

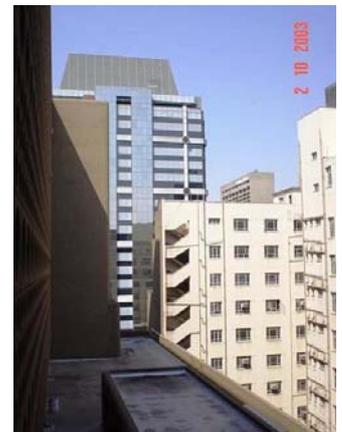
**JOHANNESBURG METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY**

**HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM**

Compiled by: Dr JJ Bruwer, 2002-07-29

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Cellphone: 082 325 5823

**NAME OF PLACE: AFRICAN LIFE CENTRE**



Left: corner Eloff Street and Commissioner Street.  
Centre: entrance to 111 Arcade.  
Right: an unusual view; the *African Life Centre* as seen from the *NBS Building*.

Previous/alternative name/s :

**LOCATION** Street : Commissioner  
 Street number : 111  
 : [55, 57, 59, 61 Eloff; 114, 116, 118, 120 Market;  
 : 111, 113, 115, 117 Commissioner; 24, 26, 28, 30 Joubert]  
 Stand Number : 4406  
 Previous Stand Number:  
 Block number : AA  
 GIS reference :

**ZONING:** Current use/s :  
 Previous use/s :

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:**

Height :  
 Levels above street level :  
 Levels below street level :  
 On-site parking : yes

**CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:**

Walls:

Roof:

Windows:

**SITE FEATURES:**

**ALTERATIONS:**

**INTEGRITY:**

**INSCRIPTION:**

**ARCHITECT:**

Monty Sack.

**BUILDER:**

**CONSTRUCTION DATE:**

Date on plans :  
Approval of plans :  
Completion date :

**BUILDING STYLE:**

Post Modern Decorative.

**BUILDING TYPE:**

Shops to street, arcade and office building.

**ENVIRONMENT:**

The *African Life Centre*, before its 'make-over', stood as a strict office building, lending a sombre feeling to its surround. The blue colouring of its 'new-look' lends to the building - seen in isolation - a light and refreshing look; standing as a 'buffer' between the formal business sector and more informal trading and residential sector. The building tends to be a 'show-of', i.e. on account of its sheer dominance in scale of other buildings in its immediate surround.

**CONDITION:**

The building appears to be in an excellent condition.

**URGENT ACTION:**

**SAHRA RECORD REGARDING ALTERATIONS, RENOVATIONS, RESTORATION:**

**PROTECTION STATUS:** (under National Heritage Resources Act, 1999)

General protection:	Section 34(1) structure/s	<input type="checkbox"/>
Formal protection:	provincial heritage site	<input type="checkbox"/>
	national heritage site	<input type="checkbox"/>
	provisional protection	<input type="checkbox"/>
	heritage area	<input type="checkbox"/>
	listed in provincial heritage resources register	<input type="checkbox"/>

Relevant Gazette Notice:

Gazette description:

**FORMER PROTECTION STATUS:** (under National Monuments Act, 1969)

**NOTES:**

**DEEDS INFORMATION:**

Original ownership:

**PRE-HISTORY OF SITE:**

**FIRST CARLTON HOTEL:**

The famous first *Carlton Hotel*, occupying almost a whole city block, was situated at 24, 26 Joubert, 111 – 117 Commissioner, 118, 120 Market and 55 – 61 Eloff Street.

According to Leyds, excavations for the first *Carlton Hotel* were started in 1898. The project was interrupted, however, by the Second Anglo-Boer War and not resumed until 1903. "Meanwhile, for nearly five years, there stood a crane on a platform high above the second-storey framework. Hanging from the crane was a huge imitation brandy bottle, advertising the old established firm of Jooste & Bryant...The bottle was at least 20 feet long, with a diameter of 5 feet. It was made of a bamboo frame covered with oiled paper and painted to look like a bottle of brandy,...It became a well-known landmark and there was general regret when after many years it at last had to make way for the rising Carlton Hotel." (Leyds, G.A.: A History of Johannesburg).

"In fact, the *Carlton Hotel* was the first building to demonstrate that man claimed not only the space above the city but also the space below ground level. The hotel had a basement of three storeys." (Lionel Phillips, 1905).

