

Review

Old Umtali 1891-1897: Conservation, interpretation and understanding a colonial past using historic buildings as evidentiary sources

Njabulo Chipangura

Curator of Archaeology, National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe.
Mutare Museum P.O. Box 920 Aerodrome Road, Mutare, Zimbabwe
E-mail: nchipangura3@gmail.com

Accepted 19, March 2013

This paper will critically address the questions of conservation, changes in use and values of historic buildings at Old Umtali a former colonial town that lived between 1891 and 1897 before it was converted into a mission school thereafter. The buildings have since then survived up to now and have been used by the United Methodist Church (UMC) with various conversions to suit contemporary uses. The paper therefore seeks to examine how the buildings at Old Umtali can be used as historic documents and as evidentiary sources that can help explain the experiences of colonialism in the post-independence state of Zimbabwe. One of the key arguments that will be pursued in the paper is that the historic buildings at Old Umtali can be viewed and defined as cumulative scenes for past actions produced by colonial encounters. The built environment in this regard is seen as a historic document which can provide information about the past which is not available from any other source. In a way the paper will show the importance of conserving historic buildings because they constitute an important aspect in the management of heritage in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Conservation, Historic Buildings, Old Umtali, Interpretation, Critical Heritage, Adaptive Use, Values, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

By tracing the beginning of a pioneer settlement at Fort Hill as being the precursor to Old Umtali, the paper will present the history of the site and its interpretation and show how it can be marshalled for the purpose of a critical heritage practice. Analysing the questions of conservation in buildings and their associated histories can contribute to the sociological understanding of collective memory and more broadly to the process of meaning construction in relation to the built environment (Milligan 2007: 106). This is so because the physical existence of the historic built environment is a record that ties the past to people who visit such places to get in touch with history (Milligan 2007: 106). Conservation in this paper is not merely seen as a technical question but I extend my argument to see it as an intellectual and at the same time as an epistemological question. I thus argue that historic buildings at Old Umtali should be conserved and used for different contemporary purposes and thus contributing to the production of knowledge on colonial

experiences in Zimbabwe. Questions can then be asked about the colonialism and the various movements of the Pioneer Column in Zimbabwe using the case study of Old Umtali as tangible form of this evidence.

Tracing the beginning of a settlement at Old Umtali

The settling of the British at Old Umtali in 1891 can be viewed as a responsive action by Cecil John Rhodes to halt the escalating influence of the Portuguese in Manicaland (Sells 1954: 20). According to Sells (1954), a treaty had been signed between the Portuguese and Chief Mutasa who was the paramount leader of Manicaland in 1873. The treaty established friendly relations between the Mutasa people and the Portuguese and the latter were given the right to mine gold in the area. A Portuguese flag was later raised at Bingaguru the capital of Chief Mutasa to authorise this friendship (Sells 1954:22).

(Sells 1954: 22). In 1877 the Portuguese went a step further and declared that the country of Mutasa was a part of the Portuguese territory thus establishing direct rule over Mutasa and Manicaland. Thereafter preparations for extensive mining operations by forming a Chartered company known as the Mocambique Company with full right of occupation and mining were made (Sells 1954: 22). Cecil Rhodes became interested in this new move of the Portuguese and was disturbed that English and Afrikaans speaking people were not joining in the new adventure. He realised that he must move into Manicaland quickly to counter Portuguese influence (Sells 1954: 24). Subsequently, on the 15th of September 1890 Achibold Ross Colquhoun under the instruction of Cecil Rhodes secured a concession of mineral and trading rights with Chief Mutasa who also agreed to put himself under British protection. What is quiet interesting to note here is that Chief Mutasa denied ever signing an agreement with the Portuguese and is quoted as having said, 'I allowed them to live here and they sometimes gave me presents but I never gave them my country nor or ever concluded a treaty with them' (Sells 1954: 24).

