

THIBAUT AS REVOLUTIONARY ARCHITECT

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Louis Michel Thibault was the first formally educated architect at the Cape. It is generally accepted that he was trained in France as a Palladian Classicist by J.A. Gabriel and introduced this style to South Africa whereupon, through isolation from the European mainstream, he fell prey to his own decadent mannerisms. In this paper an opposite hypothesis is postulated: Thibault, by age-group, provenance and training prior to his emigration, was part of a group of Revolutionary Architects in the sense coined by E. Kaufmann. The term does not designate political involvement but refers to an intentional breach with the Renaissance-Baroque tradition. Specifically it rejects the old design principles known as hierarchy, concatenation, harmony and sequence (*enfilade*); it disclaims animistic plasticity and literary picturesqueness; it embraces repetition, antithesis, multiple response and subordinates itself to stereometric rigorism. Thibault's work is measured against these tenets. In the analysis some new interpretations are presented in terms of *architecture parlante*. It appears that his 'classical' works should rather be seen as concessions to the conservative taste of his clients and/or liberties taken by craftsmen, and that Thibault preferred to work in the revolutionary idiom wherever he could. During the anniversary of the French Revolution and during the present period of Postmodernism Thibault's oeuvre should be read not as the work of a degenerate emigré, but as that of a pioneer-innovator of the Revolutionary Architecture and thus of a forerunner of Modernism.

Louis Michel Thibault was die eerste formeel opgeleide argitek aan die Kaap. Die algemeen aanvaarde opvatting is dat hy in die klassiek-Palladiaanse styl deur J.A. Gabriel in Frankryk opgelei is en hierdie styl na die Kaap ingevoer het. Hierna het hy glo weens plaaslike omstandighede en isolasie gaandeweg in 'n eiesinnige dekadente maniërisme verval. In hierdie artikel word presies die teenoorgestelde hipotese gestel: Thibault was deur ouderdomsgroep, herkoms en opleiding uit die staanspoor deel van 'n groep Rewolusie-argitekte. Die begrip Rewolusie-argitektuur is deur E. Kaufmann gevorm. Dit verwys nie na 'n politieke betrokkenheid nie, maar na 'n doelbewuste breuk met die Renaissance-Barok-tradisie. In besonder behels dit 'n verwerping van die ou ontwerpbeginsels, te wete hiërargie, samektering, harmonie en opvolging; verwerping van plastisiteit, animisme en die pittoreske; aanvaarding van herhaling, teëstelling, meetkundige tematisering en onderwerping aan stereometriese rigorisme. Vervolgens word Thibault se werk aan hierdie maatstawwe gemeet. In hierdie analise word enkele nuwe interpretasies in die gees van die *architecture parlante* aangebied. Dit blyk dat sy 'klassieke' werke eerder toegewings aan sy konserwatiewe kliënte asook verwerkings deur uitvoerende vaklui is en dat Thibault self, waar hy kon, in die Rewolusionêre idioom gewerk het. In die herdenkingsjare van die Franse Rewolusie en in die tyd van Postmodernisme mag Thibault se *oeuvre* herwaardeer word, nie as dié van 'n verwerde uitwykling nie, maar as baanbreker en dus voorloper van die Modernisme.

When considering the work of Louis Michel Thibault (1750–1815) one is faced with the problem of interpretation. It is obvious that his work sits awkwardly between the Baroque aesthetic of the Cape Dutch which prevailed on his arrival, and the English Georgian which supplanted it when the Cape became a Crown Colony. His initial contribution was considered elegant, even by Lady Anne Barnard who was herself scathing of the Dutch taste. But his later works have left the critics puzzled and his mannered style has been explained as resulting from his years of isolation from European mainstream architectural thought. Lewcock¹ resorts to terms such as 'perverse and introspective' and 'wilful originality' to characterize Thibault's later architectural expression which in turn leads to an 'effect which borders on the ludicrous'.

Is this view of Thibault — an elegant classicist in the Palladian manner degenerating in unhappy isolation — tenable? Is there not perhaps another explanation? Can he perchance be associated with the works that have come to be termed Revolutionary Architecture which evolved in his native France in his formative years?

We must turn to Kaufmann who coined the term to

discover what constitutes a 'Revolutionary Architect'. In his classic treatise² of 1952 he discusses the term³ and states both what revolutionary architects are and are not.

