

## JOHANNESBURG METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

### HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM

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

**NAME OF PLACE:** Barbican Building

**Previous/alternative name/s :**

**LOCATION:** Street : President  
Street number : 89  
Stand number : 688 (previously 518)  
Block number : S

**ZONING:** Current use/s : Business one  
Previous use/s : Shops, restaurant, offices, photographer's studio

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:**

Underground transformer room, ground floor, nine storeys, top (studio) floor.

Ground floor : shops, boiler room and coal room.

First floor : restaurant, sweets shop with counter, soda fountain with counter.

Second, third and fourth : bay windows on President and Rissik Streets, offices with gas fires, hand washbasins, dank pipes, workshops and waiting rooms. floors.

Fifth floor : offices with gas fires(places), centre office as rest and change room for waitresses.

Sixth, Seventh and Eighth floors : pillars on President and Rissik Streets, offices with gas fires(places).

Ninth floor : offices with gas fires(places).

Top (studio) : photographer's studio with pergola, caretakers and servants quarters.  
floor Lifts motor room.

The original design included two lifts, internal staircase and a fire escape.

It is a 10 storey building built in two stages, the lower faced in stone, the upper in plaster. It belongs to the skyscraper age and at the time dominated the spire of the Palace Building, previously the tallest building in Johannesburg. Barbican Building overlooks the City Hall, a neo classical stone structure of 1912 and the red brick plaster Republican Post Office of 1897, in Rissik Street.

The Barbican Building is square on plan. Shops occupied the ground floor protected by a canopy at first floor level. The elevations facing Rissik and President Streets are symmetrical and are dominated by elements of the Classical Revival Style. The more elaborate lower half is modulated with curved bay windows capped with a cornice, which forms the base to the upper part. The simpler upper floors dominated by pairs of giant Corinthian pilasters and columns which flank the central windows, are capped by a cornice. Projecting balconies and loggias articulate the centres of the top floor. The uppermost projecting cornice is crowned by art deco towers accommodating an attic studio and topped by a strange mixture of classical oddments." This "strange mixture of classical oddments" was not on the original plans.

The building "is ten storeys high and desperately tried to appear higher hence the extraordinary pile-up of building elements. This culminated on the corner tower with a Surrealist imposition of disembodied classical details which were used to stake the building's claim in the growing competition for height and prominence which was prevalent in Johannesburg at that time." (NMC memorandum i.c.w. proposed provisional declaration of the building)

Abandoned on a island of sand, stripped of its former companions, empty and broken. Almost out of balance, over decorated, but so beautiful in its ugliness, standing proud and almost shouting to the world the Post Office and I are here to stay. (cjmb)

#### **CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:**

Walls : brick, sandstone cladding.

Roof : covered with concrete.

Windows: steel frame.

#### **SITE FEATURES:**

#### **ALTERATIONS:**

The documents pertaining to the approval of plans in respect of this building are missing from the City Engineering Department's records. See GENERAL NOTES.

Plan no. 133078: high tension chamber added to underground transformer room.

Plans passed : 4 June 1936

Plan no. 192043: cubicle screening and new basins for *Maison Gwens Hairdressing Saloon* on the first floor. Plans by Trevail & Taylor (Pty) Ltd, Shopfitting Specialists.  
Plans passed : 15 February 1949

Plan no. 220990: interior walls demolished, new stove hood and partitions added. No floor number on plan.  
Architect : D. Silverman  
Plan date : 3 December 1953  
Plans passed : 11 December 1953

Plan no. 231027: office converted to toilets and safe room on the second floor.  
Architect : Abramowitch & David Pinshow  
Plan date : 24 October 1955  
Plans passed : 11 November 1955

Plan 231625: on the first floor: interior walls demolished; new toilets and storeroom in existing space. Staircase removed and floor made good. New steps to exterior of building. Part of exterior wall removed and building linked with fire proof door to Harrowes Ltd (adjacent building on President Street). This floor was used as a showroom.  
Architect : Abramowitch & David Pinshow  
Plan date : 28 November 1955  
Plans passed : 30 November 1955

Plan no. 264358: drainage to existing shop. No floor number on plan.  
Architect : Leslie Simon  
Plans passed : 19 October 1962

Plan no. 277522: new steel canopy over pavement.  
Architect : Manfred Hermer & Partners  
Plan date : 15 September 1965  
Plans passed : 16 September 1965

Plan no. : (no number).  
Ground floor : marble facings to existing interior columns and stall board visors.  
First floor : door to toilets moved to new position, opening bricked-up and new door installed.  
Second floor : partitions removed.  
Architect : Manfred Hermer & Partners  
Plan date : 13 May 1965  
Plans passed : 11 August 1965

