

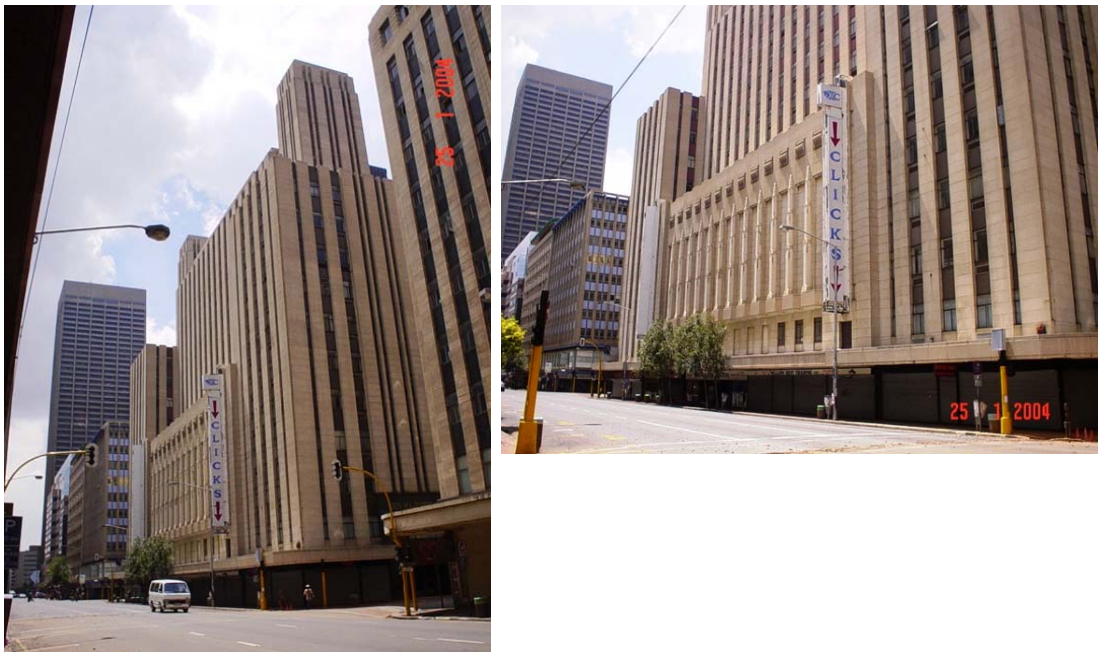
**JOHANNESBURG METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY**

**HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM**

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

JJ Bruwer ©  
Cellphone: 082 325 5823

**NAME OF PLACE:** [Second] HIS MAJESTY'S BUILDING



Top left: Commissioner Street – main elevation and streetscape. Just visible on the right in the picture is the *Shakespeare House*. Top right: view of lower section of Commissioner Street elevation.

Previous/alternative name/s :

**LOCATION:** Street : Commissioner  
 Street number : 120, 122, 124  
 : [51, 53 Eloff; 119, 121, 123 Fox]  
 Stand Number : 297, 298, 299, 301, 302, 303  
 Previous Stand Number:  
 Block number : BG  
 Suburb : Marshallstown  
 GIS reference :

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

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:**

Height :  
 Levels above street level : office towers (11, 14, and 18 storeys)  
 Levels below street level :  
 On-site parking :

The history of the site of the *second His Majesty's Building* is fascinating. Situated on the city block now occupied by the current building, was the *old Wesleyan Chapel* on the corner of Commissioner and Joubert Streets. The famous *Goldreich Buildings* was later situated on this block. See PRE-HISTORY. This building, erected to accommodate the Postal and Telegraph Services during the construction of the *Post Office Building* in Rissik Street. The building later accommodated the *first His Majesty's Theatre*. In 1937, the building was demolished to make way for the current building, designed by the well-known architectural practice of J.C. Cook & Cowen. Field Marshal Jan Smuts opened the His Majesty's Theatre in 1946, following the completion of the building in 1945. Many of Johannesburg's advocates of note, including the late Joe Slovo, had their chambers in this building, which was also the headquarters of the famous Schlesinger Organisation. In 1969, the African Consolidated Theatres (founded by I.W. Schlesinger) sold the building to the Anglo American organisation. Despite strenuous efforts by the Directors of His Majesty's Theatre (Pty) Ltd, and "The Friends of the His Majesty's Theatre", the final hour came in 1981, when the Theatre was closed. It was subsequently converted to a retail store.

The following description by Chipkin, serves as a fitting introduction to a description in turn, of the *second His Majesty's Building*: "His Majesty's worked as a major theatre – to replace the historic His Majesty's Theatre (1903) – and it worked as chambers for the legal profession, besides providing lettable accommodation for commercial tenants. These competing elements are expressed in the elevations in a series of modular forms. But it is the architectural massing that I regard as brilliant: a cavernous theatre incorporated in the middle ground into variable office towers, eleven, fourteen and eighteen storeys high. Basically the building comprises a central slab block, but unlike later-generation slab blocks it does not break up the townscape into a series of individual property towers. It contributes to the street wall (both as extension and as element of change) by picking up the modular treatment of Shakespeare House [see BF-3] with its own clear-cut statement of modular accommodation in the Rockefeller Center manner, thus adding its own share to a consistent metropolitan milieu. In addition, the symmetrical massing builds up towards two end lift-towers, creating a distinctive and recognisable image. Yes, the competing towers do produce architectural duality but in the upper levels this dualism contributes not one but two elegant eighteen-storey towers to the city skyline. What is more, the upper components of the Chrysler and Escom towers provide a dramatic counterpoint in the vicinity. As at the Lewis & Marks skyscraper [P-6], His Majesty's verticality derives from the Rockefeller Center in New York, which Maurice Cowen visited in 1936. It was said on his return that he was 'crazy about the Rockefeller Center', a complex that had captured his imagination. It was this imagination that bestowed a powerful image of metropolis on Commissioner Street. The early skyscrapers, besides being seductive landmarks, represented a quantitative change in the urban scale of the Witwatersrand. Johannesburg was now a city of skyscrapers and traffic din. It had great movie houses with large photomontage placards and the glow of urban electricity. And from nooks and crannies there drifted the sounds and idioms of township *marabi* culture, picking up jazz-beat inspiration from gramophone records and American movies. (Chipkin, C.M.: Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...).

#### **CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:**

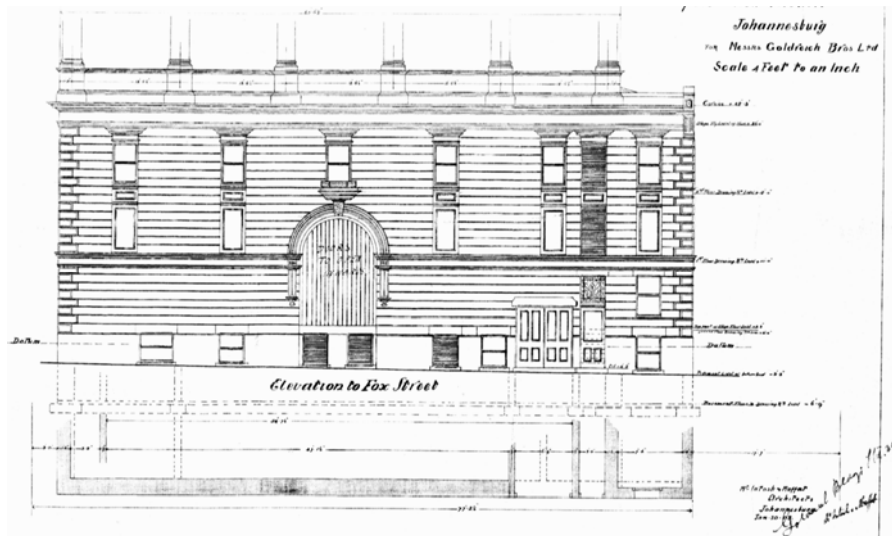
Walls: reinforced concrete frame construction; stuccowork; black polished granite to first and second floor with patterned bronze insets to main entrances.

Roof: concrete, flat.

Windows: steel side-hung casements with fanlights over.

The authors were unsuccessful in the efforts to locate the original municipal submission drawings of the building. Neither could the original Application for Approval of Plans form be found. This, sadly, has made it impossible, to establish the original estimated cost of the building. It would no doubt have been quite a considerable amount!

It is suggested that the existing section in Fox Street of the former *second His Majesty's Theatre* – see below (right) may include parts of the façade of the *Goldreich Buildings*. Below (left) is a copy of a section of the Fox Street elevation (by the architects McIntosh and Moffat, dated 20 January 1903) of the building, showing what the lower aspect of the façade (i.e. in Fox Street) of the *first His Majesty's Theatre* might have looked like after the conversion of the *Goldreich Buildings* in 1903.



#### SITE FEATURES:

#### ALTERATIONS:

Below is a list showing the dates of approval of subsequent additions / alterations to the building, and the names of responsible architects. This is not a complete record of the changes effected to the building since its completion, as the plans record of the building appears to be incomplete.