- They are not architects commissioned by revolutionary authority in the years 1789–1799 to design public buildings or memorials or ephemeral decorations for revolutionary celebrations.
- They did not play an active role in the political scene. In fact their works preceded the events of 1789.

Instead they are:

- Discontented architects in search of new forms and principles of composition.
- Those architects who reject well-balanced harmony within a hierarchical order for expression of character, creation of atmosphere and division of composition into independent units.
- Those who reject literary picturesqueness for expressiveness through form.
- Those who reject Baroque animism for direct material expression.
- Those who reject revivalism for plain monumental volumetric form.

How were these characteristics manifested in their architecture? Kaufmann⁴ in his chapter on 'The Architects of the French Revolution: The Generation of 1760' distinguishes the following design principles or 'revolutionary pattern'.

1. Repetition, which may be
 - a) Reduplication, or the repetition of a motif without any alteration in shape or size.
 - b) Juxtaposition, or the undifferentiated array of equivalent elements.
 - c) Reverberation, or the presentation of one and the same motif in different sizes.
2. Antithesis, which can be expressed by
 - a) Contrasts in texture
 - b) Opposition of different sizes, different shapes, or both.
 - c) Tension between distanced elements.
 - d) Compensation between elements of different weight.
 - e) Interpenetration, which under the revolutionary (individualistic) system means that one feature seems to intrude into another, or even to tear it apart ...
 - f) Reverberation. Obviously the pattern of reverberation has an element of antithesis ...
3. Multiple response, which uses patterns of repetition, or antithesis, or both together ...'

A short chronological setting out of Louis Michel Thibault's early life will readily place him within the ambit of the Revolutionary Architects:

- 1750 Baptized on 29 February in Paris.^{5 a}
 1775 Admitted as pupil of Gabriel and then later of Le Roy and Mique at the Royal Academy of Architecture in Paris.
 1776 His terra cotta model of the French Order presented to Louis XVI.
 1781 Studied in Paris as Military Engineer under Colonel Charles Daniel de Meuron.

Thibault's intellectual environment can be reconstructed from the foregoing chronology. The years from 1775 (commencement of his studies) until 1781 (his departure for the Cape) are of particular interest.

What was current in French Academic thought of the time?

From Puyfontein's⁶ account Thibault can be linked directly to Gabriel in the year of his retirement as director (1775), Mique, his successor, and Le Roy, 'one of the most illustrious professors of the period'.

However, it will be demonstrated that it was Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), one of Kaufmann's three Revolutionary Architects, who was to influence the students. He was admitted as a second class member of the *Académie d'Architecture* in 1762, and was to achieve first class status in 1780.⁷

If one examines Egbert's⁸ chronology of the *Grand Prix de Rome* of the *Académie Royale d'Architecture* one finds Etienne Boullée's name attached to that of the prize winners (1773 *Deuxieme Prix*; 1777, *Deuxieme Prix*; 1779 (for 1778), *Premier Prix*) whereas Mique's name is

associated with such a prizewinner only in 1781 (*Premier Prix*) and Le Roy's name in 1783, *Deuxieme Prix*. Over and above the prestigious *Grand Prix de Rome* inaugurated in 1702 and run annually from 1720, the *Académie* introduced monthly competitions in 1763 namely the *Prix d'Emulation*, which Thibault seems to have won twice, in January 1775 with 'A gateway to a commercial town' and in March 1775 with 'an altar for the principal chapel in a circular building'.⁹

The subjects of Thibault's *Prix d'Emulation* plus the guidance Boullée gave the winners of the *Grand Prix* reflect the importance of the Revolutionary Architect's influence on the intellectual atmosphere in the *Académie*. Although Boullée's *Architecture, essai sur l'art* was written late in his life, the illustrations to which it refers were prepared for use in his lectures.¹⁰ These then must have been known to Thibault with their subjects of Metropole, Opera, Circus, Bibliothèque, Cenotaphs, City Gates, etc.

The Revolutionary Architects had built few buildings by the late 1770s. Boullée's *Hôtel Alexandre* (1763) and *Hôtel Brunoy* (1779) were considered 'sterile' by their author. Ledoux's *Hôtel Guimard* (1770), *Chataux Louveciennes* (1771) and *Hôtel de Thélusson* (late 1770s) are more idiomatic of the Revolutionary style and could have influenced the young Thibault.

The projects by Ledoux for the *Ferme Générale* of the Saltworks and the *Barrières* were undertaken in the 1780s and would not have been known to Thibault. Any resemblance between such works and his own must therefore be the result of training and not an example followed. The possibility that Ledoux's drawings for these projects circulated at the Cape and were known to Thibault cannot be excluded.