With this new agreement, the British South African Company (BSAC hereafter) agreed that under the chief's supervision and authority it would aid and assist in the propagation and establishment of Christian religion, educate and civilise the native subjects of the chief (Sells 1954: 24). In addition, the company undertook and agreed to pay the chief and his successors in perpetuity an annual sum of one hundred pounds or the equivalent thereof in trading goods. The first settlement by the BSAC after the signing of the treaty was at a place called Fort Hill. Sells (1954) argues that 'because of the controversy between the British and Portuguese over the occupation of Manicaland and the loyalty of Chief Mutasa, an excavation was made in the side of the hill to serve as a fort in case it was necessary to retreat'. Its main purpose seemed to be to provide a place for retreat in case the Portuguese forced them to retreat.

However, after some time it was realised that a village providing for a settlement could not be established on the elevation around the fort in that there was no level ground. Furthermore the excavation made in the side of a hill did not provide a place for buildings and thus expansion on this hill would have been most difficult. Sells (1954) argues in his own words that 'the fort established on the site of the ridge was so located that it was not possible to establish a town in that vicinity'. With the arrival of Cecil Rhodes in Manicaland on the 11th of October 1891 he went to see Bishop Knight Bruce who lived in a hut near the site where the Old Umtali was to be moved later on (Sells 1954: 25). Bishop Knight Bruce had received this site from headman Saungweme who was the local representative leader of Chief Mutasa.

According to Sells (1954), the Bishop and Rhodes then proceeded to see headman Saungweme and it was then that Rhodes requested permission to move the pioneer

column from the Fort Hill to an open space called Chiremba which was more suitable for starting and developing some settlements. Because headman Saungweme was given the area by the paramount Chief Mutasa he sent messengers for the approval of this request to Mutasa. The messengers returned with the approval of Chief Mutasa who is reported here to have said, 'I gave the area to you and you are authorised to give it to Mr. Rhodes, a friend of Bishop Knight Bruce' (Sells 1954: 28).

Arrangements were thereafter made for preparing the second site of Umtali with the immediate erection of huts for the police and a pole and mud building for a hospital (Sells 1954: 32). These were ready for occupation within a few months and the nurses, preceded by the police moved to the site from the Hill Fort in December 1891 marking the beginning of what was again going to be another short lived settlement of the pioneer column at Old Umtali.

The shift from Old Umtali to New Umtali and the transformations

By 1895, this site possessed amongst other structures the following core colonial and civic structures: a hospital, post office, bakery, butchery, church, four hotels, two banks, a Meikles Brothers shop, a library and a cemetery (Sells 1960: 3). The number of buildings increased over the years and in 1897 there were at least twenty five permanent buildings. Through the exploitation of mining concessions, the colonial town experienced a boom in its development resulting ultimately (with the development of a railway system) in a shift in town centre from the present day site of Old Umtali to the site of contemporary Mutare, then 'Umtali' (Sells 1960: 4). Sells (1960) thus argues that when the railway line was surveyed from Beira it was realised that it could not be taken to the old site. This was because the distance from the surveyed line with the mountain between was so great that it was decided to move the township to the railway line.

On March 26th 1896, an agreement was signed between the property owners at Old Umtali and Cecil Rhodes representing the BSAC to move the township to a suitable site along the surveyed line. A committee consisting of five property owners and two stand holders was appointed to select a healthful site for the new town along the surveyed line. Property owners at the old site were paid a compensation of fifty thousand pounds each by the BSAC which then became the owner of the old site and the remaining buildings (Sells 1960: 4). The BSAC also committed itself that an exactly similar plan as the existing township of Umtali be laid down on the site for the new township when selected, so that all the present owners of stands in Umtali will have an exactly corresponding commonage and water be available for the



Figure1. A picture of the original Old Umtali Settlement taken in 1894. (Picture courtesy of the Library and Archives Section, Africa University)

new township (Cooke 1977: 152). In addition, as part of the agreement the BSAC was to erect suitable Government buildings and hospital in the new township and to provide a sum not exceeding three thousand pounds for water supply if required (Sells 1960:8)