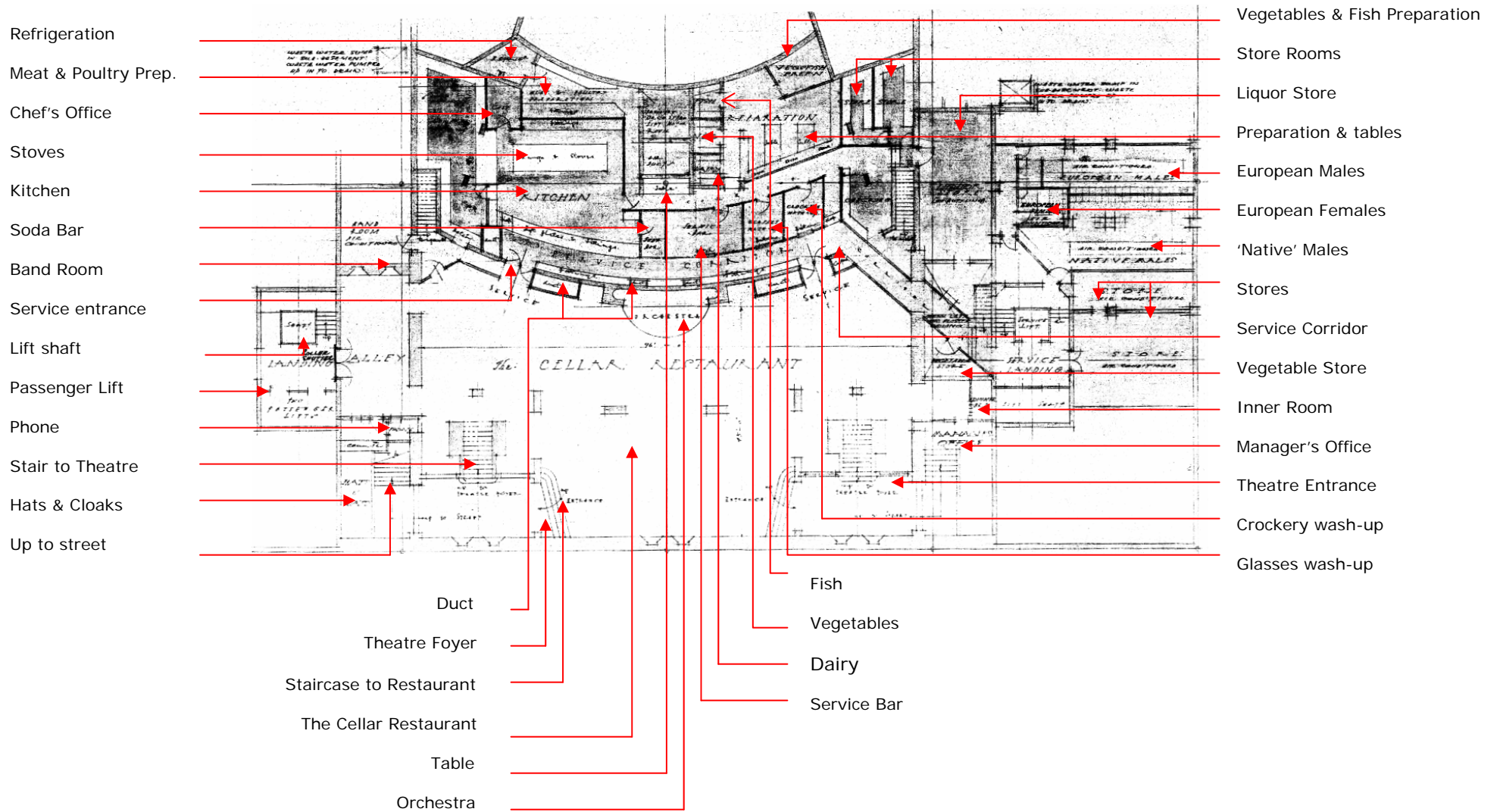
#### Date approved:

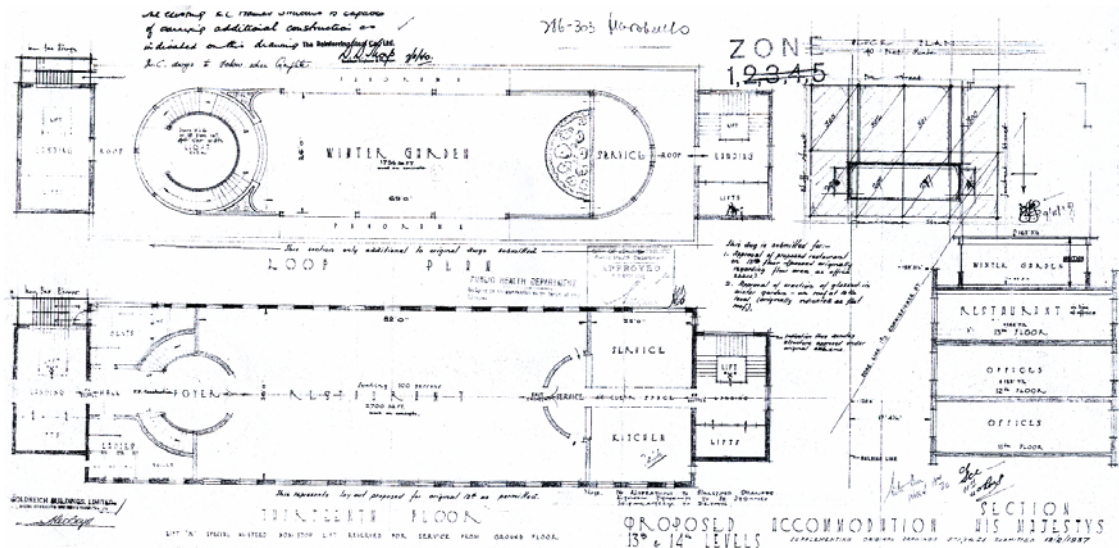
#### Architect/s:

1940	J.C. Cook & Cowen.
1941	J.C. Cook & Cowen.
1946	J.C. Cook & Cowen.
1947	J.C. Cook & Cowen.
1951	Author: C. van Tonder.
1952	Harris & Jones.
1953	Author unknown. (For African Consolidated Theatres).
1954	Author unknown. (For African Consolidated Theatres).
1957	Author unknown.
1959	Fox Theatres (Architectural Department).
1959	Fox Theatres (Architectural Department).
1961	Anthony Endres.
1965	Hylton Smith.
1967	J.C. Cook & Cowen.
1968	Bentel and Abramson.
1971	Author unknown.
1972	Monty Sack.
1974	Moross & Partners.
1975	Moross & Partners.
1979	M. Lojdl.
1980	J.C. Paula (Civil Engineer).
1980	Anglo American Property Services.
1983	Anglo American Property Services.
1984	Trust Bank Planning Department.
1991	Anglo American Property Services.

THE CELLAR RESTAURANT:

Below: 'Amended Plan Of His Majesty's – Cellar – - Restaurant – Basement – Floor' for 'His Majesty's Buildings, Johannesburg'. Plan signed by Maurice Cowen (J.C. Cook & Cowen) pp. Goldreich Buildings Limited. Site passed by the City Engineer on 12 December 1946.



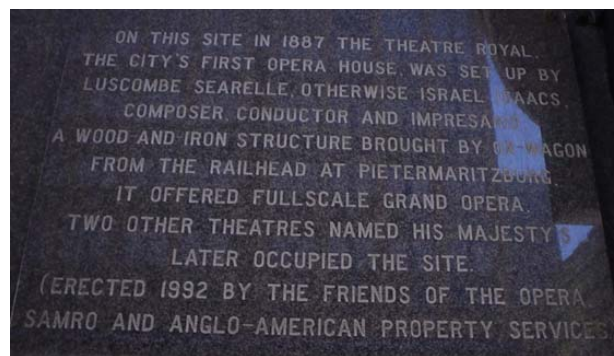


Above: copy of design of a proposed new restaurant on the 13th Floor to replace existing office space, including an addition of a winter garden to the roof. Drawings by J.C. Cook & Cowen for Goldreich Buildings Limited (signed by Alec Boyd). The plans were signed by the City Engineer on 11 November 1940. Included in the design was a 'special hi-speed non-stop lift reserved from Ground Floor'. Plans approved – 12 December 1940; estimated cost – building £1 500; drainage £5. Completed 6 March 1942.

**INTEGRITY:**

**INSCRIPTION:**

The photo below shows the information appearing on a polished granite plaque located at the main entrance to the building in Eloff Street.



