
De Aar: Lines of Architecture in the Making of a South African Town (1902–1977)

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Reviewed by

Robyn Schnell

Department of Historical and Heritage Studies

University of Pretoria

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Miescher is one of ESI Press's latest publications. Based on Miescher's study of a series of plans kept in archives across South Africa, he examines the former railway town's 'lines of architecture', infrastructure, and urban history from the turn of the twentieth century until the town's official 75th anniversary. In South African urban historiography, the urban histories of small towns have been largely overlooked in favour of the urban histories of larger, more imposing metropolitan cities (Maylam 1995: 21). Miescher's analysis of the history of a small town situated in the province of the Northern Cape is thus rather unique.

De Aar is not the first study that has been published on the history of this former railway town. Two previous official histories of De Aar were published by the town's municipality in 1952 and 1977 (p. vi). What differentiates Miescher's history of De Aar from these two is that he adopts an 'inclusive perspective' by outlining the 'complex history' of the black-owned properties in De Aar (p. vi). In stark contrast to the two 'official' histories completed in the apartheid era which focused on the history of De Aar's white community and white neighbourhoods he 'considers the former black neighbourhoods' and black-owned properties of the town (p. vi). The specific period that Miescher has chosen to explore, 1902–1977, coincides with two significant events in De Aar's urban history: in 1902, the De Aar farm was purchased by brothers Wulf and Isaac Friedlander who hired a surveyor

to delineate plots for a future town” (p. 14); and 1977 which marked De Aar’s ‘official 75th birthday’ (p. vi). Miescher briefly mentions that the formation of De Aar was a result of ‘British railway imperialism in the late nineteenth century and the South African War of 1899–1902’, and provides a brief explanation of the genesis of De Aar’s urban and spatial history, which ‘emerged from the abandoned military camp at De Aar railway station after the South African War’ (p. 8).

In his seminal article titled ‘Explaining the Apartheid City: 20 Years of South African Urban Historiography’, historian Paul Maylam defines the difference between what he terms, ‘history-in-the-city’ and ‘history-of-the-city’ (Maylam 1995: 20). By using the term, ‘history-in-the-city’, Maylam is referring to the ‘social movements and popular struggles around community issues’ in a particular urban environment (Maylam 1995: 20). Whereas, ‘history-of-the-city’ refers to the spatial history of the urban area’s built environment and focuses primarily on a ‘more specific urban experience’ (Maylam 1995: 21). Maylam asserts that urban historians have been preoccupied with the former, whilst overlooking the latter (Maylam 1995: 20). In his contribution to Maylam’s argument, historian Vivian Bickford-Smith also defines the ‘history-of-the-city’ approach, by maintaining that this approach must combine the dominating themes of urban histories (Bickford-Smith 1995: 64). Such themes include the analysis of a city’s purpose and function, the consideration of themes such as the economic, spatial, social, and governmental aspects of a study’s chosen city and by doing so within the ‘grand processes’ of industrialisation and urbanisation (Bickford-Smith 1995: 64). Furthermore, Bickford-Smith argues that the ‘history-of-the-city’ approach must compare a study’s subject city with others in the same category (Bickford-Smith 1995: 64). While Miescher addresses some of these criteria in *De Aar*, he does not include a comparative component.

What is of note is that in line with the inclusivity of all of De Aar’s community members is the fact that the book is a bilingual publication which includes the text in English on the lefthand pages of the book, and the Afrikaans translation on the righthand side. In the Preface, Miescher explains that the inclusion of both languages is because Afrikaans is the primary language that is spoken in De Aar by the majority of its residents, both in the past and present (p. viii). Additionally, Miescher affirms that the bilingualism of *De Aar* pays homage to the multilingualism of South Africa as a whole (p. viii). Miescher’s inclusionary approach is reinforced by the addition of a list of De Aar’s former Black property owners in the book’s appendix (p. 12). This list is a transcription of the entire list of ‘landowners and their property in Greenpoint and the Malay Camp in 1925’ (p. 66), which were other ‘Black residential areas’ within the town (p. 40). In addition to the names of the property

owners, this list also includes the 'estimated value' of the properties and the plot numbers (p. 102).

