The Finest Building

JOHN MOFFAT BUILDING

By Heather Dugmore

"We regard the architecture which resulted from Fassler and his team's collective design as the finest building created at Wits in the second half of the 20th century." - Professor Alan Mabin, Head of Architecture and Planning, Wits University, commenting on the John Moffat Building.

On 23 October 2009, Wits University will celebrate the 50th birthday of a campus icon: the John Moffat Building. This month Wits Review explores the remarkable life of this celebrated piece of architecture and the people who created it.

It was a case of "students first" in Professor John Fassler's mind when he and his staff team of architects drew up the plans for the first ever building for the Faculty of Architecture.

The commission came almost 40 years after architecture was established as a department on campus in 1921.
Fassler, who was Head of Architecture from 1948-1968, embraced the challenge of creating not only a masterpiece for the University but an environment conducive to harmony and performance for the arts and architecture students who shared the building.

Art and architecture are natural bedfellows and courses offered by the Department of Architecture back then included the history and appreciation of art and drawing from life. It was only in 1957, two years before the John Moffat Building was completed, that an independent Chair of Fine Arts was established.

The birth of the John Moffat Building was cause for great celebration since the Department of Architecture had spent its first 30-plus years in rudimentary hutsments on campus. Money was short, particularly in the World War II era, and it was only in 1954 that the University Council gave the building the go-ahead.

"The project was largely made possible due to the generosity of an architect named John Moffat who practised in Johannesburg for many years before ill health forced him to retire to his farm in the Lydenburg area," explains Professor Mabin.

Moffat passed away in 1941, and in his will he stipulated that the proceeds of his handsome estate of 100 000 pounds be paid to the University some 15 years after his death and "that the use to which the funds accruing be put should take a permanent form".

The 15-year wait was a curious decision, made for reasons known only to Moffat, but this accounts for the time period between his death and the go-ahead to design something of "permanent form", which became the building named after him.

From his place of eternal rest, the generous Mr Moffat must still be smiling at the product of his pouns.

The University footed the rest of the costs with certain reluctance as the story goes that Fassler spectacularly exceeded his budget. With hindsight it was well worth it because 50 years later the John Moffat Building remains an icon on campus.

“We regard the architecture which resulted from Fassler and his team’s collective design as the finest building created at Wits in the second half of the 20th century,” says Mabin.

“Each of the sixmember team brought special skills and concerns to the project, as well as a deep commitment to Wits and a desire to create a lasting and beautiful artifact.”

The School of Architecture and Planning now shares the John Moffat Building with the School of Construction, Economics and Management. The students who walk its corridors today are perhaps unaware of the level of dedication and detail that Fassler and his team invested in their place of learning.

Fassler saw to it that a fountain was built below the windows of the library so that its sound would assist concentration. In the same vein, a sound-absorbent ceiling was built into the reading room to enhance study and concentration.

All work and no relaxation doth not a rounded student make, and Fassler made sure the students' leisure needs were incorporated in the design. The pool, fountains and seats on the building's east front were created to form a precinct within the campus where students could relax between lectures.

Many of these qualities continue to be experienced first hand by the students who use John Moffat daily. The fountains and other features are in need of attention, but students continue to bask in the sun's warmth inside the glass window of the foyer on winter mornings, or cool themselves in the shade on the other side of the very same window ledge on a summer's day.

Fassler believed that buildings are to be lived in and loved and every need, aesthetic and comfort was conceived for the John Moffat Building; from the under-floor heating installed throughout the building at a time when very little was known about this technology, to the interplay of light and shade throughout the precinct. Pioneering this important natural device in our sunlit country, Fassler designed daylightsit studios for both Architecture and Fine Arts. The architectural studios received natural light from both sides, while the arts studios received south light, with supplementary roof lights.
Heritage

"Some of the studios have since been sub-divided or transformed into office spaces, which was partly intentional in the original plan as the team designed the building to be flexible and to facilitate internal subdivision and expansion," says Mabin.

Then there's the extraordinary spiral stairwell with the focal mosaic at the bottom of the stairwell, designed by Cecily Sash. A fine arts lecturer at the time, she is now a prominent artist living in the United Kingdom.

Looking back at the life of this building, it has nurtured and supported a phenomenal lineage (and expansion) of alumni.

"Sever
t
l
..thousand
architectural alumni have
spent most of their time at Wits in the John Moffat precinct during its five decades," comments Mabin. "They have gone on to make a major impact on buildings and cities - in Johannesburg and in every corner of the world."

Spending most of his working life in John Moffat Building, Mabin daily appreciates what Fassler and his team created.

"He had a passion for architecture. He devoted himself to building up the Department into one of the best in the country, and he threw himself into creating this living masterpiece for students, drawing on his creativity, his integrity and his exploration of the world's great architecture of the day.

