The Professional Development Hub (PDH) is one of Wits’ newest redeveloped buildings and is the home of Wits Enterprise (the University’s intellectual property commercialisation company) and the Wits Language School. The new facility enables Wits to offer external clients and language students a stunning facility for conferences, professional development and short courses. An old building with interesting antecedents has become a state of the art venue with top audiovisual and teaching equipment. This newly renovated building, located on the East Campus, is centrally situated at Gate 6 opposite the M1 motorway offramp on Empire Road.

By Kathy Munro and Natalie Knight

Photos: Peter Maher
The original building dates back to the 1950s and was designed by the architectural firm of Pearse (the first professor of architecture at Wits), Aneck Hahn and Bristol, for the National Institute for Personnel Research (part of the CSIR). The window design and shape, north façade and elevations reflected the work of the young Robert and Denise Scott Brown, who trained in architecture at Wits. The Scott Browns later travelled to the USA to study and sadly Robert died in June 1959, a young man lost to the profession far too soon. Denise Scott Brown went on to build a brilliant and creative career and 50-year partnership with Robert Venturi. Together they became influential in what is now known as the postmodernist movement in architecture in the USA. Denise, in remembering her Johannesburg roots, wrote: “There is part of one building (now the PDH) to show for the brief career” of Robert Scott Brown. Wits recently honoured her with an honorary doctorate at its 21 July 2011 graduation ceremony for her lifetime contribution to architecture.

Through the decades the original five-storey building saw many changes in use and occupation. The widening of Empire Road and the proximity of the motorway and growing traffic volumes almost stranded the building in a vortex of vehicular noise and fumes. In 2007, the architects Fee and Challis were appointed to convert the old building into “a modern, sustainable and up to date training facility and short course centre.” They aimed to integrate the two existing and separate buildings into a single entity. By doing this they created a sense of place with an internal and an external linked courtyard. The creation of an atrium at the centre of the building extending through four floors brought natural light into the interiors. Wits’ need for a building to accommodate up to 1 000 people placed a design emphasis on mobility and movement as different classes and courses run continuously in the many classrooms. Ramped bridges and open galleries facilitate access and legibility of activities. The new rear extension harmonises magnificently with the older building. The technical challenges of working with an older building, incorporating a dining and catering facility, inserting two new lifts (in an older shaft meant for one lift) and introducing double glazing and air conditioning, security systems, and the latest in audiovisual technology have been managed with style and flair by the project architect, Jose Ferreira. Michael Challis commented: “Incorporating all the required services was indeed a challenge.”

In addition, the building has been enriched through graphics and branding and has been complemented by the artworks selected and assembled by Natalie Knight, the Wits West Campus art curator.

The art selected responds to the nature of the auditoriums, boardrooms and gallery corridors overlooking the vast atrium space. The brief from the then CEO, Charles Marais, was to provide art that suited the international and cosmopolitan activities taking place in the building. Marais favoured bright colours, faces, figures, people and action, while he was also open to new ideas.

The art includes works by artists from the UK, the USA, and Europe, but the majority are South African.

In the entrance are five works entitled The Potter by Susan Woolf, whose graphic work incorporates some of the aims of the PDH to create and mould professionals.

The inspiration for Woolf’s work was the poem:

\[
\text{As the potter mouldeth plastic clay} \\
\text{To forms his varying fancy doth display;} \\
\text{So in thy hands, O G*d of love, are we}
\]
Hamba Kahle Tata (Mandela shirt made of safety pin) by Jane Makhubele.

Night Scene in the City (collage) by Kagiso Patrick Mautloa.

The Professional Development Hub

October 2011
Heritage

The poem implies that our fate is beyond our control, but some of our destiny is in our own hands and requires our efforts.

In contrast to the art collections in various buildings on the West Campus, which were added to over the years as budgets became available, the PDH collection was assembled in three months. A few themes shaped it. For example, a musical theme features in the downstairs canteen, with three-dimensional works of musicians, a contrabass player and a drummer, by Israeli artist David Gerstein. Rinat Goldstuck produced three small works for the columns of the canteen using an unusual paper mosaic medium. The effect is a colourful and relaxing ambience.

The main atrium has large wall spaces and this area required a sophisticated feel for formal occasions and events. A circular painting, From Inside Outside (180 x 180cm) by South African artist Diana Hyslop, incorporates figures full of activity. This work can also be enjoyed from all the floors above as it provides a bird’s eye perspective of the activity. Colourful mono-prints by an action painter, the Scottish artist Bruce McLean, line the back walls, flanked by a red roller painted by American artist Michael Mazur.

The problem of highlighting three deep niche areas was solved by displaying traditional Zulu milk pails, meat platters and red woven hats to echo the forms of the nine windows above, using colour and shape.

The main offices and boardroom are situated on the third floor. In the entrance and along the passage to the principal boardroom are works by major South African artists, including original works by Thomas Kgope and Roy Ndinisa. A special feature is a pair of collages by the celebrated artist Kagiso Patrick Mautloa. He has had five solo exhibitions at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg and his work is to be found in major corporate and national collections.

In the boardroom, a portfolio of prints by artist Ephraim Ngatane is featured. The late Ngatane was honoured with a posthumous one-man show at the Standard Bank Gallery in February 2010. Other artists of stature include Nils Burwitz (currently living and working in Spain), whose screenprints pay tribute to South African icons Walter Battiss and Athol Fugard.

The staff recreation room has a drawing by Alfred Thoba, a controversial but much sought-after artist whose works are featured in several of the major museums throughout South Africa.

The office of the new Wits Enterprise CEO, Duncan Raftesaft, incorporates three paintings by Natalie Monk, a 2010 graduate of the Wits School of Fine Arts. Raftesaft commented that he is delighted to be the custodian of so much superb art.

On each of the other floors, works by South African and international artists have been hung. A signed lithographic poster by Pablo Picasso and an out-of-print poster by William Kentridge provide reference to the artists whose original works, and even their prints, are beyond the University’s budget.

Posters were donated by Natalie Knight (of important exhibitions at her gallery in Hyde Park). In addition, large vinyl banners donated by the Johans Borman Gallery in Cape Town (with images of works exhibited there, including works by Irma Stern and Fred Page) are displayed in the building.
A large work on fabric with colourful beads by Yvonne Makhubela was selected for the auditorium, both as decoration and to improve the acoustics. Outside the auditorium is a fabric work made of gold-coloured safety pins, entitled *Hamba Kahle Tata*, by Jane Makhubele, paying tribute to Nelson Mandela.

A variety of prints and posters enhance the other boardrooms. Two unusual works by former Wits mathematics lecturer and artist Chonat Getz (showing the connection between mathematics and art) have been placed in the downstairs boardroom. Getz generously donated one of the works.

We extend an invitation to Wits Alumni to visit the PDH and to enjoy the design of a fine building and its rich art collection. There is a natural conversation between the art and the architecture. Wits now has a well-considered, sophisticated and imaginative centre that reaches out to the wider community.