The West Campus at Wits

By Professor Katherine Munro

Photos by Peter Maher
I have worked on the Wits West Campus for some 15 years and the pleasure I feel each day when I take that right-hand turn from Yale Road through the tunnel is rooted in the feeling of excitement generated by one the greatest childhood treats Johannesburg could offer: a visit to the old Rand Easter Show.

Today, the charm of the West Campus lies in its mix of a sports stadium, a modernist tower, academic buildings at the top of the hill, water features, spreading lawns, the Cape Dutch-style cluster of buildings (home of the Wits Club and Alumni Relations), sports fields and residences towards the lower reaches of the slope. Old exhibition buildings have been gutted and redesigned to serve new purposes but unusual architectural features have been retained, and the old trees, bricked walkways, landscaped gardens and outdoor sculptures turn the West Campus into a harmonious whole. Cars and delivery vehicles have been kept out of the core. Love it or hate it, the ‘Union Castle’ grey paint adds to the artificial unity of the composition. The West Campus, with its 29 buildings, is worth exploring, including a few heritage features that ought to be preserved to add to the experience.

As with the East Campus, the West Campus has a north-south orientation on the steeply sloping ridge. Its layout reflects that it was a prestigious, vast exhibition site extending over 38 hectares. The buildings are an eclectic mix of adapted permanent exhibition halls and buildings constructed during the exhibition era.
(1907 to 1984) and the more modern adaptations and additions of purpose-built university residences and academic office and teaching spaces. Wits acquired the land and its infrastructure in the early 1980s, when the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society (WAS) relocated to the showground site at Nasrec, south of Johannesburg.

Still, I daily recapture that childish anticipated thrill of a ride on the cable car that ran down the hill from the Tower of Light to Empire Road and the garish pleasure of funfair roundabouts. An indulgent spinster aunt had given me an entire day of frivolous purchases, from candy floss and toffee apples on sticks to a yo-yo that glittered in the dark. We wandered through acres of thrilling displays, from the Flower Hall, with that heady aroma of exotic orchids, prize roses and colourful dahlias, to checking out the best leghorn hens, to conducting our own inspection of the quality Afrikander cattle, to the displays of intricate industrial machinery, the newest in swimming pool design and all that one could import from faraway countries. We gathered pamphlets and dinky samples of household products and took a rest to swallow an indigestible pie and gravy in one of the cavernous canteens. The Home Industries buildings at the lower end of the site were always a drawcard with their incongruous faux Cape Dutch houses and barns, where one could marvel at the enthusiasm of real housewives in producing the ultimate sponge cake, bottled Kakamas peaches or delicate embroidery.

If it rained (and it often did at Easter), the Rand Show was a bedraggled and miserable place. The crowds evaporated along with the glamour and it suddenly became a place where desperate salespeople urged you to buy tawdry gadgets. The Star reported on record attendance figures or when it rained anxiously worried about break-even visitor numbers. It did not occur to me as a child to reflect on the strongly colonial and then apartheid feel of the place, for this was a segregated show in its attendance, or that I was a privileged white child. I simply loved it through rain and shine and through good times and bad. Later, I did begin to question why segregation was necessary and why the showground was also the place where the South African Defence Force gathered its annual intake of white conscripts. The showground was the starting point for ‘the boys’ (all white teenagers in those days) to begin their military training and then later to be sent to ‘the border’ as part of their national military service.
The Sharpeville massacre took place on 21 March 1960 and less than a month later, on 9 April, Hendrik Verwoerd was shot in the face by David Pratt, a member of the WAS, when the Prime Minister opened the Rand Easter Show. The scene of the crime was the President's box and the occasion was Verwoerd's speech to mark the launch of the Union Exposition and the 49th Rand Easter Show, celebrating the 50th jubilee of the Union of South Africa. You can still walk or sprint around the athletics track and visualise the day. Verwoerd miraculously survived that first attempt on his life, but not the Tsafendas knife attack in Parliament in 1966.