"In 1903 the *Rand Daily Mail* had reported the comments of the Inspector of Buildings, Mr E.H. Waugh, that the new houses being built in Johannesburg were of brick – 'good solid houses' – instead of the timber-framed, corrugated iron houses of the past. He noted that two new 'skyscrapers' were under construction in the centre of the town, and 'another huge building is the Carlton Hotel which will be by far the largest and most sumptuous hotel in South Africa'. (Chipkin, C.M.: Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...).

Right: "The Palm Court of the Carlton Hotel was a fashionable and favourite spot for afternoon teas and *thé dansants* for the socialites of early Johannesburg." (Norwich, O.I.: A Johannesburg Album; Historical Postcards, postcard 109).



"Carlton Hotel, 1904. Built on an entire city block, and fronting on Eloff, Commissioner, Market and Joubert Streets, this was Johannesburg's first 'skyscraper,' a term that had only become widely used in the Edwardian era. (The first 'skyscraper' actually erected and planned on modern principles of construction was William Le Baron Jenney's building of the Home Insurance Company in Chicago in 1885. In many respects the Carlton Hotel is not unlike that building.) Whereas the American architects of the late 19th century attempted to express the skeleton from [sic.] of steel in the facades of their buildings, the architect of the Carlton has disguised the steel structure with masonry and crowned the whole building with a massive cornice. The vast wall surfaces are punctured with neatly spaced windows and doors and further patterned with cast iron balconies. The general effect is impressive and restrained after the general meleé of the Fancy Dress Ball of Architecture that was the Victorian era. The Carlton represents the transitional period from Victorian to Edwardian, and forms the basis of the contemporary 'skyscraper' in Johannesburg which emerged in the post-war period of the twenties and early thirties." (Stoloff, C.A.: The Historic Buildings...).

"The Carlton Hotel was built as a fashionable hotel on the corner of Eloff and Market streets. A Carlton Company was formed in 1902. The English architect, Th. Smith, was invited to draw plans, together with the Johannesburg architect W. Leck. Ivan Kreuger, the Swedish millionaire and match

king, was responsible for the construction of the steel frame of the Carlton building. It was eventually opened as a hotel on 16 February 1906 under the management of Mr Morelli. In 1923 the entrepreneur I.W. Schlesinger took over the management of this hotel and increased it by three storeys, and by 1936 there were nine storeys." (Norwich, O.I.: A Johannesburg Album; Historical Postcards, postcard 108).

Right: "Another view of the imposing Carlton Hotel with its majestic entrance in Eloff Street. The ground floor on the Eloff, Market, and Commissioner sides was occupied by shops, particularly those likely to satisfy the requirements of the visitors, many of whom came from overseas, who stayed in the hotel. The most colourful of these shops was Sieradzki's which sold the ostrich plumes and material fashionable at the time. The Market Street aspect of the Carlton Hotel was occupied by a jewellery shop, and adjacent to it a number of small shops were demolished to make way for the Carlton Bioscope built in 1910 between Eloff and Joubert streets." (Norwich, O.I.: A Johannesburg Album; Historical Postcards, postcard 109a). For information on the Carlton Bioscope, see Carlton Theatre below.



#### CARLTON THEATRE:

According to Van Der Waal the *Carlton Theatre* was situated at 116 Market Street. (Van Der Waal, G-M.: From Mining Camp to Metropolis...).

There is a song 'Video killed the radio star' – I think the Boomtown Rats recorded it – which is an apt description of the demise of a large number of cinemas in South Africa. The video machine is connected to the television set and the arrival of television in South Africa during 1976 started a downhill period for the cinema and theatre industry. I remember going to the theatre as least once a month and to the cinemas once a week. The television changed that for a while and a large number of South Africans remained glued to their television sets during the evenings. It is interesting to note that theatres like the *Carlton, Gaiety, and Palladium* were in one way or another connected to the I.W. Schlesinger organisation. The destruction of these buildings left a void in Johannesburg night life. Another factor is the demolition of a large number of residential buildings in the inner city. This started a vicious circle – the number of inner city residents was systematically reduced – this meant an automatic reduction of patrons to the cinemas and theatres – leading to less people during the evenings in the city and as we all know; safety in numbers – an important factor – as this could have saved the heart of the city from a slow death and all the crime that followed. This is a leading factor making Johannesburg the capital city of crime in the world at one stage and sadly this city rot has filtered through to the areas adjacent to the inner city, making a place like Hillbrow, as an example, an almost no-go area for tourists. A huge abandonment of buildings followed this crime wave leading to the building boom in Sandton. This notorious title is still taking a toll on the inner city – and it is taking a lot of hard work from various people and organizations to make Johannesburg once again the glorious City of Gold. (Catharina J M Bruwer).

