Buildings capture memory, history, growth, purpose and institutional significance. Some buildings are more important in our collective endeavours than others. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of the buildings of the Faculty of Health Sciences.
The future of the Esselen Street Medical School was cut short by the opening of the giant Johannesburg Hospital in 1978 and its allied Wits Medical School on Parktown ridge, on the site of the Hohenheim estate. Hohenheim had been a gracious late-Victorian mansion on Jubilee Road. It was built by Lionel and Florence Phillips in the early 1890s, and later owned by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, who penned his classic *Jack of the Bushveld* there. The house would later become the Otto Beit Convalescent Home.

In the early 1970s the mansion was demolished. The suburb had fallen prey to the political dominance of the apartheid state, as acres of well-proportioned gardens were built over and recycled for more functional purposes. Parktown was forever transformed and ceased to be the pre-eminent residential suburb for the Randlord magnates. As the city expanded northwards, these properties started becoming integrated into the inner city. The land was simply too valuable and too close to Hillbrow and the CBD for heritage to triumph. The encircling motorway, the M1, and the widening of Oxford Road and Victoria Avenue made Parktown properties accessible and desirable for institutional redevelopment. The homes on Jubilee Road were stranded relics of a bygone age.

Once the decision had been taken to build a new Johannesburg Hospital in Parktown, it was obvious that the Medical School would need to move with the hospital. The scale and size of the new hospital development was massive and under the control of the Transvaal Provincial Administration. It was a controversial development, firstly because of the political agenda, as the Anglophone Randlords gave way to the ideology of the Pretoria government. National Party thinking was intrusively and deliberately being inserted into the fabric of the city of Johannesburg.

*Photos by Peter Maher*
Secondly, it meant the destruction of the cultural ambience and historical roots of old residential Parktown. The giant concrete slab of a hospital and its associated buildings (the tower block nurses residence and a hideous chimney stack) together with the brutality of the architecture of the Johannesburg College of Education (today the Education Campus of Wits University), brought a new architectural idiom to the city. According to Herbert Prins, the architects failed to draw any ideas from the actual sense of the place, nor did they show an understanding of Parktown’s history and heritage.

Thirdly, the hospital was built when the fashion for the all-embracing complex was fading, succeeded by the move back to smaller specialist hospitals. Thus, it was almost an anachronism as it emerged, so prominent from all approaches. The site on the commanding Parktown quartzite ridge gave views northwards to the Magaliesberg and lay at the intersection of York and Jubilee roads.

Some welcomed the provision of a public hospital catering for ‘the poor’ who would now find their way to Parktown; but with limited public transport services, accessibility was not quite as easy as planned. In contrast, the old hospitals were within walking distance of the Johannesburg station, with established transport linkages to Soweto and the reef towns of the Witwatersrand. It was also an apartheid project - the patients in the 1970s were all to be ‘white’.

During that decade, it was the most ambitious and complex mega medical centre in the city of Johannesburg, and the construction in Parktown was seen as part of the projected east-west ‘educational belt’ stretching over five kilometres. The giant complex has an architectural and political affinity with other state-sponsored mega projects in Johannesburg in the 1960s and 1970s – such as the tower block of the SABC, the campus of the Rand Afrikaans University (today the University of Johannesburg) and the Goudstad Onderwyserskollege. Clive Chipkins calls it the ‘Broederbond Wedge’.

The joint clients were the Transvaal Provincial Administration and the University of the Witwatersrand. The architects were Colyn & Meiring and Cowin, De Bruyn and Cook. In a 1972 article in Plan, Gilbert Colyn explained
that the consortium was commissioned in 1968 and instructed to “adopt unorthodox methods of obtaining decisions and to streamline contracting and tendering procedures”. The policy approach was that of ‘design as you build’, noting the need to contain costs despite shortages of materials and labour. Chipkin dismisses fast-track schedule and mass-production techniques as exhibiting a topographical insensitivity and a drive to meet deadlines and the “insatiability of the logic of industrialised mass-production building components” (Chipkin - *Johannesburg Transition*, p 303). The vast complex from the start projected the integration of a 2 000-bed teaching hospital and a medical school for 800 students. In addition, parking for 2 000 cars and onsite residential accommodation for approximately 1 300 nurses was planned. Each component was labelled and planned in stages.

Despite the controversy of location and politics, the University of the Witwatersrand was keen to turn the Parktown development into a grand asset. The university’s requirements were to create facilities for undergraduate clinical teaching and postgraduate training in each medical specialisation. The new school was to produce 200 medical graduates a year. Degrees in Nursing, Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy were additional functions.

The original working name of the new medical school was the Basic Sciences Building - a 10-storey block, comprising a four-storey L-shaped podium “above which rises a six-storey square block placed to the south of the broader arm” (architects’ plans). The shape of the building included areas of integrated teaching and clinical engagement with patients, as well as areas with less contact with the clinical world, where the focus was on the basic sciences.