In March 1898 an agreement was reached with the BSAC between Mr. Rhodes and Bishop Hartzell for the taking over of the old site and the 13, 000 acres of land for the establishment of the Hartzell industrial mission and this also included certain grants of land in the new township and an agreement with the Methodist Church for conducting a school for European children. Reverend Hunter Reid was subsequently sent to the new site for the purpose starting a school for European children. It was opened in October, 1898 and the mission was officially opened on October 7 1899. This composite structure with all the buildings mentioned above is still standing. Of the whole complex which has about twenty five colonial buildings only seven have in recent times been used in ways deemed proper in heritage terms.

Moreso, today there are some measures that have been put in place by UMC to protect the historical components of the buildings. The commitment of the church in conserving and at the same time using the buildings in a way deemed suitable enough is exhibited in that it has an established fund that they use to take care of the seven identified historic buildings. Conservation in historic buildings describes all physical interventions in the actual fabric of the building to ensure its continued structural integrity. Fitch (1990) argues that such measures can range from relatively minor therapies such as fumigation against termites to very radical ones such as insertion of new foundations. It also encompasses all processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance. The Burra Charter explicitly states that 'conservation means all the processes of looking

after a place so as to retain its cultural significance (Burra Charter 1979:2). Cultural significance can then entails looking at the aesthetic, historic, scientific or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. The buildings at Old Umtali are also being maintained departmentally by the mission school with each responsible department ensuring that their authenticity is not compromised during use.

Thus conservation in historic buildings includes maintenance and may according to circumstances include preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaptation ...commonly a combination of more than one of these" (Aplin 2002:2). However, Linchfield (1998) critiques conservation in historic building when he argues that "...the introduction of a conservation objective in respect to any part of the urban fabric introduces constraints on the way in which the fabric should be treated during its remaining life cycle, compared to a situation if there is no such objective". He argues that there will be loss of freedom in taking measure against the obsolescence of the building and that it restricts what can be done to strengthen the fabric of the building (Linchfield 1998:70).

In his own understanding he puts it that: this necessity, to place the conservation objective in the forefront of management policy, has led to the necessity for searching out those uses which can function in conserved properties, which has been dubbed 'new use for old' or adaptive use' (Linchfield 1998:72). Similarly, the buildings at Old Umtali have been endowed with new uses that I argue are still compatible with the historical significance of this heritage precinct. All conservation activities at this precinct are therefore prescribed against a backdrop of contemporary uses that have respected the historical epochs of the place and its state of authenticity. Authenticity has been defined as the original

as opposed to the copy, the real as opposed to the pretended and the genuine as opposed to the counterfeit (Jokiletho 1999: 296). In the words of Jokiletho (1999) 'being authentic refers to acting autonomously, having authority, being original, unique, sincere, true or genuine'. Milligan (2007) also views the call for authenticity to be the ultimate justification in choosing to conserve historic buildings. It is also no exaggeration to say that this concept lies at the base of all modern doctrine on the conservation and restoration of historical monuments (Starn 2002:6).