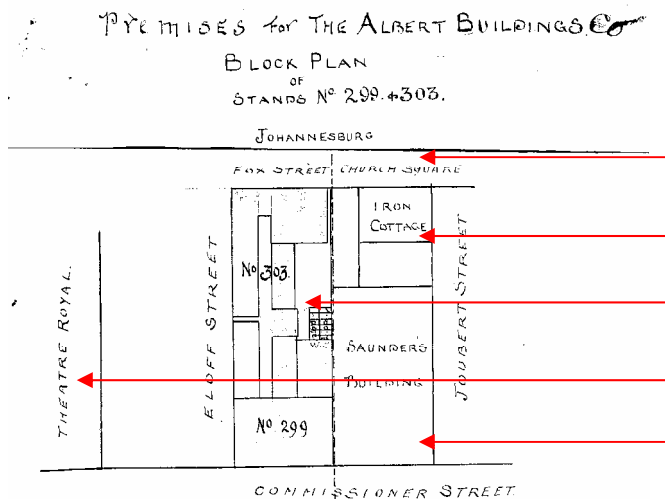
"ON THIS SITE IN 1887 THE THEATRE ROYAL, THE CITY'S FIRST OPERA HOUSE, WAS SET UP BY LUSCOMBE SEARELLE, OTHERWISE ISRAEL ISAACS. COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR AND IMPRESARIO. A WOOD AN IRON STRUCTURE BROUGHT BY OX-WAGON FROM THE RAILHEAD AT PIETERMARITZBURG. IT OFFERED FULLSCALE GRAND OPERA. TWO OTHER THEATRES NAMED HIS MAJESTY'S LATER OCCUPIED THE SITE. (ERECTED 1992 BY THE FRIENDS OF THE OPERA. SAMRO AND ANGLO-AMERICAN PROPERTY SERVICES.)"

**Authors' remarks:**

- The above information pertaining to the *Theatre Royal* is incorrect; the *first Theatre Royal* was situated on Market Street east, and is referred to in a newspaper article dated 21 September 1887, as being a music hall;
- The *second Theatre Royal* was located on the corner of 60 Eloff Street and 126, 128

Commissioner Street, and not on the site of the *second His Majesty's Building* (this is borne out, *inter alia*, by Van Der Waal, Hedley A. Chilvers, and a newspaper article dated 1897); a sketch (see copy below) of a site plan dated 18 April 1893 by the architect Charles R. Snell, clearly also shows the position of the *second Theatre Royal* as being opposite the site of the *second His Majesty's Building* in Eloff Street); see PRE-HISTORY in this connection;

- Luscombe Searelle, according to both Chilvers and Leyds, only arrived in Johannesburg in 1889; he therefore could not have started the *Theatre Royal* in 1887;
- Was the *Theatre Royal* really the City's "First Opera House"?; consider that the *Globe Theatre Building* was opened on 29 September 1888 (Leyds, G.A.: A History of Johannesburg).



Left: Copy of site plan by Charles R. Snell dated 18 April 1893, clearly indicating the position of the *Theatre Royal*.

Church Square.

Wood and iron cottage.

Premises for the *Albert Buildings Co.*

*Theatre Royal*.

*Saunders Building*.

"In March 2003 South Africa hosts the Seventh Annual World Congress on Art Deco. This will be held in Cape Town and to link into this, Jo'burg is erecting plaques on buildings evidencing the Art Deco theme. We start with the TOP TWENTY – great buildings in the Inner City will be identified by means of distinctive blue and white heritage plaques. A further forty buildings of similar merit will follow in the hall of fame. These include more in the centre of town but also those spread across Johannesburg, noticeably blocks of flats. Art Deco was not just the preserve of the wealthy corporates [sic.]- it belonged to everyone, and the purpose of this project is to highlight a period in the history of Jo'burg which created a valuable architectural and social treasure. Some of these buildings are, sadly, deteriorating but dilapidation and decay cannot conceal the glorious and exuberant architecture." (Information sourced from Art Deco Plaques\main.htm).

The information below, appears on an Art Deco heritage plaque (see right) at the entrance to the building in Joubert Street: "HIS MAJESTY'S. African Consolidated Theatres commissioned JC Cook & Cowen to design a new theatre and office complex in 1937, and named it in honour of the newly crowned King George VI. Construction was interrupted by World War II and only completed in 1945. Decorated with the plushness befitting royalty, His Majesty's Theatre became the venue for spectacular productions. The theatre occupied the central block between the office towers which were topped with steel crowns, lit up at night. Advocate Joe Slovo, who headed Umkonto we Sizwe for years had his chambers in the office block." (Information sourced from Art Deco Plaques\list1.htm)



The historic association between the *second His Majesty's Building* and not only the late Joe Slovo (see GENERAL NOTES), but the City's legal profession in general, remains of interest. Numerous advocates were to make their chambers in the building after its completion. See also GENERAL NOTES. Of special interest is the fact that the building by then accommodated the Bar. See below for appropriate description.

"From 1908 most of the members of the Bar had chambers at Sauer's Buildings. But Dr Krause, Harry Morris and L O Pyemont kept chambers at National Mutual Building. From about the year 1923 the Bar moved to Corporation Building where it remained until about 1939 when it moved to Empire Building. A resolution to move to His Majesty's Building was passed in the year 1940 and the move took place in November 1941. In 1948 there was a rent increase of 50%, which gave rise to some expressions of

discontent. The Bar moved from His Majesty's Building to Innes Chambers on the corner of Pritchard and Kruis Streets in 1961. In the year 1977 the Bar, by reason of a pressing need for further accommodation, per force became the tenant of some rooms in a building in Pritchard Street on the other side of Kruis Street which subsequently became Schreiner Chambers. In 1993 two floors in Innes Chambers were extended into a new building in Market Street, called Colman Chambers after that eminent judge. Each move was preceded and accompanied by the expression of divergent views, misgivings and recriminations."

(Information sourced from <http://www.johannesburgbar.co.za/earlydays.html>).

#### **ARCHITECT:**

J.C. Cook & Cowen.

#### **BUILDER:**

The Reinforcing Steel Co. (Pty.) Ltd.

Hubert Morisse & Company (Pty.) Limited - Building Material Merchants.

#### **CONSTRUCTION DATE:**

Date on plans : 1937  
Submitted : 18 February 1937  
Approval of plans :  
Completion date : 1945

The basement contract for the building, according to Chipkin, "was completed in early 1938 and its superstructure under construction when war intervened in 1939. Building then dragged on until it was completed, ready for the victory celebrations of 1945." (Chipkin, C.M.: *Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...*)

Authors' note: the extant plans record of the building leaves nothing to be desired; this, and the fact that the original submission drawings by the architects J.C. Cook & Cowen could not be found, have made it impossible to compile an architectural history of the *second His Majesty's Building*.

#### **BUILDING STYLE:**

Art Deco – Monolithic, 1930s.

"Architectural Merit: A beautiful Art Deco building." (Johannesburg Building, Space & Urban Feature Classification, 1998: Inner City).

"Johannesburg's stunted skyscrapers of the 1930s (eight to ten storeys high) derived their stylings from Art Deco New York in order to express the verticality inherent in the modern metropolis under the compulsions of capitalism. They were also striving at the functional level to uncover the nascent modular beat which is inherent in modern, mass office accommodation. In many cases this is inherently a Gothic-derived architecture with pronounced vertical motifs and roof pinnacles. The modular form of His Majesty's Building confirms this statement." (Chipkin, C.M.: *Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...*).

#### **BUILDING TYPE:**

The *second His Majesty's Building* was originally designed as a theatre and office complex. Sadly, the theatre is no more, as it has been converted to retail space.

#### **ENVIRONMENT:**

Johannesburg has never been a jealous guardian of its architectural heritage, rather like a bee, continuously disposing of one flower for another. The two substantial Victorian finance buildings have been reduced to one. The *Exploration Building* only exists on paper and of the four major Edwardian blocks, only three remain. The *first Carlton Hotel* had to make room for yet another skyscraper. The *CNA Building* has been abandoned and left to rot with the vacant stand to its rear, having left the building standing 'naked' and no longer as appealing to the eye as it used to be. The majestically *His Majesty's* has been partially 'dethroned' – her double crown – once a proud element in the Johannesburg skyline, has disappeared, and so her original theatrical function. This building has in a

sense, become just another 'ordinary' building in the environment. Commissioner and Fox Streets are no longer the socially vibrant streets of former times. (Catharina JM Bruwer).



Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, showing, on the left, His Majesty's Theatre, and on the right a portion of the Carlton Hotel.

Above: Commissioner Street in 1956 with the *second His Majesty's Building* on the left in the picture (Stark, F. [Ed.]: *Seventy Golden Years...*).

Due to its siting, sheer massing, and prominent scale, the *second His Majesty's Building* has always held an uncontested position in the City of that of a landmark building. From an historic viewpoint, it is the only surviving anchor of the former African Consolidated Theatres empire in Johannesburg. During the late 1930s, according to Chipkin, the "new entertainment buildings on Commissioner Street – Broadcast House (1935-7), the Empire (1936), Colosseum (1933) and later His Majesty's (1937-41) – originally all bore the ACT logo of African Consolidated Theatres. All were fitted with splendid matching name signs, duplicated symmetrically on each building. These signs when illuminated were a *tour de force* that not only introduced a brilliant sense of urban night life but also successfully produced an awareness of corporate identity, which random lighting could never achieve. Those uniform vertical neon signs were a direct derivation from Radio City in the Rockefeller Center, but ultimately they are a product of Coney Island mediated by the Hippodrome (1905) on New York's Sixth Avenue. I.W. Schlesinger, the owner of African Consolidated Theatres, came from the Bronx, which made him familiar with Coney Island and the Broadway theatres of New York." (Chipkin, C.M.: *Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...*).

