The crowning glory of homesteads, gables are a defining feature of Cape Dutch architecture.
WHAT WOULD YOU PICK AS THE Cape's most distinctive feature? Table Mountain, voted one of the seven natural wonders of the world? Cape Point, or perhaps Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens? It all depends on your point of view. But for architectural historian Dr Hans Fransen, one feature stands head and shoulders above the rest.

"Cape Dutch architecture is by far the most important contribution made by settlers to world culture. It is absolutely unique," says Dr Hansen, heritage consultant and author of The Old Buildings of the Cape. "Nowhere else has developed such a distinctive style of architecture."

Set amid oaks and vineyards, gracious Cape Dutch homesteads, with their gleaming white plaster and exuberantly decorated gables, are one of the most captivating sights of the Cape. And the story of their architectural heritage is as fascinating as the buildings are appealing.

After the Dutch East India Company established a base in the Cape in 1652, the first settlers built basic rectangular dwellings with no more than three rooms. A century later burgeoning prosperity allowed for more ambitious building, and a new architectural style was born. Although drawn from the Baroque style in vogue in the Netherlands, once European design took root in South Africa it developed in a way that had its own special character that was both appropriate to local conditions and remarkably consistent. Many factors played a part in the evolution of Cape Dutch architecture, from practicality and a desire for status to the skills of slave craftsmen.

"When it came about as a style in the early 1700s, people built what was best for the circumstances," explains Dr Fransen. Builders had to work with what was available – local bricks, for instance, were made of sun-baked clay and did not weather well, so had to be protected with plaster made with lime from sea shells, which gives Cape Dutch Houses their characteristic whiteness. The walls were thick – two brick courses deep to provide protection against heat and damp, while the steep pitch of the roofs was dictated by the need to have runoff from the reed thatch. Glass for window panes had to be imported from Holland.

But above all it is the central gables that make

□ The 1767 winery at Spier, the earliest dated building of its type.
Cape Dutch architecture so distinctive. At first it was the curvaceous Baroque silhouettes adorned with swirls and curlicues, while later gables were in the more restrained neoclassical style. And there is no better place to gain a perspective on their development than at Spier near Stellenbosch, which boasts 21 gables dating from various periods. In wealthy farm complexes not only the manor house had decorative gables, and at Spier the winery, the cow house, slave quarters and workshops are all adorned with handsome gables. In recognition of this important heritage, Spier’s award-winning Pinotage and Chenin Blanc wines carry a ‘21 Gables’ label. And by special arrangement with Spier, Dr Fransen gave us a tour of all of them.

“There is no other farm complex that I know of with as many gables,” says Dr Fransen. “They tried to make each of the buildings prestigious. You can read the period from the gables and each period is represented here. They start off with the simple concave-convex ‘holboel’ shape, and then later become more florid, curling at the top, and the mouldings get more pronounced in the Baroque/Rococo period. Then around 1785 it suddenly changes.”

It was then that architecture altered its tune to the more restrained neoclassical style, where triangular pediments and urns are typical features. There are parallels between the architecture and music of the period, points out Dr Fransen, like the transition from Baroque (CPE Bach) to the classical (Mozart and Haydn), although the change in music was more gradual.

The story of Spier dates back to 1679 when Cape Governor Simon van der Stel opened up the Stellenbosch valley for settlement by the first free burgers. “This is where the story began, on the banks of the Eerste River,” says Dr Fransen. Arnaud Janz, a German soldier with the Dutch East India Company, became the first recorded owner of property on the Eerste, the first river after Cape Town. The name Spier is thought to derive from a Dutch word for bulrushes, and not from the second owner Hans Heinrich Hattingh’s native German town of Speyer as is otherwise suggested.

By the middle of the 18th century the farm at Spier, then owned by Johan Hoffmann, was already known for its quality wine. Next came Albertus Myburgh, who owned the farm from 1765 to 1781. As is often the case with new owners, he had ambitious building work carried out. The winery
at Spier; the earliest known dated building of its type in the country, bears the date 1767 on the holbos gable. In the heart of the Spier complex is an impressive row of gabled buildings: the Jonkershuys, with a gable dated 1778, the workshops (1817) and the homestead (1822), although the house itself was built earlier. Around the complex are the 1773 stables and the slave quarters, their 1812 gable topped with a pediment and hooked scrolls.

Dr Fransen, who has just been conferred with the Award for Extraordinary Cultural Service by the Federatie van Afrikaans Kultuurverenigings (FAK), gives a delightful insight into the progression of the gables’ architectural style. He points out how the different forms of the cavetto (plaster moulding) give a three-dimensional quality to the gables, and how curler curls of plaster were scrolled onto the face of the gable as Baroque designs became more elaborate.

"Enriched plaster work is a colonial feature. It was common in the Portuguese colonies but very few places have anything like what we have here. We don’t know who did the work, but it was probably Cape Malay slaves under instruction from European builders, for there is little or no Oriental influence," says Dr Fransen. "But you can just imagine how, when the work was finished, the plasterers climbed down the ladder, stood back and said, ‘That’s a good gable!’"

The ‘letter of the alphabet’ plan of homesteads is another feature of Cape Dutch architecture. T, L and U plans evolved as more rooms were added to the original rectangular buildings. And the H plan characteristic of prosperous country manors from the early 18th century is unique to the Cape. Interestingly, the width of rooms is always between five and six meters, something which Dr Fransen suggests may have been introduced as a rationalisation measure by Dutch East India Company administrator Hendrik van Rheede tot Drakenstein.

After the British occupied the Cape for the second time in 1806, Cape Dutch architecture continued until the 1880s and later enjoyed a revival promoted by Cecil Rhodes, while architect Herbert Baker designed many new buildings in Cape Dutch style from the 1890s.

In recent times Spier was put on the map by Niel Joubert, one of the pioneers of the Cape wine industry who owned the farm from 1965 to 1993 and began bottling the estate’s own wine. The present owner of Spier, entrepreneur and opera enthusiast Dick Enthoven, undertook a programme of restoration work carried out by heritage architect Tom Darlington and playing a valuable part in heritage conservation.

And so the 21 gables of Spier remain to be enjoyed by visitors, and perhaps celebrated with a glass of their very own wine. Mapping reference F2 see inside back cover

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