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The re-scripting of the Johannesburg West Dutch Reformed Church

The spire of a Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) is a ubiquitous feature of the South African landscape. They dominate the rural townscape and are a repeated constant in many suburban settings. Seemingly benign, the evolution of the architecture of the DRC is closely linked to the rise of an Afrikaner identity and in turn Afrikaner Nationalism in the early twentieth century. This new self-awareness in many ways parallels in close ideological connections between the DRC and the apartheid state.

The generic architecture of DRC buildings was part of an ideological (and professional) project spearheaded by the architect Gerhard Moerdijk to create an architecture representative of the Afrikaner people, free from the references of Catholicism or British colonial power. The project was a great success leading to many commissions. It was in turn taken up by other architects, many of whom were protégés of Moerdijk, creating an almost national language for DR Churches. Over the course its evolution the buildings style evolved from early neo Cape Dutch examples to mid-century Neo-Byzantine and later bold late modernist 'tent churches'.

In inner city Johannesburg suburbs, social change, particularly since the fall of apartheid, has led to many of these former DR Churches being abandoned by their dwindling congregations. Western inner city suburbs such as Mayfair, Mayfair West and Brixton, some of the first formerly 'white' suburbs to start to 'grey' (the term given to the then illegal occupation of the properties by non-white peoples under the apartheid states segregation laws), have numerous examples of such churches. The churches don't however remain abandoned relics. In these suburbs you will see former Dutch Reformed Churches now functioning as community halls, houses, Hindu temples and Mosques. This paper will explore this in light of the churches' history looking specifically at the example of the former Johannesburg West Dutch Reformed Church, a classic 1940s DRC, which now functions as the progressive Masjid-UI-Islam.