In terms of the current situation, the prominent interconnectivity between the *second His Majesty's Building* and the 1930s buildings on the neighbouring block, west of Joubert Street, still applies. "When His Majesty's was completed in 1944, Commissioner Street began to take on the metropolitan character that was latent in the 1930s development, since this building, occupying an entire city block, picked up the vertical modular treatment in Shakespeare House (1925) and the CNA Building to the west. At the same time, with its vertical signage and vast scale, it also related to the cinema buildings to the east." (Chipkin, C.M.: *Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...*).

"Norman Hanson, describing Johannesburg in 1952, wrote that there were 'no boulevards, no monumental approaches, no interweaving parks, no city squares'. He neglected to say, however, that by 1952 Johannesburg possessed one metropolitan thoroughfare in the central city portion of Commissioner Street. When His Majesty's was completed, it made this thoroughfare work visually: looking eastwards, its own vertical signage extended the thematic vertical illuminations of the lesser Broadway from Broadcast House in the east up to Joubert Street in the centre. In addition, from its central position, His Majesty's looked westwards to the financial quarter that extended from Eloff Street as far as Sauer Street. Here a whole series of secular statements of material power occurred: two substantial Victorian finance buildings, Permanent Building (extant as *Victory House*) [see BD-1]



and Exploration Building [see Pre-History: BB-1]; four major Edwardian blocks, the Carlton [the first *Carlton Hotel*; see Pre-History: AA-1], the Rand Club [see BD-3], Standard Bank [BC-3] and the Corner House [see E-1]; and massive 1930s statement of financial power at the S.A. Permanent [Peoples Bank Building; see D-1], S.A. Mutual [E-3] and Barclays Mutual and Barclays Commissioner Street [F-4]. On this east-west axis of variable character there was one stepped infill skyscraper, Annan House, besides the verticality of the CNA Building [BF-1] on Rissik Street corner, Cook & Cowen had contributed a substantial building to this block, Shakespeare House [see BF-3] (on the corner of Joubert), which picked up the verticality of the CNA headquarters in its own vertical modular treatment. The superblock [sic.] between Joubert and Eloff streets was the missing link, and it was here that Cook & Cowen would make connections and form the transition between the theatreland of the east and the financial sector of the west." (Chipkin, C.M.: Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...).

**CONDITION:**

Fair.

**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	<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:**

In 1977, the NMC was requested by the Directors of the His Majesty's Theatre (Pty) Ltd, i.e. Joan Brickhill, Louis Burke, Margaret English and Graham English, to consider declaring the *second His Majesty's Building* as a national monument. The theatre at the time, was being leased to this Company by Anglo American Property Services (Pty) Ltd., and there were plans to convert the theatre to shops and offices. Support for the theatre was dwindling and it was clear that drastic steps were required to save the theatre.

The NMC, after consulting various architectural historians, however, decided not to declare the *second His Majesty's Building* as a national monument. It was considered at the time, that the theatre was not of sufficient national importance to merit its declaration as a national monument.

# His Majestyteater: Raad se antwoord

**GEAGTE REDAKSIE** — Met verwysing na u hoofartikel (DT 1979-11-03) oor die bewaring van die His Majesty-teater, wens ek sekere foute en feite onder u aandag te bring.

U skryf: „Dis bykans ondenkbaar dat die gebou wat tot 'n historiese monument verklaar behoort te word, nie deur die Monument-kommissie as sodanig aanvaar is nie.” Ten eerste word voorwerpe sedert 1969 nie meey tot historiese monumente verklaar nie, maar wel tot nasionale gedenkwaardighede. Verder is die ou Historiese Monumentekommissie ook in 1969 deur die huidige Raad vir Nasionale Gedenkwaardighede vervang.

Waar u blad in die verlede besonder min publisiteit aan suksesvolle bewaring gegee het, kom dit vreemd voor dat u uself plotseling as 'n voorvegter vir bewaring voorhou en uself bevoeg ag om op so 'n prominente wyse kritiek op my

raad te lewer, veral as in ag geneem word dat u vóór die publikasie van die hoofartikel nie met een van die RNG-kantore in verbinding getree het om die RNG se volledige houding ten opsigte van die His Majesty vas te stel nie.

Dit is nie die Raad vir Nasionale Gedenkwaardighede se taak om die verklaring van geboue of ander voorwerpe wat bedreig word, voor die voet aan te beveel nie. Dit is die raad se plig om selektief te werk te gaan en onder meer die beste voorbeelde van seker tipes geboue vir verklaring uit te sonder.

Toe mnr. Louis Burke in Augustus 1977 die RNG genader het met die versoek dat die His Majesty tot nasionale gedenkwaardigheid verklaar word, het die RNG die saak deeglik ondersoek en ook die menings van verskeie kenners op die gebied van argitektuurgeskiedenis ingewin. Alle geraadpleegde kenners was dit eens dat die His

Majesty-teater, weens 'n gebrek aan genoegsame argitektoniese meriete, nie die status van nasionale gedenkwaardigheid waardig is nie. By hierdie tipe teater is veral die interieur belangrik, en daar word algemeen aanvaar dat die Colosseum 'n baie beter voorbeeld van 'n teater in die Art Deco-styl is. In vergelyking met die Colosseum, is die His Majesty se binneversiering grof en, al het daar nie 'n vergelykbare teater in Johannesburg bestaan nie, is dit te betwyfel of enige deskundige die verklaring van die His Majesty sou steun.

Daar moet verder in gedagte gehou word dat, indien enigsins moontlik, die verklaring van 'n gedenkwaardigheid in samewerking met die eienaar daarvan behoort te geskied. Die eienaar bly ná verklaring nog verantwoordelik vir die instandhouding van sy eiendom en, om verklaring op hom af te dwing, is om klaarblyklike redes nie die gewenste optrede nie.

Nadat alle faktore in ag geneem is en my raad die saak deeglik oorweeg het, is besluit om nie die verklaring van die His Majesty tot nasionale gedenkwaardigheid aan te beveel nie.

Hoewel 'n mens simpatie met die Burkes se probleme het en hulle pogings bewonder om die teater te red, behoort dit dus duidelik te wees dat die blote feit dat die gebou se voortbestaan bedreig word, nie genoegsame motivering vir die verklaring daarvan tot gedenkwaardigheid is nie. Hierdie gebou is nie 'n geval vir die RNG nie, en ek wil my raad se teleurstelling uitspreek teenoor die implikasie in u artikel dat my raad sy plig in hierdie geval versuim het.

**C. F. van R. Zietsman**  
Streekvertegenwoordiger, RNG

h/v Kerk- en Beatrixstr.,  
Arcadia  
Pretoria

● (Effens verkort)

## DEEDS INFORMATION:

Original ownership: Goldreich Buildings Ltd.

African Consolidated Theatres.

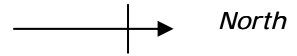
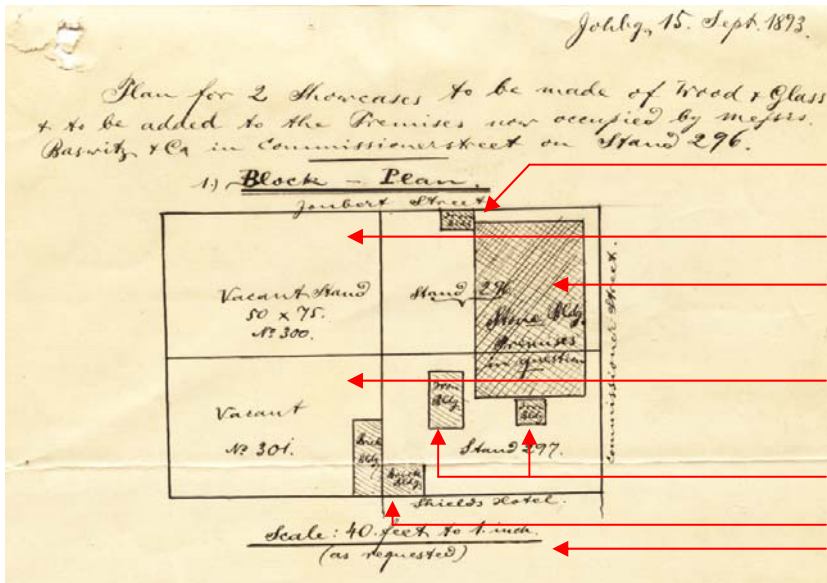
Anglo American Property Services (Pty) Ltd.

2003: "And it is a Kenyan businessman, Moos Baba, who is believed to have bought Sanlam Centre and His Majesty's Building."

(Information sourced from <http://www.sapoa.org.za/News/September%202003/September2003.htm>).

**PRE-HISTORY OF SITE:**

The copy below of a site plan dated 15 September 1893 is one of the earliest extant records pertaining to the history of the site of the current building. It clearly shows that the southern half of the city block was still vacant by 1893.



Iron building.

