The Atrium, Southwest Engineering
parttwo

The Great Hall has been consistently used for all types of functions and events requiring a large venue. My first visit to the Great Hall was as a teenager, to be thrilled by lively Gilbert and Sullivan productions of the Wits Dramatic and Operatic Society. Who can forget the youthful professor of law, Paul Bober, in the role of the “modern major general” – he was word and pitch perfect. In the 1950s a memorable production was King Kong.

Jewel in the Crown

Central Block and the creation of the University of the Witwatersrand

By Professor Katherine Munro

Photos by Peter Maher
Heritage

This was a venue synonymous with the voice of political protest in the 1960s and 70s, when public figures who wished to communicate another view of South Africa’s future to the apartheid government were welcomed, often attracting overseas speakers. I remember the thundering address of Robert Kennedy in this hall in 1966.

The Examination Room was located above the Great Hall on the second floor and is still used primarily for this purpose. It seats several hundred students and was intended as the central examination venue. In addition to examinations there were other activities such as lectures, tutorials, registration of students and, until the 1970s, socials and dances.

I can remember as a naive first-year student in 1963 walking into the Exam Hall firmly set on studying psychology and sociology, only to emerge registered for economics and political science. I’d encountered Donald Livingstone, who had set about trying to persuade me to depart from Wits and study domestic science rather than political science as the females of the species were destined to become wives and mothers. This tongue-in-cheek remark was enough to set me on another well-chosen path which led to my being captivated by the erudition and enthusiasm of Professor GHL Le May, affectionately known as Copper Le May, who expounded with equal authority on the British Constitution, the politics of the Boer War and the strategy of the American Civil War, in lecture rooms of the Central Block.

A staff common room and dining room were located at the south-east corner. This was a convivial, relaxing place where staff were served stodgy cheap meals and the pleasure was in the conversation of colleagues from all disciplines. Later a corridor was pushed through to Senate House and today that space is occupied by offices of the Politics discipline. Staircases at each level on East and West connect the Central Block to Senate House. Today you will find schools and disciplines such as Philosophy, Social Anthropology, Sociology, History and Political Studies.

Prior to the development of the West Campus the Central Block contained the Law Library and the Geography Library, housing the map collection. These libraries added character to the building but were relocated in the late 1980s as new facilities were opened elsewhere.

During the 1970s I recall the daily tea ritual of Professor Ludwig Lachmann, the old-world head of Economics, in his front study in Central Block - women poured the tea and the men stood up for the women!
The 1964 closure of the main road along the east-west axis proved controversial. The road was reserved for pedestrians and the patterned brick-paved Bozoli Piazza replaced the driveway. Mr JN Shunn, a lecturer in the Department of Architecture, proposed an underground multi-level parking garage under the central open space with gardens above. This has still not come to fruition.

In the mid-1970s the Central Block was dwarfed by the tower block to the rear and south - the 11-storey Senate House, built during the era of GR Bozoli. The access road to the south of the Central Block ceased to run across the back of the building.

By 1968 the courtyard quadrangles of the Central Block on either side of the Great Hall were filled in with East and West Annexes to create more offices and seminar rooms. The East Annex first housed the offices of the Finance Department, where weekly cash pay packets were collected by the large numbers of support staff employed in gardening and cleaning. As five levels were inserted in each annexe, a rabbit-warren effect with the emphasis on functionality was created and reasonably sized interior offices and student seminar rooms looked out bleakly onto enclosed spaces and toilets. For some fifteen years my office was CB East Annex room 60 and here Economic History found a happy home as part of the Department of History.

In his 1968 Report, Vice-Chancellor Professor Bozoli noted that the gross floor area per student (and there were 8 500 students by this time) was 190 square feet (58.5 square metres) and considered this to be rather on the low side in comparison with overseas norms of 300 to 400 square feet (92 to 123 square metres).

Through the years the University’s liberal tradition of protest against the National Party apartheid government underpinned visible public resistance. The stance of Wits staff and students against exclusion of black students is commemorated in a plaque, now located just inside the entrance hall of the Central Block. In 1959 this statement was written on a giant banner and hung across the fronting pillars. It was an image captured in newspapers around the world. In 1987 the University again affirmed in a general assembly its freedom to teach, research and pursue independent scholarship.
In 2004 a third plaque marked 10 years of democratic rule and reaffirmed the University’s commitment to academic freedom.

This is remembered in a second plaque. In 2004 a third plaque marked 10 years of democratic rule and reaffirmed the University’s commitment to academic freedom.

