

THE UNWILLING PROPHET

by Lucia Burger



→ Professor 'Ora Joubert

She not only took on her own profession and architect colleagues but also developers, insurance companies, tertiary institutions, embassies, local governments, central government and, last but not least, every man on the street with a Tuscan home. Nevertheless, when it comes to herself, Professor 'Ora Joubert is determined: it is not about her. It is about the cause. And the cause is a plea to establish a South African architecture with a character of its own.

"Words fail me when I come across the passé, stylistically dubious, climatologically irresponsible, superfluously decorated, clumsily proportioned and downright ugly buildings, designed by architects who graduated from respected academic institutions." These words evoked an audible murmur among the select audience of academics, architects and media representatives in Pretoria's Aula theatre.

It was 18 November 2004 and on the stage – small, with an illuminated screen behind her – stood the new head of the University of Pretoria's Department of Architecture. It was her inaugural address. Since then the stream of letters in reaction to the lecture, to especially newspapers in Gauteng, has not dried up.

It was not Professor 'Ora Joubert's cutting remarks about our "unattractive cities", "our architects' hesitance to get involved in public housing projects" or our "American TV-inspired nouveau rich residences" which hurt (or elated) the letter writers as such. It was her remark about the "obscene, outlandish architectural trend" which she christened "Tos-Afrikaans" or "Boere Spanish".

"Ugly? But that is what people want!" was the retort. And remarks like: "Outlandish designs prove people are looking for an identity. Building styles are not only bad. This is what a real Tuscan home looks like" and "Professor shows what architecture must look like,"

stirred the pot. Even Nataniël responded in a letter to the Afrikaans daily, *Beeld*: "As my grandma used to say: They think they are grand when they live in artificial villas with hollow columns."

Joubert is non-negotiable on the subject. "For our apparent obsession with Tuscany, I can find absolutely no academic or social justification." The woman who speaks with so much conviction and passion in public on her discipline, is however surprisingly evasive and vague when it comes to questions about herself. "I don't really bother with other people, but I have nevertheless thrown this debate in the public arena – that is probably a contradiction," she says.

I drive through my suburb in Johannesburg on my way to interview the Professor and examine my environment with new interest. Since Joubert's words I cannot help but see that over the past few years in almost every street one or two Tuscan villas have made their appearance. In general it is extremely ordinary homes which had two columns and a portico, painted in some or other shade of terracotta, added in the end and boasting a row of sphere-shaped rose trees and lavender bushes in front of the wall. You see them everywhere in Johannesburg and Pretoria where security complexes (or "bourgeois enclaves with their own recreation facilities, 24-hour security and romantic names," as Joubert calls it) nestle



→ Great architects create transcendent spaces that uplift the human spirit, such as this home created by Professor 'Ora Joubert.

Battiss and a collector of plants." She herself collects succulents. Joubert describes her position as architect in this country as "someone who lives in Africa and therefore identifies with Africa. South Africa is different to Europe and elsewhere. It is the synergy here that I am passionate about."

She obtained her BArch degree cum laude at the University of Pretoria in 1982. Thereupon followed a Master's degree at the Pennsylvania State University and a Doctor's degree at the University of Natal, with the title of her thesis: A contemporary assessment of the origin of modern aesthetics – the impact of modern art on modern architecture. Time after time she comes back to her position in Africa. "Inherently I'm a socialist. I am politically aware, always have been, and cannot distance myself from the social contract – especially not in a country like South Africa." From 1986 to 1989 she worked for the Get Ahead Foundation, a township-based non-governmental organisation. Here she contributed to the creation of architectural and art programmes for children from Mamelodi and Alexandra.

According to Roger Fisher, Joubert is a perfectionist who does not stop until a task has been perfectly executed and therefore she is sought-after as an academic. Apart from the USA, she has also lectured at the universities of the Witwatersrand, KwaZulu-Natal and Pretoria, and from 2001 to 2004 as head of the Department of Architecture at the University of the Free State. Her first love, however, remains design which she indulges in as associate at the firm Joubert, Comrie and Wilkinson Architects & Urban Designers.

Adèle Nothnagel from Tzaneen, one of Joubert's clients, whose home has garnered several awards, says that on a project the relationship between Joubert and the client is like the "meeting of yin and yang, a continual process of give and take."