His training would have followed the *Académie's* curriculum devised by Blondel. There were two sets of courses, one an elementary six month course for amateurs and beginners, and the other a two year theory course for prospective practitioners comprising three parts: theory, layout and construction. The latter is the course probably followed by Thibault.

Boullée's influence as educator was strong and pervasive. His essay is a reaction to Pérauld's thesis that architecture is an art of pure invention. Boullée asserts that a study of Nature is necessary and that the Poetry of architecture derives from natural effects and through their application architecture becomes an art of the sublime.¹¹

The sense of the Sublime derives from Burke's attempt to create a science of the emotions in his 'Sublime and Beautiful' (1757) which was translated into French in 1765.¹²

The Sublime was that emotion of astonishment 'in which all [the soul's] motions are suspended, with some degree of horror'.¹³ That which could evoke the Sublime was related to obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, succession and uniformity, magnitude and light. Many of Burke's injunctions refer particularly to buildings and Boullée appears to have interpreted these directly in his drawings. The gloomy, decayed ruins of

the fallen Roman Empire which Piranesi portrayed in his etchings would also have been readily available to the French through their Roman connection by means of the *Grand Prix*. These illustrations evoked the sublime emotions referred to by Burke and inspired the building types which Boullée chose to portray. Civil projects became the obsessive concern of the Revolutionary Architects and such was the impact of these projects that the meaning of the word 'monument' changed in French from 'memorial' to 'large edifice'.

After the first glow of reason brought to architecture by Laugier and his *Essai sur l'Architecture* of 1753, which usurped the ubiquity of the Baroque and Rococo aesthetic, there followed the mannered questioning of the slavish following of classical precedent, particularly the ruling fashion of Greek Revival.

Newton had come late to the French but his influence was as profound as in his homeland. Just as he had been eulogized in verse by his compatriots so he inspired Boullée's architectural theories. It is therefore not surprising that it is the effect of light which was of overriding importance to Boullée and that he should introduce the theory of an 'architecture of the shadows'. It is a reflection on the genius of Boullée that he could, through the medium of architecture, synthesize the prevalent theories of the day.

The foregoing is a brief *resumé* of current thinking which would have influenced Thibault's architecture.

Here follows an abbreviated *curriculum vitae* of Thibault in the Cape.

- 1783 Arrives at the Cape as a member of de Meuron's (The Neuchatel Swiss) regiment in the pay of the Dutch East India Company.
- 1786 Marries Elizabeth von Schoor and settles at the Cape.
- 1795 As chief military engineer of the Dutch East India Company he signs over the inventory of buildings to His Britannic Majesty.
- 1799 Appointed Architect of Military Works under British occupation.
- 1801 Appointed Inspector of Public Works in the Colony to the Batavian Government.
- 1807 Permission granted to practise as Surveyor in the Colony.
- 1811 Appointed as sworn Government Surveyor.
- 1813 Services offered as Director of Arts and Crafts at a Technical Institute founded and funded by the Free Masons of the Lodge de Goede Hoop.
- 1815 Died 14 November 1815 and buried in the Dutch Reformed Cemetery, Somerset Road, Cape Town.

Thibault can thus be considered a Revolutionary Architect by training and by nationality. His absence from his native France during the Revolution does not disqualify him since it is practice and not political persuasion which Kaufmann considers admissible. In any event when it came to expressing political sentiment Thibault was discrete since he found himself in possession of information on military installations at a time when the Cape became the pawn in the shifting European political power.^{14 b}

If we are to apply the term Revolutionary Architect to Thibault then we shall have to analyse his work to discover whether or not it reflects the 'revolutionary patterns' identified by Kaufmann. It will be of particular interest to subject the contentious examples to such a scrutiny, for example the Lodge de Goede Hoop and the Wachthuis, both slated by Lewcock.¹⁵

