




*treasure trove of
history, tradition
& fond memories*

SUNNYSIDE



Many alumni will have fond memories of Sunnyside if they were fortunate enough to live in the premier and oldest women's residence on East Campus as undergraduates. Sunnyside Residence has been a second home for thousands of women students since 1929. Its traditional style of architecture has always been held in affectionate regard and a sense of community fostered by a succession of strong leaders.

By Katherine Munro

Transvaal colonial for 'new girls' hostel'

Architect Frank Emley, of the firm Cowin & Powers, designed the "proposed New Girls' Hostel" in 1928. Its architectural style is Transvaal colonial, redolent of Herbert Baker, with its terracotta-tiled roof, generous proportions, rectangular shape, garden quadrangle below a wide balustrade verandah, and arched windows. The fittings, masonry and woodwork reflect detailed artistry. The panelled dining room (now a study area) is the heart of the residence, capturing purpose and community.

Emley's distinctive rusticated style, featuring arched, small-paned, recessed Palladian windows, prevails. Genuine Burmese teak was used throughout.

The original H shape design positioned the dining hall facing north, fronted by a wide terrace-style verandah with arched columns on the ground floor. A gracious double stairway led down to the lower ground floor and the semi-enclosed garden to the north, with its delightful semi-circular fountain. The husband of Dean Erica Biesheuvel (1943-1963), Dr Simon Biesheuvel, laid out the gardens and the lower terrace on the northern side of the fenced garden was known as "the Biesheuvel Terrace."

The main entrance, with an arched, glassed, panelled door above a set of now well-worn steps, faces west. Wide corridors were ideal for displaying the annual group photos of the residents and house committees, helping establish traditions.

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The wrought iron, well-proportioned staircases and the delicate balconies added further grace and charm.

The original roof was covered in beautiful terracotta Roman tiles (some are still visible on parapets), which were ill-advisedly removed in the 1980s or 1990s and replaced with concrete tiles coloured to look like terracotta.

The west wing was completed first. Emley and Fred Williamson, in association with Cowin & Powers were the architects of the east wing, completed in 1931.

'The Grand Old Lady' - for ladies only

Architects Professor Geoffrey Pearce - head of the Wits architectural department - and Aneck Hahn enhanced the original residence in 1953. They extended the building to the north, east and south and by 1979 Sunnyside - then 50 years old - was home to 154 students whose residence fees were set at R1 050 per annum, excluding laundry.

A 1979 Wits residences pamphlet comments: "The most appealing feature of Sunnyside is its wonderful

garden overlooked by a wide verandah where students are served tea and buffet lunches when the weather is fine."

Sunnyside has earned the title "the grand old lady" of residences not because it is the oldest, but because it has always had the reputation of being a traditional residence exclusively for the young women students of Wits.

Sunnyside has always been a close-knit community of women and, although subject to debate at different times, the view is that it should remain a single-sex residence, as are Jubilee, Girton, Medhurst and Reith residences.

Accommodating students from other parts of Africa ("Kenya, the Rhodesias, Portuguese East Africa") was initially the focus, so girls from Johannesburg were accepted only in exceptional circumstances.

What's in a name?

'Isabel Dalrymple House' was the original name of Sunnyside, named for Council Chairman Sir William Dalrymple's wife who in the 1920s and 1930s took a great interest in the wellbeing of Sunnyside



residents. The sobriquet ‘Sunnyside’ was an informal one and the name was only formalised in 1983. The origin of the name ‘Sunnyside’ has a deeper history, which reveals Wits’ connection to the Sunnyside Park Hotel.

Sunnyside was the name of Lord Milner’s house in Parktown, now the Sunnyside Park Hotel. Wits first used the hotel as a men’s residence from 1912. During World War I, it was a convalescent home for returned soldiers. In the 1920s, it became the women’s residence when the men moved back onto East Campus into Dalrymple House.

The original planning of East Campus residences included men and women. Hostels were among the first structures approved. Construction of the student residences began in 1920 and male students occupied College House the following year. Dalrymple House admitted its first female students in 1922.

The first Dean of women students was Margaret Ballinger (who later became the doughty and distinguished MP and a founder of the Liberal Party), but with the Principal, Prof. Jan Hofmeyr and his puri-

tanical and controlling mother taking up temporary residence in College House, there was an inevitable personality clash. Mrs Hofmeyr expected the young women to remain invisible to the men of College House and issued a directive that the women close their curtains while dressing so the men could not see them. Ballinger retorted, “And what about the men doing the same?”

The Hofmeyrs prevailed and the women students relocated to Parktown. Dalrymple House became a second men’s residence during construction of the new women’s residence. In 1929, the year that Sunnyside was sold for £8 500, according to a handwritten archive note.

In 1930, 40 girls and the Dean, Miss Swansbourne moved into the half-completed Isabel Dalrymple House, which accommodated 70 students on completion in 1935.

The enduring popularity of Dalrymple as a “superior” residence and an increase in the number of students at Wits demanded an increase in the number of beds. In 1937, with Dalrymple House



full, annexes in Braamfontein served as additional women's rooms. Phineas Court and Marmer Court, the latter of which stood on the corner of Bertha and Jorissen Streets, was known as "The Colony." The girls wore long dresses in the evening and had to hike across a campus "which resembled a wattle plantation" to dine in style at Sunnyside.