"Fassler toured Europe during 1956 and one of the many buildings which particularly impressed him was the Allianz Building in Munich. His broad concept for the John Moffat Building seems to have been strongly drawn from this."

A detailed description of the John Moffat Building from SA Architectural Record, November 1959, reads:

"The introduction of a new building into a Campus of traditional character and classic motifs posed the question as to whether the design should reflect 'current' architectural theory, relying entirely on its contemporary merits or whether the building should be designed with cognizance of its setting, one in which an attempt be made to create harmony with its neighbours.

"The architects chose a contemporary building which would blend into the Campus by siting, massing, detailing and proportion and by sympathetic scale to create a stimulating and harmonious asset in harmony with its Campus setting. A 'fashionable design' was avoided so that the building should not rapidly date, but rather that it should exhibit a timeless character."

Fassler collaborated well with his team on all aspects of the building's design. Duncan Howie contributed innovative ideas for human comfort based on new technologies, notably the under-floor heating. Gilbert Herbert brought a strong intellectual, research-based and practical appreciation of international style and modernism, and Uge Tomasselli contributed his appreciation of materials and interiors.

The specs for the building were based on an annual intake of 40 students in Architecture, 25 in Quantity Surveying and 43 in Town Planning, totalling 320, while the Department of Fine Arts required accommodation for 45 students in practical classes and 270 in academic classes. The divisional library was designed to house 10,000 volumes, the lecture theatres to seat 290, 80 and 40 students respectively, with a seminar room for 30. In addition to this, an administrative wing, studios, the Materials Museum, exhibition space and staff drawing offices constituted the essentials.

Five sketch plans were prepared and the best of each was incorporated in the final plan. These included the setback of the east wing to create a forecourt and the location of the largest lecture theatre, which needed to be accessible from the road for public lectures.

The plan was resolved into the basic T-shape, with all the studios, the seminar, crit room and associated staff accommodation in the north wing. The form of the building produced a series of semi-enclosed and enclosed external spaces, lending themselves to attractive landscaping.

The external finishes were chosen for their appearance and durability so as to avoid costly maintenance. The building was sheathed in pre-cast combed terrazzo in a warm off-white shade which retains its colour even when wet.

The floors throughout the building, amounting to some 5,000 square metres, were covered in "krommin" marble-type linoleum.
Without detailing all the features, the attention to every nook is evident, both inside and outside the building. The Dorothy Susskind Auditorium is lined with oak veneer paneling, removable for access to the black-out shutter installations, with specially shaped slats backed by 2.5cm felt for acoustic control on the rear wall. The tip-up seats are upholstered in light blue "vinyl" with kiaat counters and chromium-plated steel frames. The curved, reflective ceiling contains recessed louvred lights on a dimmer circuit to provide glareless illumination during illustrated lectures.

The celebrated Martienssen Library has adjustable bookshelves in oak, which contrast with the kiaat doors, mahogany tables and blue-upholstered chairs designed by Fassler himself. The columns have blue and white glass mosaic sheathing, the floor is light blue linoleum, and the ceiling is covered with highly absorbent acoustic tiles with dustproof fluorescent light fittings.

All the materials and colours in the building were carefully selected to create an atmosphere of harmony; nothing aggressive was used.

While the building was completed in October 1959, it was already in use whilst under construction. In February 1959 a summer school for the South African Institute of Town Planners was held at John Moffat.

In the 1980s, additions, partitions and alterations, known as "John Moffat Extension" were commissioned to increase the original studio space. "In keeping with the original building's use of light, the extension has achieved a wonderful illumination of studio spaces," Mabin explains.

Connecting the John Moffat Building to the John Moffat Extension is an enclosed walkway. "Regrettably there has been little consistency in style between the old and the new, and the combination of some poor planning and more than a little neglect have brought us to the point where the precinct is in need of attention."

Fortunately Wits has now secured a large budget from National Government to renovate the building, as well as to build a new addition to the John Moffat precinct to increase its size. A competition to be launched during the week of the 50th anniversary of the John Moffat Building in October will culminate in plans being submitted for the new phase.

"The competition is specifically aimed at young graduates," says Mabin. "While respecting the superb example of the half-century-old John Moffat Building, the architects of the next phase will bring new ideas and materials to this part of the campus and create an environment which will build on the successes of the past decades."

The past and present will be celebrated during the week of 18th-24th October 2009, when the School of Architecture and Planning will be hosting exhibitions, symposia, lectures and events to mark the 50th anniversary of the John Moffat Building.

The week will culminate in an alumni reunion for all graduates and diplomates of the School on Saturday 24 October, with tours, discussions, films and a festive lunch.

*Research contributors: Professor Alan Mabin and Garth Klein, School of Architecture and Planning.*