Conversions, new use and changing values

The conversions of the buildings from their original use in the old town to become a mission school are compatible with the history of the site because the buildings have been converted into uses that are not so much different from their original use. Inevitably, there is a compromise in finding a balance between the requirements of the occupiers for continued occupation and the requirements for continued conservation. Adaptation then means modifying the historic building so that it suits use or a proposed use (Burra Charter 1999:2). The use value in historic buildings entails upkeep and adaptation to the functional requirements of the present (Starn 2002:6). Some of the converted buildings include; the town house where Rhys Fairbridge the surveyor who surveyed the present location of the City of Mutare used to stay. The building is now used as a staff quarter for teachers and other general staff members working at the mission. Thus there are a lot of similarities with their old use in that sense. Acceptable limits to change means that historic buildings are recognised as living entities which must not be treated as wholly stagnant but as dynamic systems. Historic buildings are not in any way like museums artefacts in which the conservators try as much to suspend or reverse the natural process of decay. Buildings differ in that they must adapt to suit contemporary needs in ways that build upon rather than detract their inherent qualities, character and associations (Fitch 1990: x). Social value in respect of use of these buildings by the people is not about the past or about social history, but about their attachments in the present (Davison 2000: 129). Values can simply be defined as socially assigned property or attribute to an object or place (Mupira 2007:205). They are thus social constructs and are relative because different people see or perceive values differently depending on how they compare or relate things to each other. The relativity of cultural and social values is therefore fundamentally dependent on human beings as members of the society.

A jail that used to house prisoners has been turned into a dormitory and the stable where Cecil Rhodes used to keep his horses has also been turned into a dormitory for students as well. The building that used to house

offices of the BSAC has been converted to a similar compatible use and is still being used as administrative offices by the mission school. Next to it is the old court which has been converted into an administrative block and the Rhodes Hotel has also been turned into an accommodation space. The first church to be constructed at the old town was also converted into a student's chapel. In addition, the first school to be established at the old town for pioneer children in 1896 called the Umtali Academy has also been turned a girl's students dormitory. Conservation itself does not mean that change is totally excluded but the question of acceptable limits to change must be addressed. Martinez (2010) therefore notes that 'the fundamental question at the core of the contemporary conservation, restoration debate is where to establish the limits of intervention.

The state of conservation of historic buildings at Old Umtali

At least seven buildings were analysed in terms of their state of conservation and how their conversions to new use have remained compatible with their historical and social values. These were the jail which was constructed in 1891, the town house built in 1892, the Umtali academy of 1894, the magistrate's court of 1891, Rhodes stable constructed in 1893, the Rhodes hotel of 1891 and the Anglican Church of 1891. Given the historical integrity of this heritage precinct, I elected to view the site, for assessment and analysis purposes as an entire historic landscape, analysing the precinct in its totality against six criteria that I devised for assessing the historic buildings. Precinct is term that is increasingly being used in the field of urban heritage conservation to describe more extensive areas around historic buildings which may contribute to its heritage value (Aplin 2002:123).

The first criterion I used was based on the measuring the quality of architectural styles and workmanship exhibited by the seven historic buildings. On this, I noticed that the quality is variable, however buildings like the magistrate court, the jail, the Umtali academy, the Rhodes hotel and the church displays a remarkable achievement of architectural style and workmanship measured against their construction period of time. Typological uniqueness was the second assessment criterion that I used and I observed that the buildings display a very high level of uniqueness which is outstanding particularly owing to their early nature of construction. Again under this criterion, the jail, the town house and the Rhodes hotel are particularly noteworthy.

The third criterion I used was based on measuring the innovativeness exhibited by the seven historic buildings. From this analysis, I came to conclude that it is relatively low probably because at that period of time the focus was



Figure 2. The Rhodes Hotel constructed in 1891 and exhibits some high level of typological uniqueness



Figure 3. The Umtali Academy constructed in 1894 shows in this picture some signs of innovation in the method of construction

largely on making core houses with no much of designs being implemented. However, the Rhodes hotel displays a bit of innovativeness but not really of a higher order. At the same time, the Umtali academy also shows some form of innovativeness. Symbolic and sentimental value to particular communities was the forth criterion used during this assessment. I noted that it is high because the buildings have a direct bearing on the UMC community and certainly on some sections of the white community in Zimbabwe who still trace their roots to the

Pioneer Column.