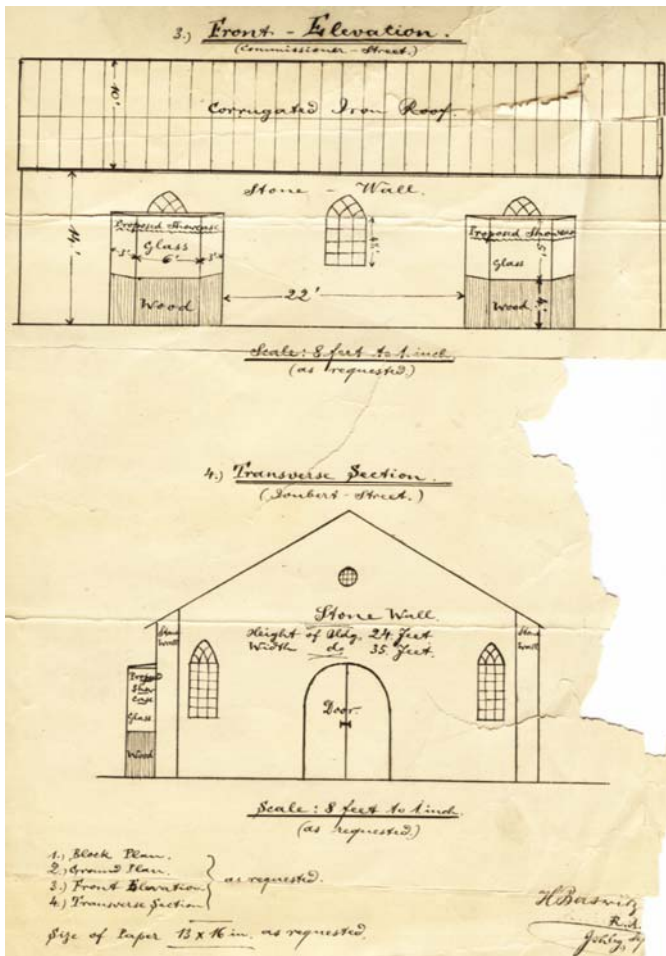
Stand 300 – vacant.

Old Wesleyan Chapel - Stands 296 and 297.

Stand 301 – large vacant Stand with brick building on the west boundary.

Iron buildings – Stand 297.

Brick building – Stand 297.  
Shields Hotel – Stand 298.



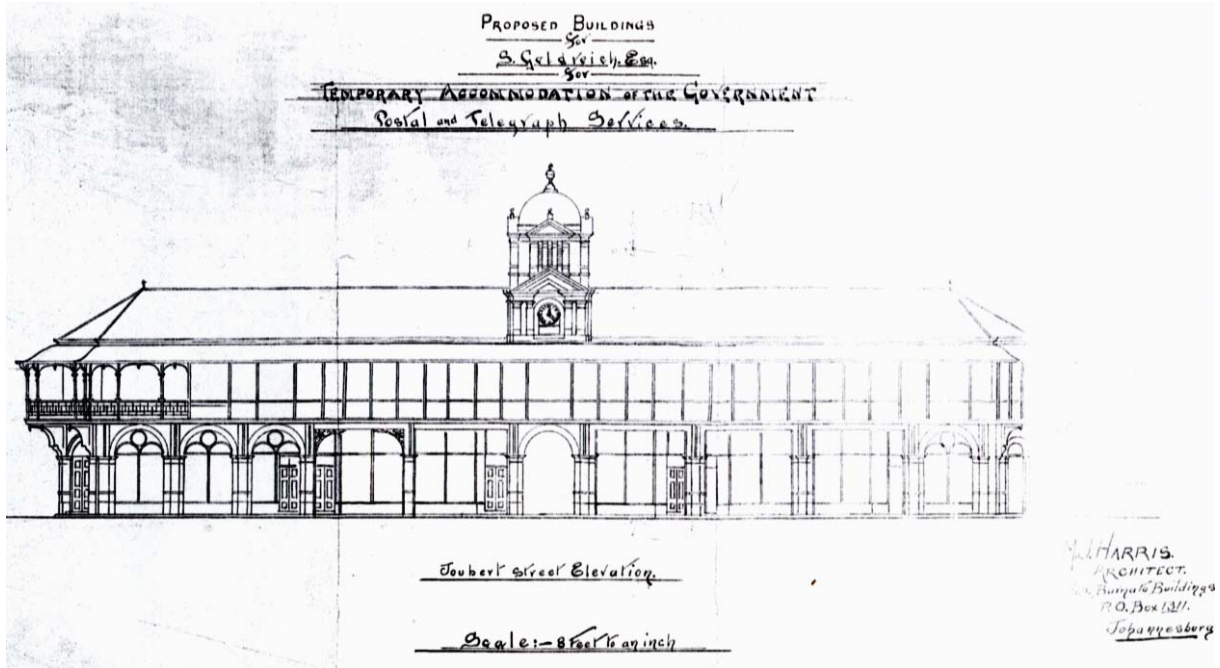
**OLD WESLEYAN CHAPEL:**

The *Old Wesleyan Chapel* stood (prior to the date of the above site plan), at 118, 120 Commissioner Street (Stands 296, 297). This was a 59' x 35' brick building with corrugated iron roof and gable. The identity of the architect of the building is unknown. On the left is a copy of a plan dated 15 September 1893, regarding the proposed installation of two new display windows (for the new owners Baswitz & Co.). The Chapel was being converted to a shop and the plan was passed on 29 September 1893. See also Site Plan above.

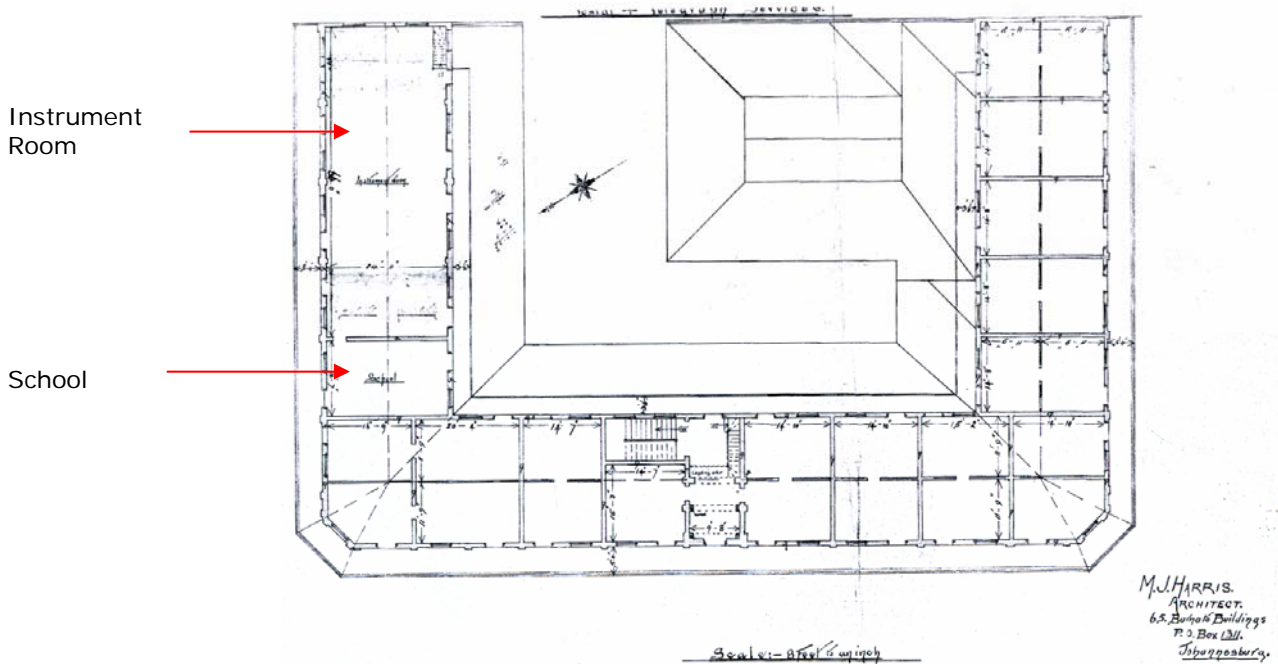
The authors were unsuccessful in finding any published information on this building.