*Papenboom*¹⁶ (c. 1785) was one of Thibault's earlier South African works and is often compared with the Petit Trianon in Versailles (1762-68) of his teacher¹⁷ Jacques-Anges Gabriel (1692-1782). However, if Papenboom is compared with Ledoux's House for Mlle de St. Germain (1772) then Thibault's revolutionary traits become obvious. Whereas the Petit Trianon shows distinct concatenation, gradation and especially Baroque vitalist plasticity of decoration, both Ledoux's and Thibault's designs have been conceived as interpenetrating volumes and spaces, the recessed portico being a persiflage of the *avant-corps* of the Trianon. Ledoux's and Thibault's works have walls which are unmodulated flat surfaces with punched-out window and door openings. Gabriel's manneristically placed balustrade at roof level echoes the column and window rhythm and is repeated in the garden. By contrast the revolutionaries prefer a flat roof, reminiscent of Egyptian practice. While Ledoux still compromises by adding four statues over the columns, Thibault is more radical. He does not even permit the conventional vases. Thibault's podium is unmistakably Ledolcian: by recessing the access road and omitting balustrades the podium is exposed with stark cubistic clarity. This again allies Thibault with the revolutionaries in their concern for primary volumes and forms. Bearing in mind that Papenboom was built at the beginning of Thibault's South African career, the thesis that he arrived as a proper French Classicist and gradually degenerated into his own kind of Cape-mannerism seems untenable.

The *Hospital*¹⁸ (25 May 1791) is a prime example of antithesis in the sense of Kaufmann's 'tension between distanced elements' where the flanking buildings have been disproportionately removed thereby stretching the connecting links beyond all classical decorum. The flanks are both higher and more prominent than the receding central part which even lacks a pediment. Again this compositional system is part of Revolutionary Architecture as exemplified in Ledoux's Discount Bank on the *rue d'Artois* designed in 1788 for the Minister of Finance, Jacques Necker. That this is not a singular accident is confirmed by his Gateway of Bourneville where the hollow centre and dominating flanks are taken to the extreme. This system was preceded by the work of Jean-Francois de Neufforge, a Belgian-born pupil of Blondel's who published in 1757 to 1777. In his '*chambres consulaires et chambre criminelle*' peripheral elements successfully compete with the main part.

Thibault's Hospital is also an example of 'multiple response': the pediments of the flanking buildings are repeated in reduced scale on the receding sections with no more than a vestigial wobble on the right-hand parapet. Whereas windows on the right are arched,

those on the left are rectangular, producing a 'compensation between elements of different weight' namely the differing facade heights.

The *Koopmans de Wet house*¹⁹ (c. 1791–93) is an example of traditional concatenation, hierarchy and integration. There seems to be no trace of revolutionary architecture. The only incongruous element is the garland over the entrance which — in typical Baroque manner — extends over its frame and 'addresses the onlooker'. This treatment is characteristic of Anton Anreith's work²⁰ as seen in the banner held by the lion and unicorn (Government building, Adderley Street)²¹ or on the Wine Cellar pediment (Groot Constantia).²² Sculpture and architecture seem to share a common life and plasticity. However, on the *Koopmans de Wet* facade the remnant garlands are stereotyped and dead. This type of contrast between 'architectural' and 'sculptural' ornament is not typical of revolutionary architecture.

Saasveld^c (1791) has been removed from its original site in Kloof Street below Table Mountain and reconstructed in Franschhoek with the Drakenstein as backdrop. The concern with primary volumetric forms is again illustrated in this structure. Outbuildings become major contributors to the attenuation of relationship of these forms in space.

The waenhuis facade could possibly be mistaken for one of Ledoux's *barrière* designs of 1784. Both display

asthenical proportions (hard to justify for either the *barrières* or a waggonshed) and other details such as the 'idiotic stare' of the round 'eyes' of *Barrière de Montmartre* which have been placed too far apart and too high. Thibault's triglyphs become oversized keystone (like those of the *Barrière des Fournaux* or post-modern ones for that matter); fake rustications are contrasted with smooth surfaces; the 'sinking' flat arch — not half circle as Fransen²³ calls it — is a favourite revolutionary theme, recurring in the *Barrière de Courcelle* and the gate of *Hôtel de Thélusson*.

The *Lodge de Goede Hoop* (1803) (Figure 1) is the composition of form in light. It resembles the earlier composition of interpenetrating volumetric forms of Thibault's earlier project for a wheat store (1803) (Figure 2). Here, however, windows are reduced to a minimum and thus ignore the landscape and its romantic setting. The column design is a composition of antithesis (alternated rusticated block and smooth shaft) and interpenetrating volumes (cylinder penetrating cuboid). They front the shield wall of Egyptian inspiration — doubtless intentional if one examines the taper of the section,²³ which allies it to the masonic tradition. The hemi-cylindrical projections flanking the portico owe more to Ledoux's *Oikema* than to local tradition of apsidal ends of church architecture.

