Breathing new life into University Corner

Professor Katherine Munro recalls the humble origins of this corner building in the heart of Braamfontein, its association with the Lawson family and its new incarnation as a vibrant centre of art and culture for Wits University.

University Corner, formerly Lawson’s Corner, is currently being transformed as an expression of the University’s commitment to urban renewal, Johannesburg reinvention and to Wits’ rich art collection.

Located on the corner of Jorissen and Bertha streets, the centrepiece of the revamped building will be the new Wits Art Museum, indelibly connecting Wits to the Newtown cultural arc.

Looking back

Wilfred Lawson was a successful Johannesburg businessman, who founded the Lawson group of companies. Lawson was a fondly remembered and significant player in the retail automobile world from the 1930s to the 1970s. Lawson purchased the University service station on the corner site in 1943 and added the name Lawson Motors. Lawson started with a Ford sub-dealership and later retailed Volvo, Renault, Toyota and Mazda cars and Volvo trucks and buses. As his daughter, Wilma Lawson Turnbull recalls: “In those early days my father sold many Wits students their first cars and arranged finance for them”. Lawson also developed the Lawson racing team and Volvo cars were very successful in the nine-hour races at Kyalami.

The first modern building built on what had now become known as Lawson’s Corner was the seven storey functional corner building with garage, workshop and forecourt on the ground floor, which was built in 1948.
The success of the Lawson Group was expressed in bricks and mortar. Paul Kotze, Wits Professor of Architecture recalls Lawson’s garage as the traditional family pit stop on the long journey from Senekal in the Free State to Pretoria.

In 1968, the 21 storey Lawson’s building behind the original garage was redesigned by the architects, Neill Powell and Neill, with a grand, theatrical double-volume revolving restaurant on top. Many alumni and Wits staff of that era will remember the novelty of the panoramic 360° views over Johannesburg from the cocktail lounge. The dramatic, ruched, velvet curtains set the scene. In the 1970s, Nosal Hall (Lawson spelt backwards) was built on the site diagonally opposite the garage and facing the Dental Hospital. The prominent Wits frontages on 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, together with the Catholic Church, the South African Breweries headquarters and the two Lawson skyscrapers and retained lowly garage lined the main thoroughfare into the city via the Queen Elizabeth Bridge.

The Lawson gift to the city of an island fountain with two buck marked the student route to Pop’s Café. Wilfred Lawson was a creator and innovator - the Lawson’s pinnacle steel sculpture which stood outside the Lawson’s building has been relocated to the West Campus.

Lawson’s building in the 1970s also became the original offices of Sotheby’s auction house opened by Reinhold Cassirer, when it was established in Johannesburg. Even at that stage, there was a sense that the car showroom could lend itself to being a gallery...

**Wits acquires Lawson’s Corner**

Wilfred Lawson died in his sixties in 1975 and the University acquired the two Jorissen Street buildings. The Shell garage continued to operate on leasehold for many years and the 21 storey building became
University Corner. The Vice-Chancellor at the time, Professor G R Bozzoli, proposed moving the staff club from Hofmeyr House to the revolving restaurant, and although the Hofmeyr House staff club continued to function for several years, the skyline restaurant became a staff dining facility and a welcome change from Mrs Curruthers’ canteen at the back of Central Block. However, turning the 21 storey office block into homes for academic departments and multipurpose tutorial rooms proved a challenge on a campus that was more accustomed to three and four storey, low-rise buildings. But then again, University Corner was the only university building with high-speed lifts!

Today we are seeing an extraordinary transformation of three different older buildings, too long neglected. The architects are Fiona Garson and Nina Cohen. This energetic partnership won the competitive tender for the conversion of the old buildings, as long ago as 2004. The task was to create a modern gallery and academic centre for the Wits School of Arts and Wits’ hidden treasures. It was to be world-class and comparable to art museums abroad. At the time, the quantity surveyors attached a price tag of R47-million to the design for the renovation and the creation of exhibition areas.

**A world-class art museum**

The new Wits Art Museum, which is nearing completion inside University Corner, will be the biggest university gallery in South Africa and heralds a remarkable rebirth, resurgence and revival of Braamfontein and the creation of a Wits cultural precinct that will include the Wits Theatre, The Nunnery, and the Wits School of Arts as well as forming part of the Newtown cultural arc.

The Art Museum project is infused with enthusiasm, passion, love and a Wits spirit that unites curators, architects, benefactors, management and engineers into a dedicated team thrilled to be part of history in the making.

The design is innovative and exciting. The museum will comprise 5 000 square metres of space of which approximately 60% will be used for storage. There will be four galleries in addition to a frontcourt gallery. These, together with active work areas, will fill the remaining 2 000 square metres. Teaching, which integrates theory and practical, will also take place in the galleries.

A coffee shop and retail outlet accessible from street level will be positioned at the old garage forecourt. Eventually this will be a friendly social space with Wi-Fi connectivity.

The Wits Art Museum, which will open in early 2012 to coincide with the University’s 90th anniversary, will put Wits on the map as a collector of African art and internationally renowned centre for teaching and research in African art.