By the 1960s, in post-Sharpeville times, we could see the might and muscle of the apartheid state in military displays in the State Pavilion. In 1976, after the Soweto children's revolution, a group of us as concerned academics under the leadership of Irene Menell ran classes in some of the exhibition halls for angry and now school-abandoned children from Soweto. In the August chill the showground did not look so inviting but we attempted to engage with the group of students who became the "lost generation", in an effort to prepare them for university.

The Rand Show's official title was the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society Annual Exhibition. With the support of the City of Johannesburg, the WAS held its first show on the Milner Park site in 1907. The history is recorded in Thelma Gutsche's A Very Smart Medal, published in 1970. The book is worth reading to capture the nostalgia of a bygone era. The WAS had been established in 1894 and held its first (mainly agricultural) show in that year, but the location was closer to the old Fort. That first show was opened by President Paul Kruger. The 1896 Plan of Johannesburg positions the "Agricultural Show Ground between Braamfontein and Parktown, to the north and outside the Sanitary Board's Jurisdiction Boundary". The WAS survived many financial and political vicissitudes and never had enough money to cover its expansionary plans, the weather playing havoc with attendance numbers at its shows.

Shows did not take place during the Second World War, between 1941 and 1945 while the showgrounds at Milner Park were taken over by the Union Defence Force. The WAS finally folded in 2001 when its assets were liquidated by West Trust and the third exhibition area, the Nasrec Expo...
Centre, passed into the ownership of Kagiso Exhibitions.

The Milner Park site has an interesting history. Sir John Maud, in *City Government: The Johannesburg Experiment* (1938), comments that Johannesburg owned hardly any public land during its first 17 years as it was thought that the town had the impermanence of a mining camp. In 1903 the Transvaal government gifted the large open space to the north-west of the town centre to Johannesburg, as a result of the initiative of Lord Alfred Milner, who at this date was the Governor of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. He instigated the reconstruction of the then Transvaal Colony after the Anglo-Boer War. The area donated had been an old town brickfield and the first investment had to be in clearing the land of trees and bushes and levelling large excavation holes. Thirty-two acres were ready for the 1907 show. The site was subsequently named Milner Park.

The popularity and coverage of the annual show of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society expanded and the focus shifted from agricultural to industrial and consumer products reflecting the development of the South African economy, with Johannesburg as its mining and commercial hub. It was at the Rand Show that soccer was first played by floodlight in the main arena. In 1937 Sir Malcolm Campbell's famous landspeed racing car *Bluebird* could be viewed in the Hall of Transport. By the 1950s the WAS was the host of a number of prestige international pavilions in addition to the extant arena being used for cattle judging and equestrian events.

It was an odd situation, for the show was a two-week event and during those two weeks the
Show was an impossible neighbour for the University on the other side of Yale Road. Both institutions had grown through the years and both served thousands of clients. Numbers swelled and increasing wealth led to more people arriving in more private vehicles. 'Park and Ride' services did not solve the problem. The Agricultural Society had the right of possession and by 1967, when the University offered its Frankenwald Estate of 1 000 acres in exchange for the Society's 97 acres, 44 years of lease were still to run and the Society dug in. Even as the motorway sliced through the eastern edge of the showground in the late 1960s, the future physical co-existence of both institutions had to be questioned.

If ever there was a story of muddled thinking, lack of foresight and poor town planning, the unsatisfactory relationship of Wits University and the WAS, national road-building authorities and the City of Johannesburg said it all. The tunnel route and the small overhead foot bridge were the only two points of direct north and south access from the University campus, across Yale Road, over the motorway and onto the Milner Park show grounds. Parking was always at a premium and there were many years when the University almanac had to schedule the Easter break between teaching blocks to close for teaching and enable the reopening of the campus as a giant extra parking lot.

To be continued...

A chapter in the planned book on Wits buildings will be on the West Campus and its history. Should any Wits alumni have any early photographs of the Rand Easter Show or its reincarnation as the Wits West Campus, please contact the author on katherine.munro@wits.ac.za.