Once inside one is aware of the subterranean nature of

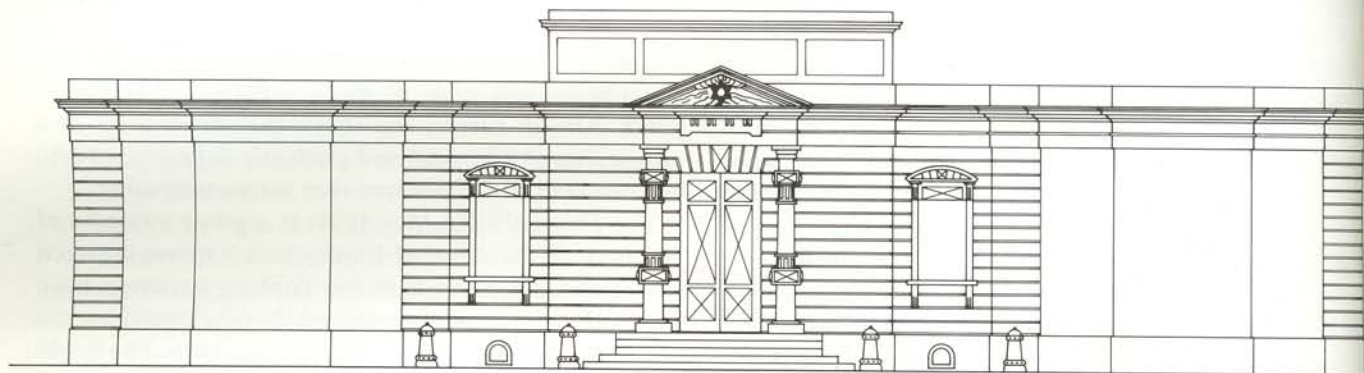


Figure 1 Freemasons' Lodge de Goede Hoop (1803).

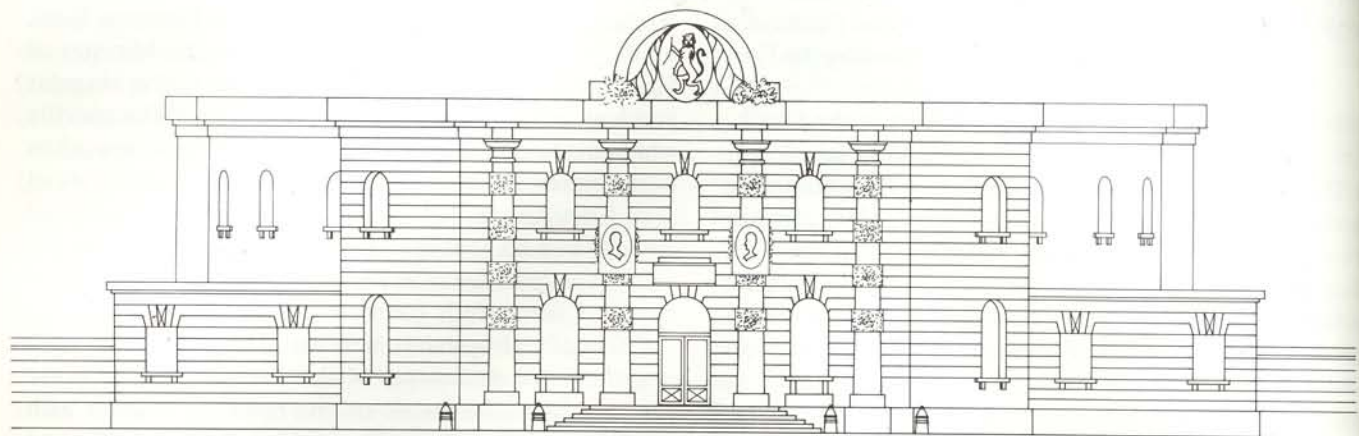


Figure 2 Wheat Store (1803).

the architecture, a characteristic concern of the Revolutionaries²⁴ with its *lumière mystérieuse*. It appeals less to the senses than to the intellect. What offends the eye may intrigue the mind. Once we intellectualize and verbalize the composition the *architecture parlante* (speaking architecture) tells of the ascendancy from a low order of straight line geometry, through a higher order of triangular surface and circular forms, finally to the highest order (unexecuted in the built version), the three-dimensional ellipsoid.