Part of Wits’ Diamond Jubilee celebration in 1982 was the opening of the new Medical School in August/September. A plaque commemorates the opening by the Chancellor, Dr Mike Rosholt. The Medical Graduates Association hosted a banquet for graduates of specific earlier years, and a homecoming for all medical alumni was another highlight. By 1982 the Medical School had graduated 5 564 doctors and awarded 2 444 other qualifications in paramedical fields and at postgraduate level.
The Medical School was described at the opening ceremony by Prof. Charlton, (Dean 1978-79 and Deputy Vice-Chancellor) as a “magnificent medical school and academic hospital complex with superb teaching and research facilities”.

Prof. Phillip Tobias was the Dean at the time of the move from Hospital Hill to Parktown (1980-1982) and he recalls his first impressions: “We were given a large spacious building able to house extra staff, and we could anticipate an expansion of facilities. But the great York Road façade was unpleasing to the eye, and that façade still cries out to be covered with a grand mosaic.” It took a year to plan the move. “The greatest strength behind the organisation of the move was the technical staff. In Anatomy, we needed to move an entire museum, thousands of skulls and skeletons, hordes of specimens and, of course, our very important fossil collection,” remembered Tobias, who personally conveyed the Taung Skull by car and ensured he had a bodyguard for this most prized Wits possession.

“In addition to the bleak façade, there were also the bleak corridors and the vast distances, so much so that you needed a tricycle to get to the mortuary!” added Tobias.

A critical question in medical education was the Medical School’s stance on educating both black and white doctors, and serving both the black and white communities. By 1982, 20% of the annual intake of students was ‘black’, but a point of controversy was the differing exposure at the hospitals. White students were able to serve patients of all races, whereas black students were restricted in their exposure to white patients. A brass plaque commemorates a recommitment in the year 2000 to the ideals of non-discrimination, and apologies for past transgressions and suffering caused to staff, students and patients. Today, in a different era and in a vastly different political landscape, Wits continues to educate its doctors to the highest standards of professional excellence.

One’s first impression of the Medical School is of a stark concrete front facing York Road, softened only by the four top and bottom inset windows with a blue trim. The original colour of the window edges was red and students wryly titled them ‘hot lips’.
Through nearly 30 years of occupation, the design of the building has been secondary to its practical and successful functionality.

At present the building comprises seven schools (Anatomical Sciences, Clinical Medicines, Oral Health Sciences, Pathology, Physiology, Public Health and Therapeutic Sciences) spread over 10 storeys. The latest initiative is a fundraising drive for the School of Public Health, headed by Professor Sharon Fonn. This school plans to develop a carefully designed new building to meet the need to strengthen public health education and systems on the African continent.

As you walk into the main entrance these days, the students ‘have their say’ in a lively wall debate on topics such as the acceptance of gifts from the pharmaceutical industry, the disclosure of HIV status to sexual partners, and the offering of untested traditional cures for fatal illness. Contributions are added on coloured sheets of paper and are there for all to read.

The entrance to the faculty offices is splendidly signalled by a large mosaic, a donation by medical graduates, symbolising the mission of the faculty in Africa. The huge foyer offers an airy space for public interaction and exhibitions. The floor houses the faculty offices, the Adler Museum of the History of Medicine, the library, the canteen and the bookshop. The Adler Museum brings the past practice of medicine into the present and is a reminder to students about the evolution of their discipline. The Hunterian Museum of Anatomy on the second floor is a unique collection of human specimens. The four principal lecture theatres are located on the mezzanine floor.

The sheer scale and size of the building challenged the faculty to use its key museums, its artefacts and its art to create a welcoming and interesting environment for its staff and students. Creative Wits graduates were invited to donate their own works of art to be displayed in the Deanery and the faculty corridors. The library has some impressive bronze busts of illustrious medical persons, and the Adler Museum of Medicine has begun a tradition of supporting medical art by holding annual art exhibitions, such as the ‘Expressions of Art’ competition for students and the ADCO Health Profession Art Society exhibition.
“The Medical School is dedicated to the advancement of medical science and the promotion of health among all the people of South Africa.”

David Goldblatt has donated a series of photographs of the Owendale Asbestos mine complementing an exhibition on ‘Asbestos – wonder fibre, serial killer’. Colin Richards, Walter Oltmann, Churchill Madikida, Ansel Krut, Stephen Hobbs and Elain Hirshowitz have all contributed donated or commissioned works. Their art speaks to contemporary medical and social concerns.

Today the Faculty of Health Sciences offers top quality undergraduate degrees in Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy, with some 500 students graduating as health professionals every year. The depth and breadth of research means that through its partnership with the Gauteng Health Department, Wits employs over 800 medical and dental consultants who are involved in teaching undergraduates and postgraduates, and in research programmes. The Faculty of Health Sciences serves a diversity of communities and is actively responsive to the health needs of a rapidly developing society with a continent-wide reach.

The buildings that have evolved over a century are simply the physical expression of a deep and abiding commitment to research, teaching, scholarship and service in healthcare for all. The simple words on the 1982 brass commemorative plaque continue to inspire the mission and vision of the Wits Medical School:

“The Medical School is dedicated to the Advancement of medical science and the promotion of health among all the people of South Africa.”

References