Between the 1960s and the early 1990s Wits was frequently a site of protest and struggle when police disrupted protesting students and the tear-gassed victims raced for refuge into the hidden annexes of Central Block. They twisted flaming funnels of newspaper to dissipate the effects of the tear gas, permeating the building with an acrid smell. In the 1980s a rear first-floor lecture room was bombed out, as was the office of Professor Tom Lodge, Professor of Politics, on the west wing ground floor. It was an unsettling time as academics, anticipating...
more violent acts, debated whether to remove their books to their homes. Throughout Wits kept on teaching, examining and graduating its students and never closed. Wits again proudly commemorated the opening of the University to all in 2004 and this freedom is marked with a plaque placed alongside the 1959 one.

In late 1978, under the direction of the planning officer, David Sleeman, the Great Hall was given a facelift to improve its functionality for music and to improve the acoustics, lighting, seating and stage area. Several structural changes were made to turn the hall into a concert venue: the 12 m stage in front of the proscenium (with a performance area of 8 m) was extended to include an orchestra pit (4 m x 10 m); the interior walls were treated to enhance the acoustics and fold-up acoustic panels were brought in so that the backstage area could be accessed for major events, such as graduations. It remains an essential venue for graduations, concerts, visiting lectures, orientation, student events, and important commemorative and political events.

The most recent improvements to the Central Block took place in 1999 and 2000, during the vice-chancellorship of Professor Colin Bundy, when Henry Paine was appointed the architect to modernise the foyer, enhance its acoustic properties and update the toilet facilities throughout the building. The inner screening glass wall was adapted to open up access to the foyer and black acoustically absorbent surfaces were used to improve the ambience. These were positioned in front of the 1930s travertine wall claddings. The new black panels contrast with their stainless steel frames and rivets. The red quarry tiles so distinctive of the 1930s modernist architecture were again sourced from Albany, Grahamstown. The sculpture of Geoffrey Armstrong was introduced with the addition of the long wood bench-like forms that invite people to take a seat. The coats of arms of the Witwatersrand towns originally associated with the founding of the University are on the left-hand wall and make a colourful display of our mining heritage.

Now to relate a little more about the other four oldest Wits buildings.

The Botany, Zoology and Geology Block (today named the Biology Block) was the first academic building on the campus, completed in 1922. A competition was held for the design in 1919 and the prize winner was John Perry of Cape Town. Perry worked with EH Waugh, the Town Engineer of Johannesburg, and John Barrow was the builder. It was built around three sides of a quadrangle, framing a front open courtyard area. The architects’ estimated cost for the building was £65 300. By 1923 this building had become the home of the Departments of Geology, Applied Mathematics, Botany and Zoology. The building also housed two small botany and zoology museums, the lighting of which caused
controversy during construction. In 1968 a further floor was added to the Biology Block and the underground phytotrons or controlled growth chambers were inserted below ground in the front courtyard.

Today the building is linked to the Oppenheimer Life Sciences building via an aerial walkway. The building, according to Caroline Crump of the School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences, still serves its purpose as it brings together researchers, laboratories and students into a close working environment. “The space works and biology today is at the heart of future global developments, so is at the forefront of advances in science,” she says. Today the Zoology Museum and the Moss Herbarium are combined in a single museum in the Oppenheimer Life Sciences Building, which was built in the 1980s.

In 1923 the Physics and Chemistry Block was the second teaching block to be built, following a Greek classical design with impressive 18 cast columns fronting a recessed portico and rising above the shallow set of nine steps. The building was occupied by the middle of 1924 and is today the home to the School of Physics). In 1960, during the energetic headship of Professor Frank Nabarro, the Physics building was redesigned and extended at a cost of R320 000 and then housed the Physics Department together with the Physical Science Division Library. The columned frontage remained unchanged but the interior was transformed and a second floor was added on three faces of the building. Old laboratories and lecture rooms were converted and a number of new rooms added. Space-saving gallery floors were built in the library, in the workshop and in a large laboratory. Roof space was converted into three laboratories.

In 1925 the Council minutes record receiving a preliminary report for the two-storey Engineering Laboratories and Workshops building (today’s North West Engineering), designed to harmonise with the other key buildings, with a budget of £60 000. The architects were Messrs Cowin and Williamson and the builder was again John Barrow. This building was constructed between 1926 and 1928 and was officially opened by the Prime Minister, JBM Hertzog, in 1928. In 1961 it was extended with the addition of the John Orr Wing, named in honour of the first professor of engineering at the School of Mines in Kimberley, who bequeathed a considerable capital sum to Wits.