A vertical progression similar to the one in the Lodge is found in the facade of the *Old Government building* (1814) (Figure 3), a flat lintol becomes a triangular pediment which transforms into a semicircle which in turn is crowned by a full circle. We interpret this *architecture parlante* as symbolizing a sunrise. The erstwhile Drostdy Hof in Graaff-Reinet has a similar composition. Thibault provides no literary proof to justify our interpretation. Ledoux's '*Déjà l'aurore s'empare du monde; les arts se réveillent; un nouveau jour commence*'^{25 d} (which sounds quaintly familiar to readers of Le Corbusier) can however be applied.

The *Guard house* (1804) (Figure 4) is more radical than his earlier *Guard House* (before 1793) (Figure 5) to the Slave Lodge. Here the *architecture parlante* is in the ascendant. It is akin to Ledoux's *barrières*, and although termed 'perverse' by Lewcock,²⁶ is more restrained than these. The facade reveals an overlay of at least three

buildings (reverberation). The largest is a rectangular rusticated and corniced backdrop onto which is superimposed a gabled 'primitive hut' à la Laugier which in its turn carries a central flattened pedimented portico. The headless plumed helmet of the acroterion is echoed in the emptied niches, a hollow vestigial of an earlier epoch. An inversion of scale is indicated by the oversized hitching rings placed beyond human reach in the manner of Ledoux's *Salines* at Chaux.

We interpret the column decoration as being fasces (wooden rods bundled about an axe) as carried by Roman *lictors*, which speak of the rule of law and symbolize '*ex unitate vires*'. The discovery that the same decoration appears on Ledoux's *Maison d'Union* corroborates the interpretation.

The '*Hurling*' pump house (ascribed to Thibault) features the same unlikely pile of design elements as Neufforge's Sepulchral Chapel.

The fluted and truncated cone of Thibault's authenticated design for *fountain on the Parade* (1805) (Figure 6) is similar to the Hurling pump's. This archetypal design may be traced back to Bramante's *Tempietto* which was geometricized in St. Martin's-in-the-Fields by James Gibbs (1721), thereby subjecting architecture to the discipline of geometry. After Thibault, John Nash's *All Souls* on Langham Place, London (1822-1824), takes the theme of interpenetrating stereometric bodies to an extreme.

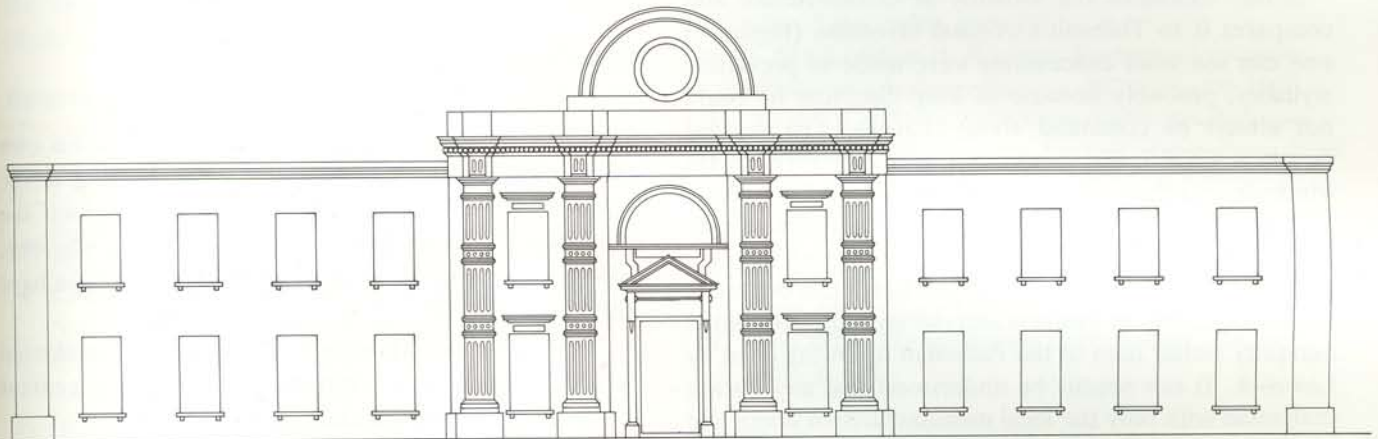


Figure 3 Old Government Building (1814).