**GOLDREICH BUILDINGS:**

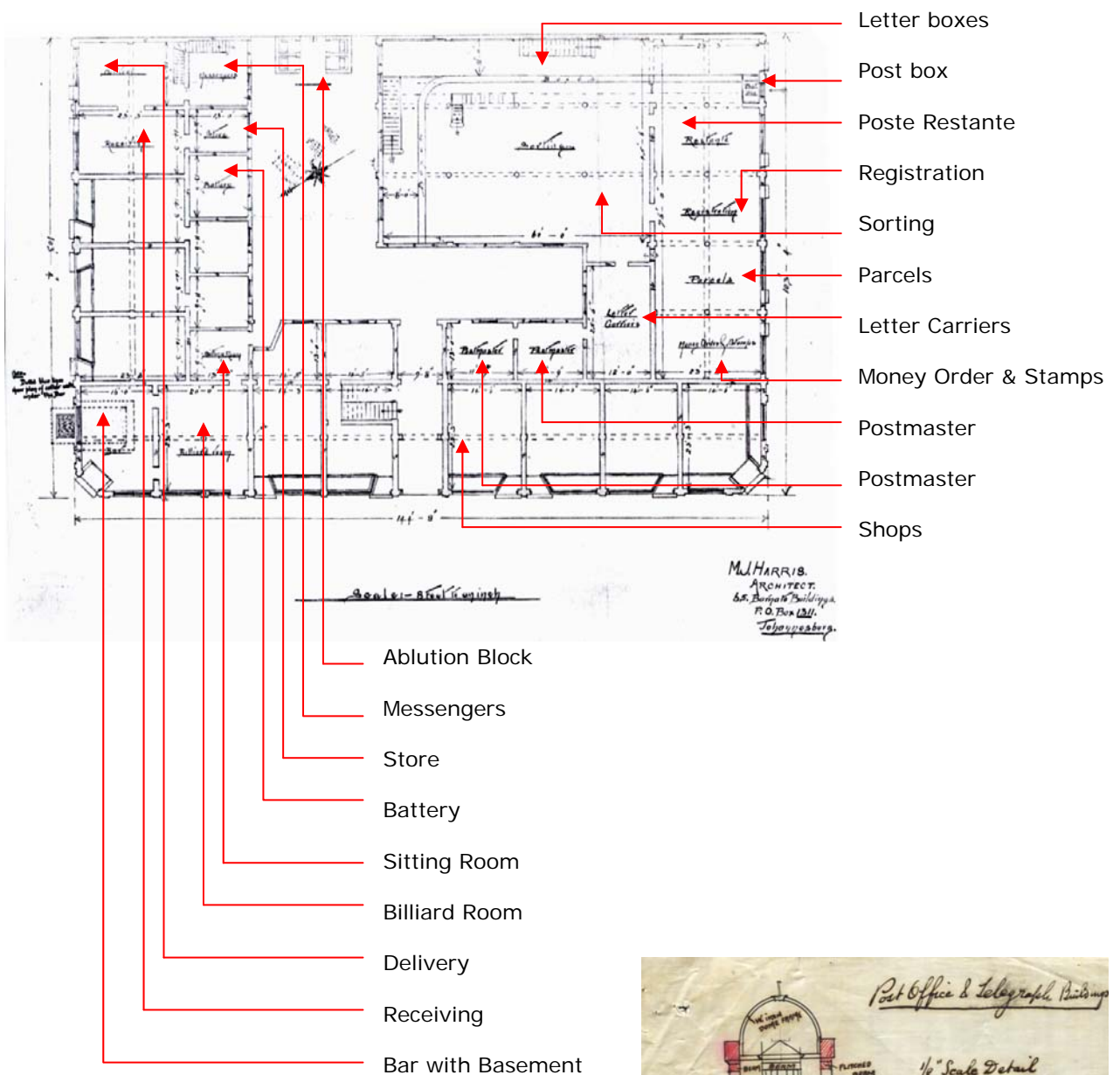
The double-storey *Goldreich Buildings* - completed ca. 1895 – was situated at 117, 119 Fox Street, 20, 22 Joubert Street, and 118, 120 Commissioner Street (i.e. on Stands 296, 297, 300, 301). This Neo-Baroque building, designed by the architect M. J. Harris (no date on plans) with wooden verandahs, and crowned with central clock tower in Joubert Street, was designed for the use, albeit on a temporary basis, by the Government Postal and Telegraph Services. It was the property of the famous Goldreich brothers. See description below by Leyds. The building was later (i.e. 1903) converted to the *first His Majesty's Theatre*. This was after the completion in 1897 of the *Post Office* in Rissik Street (see I-1). See copy below of original submission drawing: Joubert Street elevation.



Below: copy of original First Floor plan; the functions originally allocated to different spaces within the proposed new *Goldreich Buildings*, are of interest (see also copy below of original Ground Floor plan); the information provided by these drawings on the management of postal and telegraph services in early Johannesburg, is invaluable.

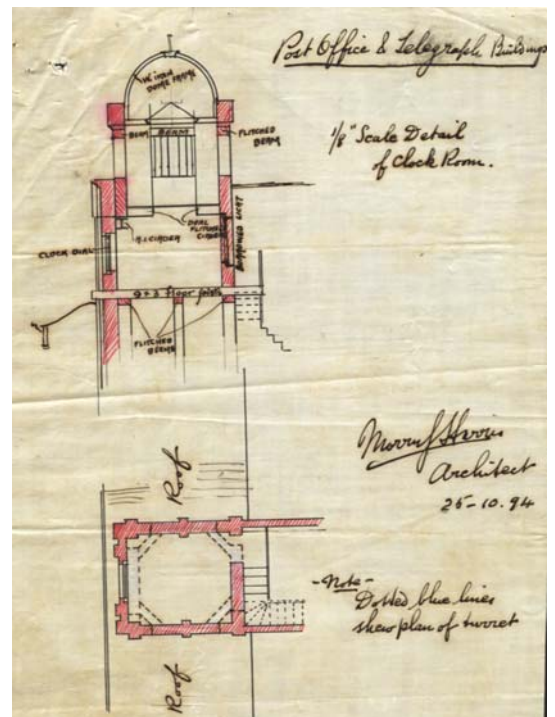


Below: copy of original Ground Floor plan:



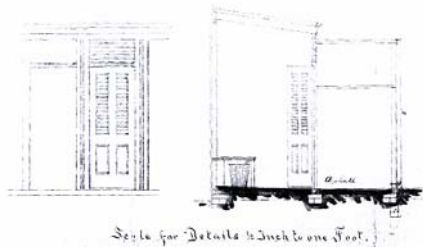
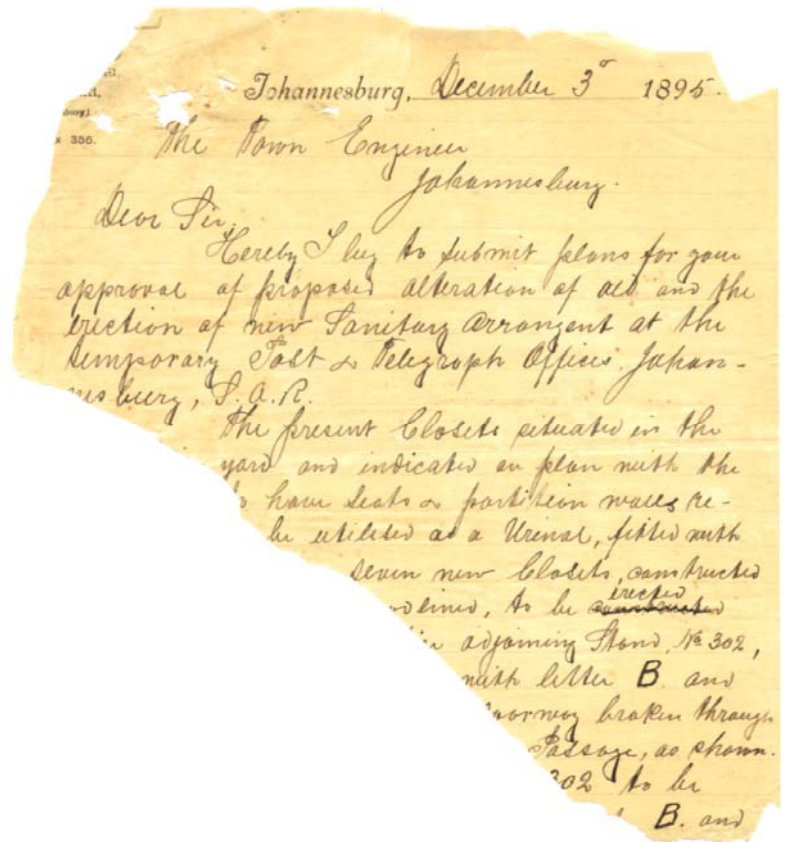
Right: copy of original plan of the clock turret with wood and iron dome as designed by Morris J Harris on 25 October 1894 for the proposed new Post Office and Telegraph Buildings.

"There were two brothers", according to Leyds, "named Goldreich, the firstborn being Samuel, born in Prussia in 1862, and James H., born in 1867. The first was educated in Nottingham, England, came to the Transvaal in 1880, and later in life was made member of the Colonial Institute. The brothers built the Goldreich Buildings in Joubert Street, between Fox and Commissioner Street. At the Fox Street corner the Johannesburg Post Offices was located for some years during the erection of the 'new' Post Office in Rissik Street...before the Boer War. The town was growing fast, and the Post Office was always crowded, so that animated scenes were witnessed especially when the weekly overseas mail arrived. Goldreich Building was known all over the Rand and never regained its glory



when the Post Office moved. The building also contained the original small His Majesty's Theatre, which saw many famous theatrical companies from London perform to distinguished audiences which often included Lord Milner, immediately after the War. The Goldreich Brothers originated the townships known as Hillbrow (which contains Goldreich Street) as well as Regents Park and Wanderers View. The latter, in Smit Street, is no longer so named, because the beloved old Wanderers Ground is now the railway depot." (Leyds, G.A.: A History of Johannesburg).

Right: copy of the remnant of a letter dated 3 December 1895 concerning 'Sanitary Arrangement at the Temporary Post & Telegraph Offices'; this is one of many examples of the desperately poor quality of many documents comprising the plans record of the City's valuable buildings.



Above: copy of drawing of the Closets referred to in the above letter.

