Africa did not have their own dwellings that were apart from those of their masters. They did not own property and therefore it is impossible to define specific material culture as belonging to the slaves. However work at sites such as Vergelegen by Markel (1993) has shown that there is a possibility for finding slave quarters in the rural cape. The case of Genadendal on the other hand indicates that there is a possibility of engaging with the material culture of emancipated slaves since some of them were incorporated into mission stations after the emancipation (Gwasira, 2004).

Conclusion

This study established that a Genadendal style of architecture existed and it was characterised by stepped gables that were later replaced by the "dormer" gables at the werf and triangular end gables with parapets in the village. The other distinctive feature of the Genadendal architecture is the window construction whereby window frames were constructed out of wood and placed on the outer surface which created a symmetrical façade. The windowsills were large and constructed with skewed angles and finally a hollow clay mould was constructed around the outer surface of the windows.

It is safe to conclude that the uniformity in the building style of Genadendal did not only occur because of the inhabitants' adherence to prescribed designs. The availability of building materials locally and through trade with the missionaries worked to create

⁶ The underclass at Genadendal consisted of slaves that were freed after the emancipation of slaves at the cape

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a distinctive cultural landscape. The emphasis on vocational training by the missionaries ensured the accessibility to affordable processed building materials such as window stays, door hinges, iron nail and woodendowels. This allowed continuity in the building materials in both the private and public buildings. The combination of the availability of raw and processed materials, rules and regulations coupled with a community that was prepared to accept the conditions of living at the mission station led to the evolution of a distinctive Genadendal architectural tradition and identity.

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