The Central Block and the other original four buildings remain the jewels in the crown of Wits.
Heritage

The South West Engineering building was constructed in 1928. Doric columns have been used to create an open loggia. The attention to detail shows in the moulded concrete benches with winged lion supports, rather like a modern misericord. A central open newel staircase with intricate wooden handrail and wrought iron sides adds grandeur. The vaulted geometrical design ceilings on the ground floor are noteworthy. The classical theme was retained with open interior colonnaded courtyards. The inner arched windows on the ground floor faced the open archways of the corridor alongside the cortile.

Today the building houses the administrative offices of the Faculty of Humanities, the Graduate School of this Faculty and the Journalism Programme. The first floor is still home to the School of Mechanical, Industrial & Aeronautical Engineering. Pictures of student groups and graduating classes dating back to the Kimberley School of Mines line the corridor. Recently, the east courtyard on the ground floor was converted into a spacious seminar room with a strong indigenous feel. Modern design flair has been used to enclose the west courtyard but the charm remains. The old courtyard is now called the Atrium; with a splendid organ and grand piano it is a popular small concert venue.

These five buildings were erected by the building firm Barrows (now called Makhudu Barrow) between 1922 and 1928 and possess a harmony and a unity of concept that gave life to the planned symmetrical layout.

From a construction perspective the main distinctive and enduring material was the concrete facing blocks used on the exteriors. These rise above the two or three layers of rough-hewn black granite base stones from Rustenburg. The concrete blocks were precast on site by Barrows master craftsmen. They are grey and have a granular texture and an Ashlar-like appearance. Construction was a close working partnership of highly skilled carpenters, plumbers, foundry workers and stonemasons.

In the Central Block the construction of the building consists of a reinforced concrete frame with brick panels between columns and beams. The solid doors and door frames are a distinctive dark teak. A warm yellow brick was used in the North West Engineering building with the arched ornamented moulded surrounds in sharp contrast.

The Barrow firm’s long association with Wits and its imprint on the Johannesburg landscape remains. Some of the symmetry of the original campus layout has been lost under the pressure of infrastructure growth to educate our students. Today we have 27 700 students. The Central Block and the other original four buildings remain the jewels in the crown of Wits.
Researching the roots and branches of the ANC

Alumnus, journalist and political commentator Jacob Dlamini has been appointed the 2009 Ruth First Fellow in the Wits Journalism Programme. A regular newspaper columnist and currently a PhD student at Yale University, Dlamini will research ‘Roots, Branches and Politics: An in-depth look at ANC branch politics’. The research will be presented at the Ruth First lecture on 17 August 2009.

Ruth First was a journalist, activist and intellectual killed in exile by the apartheid government. To commemorate her contribution to critical, independent, socially-engaged writing, the Ruth First Trust and the Wits Journalism Programme established the fellowship to enable writers to pursue groundbreaking, in-depth original research for publication in any medium.

New Head of School of Accountancy

A passion for Wits and chartered accountancy, and the challenge of ensuring that the School of Accountancy maintains its position as one of Africa’s premier schools are what enticed alumna Professor Jackie Arendse to return to Wits as the new head of the School after a stint in the corporate world.

“The Wits School of Accountancy is one of the leading schools in the country and my immediate objective is to ensure that the public’s perceptions of the School are congruent with this view,” comments Arendse. Arendse is adamant that the standard of teaching and research in accountancy at Wits remain at the highest levels. “The standard of Wits’ accountancy programmes has never been an issue,” she says. “The evidence lies in the benchmark analysis conducted by the South African Institute for Chartered Accountants. Wits continues to dominate the top 10 positions in the country in Part 1 and Part 2 of the qualification examinations (QE). We had the second highest pass rate in the country (96%) in 2008 and also had the highest average mark in last year’s QE examinations.”

Arendse, who holds two Wits accounting qualifications, is a chartered accountant and a professional member of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants, the South African Institute of Tax Practitioners and the South African Institute of Professional Accountants. She has worked at Deloitte and at Anglo Alpha as well as serving as a visiting associate professor at Wits and as a lecturer at the KPMG Academy. She presents regularly at conferences, is widely published in accredited journals and has co-authored five books.

Alumnus’ natural energy-drink a herbal hit

An alumnus has developed an entirely natural energy drink, free of chemicals and preservatives. Dr Nick Petropoulos, who holds one medical and three science degrees from Wits, developed a drink consisting of herbs which increase energy, stamina, endurance and improve memory. “The combination of my chemistry, biochemistry and medical knowledge acquired at Wits enabled the development of the concept,” says Petropoulos. The drink’s efficacy has been proved in scientific trials.