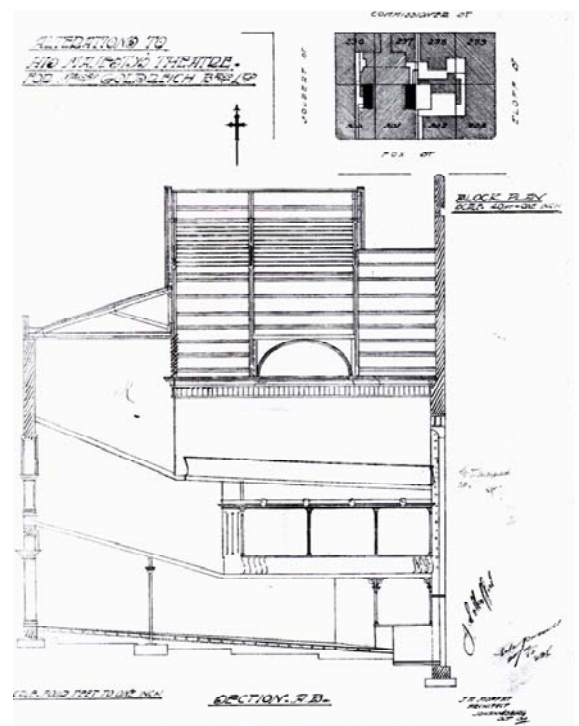
FIRST HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE:

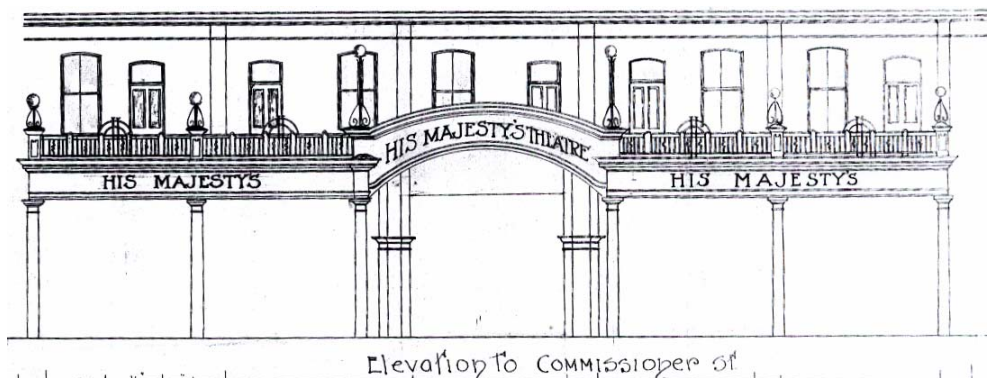
See HISTORY for more information on the *first His Majesty's Theatre*, situated in the *Goldreich Buildings*. According to Van Der Waal the *Goldreich Buildings* was previously situated on the 118 Commissioner Street portion of the site.

Drainage was installed at the *first His Majesty's Theatre* during March 1908 as per design of J. A. Moffat.

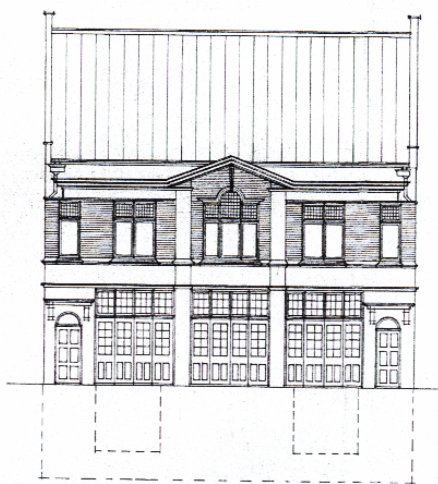
"On December 29 [1908] there was a little strike at His Majesty's Theatre where a pantomime was being produced. The sceneshifters all 'downed tools' suddenly in the middle of a performance. The management contrived to complete the evening show and the dispute was settled the next day." (Neame, L.E.: City Built On Gold).

Right: copy of plan dated 1910 by the architect J. A. Moffat showing the *first His Majesty's Theatre* occupying the whole city block.





Above: proposed verandah for *His Majesty's Theatre* on Stand 297 and portion of Stand 296; the site was passed in August 1912. Unfortunately, the author is unknown and the Application for Approval of Plans form is missing.



HART BUILDING:

D. McDonald Sinclair (M.S.A.) designed the *Hart Building* for Messrs. B. A. Hart. This double storey building with small pedimented gable and corrugated iron roof, was situated at 122 Commissioner Street (i.e. Stand 298). The plans are not dated. The site was passed during September 1919. The Basement was designed as an Auction Mart with 5" reinforced concrete floor slabs over; the Ground and First Floors were designed as stores. The design of this building is vaguely reminiscent of the *School Clinic* (see AR-3) in Jeppe Street. The *Hart Building* replaced the *Shield's Hotel*.

Left: extract from original municipal submission plans dated September 1919: Commissioner Street elevation.

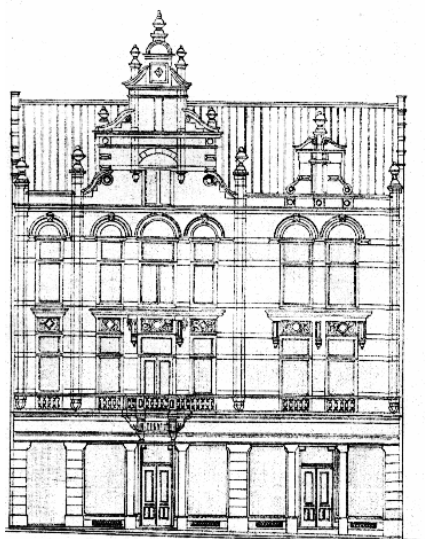
ELEVATION. COMMISSIONER. STREET.

THE GOLDREICH'S BUILDING:

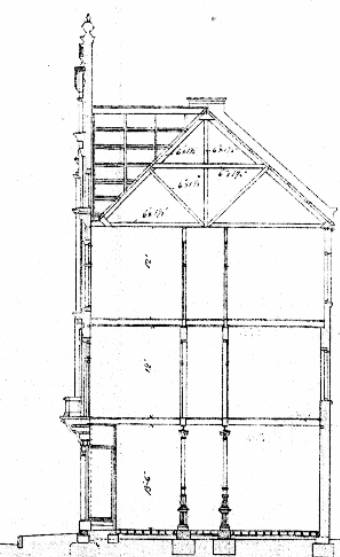
The *Goldreich's Building*, a three-storey twin gabled building with bay window on the First Floor, designed by M. B. Houge, stood at 121 Fox Street (i.e. Stand 302). The plans, passed on 22 May 1896 with S. Goldreich signing on behalf of Goldreich Building Co. Ltd. The building was originally designed as an office building and the ablution block to the rear of the stand was indicated as existing, with an additional urinal added.

Sanitary arrangements were as follows: 'earthen...troughs & pails. Bath water to be run into elevated tank'. 'Means of Rain-water Drainage'...'cesspool with 5" wrought iron piping'.

Right: copy of extract from plans dated circa 1896.



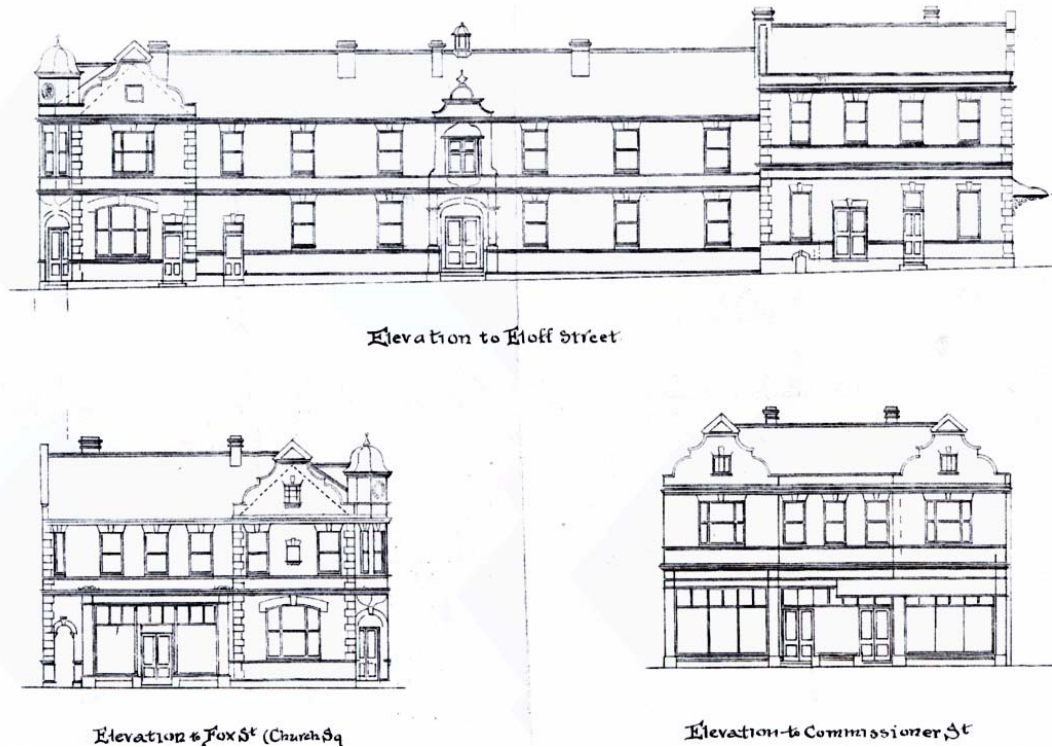
Elevation.