In her home studio I again query her on the objectionable "Tuscan" remark and the heated reaction to it in the media. "I am extremely pleased that the debate is out in the open. What that tells me is that we underestimate the public; that they are indeed interested in what the built environment looks like. It also touches on the fact that we have a particular weak culture of architectural criticism in this country. The irony of the matter is that it should actually be the public who should drive the issue because we are actually in their service." And if Joe Soap wants to build a Tuscan villa of seven million rand? I ask. What should the architect do? Still the answer comes calmly: "To the developer who writes

against hillsides reinforcing the Tuscan theme. I meet 'Ora Joubert, a slender woman in her mid-forties with light brown hair and dimples in her cheeks, at the Building Science building on the University of Pretoria campus, and follow her with my car to her well-known house converted out of stables. Little more than 10 years ago, Joubert bought the stables of the historic Clydesdale farm and converted the 100-year-old outbuildings into a residence and studio.

Its colourful simplicity and strong forms – a recipient of an Award of Merit from the South African Institute of Architects in 1995 – are striking against the neighbours' more mundane homes which date back to the middle of the previous century. The general impression is that of well-considered design and care – the home of an aesthete. There are works of Walter Battiss with radiant colours, indigenous objects d'art and furniture by international architects of the previous century such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe.

Jan Ras, the past-president of the South African Institute of Architects and a friend of Joubert's, compares her with the bright colours and energy of Battiss's works of art. "She represents that which she teaches by illuminating the realities of Africa in a Western consciousness."

Joubert believes all people have the right to a dignified existence in which living space should be sensibly planned by experts according to proven design principles. She also believes that South Africa's problems cannot be solved by isolating people in security villages while

the socio-economic realities of the majority of the population are locked away behind the doors of deficient and poorly designed small houses. It was these convictions, and more, which moved her to take a stand with her outgoing/inaugural speeches at the universities of Bloemfontein and Pretoria.

"I started looking around and decided it is pointless to continue to talk about good architecture, because that is what one always does, but nobody ever addresses the bad. I also felt that I may have for too long created the false impression – especially abroad, when lecturing on the subject – that we live happily in the democratic, new South Africa in either quaint, environmentally-friendly, indigenous settlements, or, on the other hand, in sophisticated urban abodes with our particular brand of public buildings. However, nothing could have been further removed from the truth. I consequently decided to rather examine the deplorable state of contemporary South African architecture; to take a public stand against the proliferation of built work that does not make the grade."

Architecture has been her interest since her school days, says Joubert. "Aesthetic appearance was always very important to me and I realised the only way that I can exert a measure of influence on it was to become an architect." She was born in Pretoria and matriculated at the Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool. Her mother hails from Ventersburg in the Free State. Her father, Professor Danie Joubert, was rector of the University of Pretoria. Joubert describes him as a man "who had a strong academic approach but at the same time a fine attunement to the arts, a great admirer of the work of Walter



→ A Le Corbusier chaise longue and a Walter Battiss painting in 'Ora Joubert's home.

he is particularly proud of the seven million rand Tuscan home I say if he wants to 'Tuscan', he must 'Tuscan'. It is a choice that you make as an individual. However, from a professional point of view and personally I would rather get involved in a socio-economic development than to build a house for seven million rand – frankly it doesn't float my boat. For seven million rand to be spent on one house there are seven million people who live in squatter camps. That is for me the biggest architectural challenge in this country. I cannot live with my own conscience to inhabit a monstrosity of gigantic proportions while there are seven million people who can barely eke out a living."

But all is not lost. Despite all the problems, there have been architects like Norman Eaton, Karl Jooste and Gawie Fagan who established a South African architecture relevant to our circumstances. "Such buildings are not about style but about considerations like climate, context, local skills and local building materials," says Joubert. And a rare dimple is visible for a second to soften the blow of the harsh words. 🌟

© Insig

Professor 'Ora Joubert is head of the University of Pretoria's Department of Architecture, and also chairperson of the University's School of the Built Environment. She received the Pretoria Institute for Architects President's Award in 2005 for her contribution to the public debate on South African architecture.

ora.joubert@up.ac.za