"While the theatres and cinemas north of the shopping district were all low-rise buildings, those east of the office area were much larger and also more sensational. These 'entertainment palaces' obviously felt at home in the vicinity of the tall office blocks which arose in this area, especially in Commissioner Street, which became known as the 'Great White Way' because of these buildings. In fact, the theatre buildings were so well identified with the environment that parts of them were fitted out as office accommodation. Nevertheless, they could be readily identified in the street aspect by their modelled and richly ornamented facades and large illuminated signboards." (Van Der Waal, G-M.: From Mining Camp to Metropolis...).

By 1954 tenants of the Carlton Hotel were Ike Schwartz, Sieradzki's; Central News Agency Co Ltd and Carlton Man's Shop.

#### WARWICK HOUSE:

By 1954, the *Warwick House* stood at 28 Joubert Street.

## HISTORY:

The history of the first *Carlton Hotel*, I.W. Schlesinger and the African Life Assurance Society is closely linked. The name I.W. Schlesinger is synonymous with great courage and a determination to succeed.

"I.W. Schlesinger" according to Chipkin, "landed in South Africa from New York in 1894, aged 23, and moved to the Rand, then fast emerging as the centre of South African economic activity. He was soon to become what Eric Rosenthal calls, 'perhaps the greatest South African entrepreneur since Cecil Rhodes'." "Soon after he got off the train at Park Station" according to Shorten, "Schlesinger walked into the establishment of two young fellow-Americans, Anthony Aufsehr (who eventually became Tony Officer, a famous long-distance cyclist) and Alfred W. Mabbett, and asked for a job. 'I'm good at selling things', he said, recounting how he had sold anything that had come his way in New York. The partners, who had come to Johannesburg to sell American bicycles and who imported other products as sidelines, regarded the newcomer with a measure of doubt. He was so small, only 5 feet 2½ inches tall, and he looked so young that they called him 'The Kid', but his enthusiasm was infectious and at the time they had on their hands a large consignment of Beeman's Papsin Gum which they had found they could not sell. Strange as it may seem, people in South Africa simply did not know what to do with chewing gum in those days, but here was someone who said he was a good salesman and they were prepared to grasp any opportunity of getting rid of the stock. 'If you can sell that gum you can sell anything', they said, whereupon Schlesinger went out and sold the entire consignment in a few days. His feat was recorded by Mark Twain who was in Madagascar when Tony Officer happened to be there. The cyclist told the famous author about the little American who sold chewing gum in 'darkest Africa' and Twain recounted the incident in one of his 'travel letters' that were afterwards published as a book." [Mark Twain also visited South Africa and stayed at the *Grand National Hotel*; see Pre-History: U-1 for more information.] Meanwhile, Officer and Mabbett had introduced Schlesinger to James Cavanagh, the most famous of all American insurance salesmen, who was then making a killing in this country. Cavanagh passed him on to J.B. Lindley, manager of the Equitable Insurance Company in Africa, and soon he was on the road selling insurance. Schlesinger's triumphs as an insurance salesman became a legend. Almost overnight his income rose to £10,000 a year and then to £15,000 and as he broke record after record they talked in awe in the Equitable office in New York of 'The Kid who is insuring the whole of Africa'. He insured mining magnates and diggers, farmers and country storekeepers and, so it was said, even Swazi chiefs. On one occasion he was presented to President Kruger and blithely offered to insure his life. The President, however, was 73 and thought otherwise. In 1904 he launched his greatest venture which was to prove a cornerstone of all his later enterprises – the African Life Assurance Society...he coached its agents in how to approach a prospective client. As a result the company issued 2,272 policies to the value of £1,048,450 in its first year. Then the old-established insurance companies realised that another Richmond was in the field and a battle royal followed. But African Life survived and went on to become one of the largest South African companies of its kind, for there was nothing that its founder did not know about insurance." (Chipkin, C.M.: *Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...*).