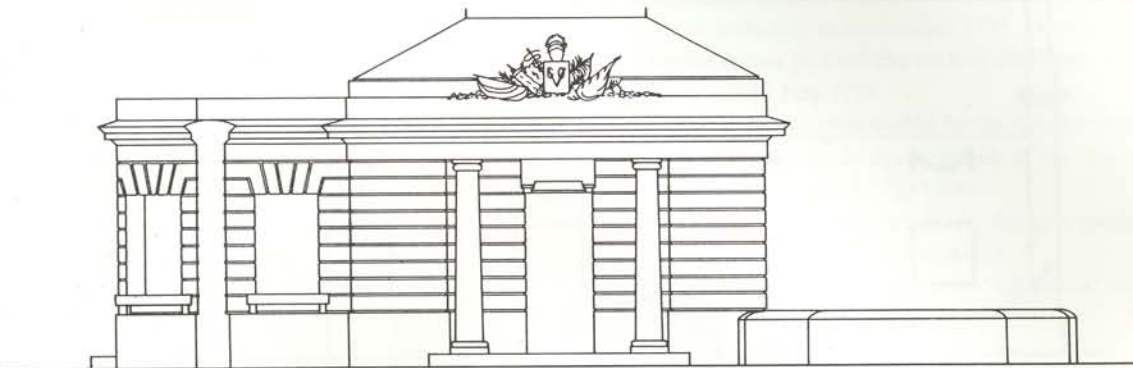


Figure 4 Guard House to Company gardens (1804).

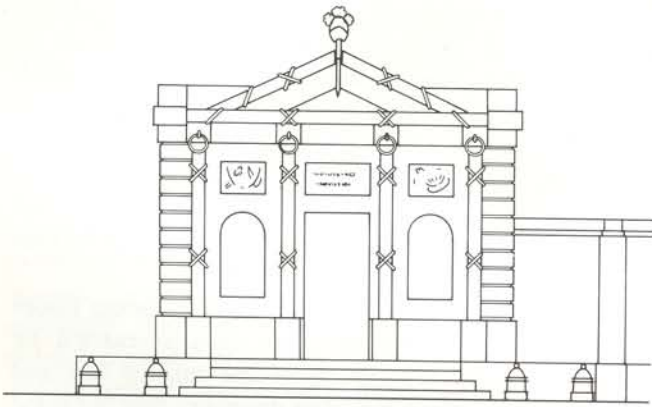


Figure 5 Guard House to Slave Quarters (1793).

Having established that the aforementioned projects can well be viewed in terms of Revolutionary Architecture, what is one to make of his projects where 'classical forms are mixed with Baroque and Rococo'?²⁷

It must be assumed that Thibault, as a new arrival to the Cape, trod warily in the execution of his designs and attempted to accommodate the prevailing stylistic preferences. The available expertise for the erection of buildings at the Cape was limited. Schutte and Anreith, both well trained in their respective crafts of builder and sculptor, brought their own stylistics to bear on Thibault's designs. This would have distorted his original intentions thereby producing an eclectic effect.

If one examines the Drostdy at Graaff-Reinet and compares it to Thibault's original invention (Figure 7) one can see what concessions were made to prevailing stylistics, probably because of long distances he could not always be consulted about changes. The original facade is smooth and continuous with repetitive square windows punched into its surface. These have been replaced by the oblong-pane sash windows which typify the period. The central portico is styled on the Pantheon, the ubiquitous archetype which can be traced to the popularity of Piranesi and the imageries of ruined antiquity rather than to the Palladian following cited by Lewcock. It can readily be understood that any distant craftsman with only the local manufacturer of doors and his own sensibilities of gable treatment at his disposal