Since the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the railway camp in De Aar 'formed the physical barrier between' the two distinctly racially segregated halves of the town (p. 40). The 'White township' (p. 14), otherwise known as 'New Township Friedlander Bro.' (p. 16), was located West of the railway camp, whereas the 'Black township' or the 'the Bloemfontein Erven and the "Beckwith Block"' (p. 34) was situated 'East of the railway camp' (p. 16). The municipality remains separated by the railway camp to the present day (p. 16). Like many towns and cities across South Africa, the Group Areas Act of 1950 altered the 'urban landscape' of the Black neighbourhoods and resulted in the 'forced removals of thousands of residents' (p. 16). However, in the case of De Aar, as highlighted by Miescher, a major obstacle to the implementation of the Group Areas Act, was 'Black freehold land' and 'Black owner's insistence on their rights' (p. 118) which challenged the white municipality's plans to segregate and reconstruct De Aar.

As is evident by the book's title, railway lines play a significant function in both *De Aar* and Miescher's study of the town. Miescher highlights how at De Aar, the 'four main lines came together and made the town one of the most important railway junctions of the entire network' (p. 2). Furthermore, Miescher specifies how 'lines and delineation constituted the physical and representational *dispositif*' in which the town's built environment and architecture emerged (p. 2). Additionally, De Aar is one of the earliest instances of a town in South Africa in which the town's development occurred adjacent to 'the lines of strict racial segregation between Black and White residents' at the turn of the 20th century (p. 8).

As Maylam notes, 'The terrain of South African urban history has become highly interdisciplinary' (Maylam 1995: 20). *De Aar* is no exception. The book is the integration of a variety of disciplines, including history, architecture, archival science, as well as spatial and urban planning. In particular, the use of archival material found in archives across South Africa laid the foundation for Miescher's urban history. Miescher asserts that archival materials helped to 'reconstruct the planning, development, and infrastructural furnishing of the different neighbourhoods' (p. vi). Furthermore, Miescher's analysis of three essential blueprints and other records found in South African archives form the foundation of the book (p. 116). This again reinforces the significance of 'lines' in Miescher's study, as Miescher has employed the lines and contours from these blueprints to shed light on De Aar's history as a town.

Within the genre of urban history, both the built environment and infrastructure play a central role. As historian Bill Freund asserted, '... one needs to stress the need to prioritise

the study of economic structures and trajectories in other periods as well to grasp how urban growth, which inevitably involves assimilating earlier layers of both activity and of the built environment' (Freund 2005: 27). Miescher achieves this in *De Aar* as he indicates the economic prospects which essentially contributed towards the development of the town's built environment, infrastructure and urban growth. For example, Miescher outlines how the 'construction of the railway line' at the end of the eighteenth century became associated with 'entrepreneurial possibilities' and opportunities (p. 20). To capitalise on this, the Friedlander brothers 'secured exclusive trading rights from the owner' of the farm, De Aar (p. 20). As a result, business activities such as trade became 'completely banned in De Aar East and [were] limited in De Aar West' (p. 16). Additionally, Miescher notes that in the 1940s the 'alleged Coloured support for racial segregation' may have been 'affected by economic aspirations and housing' (p. 84). The outcome of racial segregation had a profound impact on the development of infrastructure and the built environment, particularly in the Black township. In *De Aar*, Miescher explains how such policies of racial segregation that impacted urban planning, such as 'financial investments, property rights, legal statutes, and housing structures' formed the built environment and infrastructure in De Aar East (p. 46). These two examples from *De Aar* depict how Miescher has highlighted the way economic structures impacted urban growth in both halves of De Aar, and how such economic aspects become intertwined with layers of urban growth and the built environment.

De Aar presents an impressive study of the built environment and urban history of the former railway town. It can be argued that Miescher's study employs De Aar as a lens through which urban histories of small towns in South Africa can be viewed. *De Aar* does not claim to be a complete history of the town from its earliest conception before the South African War up until the present day. However, it remains an important contribution towards De Aar's urban history – and urban histories of small towns in South Africa in general – due to its inclusion of the previously excluded and overlooked histories of the town's black residents and neighbourhoods. The inclusivity of the history of De Aar and the bilingual element are key traits of Miescher's study that are both innovative and commendable.

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