Tribute to Bernard Stanley Cooke

architect extraordinaire who left an indelible legacy for Wits

By Professors Katherine Munro and Paul Kotze

Bernard Stanley Cooke passed away in January 2011 aged 100. His passing marks the end of a unique and special architectural era with its origins in the productive modern architectural partnerships of the 1930s.

Cooke qualified with distinction, with a diploma in Architecture in 1932, following several years of study as a part-time student and a year of full-time study. He described himself as “being his own master from 1933” and hungry for any freelance work. It was a start to a career spanning over 60 years and during six decades, he made an enormous contribution to the development of modern 20th century architecture in South Africa and most significantly to the buildings of the Milner Park site of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society (today’s West Campus) and the University itself.

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Bernard Cooke (seated) with (from left to right) his sons Julian and Paul and daughter Jane Hoepfl.
Bernard Stanley Cooke

In his remarkably long and active life he accomplished much. He was an unassuming person often in the shadow of more flamboyant and prominent trendsetters and leaders in architecture. Cooke was born in England but his family immigrated to South Africa in 1920. His professional career started when he worked as a junior assistant for Kallenbach, Kennedy & Furner while studying. As a student at Wits, Cooke met and became close friends with Rex Martienssen, John Fassler, Duncan Howie and Gordon MacIntosh. Cooke travelled abroad in 1933 and brought back to South Africa his excitement of his encounters with the pioneering modern European architects such as Le Corbusier in much the same way as the other young Wits architecture graduates of the time.

In the early 1930s, the young School of Architecture at Wits under Professor G Pearse nurtured some remarkable talent that came to shape the architecture of the city of Johannesburg in the years of post-depression and, gold mining-led expansion. Downtown Johannesburg flowered as a modern business and residential centre with an impressive collection of Art Deco buildings due to the enthusiasm and creativity of architects like Cooke.

Cooke became an exponent in the 1930s of the celebrated and innovative International Style and the Johannesburg adaptations and innovations of that style. He worked closely with Rex Martienssen and John Fassler in 1934 in a short-lived but innovative partnership. Cooke was the only full-time member of the small intimate practice and for a few brief months of intense creativity the focus was on the designs for houses, some blocks of flats in Johannesburg and some business premises. Gilbert Herbert has written about the Martienssen-Fassler-Cooke partnership (Chapter 15 of Martienssen and the International Style, 1974) but a fuller critical appreciation of Cooke’s entire body of work and his later professional partnerships is still awaited. Cooke and Fassler later worked on the original Eskom House (now demolished) in collaboration with Pearse.

In an interview in May 2010, Cooke remembered Martienssen as a delightful character, full of joy, “an excellent teacher who made everyone feel they were clever – far more than they really were”, although Martienssen never suffered fools gladly. Cooke’s memory of Fassler was of a very intense, very clever, very talented, very thorough architect. He recalled Pearse as “a tall brusque man whose appearance frightened students, but who was much liked and was extremely good to people”.

Cooke’s link to Milner Park dated back to 1936 at the time of the planning for the Empire Exhibition when Cooke, as a fresh young graduate, was responsible for the perspective drawings of the now iconic Tower of Light (the architect was Prof G Pearse). Cooke explained that the rough drawings and the inspiration were all Pearse’s, but that he was expected to turn out the detailed plans and working drawings.

Cooke enlisted during the Second World War and served in Egypt and Italy in the South African Engineering Corps. He was part of a camouflage unit whose objective in Egypt was to simulate an attack from the south and thus hide the Allied attack.

After the war, in 1946, he entered into a partnership with Leonard Fleming, the son of Frank Fleming who had been Herbert Baker’s Johannesburg partner. Through a mere two generations there was a direct link back to that tradition of the iconic colonial masterpieces. Fleming and Cooke, in a partnership that lasted more than 40 years, created some remarkable modern buildings. They were the official architects of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society (WAS) and it was in that alliance that Cooke was responsible for many of the buildings we still use on the West Campus and a good many which were later demolished.
Still in existence is the old Hall of South African Industries including the Bien Donne restaurant (today’s D J du Plessis building) with a circular frontage that sits prominently above the rockery and ridge of the Gavin Relly Green. He was the architect of the Flower Hall, an innovative structure of the 1960s for the exhibition space of the Horticultural Society, with a curved arched roof in three sections – the absolutely practical and functional engineering solution to covering a large exhibition area was achieved with elegance and style. The building is still used today as an examination venue and is still called the Flower Hall.

Another of Cooke’s unusual buildings was the British Pavilion, a large circular exhibition hall, which stood on the site of the present Barnato Hall. It was a circular exhibition building with extensive and innovative use made of steel supports and frameworks to give volume and interior space. The roof had an elegant floating appearance. Ove Arup was the structural engineer. Unfortunately the building was demolished to give way to later developments, but one can see the influence of the British Pavilion in the Flower Hall.

Cooke was also the architect of the Old Mutual Sports Hall – another large functional double-volume space with seats for spectators at first-floor level and sporting activities on a wooden sprung ground floor. Again it’s a functional building, structurally sound using concrete, glass and wood for permanence and durability. Cooke was also the architect of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society’s large West End Stadium in the late 1950s. With its overhanging cast concrete roof, it accommodated the masses attending the arena events of the Rand Show. It is this stadium which is currently being adapted and incorporated into the new Science Stadium for undergraduate students that will open later in 2011 and which will transform the old Rand Show stadium. As the resident architects of the WAS, Cooke and Fleming were responsible for the Consol Glass Pavilion, the Dairy Board Pavilion (now home of the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development), the entrance to the showgrounds (now demolished) and the functional Agricultural Boards building (now the General Mining Laboratory).

Cooke was a member of the South African Institute of Architects for 78 years and in 1982 was awarded a gold medal of distinction for his lifetime achievements. Cooke retired at the age of 78 and in his later years, he was a resident of the Silvermine Retirement Village, close to Noordhoek Valley in the Western Cape. In the 1990s, together with his grandson, Cooke designed the Silvermine Village chapel, a small unusual interdenominational community facility. The distinguishing design feature is the width of the nave, enabling all present to feel they are in the front row pews. Incidentally Cooke also designed the pews and all the other furniture.

At the age of 99, Cooke and his family visited Venice on a final pilgrimage, and in our interview, he beamed when recalling those inspirational memories.
Section of the Genmin Laboratory, formerly a Witwatersrand Agricultural Show exhibition area for the Agricultural Boards. The semi-circular open space in the roof linking the Genmin building to the Flower Hall has proved ideal for members of the mountain club wanting to practice their abseiling skills.