"Schlesinger, Isidore William. South African financier and industrialist. Born in New York in 1871, son of a Hungarian immigrant associated with the famous Labour leader, Damuel Gompertz. From youth I. W. Schlesinger displayed exceptional financial and administrative gifts, and came to the Transvaal in 1894, as a manufactures agent [see Shorten]. Became an insurance salesman. After the South African War, founded the African Realty Trust, opening up townships in Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Johannesburg. In 1904 he started the African Life Assurance Society, followed by the Colonial Banking and Trust Co. in 1910, and the African Guarantee and Indemnity Co. In 1914 Schlesinger established the African Theatres Trust, later African Consolidated Theatres. More enterprises followed – African Films and African Film Productions (the first successful locally made pictures). His *African Mirror* newsreel still exists [by 1970]. At Langholm, near Grahamstown, he established pineapple plantations, and canneries in Port Elizabeth. Through technical inadequacies of the catchment [sic.] area his irrigation venture at Kendrew, near Graaff-Reinet, failed, but he created at Zebediela...the largest orange orchard in the world [by 1970], with 650,000 trees. Also interested in early talkies, owned theatres in Britain and attempted to introduce the American drug store to South Africa. Was the head of over 100 companies, including newspapers and department stores, employing tens of thousands of South Africans. He died in 1949." (Rosenthal E.: *Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa...*). For information on the *African Guarantee and Indemnity Co Building* see D-4; the *Colonial Banking and Trust Co. Building*, see D-2; and the *African Life Assurance Society Building*, see A-1.

Appearing in Palestrant, E.: *Johannesburg One Hundred*, is a photograph with the following caption: "Dawid Johnson on point duty at the junction of Rissik and President streets, the day after the first traffic light in Johannesburg was installed in 1927. The mechanical light had been presented to the town council by Mr I.W. Schlesinger."

The last word on the founder of the African Life Assurance Society goes to Shorten "In March, 1949, the 'Little Man' of so many great achievements was mercifully released from the pain he had borne for more than twenty years. Fittingly, it was on his beloved Zebediela, at the top of a hill among the orange trees, that he was laid to rest."(Shorten, J.R.: The Johannesburg Saga).

"Schlesinger, John. South African capitalist and industrialist, son of I. W. Schlesinger...Born in Johannesburg, he was educated at Micalhouse, Natal, and at Harvard University, U.S.A. He served in the American forces in World War II. Joining the organisation as a young man, he succeeded his father as chairman of his numerous companies in 1949." (Rosenthal E.: Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa...).

I remember - in 1974 - when I started working for the African Eagle Life Assurance Society - A.E.L.A.S. as it was known at the time - we as new employees had to attend 'classes'. The 'teacher' or instructor was a kind German gentleman doing his best trying to impose upon us good employee principles. This surely was a legacy of I.W. Schlesinger as well as the theatre tickets that were up for grabs, once a month, for the best employee of each section. I earned two double sets of tickets this way, one for the *Middle Of The Road* pop group and the other one to see *Lovelace Watkins* the singer with the deep golden voice. These tickets were always for shows presented at the *His Majesty's Theatre* situated at 118 Commissioner Street, directly opposite the *African Life Centre*. The *His Majesty's Cellar* played an important role in the social life of Johannesburg especially during lunch hours. This was one of the employee's equivalent of the employers' *Rand Club* and with 30 minutes worth of lunch time, there was never time for anything more than a soda. (Catharina JM Bruwer).

Lastly, the *African Life Centre* is directly associated with the official launch in 1995 of the Gauteng Provincial Government precinct in Johannesburg. This historic association in itself makes the building a place of notable cultural significance. See below for a copied transcript of the address delivered by Mr Tokyo Sexwale, then Premier of the Gauteng Province, at a function held in the building on 20 October 1995.