Plan no. 393294: alterations for *Rendezvous Escort Agency* on the third floor; demolish all existing interior walls, damage to floor and ceiling made good; two new counters installed; new aluminium and glass partition to entrance; canopy installed to the exterior of building; dancing and lounge area carpeted; new wash-up sink and dry wall partitions; new vinyl carpets in the fifth floor rest and dressing room.  
Draughtsman : J.J. Oosthuizen  
Plans passed : 7 May 1984

In 1995, Old Mutual Properties were forced to secure the building and the measures so taken, were carried out in full consultation with the NMC. "Mr Martinson tabled a letter dated 12 February 1996 from Old Mutual Properties regarding the temporary provision of brick walls at the various entry points to the building. It was noted that this was intended to prevent squatters/vandals gaining access to the building and would not entail any damage to the building. The committee DECIDED that these measures were acceptable."

**INTEGRITY:**

Except for the missing verandah and the classical oddment of the corner projection, the façade remains intact. According to alteration plans available, very few exterior structural changes have been made to this building.

**INSCRIPTION:****ARCHITECT/BUILDER:**

Obel & Obel  
(See GENERAL NOTES)

**CONSTRUCTION DATE:**

On plan : 30 September 1929  
Completed : approximately 1931  
(according to Chipkin, completion occurred in 1930)

**BUILDING STYLE:**

The architect Mira Fassler Kamstra in 1994, stated as follows: "The importance of the...building derives from: (a) Its value as an architectural curiosity, reflecting in its vertical composition, the architectural trends which were moving from neo classical (the base building) to art deco (in the towers) at the time. (b) Its reinforcement of the record of contemporary eclectic styles of 1897 (the Rissik Street post office), 1912 (the city hall), 1929 and 1933 (in itself)."

**BUILDING TYPE:**

Shops and office building.

**ENVIRONMENT:**

"The importance of the...building derives from:...Its position as a tower building, strongly silhouetted against the sky, which forms a commanding presence on this important corner in this historical precinct at the heart of the city – a presence undiminished by the high buildings which have become its neighbours in more recent times...Its value as the last remaining historical building, besides the City Hall and the Rissik Street Post Office, on the Civic Square." (Mira Fassler Kamstra, 1994)

At the time of its construction – "...it overlooked, on the one side, the old Republican Post Office in Rissik Street as well as the pre-1914 Town Hall; on the other side, it dwarfed the nearby Victorian spire of Palace Building, once Johannesburg's highest structure – a poignant and to unintended domination of the old architecture by the new skyscraper age."

**CONDITION:**

In 1976, recommendations were to clean-up the building. The white paint to the first floor was to be removed, etc.

In October 1999, the NMC expressed concern over the neglected condition of the building and requested Old Mutual to urgently address this problem.

Aug/Sept 2002 – the building stands vacant and in dire need of attention.

**URGENT ACTION:****SAHRA RECORD REGARDING ALTERATIONS, RENOVATIONS, RESTORATION:****PROTECTION STATUS:** (under National Heritage Resources Act, 1999)

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

In 1996 the building was provisionally declared in terms of Government Notice No. 1407 of 30 August 1996 as published in Government Gazette No. 17386 of 30 August 1996. This notice was effective for a period of five years and the provisional declaration was not renewed.

**NOTES:**

It was originally contemplated by the NMC to list the building on the Register of Immovable Properties. This was communicated to City of Johannesburg during 1991.

A year later during 1992, NMC was approached for clarification on the conservation status of the building. Its position was that the building was conservation-worthy. It was subsequently rumoured that the building was nonetheless, going to be demolished.

Later during 1994, there was again talk of demolishing the building. Ms Mira Fassler Kamstra (President of The Transvaal Institute Of Architects in letter dd. 2 March 1994 to NMC, reacted as follows: "...it is our firm view that the Barbican Building forms an important asset, both in terms of its uniqueness, its embodiment of architectural history and its important position in the urban framework of the Civic Spine."

The NMC subsequently in June 1994, decided to provisionally declare the building. The owners however, objected to this. "Our client", according to their legal advisors, "has been forced to conclude that the only...option would be to accept the invitation of the owners of neighbouring properties to join them in a more ambitious development. The building itself cannot feasibly be redeveloped, as the site is too small."

In 1995, the following was stated by Monty Sack, in his capacity as a member of the CJP's (Central Johannesburg Partnership) planning team involved in setting up regional government offices in the historical precinct.- "We believe that the Barbican Building should be incorporated in the new development currently being planned in the block bounded by President, Loveday, Rissik and Pritchard Streets."