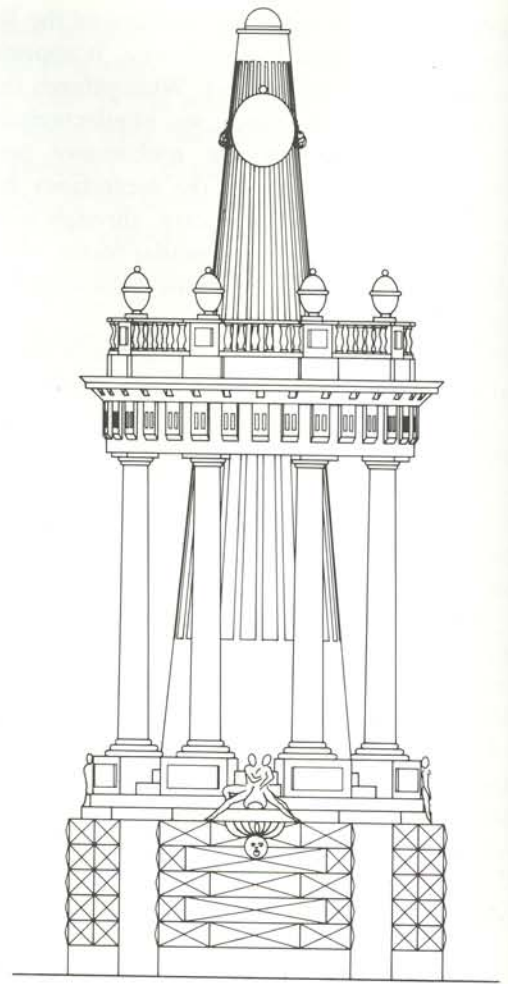


Figure 6 Fountain on the Parade (1805).

would have reinterpreted Thibault's design to his own satisfaction. 'So far from slavishly surrendering to the superior will of his architect, he permits himself the widest liberty — *perché crede di far meglio* — whereby, indeed, now as in the past, many excellent designs have been frustrated'.^{28 e}

Since few of Thibault's designs for residential buildings are extant it is difficult to know to what extent lack of his approval for changes was the rule.

It would appear that Thibault did not so much bring

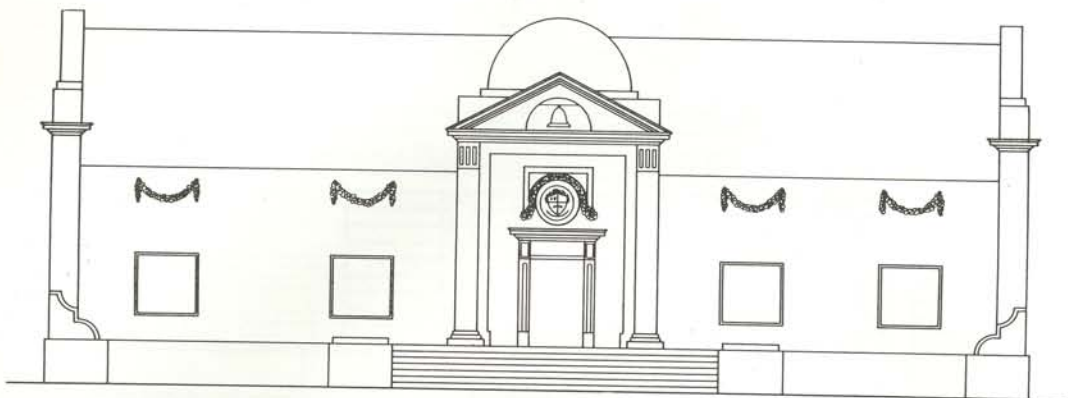


Figure 7 Graaff-Reinet Drostdy (1804).

the classical revival in the Palladian tradition to the Cape as that his design sensibilities were tempered by prevailing taste and available craftsmanship. When executing his later designs for official projects he returned to the aesthetics of his academic training. Thus even though he was not in demonstrable contact with the contemporary pre- and post-Revolutionary architectural expression of Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu, his work displays the same character through shared theories and influences.

With his appointment under British rule he was able to undertake projects on a civic scale and through the medium of these projects explore the architectural forms of his early studies. Rather than an architecture in isolation his work takes on the contemporaneous character of his colleagues in his native France. His work is not outside the mainstream of architectural thought but at its forefront even though executed on distant African shores. His status as innovator has been misconstrued but in this the year of the bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution and in the mannerism of Postmodernism his works should be reinvestigated and his status restored.

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17. H. FRANSEN, *Drie eeue kuns in Suid-Afrika* (Pietermaritzburg, 1981), p. 72.
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19. G. PEARSE, *Eighteenth century architecture in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1968), p. 29., plates 27–29.
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Notes

- a. Puyfontein disputes Deherain's (1924) claim of Picquigny near Amiens as being Thibault's place of birth.
- b. Puyfontein relates Thibault's hesitation in accepting British authority in September 1795. Nearly two years elapsed before he took the oath of allegiance to the British Crown on 11 July 1797.
- c. Pryce-Lewis was responsible for its reconstruction as the Huegenot museum in Franschoek at the site of the Huegenot memorial in the 1960s.
- d. 'Dawn has vanquished the earth, the arts awake: a new day breaks.' (Authors' translation).
- e. 'because he believes to do better' (Authors' translation).