An explosion in a German-owned shop opposite the annexe in 1940 caused the Dean, Mrs Nichols to panic and move the girls back to Dalrymple House, into very crowded rooms, "like sardines in a can."

By 1946, temporary huts were erected close to Dalrymple House (where the Umthombo building stands today) as an annexe for 37 second-year students under the popular Assistant Dean, Heather Martienssen.

In 1953, the new wing was completed and the number of students increased from 120 to 160.

Success through leadership

Sunnyside's success is due in no small measure to a succession of strong Deans, later called Wardens and now Hall Coordinators. There have been relatively

few Deans (all remained in office for many years) and their names are synonymous with Sunnyside history: Margaret Ballinger, M. Swansbourne (1924-1937), Pratt Nichols (1937-1943), Erica Bieshevel (1943-1963), Thelma Henderson (1963-1975) and Shirley Irish (1975-1996).

Mrs Henderson contributed significantly to the planning of Jubilee Hall, built in 1972-1974 and named for the University's 50th jubilee. Mrs Henderson had the distinction of being the youngest Dean.

A plaque commemorates Shirley Irish, formerly an English teacher at Parktown Girls' High, who remained in office for two decades.

Sunnyside attracted a special breed of Deans who were academic and social leaders and who shaped the girls to be proud and worthy graduates and citizens. That tradition continues.

The strength of Sunnyside rested upon its appearance, varied accommodation and strong community spirit

A sense of community has always been at the core of Sunnyside. During the war, the residents began


a night school, teaching the “native staff” of Wits. The SRC and the Students’ Medical Council later promoted this initiative.

During apartheid, Wits had to comply with national legislation and the 1979 residence brochure states: “It is regretted that, in terms of the Group Areas Act, residential accommodation on campus has not yet been approved for all races.” Many Sunnyside girls imbued with a liberal and humanitarian spirit participated in protests and demonstrations in the 1970s and 80s.

I recall too that in the 1970s Sunnyside drew feminists from across the campus to discuss the state of female academic and support staff employment at Wits. We gathered our facts, investigated and formulated our belief in a fairer society (childcare for staff members, better maternity leave, more opportunities for women). The feminist lobby met in the Sunnyside common room and was instrumental in forming the Administrative and Library Staff Association.

After 1996, the reorganisation of residences saw the warden position abandoned in favour of ‘cluster manager of East Campus residences’. Denise Hooper-Box filled this position from 1996 to 2011. She holds Sunnyside in affectionate regard and recalls the November 2007 visit of US Senator John Kerry and his wife Teresa Heinz Kerry, who had been a student at Wits and a Sunnyside resident in the 1950s. “There was an excitement in finding her photograph on the wall and their visit to her room.”

The new four-storey wing of the now 82-year-old Sunnyside Residence opens in 2012. Positioned on an east-west orientation on University Drive, the



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Sunnyside

awkward, rocky slope of the land challenged the creativity of architect Henry Paine, but the style and design respects heritage and tradition, with seven interior columns in the reception area.

Extending life



Rob Sharman, director of Residence Life, commented: “The ‘grand old lady’ has not aged well in all respects. After 80 years, some of the plumbing and electricity had deteriorated and replacing the original roof resulted in recurrent leaks. It became our dream to renovate the old building...to restore spaces to their original purpose and to create an entire new wing.”

A thorough heritage impact study by Dr Johann Bruwer and Paine shaped early planning. Paine commented: “It has been our intention to keep the axial [rather than symmetrical] relationship from the old building to the new, with linking corridors at ground and first floor level, and courtyards separating the new from the old.”

The new building extends over four floors (the old building is on three floors) but the line of the roofs remains constant due to the reduction in floor to ceiling height in the new building. The new wing will accommodate an additional 96 first-year students in 30 double rooms and 29 single rooms, including eight rooms for people with disabilities.

Sunnyside is an important example of the architectural heritage of the 1920s. The quality of the original materials used and the skilled craftsmanship demand preservation and celebration. It is a building that reflects, too, the breaking of boundaries when female students were welcomed in the largely male bastions of academe but needed a quality home from home. Renovations over the decades have reflected and respected the building’s heritage, as do the latest additions.

A revitalized and modern Sunnyside accommodating more than 200 women is set to serve Wits into the 21st century. With a proud history of lives well lived during formative years, Sunnyside Residence anticipates the future with curiosity, community awareness and confidence.

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References: Thanks to Prof. Paul Kotze and Henry Paine for comments on an earlier draft. Interviews with Robert Sharman, Henry Paine, Kathy Cannell, Denise Hooper-Box. Bruce K Murray: *Wits: The Early Years* (Wits University Press, 1982). Bruce K Murray: *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years* (Wits University Press, 1997). Johann Bruwer and Henry Paine: *Heritage Assessment in Support of Permit Application ... Additions and Alterations to Sunnyside Hall of Residence, East Campus*, May 2010. Wits Archives – two files on Sunnyside with reports from past deans; working document of I Isaacson, Deputy Librarian, on the residences. Juliet Marais Louw: *When Johannesburg and I Were Young* (Amagi Books, 1991)