Shortly after this in 1995, the NMC came to know of the change of ownership to Old Mutual. Ian Watt, the group's property division Assistant GM, at that stage, stated that Old Mutual Properties were committed to providing innovative aesthetically pleasing buildings geared to meet technological and environmental needs. He indicated that they were also firmly committed, where appropriate, to restoring and preserving older buildings, particularly those of historical note. "We believe both developers and conservationists have a responsibility to address the challenges facing cities and help them grow and expand to provide jobs and shelter for a rapid growing population and at the same time retain their character and attractiveness. We also believe it is essential that market needs guide the decision to develop or restore since the restoration of an old building may not be financially viable or in the best interests of a city."

#### **DEEDS INFORMATION:**

Original ownership: H.G. Heiman

T516/1949 Barbican Buildings Pty Ltd  
T25804/1995 South African Mutual Life Assurance Soc  
T25804/1995 Old Mutual Life Assurance Co South Africa Ltd

#### **PRE-HISTORY OF SITE:**

On this corner stand originally stood a low corrugated iron structure. By 1891, it had been replaced by the Arcade Building. This was a double storey brick building with neo-Queen Anne gable and ornament; the corner was flattened with a bay window above the entrance.

#### **HISTORY:**

Clive Chipkin provides the following interesting perspective on the background (setting) to the construction of this building: "To many Americans the 1920s seemed to be a period of what J.K. Galbraith calls 'effortless money'. It was the time of the boom of 1928 which extended into 1929 - and then- suddenly, there was the Wall Street Crash! The worst effects of the 1929... did not reach Johannesburg immediately. There was an uncertain period, leading up the Black Year of 1932. And it was during this period of uncertainty that two of the city's stunted skyscrapers were built. Both belong, emotionally, if not chronologically, to the optimistic period

of the 1920s. Both epitomise Johannesburg's competitive, hybrid environment." The other building was Astor Mansions in Jeppe Street (1932).

#### **GENERAL NOTES:**

The original set of plans for the construction of the building is incomplete (the only remaining plans are numbered 94002). So also is the remaining record for this building kept at the City Engineering Department, Township Johannesburg (Planning Dept., City of Johannesburg). All that remains on record in this regard are subsequent plans concerning alterations and additions. These plans could however, also be incomplete. No approval documentation could be found to clarify either this or the dates of approval.

Chipkin comments as follows in regard to the Obel brothers: "The architects of Ottawa House were Obel & Obel, who designed a series of significant 1930's Art Deco buildings: Astor Mansions...Anchor Mansions...the adjacent Africa House...and Circle Court... Marc Obel once recalled: 'We were considered the first architects of that period'. By 1939, the practice was in decline just as the Art Deco tide in Johannesburg had abated, rapidly becoming a historical curiosity of the past. The Obel brothers left for Miami in Florida. They subsequently came back to Johannesburg – after the war – working on some Eloff Street developments. New York influences are tangible in all Obel & Obel work. Both brothers had strong American associations. L.T. Obel studied architecture at Columbia University in the 1920's, a background that established the firm's persona. Obel & Obel were pre-eminently Art Deco designers. The essence of their style is to be found in the vestibule of Circle Court...All the variety and design exuberance which the Obels had picked up from New York's pre-Depression buildings were packed into this single statement of what it was like to be alive in the Art Deco age. Nevertheless, there was an ironic element in this situation. Behind the Art Deco glitter, Marc Obel was not oblivious to the world Depression that he had witnessed at close quarters. He remained for the rest of his life a stern critic laissez-faire capitalism out of control."

#### **SOURCES:**

Opname Historiese Geboue In Johannesburg, Second Report June 1976, Inner City, RAU

NMC File 9/2/228/118: Barbican Building, President Street, Johannesburg, Vol. I and II (incl. Coloured photographs of the buildings and surrounds)

"Old Mutual: Keeping a balance" in Old Mutual, Supplement to Financial Mail, May 19, 1995

Chipkin, C.M: Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society 1880s – 1960s, David Philip, 1993

The Market Square Of Johannesburg: Catalogue of buildings on and around the square till about 1920 (Compiled by G.M. van der Waal), Public Library, Johannesburg, 1971

City Engineering Department, Stand No. 688, Township Johannesburg (Planning Dept., City of Johannesburg)

Registrar of Deeds, Johannesburg

#### **RECORDED BY:**

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Photographs by Chris JH Coxen (unless otherwise indicated).

**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