Issued by Gauteng Provincial Government: SPEECH BY PREMIER TOKYO SEXWALE - LAUNCH OF THE GAUTENG GOVERNMENT PRECINCT, 20 October 1995

"Today is a memorable day for Gauteng. It is the day on which we formally establish ourselves as government in our provincial capital of Johannesburg. Yes, we already have our legislative arms here, operating from the Provincial Legislature behind me. For several months, members of the various political parties have been debating vital issues, and passing new laws, from this building. It was one of the decisions by the Legislature which led to our meeting here today: the decision, taken last year, that Johannesburg is the provincial capital of this new province called Gauteng. Although it took some time for the decision to be taken, it was an obvious one. After all, Johannesburg is fairly close to the geographic centre-point of the province. But there are bigger reasons Johannesburg is also the nerve-centre of finance, commerce and industry, not just in Gauteng but in South Africa. This city is home to the stock Exchange, and to more than 50% of South Africa's corporate headquarters. It houses the banks, the mining houses, the media institutions. It is, more than anything, the city that makes the South African economy tick. And for our government, which is deeply committed to the growth of the economy, and the resulting development and upliftment of our people, there can be no better place to be. Johannesburg is the cockpit of government. From here, we are driving the overall development of Gauteng, moulding it into the Lion of Africa. We are attracting foreign investors, broadening the economy, developing joint ventures between foreign investors and local business, and empowering small business. We are creating jobs - not just for the people of Johannesburg, Alex or Soweto, but for all the people of the province. Our overall objective is clear: to achieve maximum economic growth and development in Gauteng. It is our priority as part of South Africa's national growth and development strategy. Obviously, the safety and security of everyone who lives and works in Johannesburg is paramount. The same applies to visitors to our capital city. So we are working closely with the SAPS on visible policing projects in the city centre, in the suburbs and the townships to ensure that this is a secure place to be. So here we are. Our Provincial Service Commission is already in place, at 111 Commissioner Street. Many of our departments will soon start to move into offices just two or three blocks away from here - our health department, our housing department, and so on. We will have over 3 000 trained people here, in the city centre, managing the affairs of government and ensuring the provision of quality service to the public. In addition, we will have our regional offices in Soweto, Pretoria, the East Rand, the Vaal and so on. My own office is currently situated a few blocks away, at 30 Simmonds Street. Within the next 18 months or so, we will be moving here, to the old Rissik Street Post Office. In that office, we will have a range of corporate services, the Director-General's office, and my own support staff. It will be the nerve centre of government. That step will complete the first phase of the development of this new area, the Gauteng Government Precinct, which is bounded by Sauer Street in the west, President Street in the north, Market Street in the south, and Eloff Street in the east. There will be further stages after this, we are sure, as we continue with our urban renewal programme with the Greater Johannesburg TMC, and as

the private sector becomes even more involved in the revitalisation of Johannesburg. We are signing a declaration today, a declaration of intent, which indicates our commitment to this city. We believe our presence in the city confirms the confidence that government has in Johannesburg, and trust that our confidence will be matched by some of thegs (sic.) and headed north to Midrand, or even further afield (sic.). Come to where the action is - come to, Johannesburg one of the greatest cities on the African continent, and capital city of Gauteng. Finally, we wish to pay tribute to our athletes and artists who are participating in this day of fun and celebration, and everyone who worked so hard to make it happen. We pay particular tribute to the group of athletes who represented South Africa in the recent All-Africa Games in Harare, who are here to day and who took part in the fun-run around our precinct. Like Gauteng, you, our local heroes, are true winners, and we salute you for your achievements and for holding high our country's flag."

#### GENERAL NOTES:

Estimated cost of building :  
Estimated cost of drainage :  
Accommodation approved :  
Valuation at completion :  
Occupied :

The address of the Carlton Bar of the now demolished first *Carlton Hotel* was 111 Commissioner Street the main address of the *African Life Centre*.

#### CURRENT TENANTS:

Woolworths.

Juta's. Norwich: "Juta's [see V-1], after ninety-seven years on the same site, has now moved to the African Life Centre, corner of Eloff and Commissioner streets."

#### SOURCES:

*For additional illustrative information, see relevant supplementary photo album in electronic format.*

See SOURCES DOCUMENT for information on sources consulted with reference to this document.

#### ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

Historic Value:

- Associated with historic person, group or organisation
- Associated with historic event or activity

Architectural/Aesthetic value:

- Important example of building type
- Important example of a style or period
- Fine details, workmanship or aesthetics
- Work of a major architect or builder

Social/Spiritual/Linguistic value:

- Associated with social, spiritual, linguistic, economic or political activity
- Illustrates an historical period

Scientific/Technological value:

- Example of industrial, technical or engineering development/achievement
- New, rare or experimental building techniques

#### RECORDED BY:

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Unless otherwise indicated photographs by Catharina JM BPUWER.

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