Closely linked to this, was an assessment based on the historical association of the buildings with people. Here again I observed that the associations are high because the history of the Pioneer Column with its various movements across the country can be well understood if one uses the buildings at Old Umtali as a tangible form of evidence. Criterion number five during the assessment focused on looking at the level of authenticity and integrity of the historic buildings. My conclusion here was

that it is variable because although amendments have been made over time this has only been limited to fittings and repairs of windows and doors which do not fundamentally affect the truthfulness and completeness of the buildings. The last criterion I used was derived from measuring the state of conservation of the seven historic buildings. The conservation standards are very low and I argue here that although UMC is cognisant of the need to conserve the buildings it has not been able to receive expert support from NMMZ. Due to this lack of support and advice on how to proceed with conserving this heritage precinct, a number of buildings have been left to deteriorate.

Drawing from the above analysis, my argument is that a complete conservation of this heritage precinct will therefore provide an opportunity for people to observe firsthand the results of colonial architects' endeavours during the early twentieth century. Nowhere else in the country is there such a large concentration of historic buildings as at Old Umtali. Moreover, nowhere else in Zimbabwe has a complete colonial urban master plan from the early 21st century existed without much alteration. What this means is that NMMZ has to try to actively maintain and conserve Old Umtali and its exceptional history for the benefit of the population and for present and future generations.

The heritage precinct is endowed with a rich historic environment complemented by colonial structures that can help to explain both the histories and experiences of colonialism on one hand and the history of missionaries in Zimbabwe on the other hand. Using Old Umtali as a historical document can enable the country to reflect as far as the 19th century when the pioneer column arrived in Manicaland in November 1890 and the subsequent establishment of colonial structures that later gave birth to Old Umtali mission under the leadership of Bishop Hartzell. (Hulley 1971:21).

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to look closely at the conservation of historic buildings at the Old Umtali heritage precinct with a focus on seven buildings that are being used in ways deemed compatible with their authenticity. I also traced the beginning of a settlement at Old Umtali and showed that it was the desire of Cecil

John Rhodes to halt the penetration of the Portuguese in Manicaland that resulted in the establishment of a settlement by the Pioneer Column at this site. After the abandonment of the old town and the setting up of a mission school by the United Methodist Church, the buildings were introduced to a completely new use. My main argument drawn from the condition assessment of the buildings that I conducted was that the buildings must be conserved by NMMZ as an important aspect that can help interpret the history of colonialism in the Zimbabwe. As such, I have argued that the buildings are a form of historical document that people can refer to in the post-independence Zimbabwe in order to understand and have a firsthand experience on the set up of a former complete colonial settlement which is still standing.

REFERENCES

- Aplin G (2002). *Heritage: Identification, Conservation and Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Cooke CK (1979). Kopje House, Umtali: The History of a building site from hospital to cultural centre, 1897-1977, Occasional Papers of the National Museums and Monuments of Rhodesia, Series A, *Human Sciences*, V4(Part)5
- Davison G (2000). *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*. St Leonards: Allen, Unwin
- Fitch JM (1990). *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*. Virginia: University Press of Virginia
- Hulley CM, Buildings of Historic Interests: Some Umtali Buildings , *Rhodesiana* , (24).
- Jokiletho J (1999). *A History of Architectural Conservation*. Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann
- Linchfield N (1988). *Economics in urban conservation* .Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Milligan M (2007). Buildings as History: The Place of Collective Memory in the Study of Historic Preservation. *Symbolic Interaction*, . 30(1):106
- Mupira P (2007). Managing the Archaeological Landscapes of the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. *Unpublished Doctoral Thesis*, University of Zimbabwe
- Sells E (1954). The History of Manicaland, Rhodesia 1832 -1897, *Unpublished Manuscript*, Records and Archives Section, Africa University
- Sells E (1960). Umtali-Old and New: First Days in Umtali 1897-1957, *Unpublished Manuscript*, Records and Archives Section, Africa University.
- Starn R (2002). Authenticity and historic preservation: towards an authentic history. *History of Human Sciences*, Vol.5, No 1
- The Burra Charter (1979).The Australian ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance.