

**JOHANNESBURG METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY**

**HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM**

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

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**NAME OF PLACE: COMMERCIAL UNION BUILDING**



Left: corner, Commissioner and Simmonds Streets.

Top centre: corner, Fox and Simmonds Streets.

Top right: entrance, Simmonds Street.

Previous/alternative name/s : By 1976 - *Commercial Union Building*

**LOCATION:** Street : Commissioner  
 Street number : 84  
 : [30, 32 Simmonds; 83 Fox]  
 Stand Number : 1098  
 Previous Stand Number: 139, 143  
 Block number : BC  
 Suburb : Marshallstown  
 GIS reference :

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

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:**

Height :  
 Levels above street level : eight and a half  
 Levels below street level :  
 On-site parking :

**CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:**

Walls: reinforced concrete; plastered brick, polished marble.

Roof: flat, concrete.

Windows: steel casements, anodised aluminium frame shop fronts.

**SITE FEATURES:**

**ALTERATIONS:**

**INTEGRITY:**

**INSCRIPTION:**

**ARCHITECT:**

Pearse, Aneck Hann & Bristol.

**BUILDER:**

**CONSTRUCTION DATE:**

Date on plans :  
Approval of plans :  
Completion date :

**BUILDING STYLE:**

Brazilian Modernism, 1960s.

“Architectural Merit: A well articulated building the length of a city block. Central articulated cupola in the façade creates interest, and the corners are turned well.” (Johannesburg Building, Space & Urban Feature Classification, 1998: Inner City).

**BUILDING TYPE:**

Shops to street (Commissioner and Fox Streets) and office building.

**ENVIRONMENT:**

**CONDITION:**

Good.

**URGENT ACTION:**

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

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

- General protection: Section 34(1) structure/s
- Formal protection: provincial heritage site
- national heritage site
- provisional protection
- heritage area
- listed in provincial heritage resources register

Relevant Gazette Notice:

Gazette description:

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

**NOTES:**

**DEEDS INFORMATION:**

Original ownership:

1976: Commercial Union Assurance Company SA Ltd, 30 Simmonds Street, Marshallstown.

**PRE-HISTORY OF SITE:**



Left: Commissioner Street, 1956; from left to right can be seen *Annan House*, the *North British & Mercantile Building*, *Clegg House*, and nearest to the camera, *SARB House*. (Stark, F. [Ed.]: *Seventy Golden Years...*). Right: view of *Annan House* on the left and on the right, the *North British & Mercantile Building*. Copy of photo from SAHRA archive file 3/1/1Joh/143: *Annan House*, 86 Commissioner Street, Marshalltown.

COMMERCIAL BUILDING:

The three-storey *Commercial Building* – designed by Lennox Canning & Goad - was completed during 1890 and stood on the corner of 84 Commissioner and 32 Simmonds Streets .

According to Van Der Waal, the following description of the buildings by a journalist, possibly with architectural training, appeared in *The Star* dated 4 October 1890: “It is designed in a style which may be described as Free Classic Architecture, a style well adapted for a building on a small stand in which *multum in parvo* (small but comprehensive) is to be obtained and where no broad monumental treatment of the facades is possible’. The same journalist...dismissed the *Barnato Building*, also designed by Canning & Goad, with the observation that ‘the style of architecture appears to be fanciful’. Barring a few exceptions, mining houses and other companies were as yet not large enough to warrant the construction of their own buildings so that many of them had to compete under one roof. Generally, office buildings were conceived in the same style as the *Bank of Africa* [See Pre-History: F-4, First *Bank of Africa*]: the façade of a recumbent cuboid was divided into panels by a subjacent grid scheme. The face surface was given a rich texture by way of cornices, string courses, pilasters and other ornamentation so that its severe aspect addressed the tactile sense rather than the eye. Nor was there any strong emphasis on any particular point, such as the entrance. In fact, such construction components were seemingly of less significance than the stereometric form of the whole and the gridding of the façade face. Typical office buildings from that time include the following: *Tollemache Building* (1888), 73 Commissioner Street [see Pre-History: D-1], *Ginsberg Chambers* (1889-90) [see Pre-History: BC-1], 83 Fox Street; *Commercial Building* (1890) 84 Commissioner Street [see Pre-History: BC-1], and *Barnato Building* (1890), 88 Commissioner Street [see Pre-History: BC-3].” (Van Der Waal, G-M.: *From Mining Camp to Metropolis...*).

NORTH BRITISH & MERCANTILE BUILDING:

The *Commercial Building* was replaced by the *North British & Mercantile Building*. Designed by Cowin,

Powers & Ellis in 1926, it was completed during 1927. A reference of 1954 gives the name of the building as the *North British Buildings*.

**GINSBERG CHAMBERS:**

Previously, the double-storey *Ginsberg Chambers* with its rounded corner stood at 83 Fox Street and 30 Simmonds Street. Construction work was commenced during 1889 and the building was completed during 1890.

**ROYAL CHAMBERS:**

In 1910, the *Ginsberg Chambers* was demolished (its cellar was retained) to make way for the four-storey building, known as the *Royal Chambers*. The well-known Langham Deep Bar was located on the ground floor of this building.



Of interest, firstly, is the fact that the building was one of two buildings in Johannesburg designed by the architects Leck, Emley & Dickson. Secondly, was the particularly unusual design of the building with its corner tower, and concave gable in Simmonds Street. The building, *inter alia*, comprised not only the Langham Deep Bar on Ground Floor, but also a Tea Room and two separate shops with entrances in Simmonds Street. The remaining floors comprised offices.

The architectural practice of Kallenbach, Kennedy & Furner were commissioned in 1944 to attend to various alterations, some of which entailed unsympathetic changes to the main façades.

**HISTORY:**

See GENERAL NOTES.

The first Premier of the Gauteng Province, Tokyo Sexwale had his office in this building. On the occasion of the launch of the Gauteng Government Precinct in Johannesburg on 20 October 1995, Premier Sexwale anticipated the relocation of his office to the old *Rissik Street Post Office* (see I-1). This never transpired and the Premier's Office is currently located in the neighbouring *Annan House* (see BC-2).

**GENERAL NOTES:**

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

**CURRENT TENANT:**

Brazilian Coffee Bar.

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Left: Roberts, T. (Managing Editor): Who's Who of Southern Africa, Combined Publishers, Johannesburg, 1973.

## 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 Bruwer.



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