Cross Section

## ALBERT BUILDINGS:

The architect Charles R. Snell designed the *Albert Buildings* for the Albert Buildings Company. The plans of this fascinating double storey building with numerous gables and a tower on the corner of Fox and Eloff Streets were designed on 18 April 1893 and passed on 19 March 1893! The Application for Approval of Plans form indicates that the proposed sanitary arrangements were for the use of regulation pails. The building was originally designed as a shops, office and domestic building. The architect J. A. Moffat designed a new verandah, supported by Tuscan columns, during June 1912.



Left: copies of original submission drawings by Charles R. Snell dated 18 April 1893.

## SECOND THEATRE ROYAL BUILDING:

The *second Theatre Royal Building* is incorrectly indicated on the Inscription as being situated on this city block – the building occupied a portion of the block bounded by Eloff, Fox, Von Brandis and Commissioner Streets. “When the theatre was completed, a wondering city perceived a wood-and-iron building with a goodly stage, presentable boxes, and a bar or so, and displaying the resounding title, ‘Theatre Royal.’ It stood in Commissioner Street on the site of what became Marlborough House, diagonally opposite, that is to say, the south-eastern corner of the city’s largest hotel, the [first] Carlton.” (Chilvers, H.A.: *Out of the Crucible*). It is suggested that anyone interested in the history of theatres in Johannesburg, should read Chapter XVII of Chilvers’ *Out Of The Crucible*.

## **HISTORY:**

The information below is of direct relevance to any assessment of the cultural significance of the *second His Majesty’s Building*, as it regards the latter’s association with I.W. Schlesinger, the African Theatres Trust, later the African Consolidated Theatres, and the Schlesinger Organisation in general..

### SCHLESINGER, Isidore William: 1871 – 1949:

“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. 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 more 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* see A-1 and AA-1.

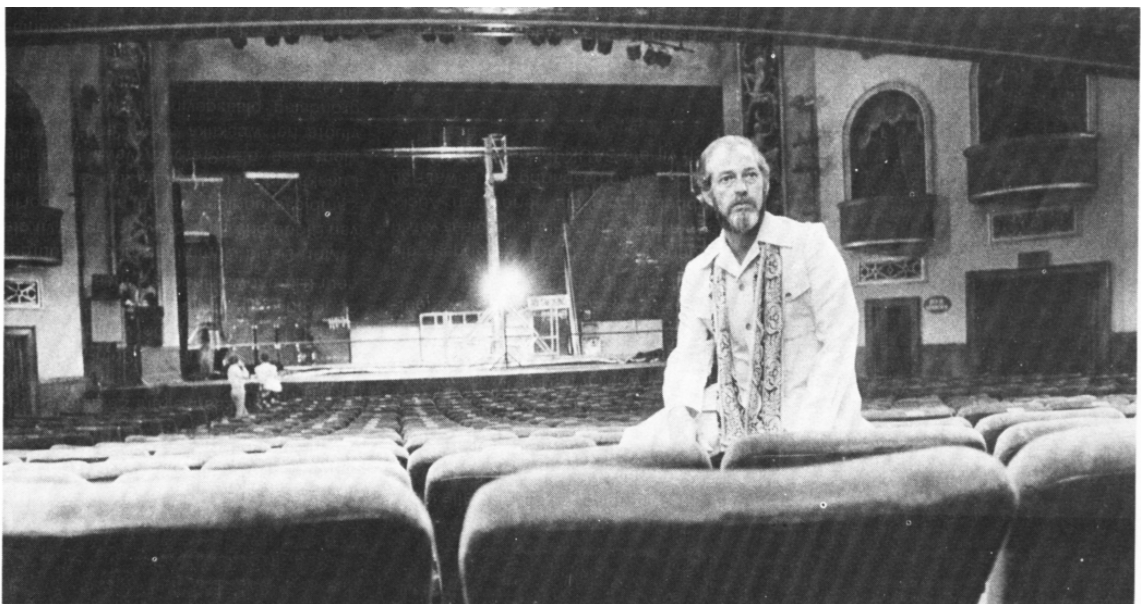
SCHLESINGER, John; 1949:

"Schlesinger, John. South African capitalist and industrialist, son of I. W. Schlesinger...Born in Johannesburg, he was educated at Michealhouse, 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...).

THE SCHLESINGER ORGANISATION:

From their headquarters in *His Majesty's Building* the Schlesinger Organisation conducted their wide circle of business interests and by 1956 they were closely associated with the following industries; adverting, commercial radio, merchandising, travel service, citrus growing, catering, insurance, film production, banking, shops and farming.

THE HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE:



Louis Burke in His Majesty's-teater in Johannesburg. Die teater, die oudste winkels en kantore. Die teater kan slegs met behulp van 'n provinsiale of staatsubsidie gered word  
The Star

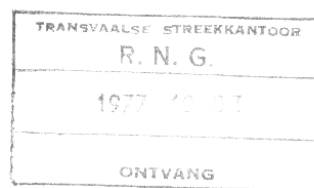
Below : copy of letter dated 22 September 1977, and attached historical background information on the *His Majesty's Theatre* (SAHRA Archive File 3/1/3/Joh/32 His Majesty's, Commissionerstraat, Johannesburg).

# HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE

Post Box 9464 Johannesburg 2000 South Africa

22 September 1977

Mr. C.F. van R. Zietsman  
Regional Representative  
National Monuments Council  
Transvaal Regional Office  
P.O. Box 28712  
SUNNYSIDE  
0132



Your Ref: 3/1/3/Jhb/32

Dear Mr. Zietsman,

re: HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, JOHANNESBURG

Thank-you for your letter of 8 September, in connection with the above matter. I am delighted to hear that the subject of saving His Majesty's Theatre will be discussed at your Council's Executive Committee meeting during October.

\* You ask for information in regard to the historical background of the theatre. I am enclosing a copy of a memorandum relating to the origin and background of the theatre since its inception up to the present day. I do believe that it is of vital importance that we try to save this beautiful and historic building.

Thanking you for your interest in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

  
LOUIS BURKE

Enc. 1  
LB/sjh

His Majesty's Theatre (Pty) Ltd Tel 834-6491

Directors Joan Brickhill Louis Burke Margaret English Graham English

## HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE

Four kings and a queen have sat on the throne of England since His Majesty's theatre, the elegant playhouse in Johannesburg's Commissioner Street, first opened its doors to patrons in 1903 - and at least one royal mistress has trodden the boards of the theatre during its colourful history.

Since the rise of the curtain on the Djin Djin Musical Company soon after the turn of the century, theatregoers have flocked to see everything from Shakespeare and Shaw to showgirls, opera, musical comedy, mime, Greek tragedy, ballet and pantomime. And they have applauded a host of illustrious names from Lily Langtry to Tommy Trinder, Dame Sybil Thorndike to Marcel Marceau, and Andre Huguenet to Dame Margot Fonteyn.

The theatre was built by the Goldreich Brothers in 1903 for Frank and Bert Wheeler, who were among the founders of the theatre in South Africa. Having already made theatrical history at the Empire and the Standard and, still earlier, in Kimberley, they intended their new theatre to be the finest and most beautiful in the city. With this in view, they engaged a firm called School-breads of London to do the interior decoration. They also received special permission from Lord Milner to call the playhouse His Majesty's and use the Royal coat-of-arms above the proscenium arch.

The theatre was under the control of the Wheeler brothers until 1914, and during their management enjoyed its first Golden Age.

Those were the days before the films and the infant cinema was no threat to the "live" theatre. The Wheelers set a standard in theatrical entertainment which was at that time unsurpassed. Frank and Bert Wheeler presented straight plays, musical comedies, Gilbert and Sullivan and Shakespeare. They brought their companies in their entirety from London, including principals, chorus and scenery, and the cast sometimes numbered fifty at a time when actors demanded princely salaries before they would leave England and travel six thousand miles across the sea to perform.

Among the famous names to grace the stage at this time were the lovely Lily Langtry, the most beautiful woman of her time; Lewis Waller, the ideal "Beau Brummel"; Mrs. Brown-Potter, Wilson Barrett; William Havilland, one of South Africa's favourite actors; H.B. Irving; Matheson Lang; Marie Studholm; Madge Titheradge; Lady Forbes-Robertson and Sir Cedric Hardwick.

A name still remembered in the city today who starred at the theatre in those years is Amy Coleridge, who played in "The Bells", "The Lyons Mail" and Shakespeare plays for the Wheelers. She also appeared at His Majesty's under the banner of Leonard Rayne when she starred in "East Lynne" with a fourteen-year-old boy named Cecil Kellaway who played Little Willie. Mr. Kellaway went on to become a star in Hollywood and Miss Coleridge taught dramatic art in the city until the late 40's, among her pupils being Moira Lister.

continued/...

All the musical comedies of the time which had achieved success in London were later produced at His Majesty's - often running concurrently with their seasons in the West End. Among them were "The Merry Widow" which created a box-office record by running for eleven weeks, "The Girls of Gothenburg", "The Quaker Girl", "The Maid of the Mountains", "San Toy", "The Arcadians", "The Country Girl" and "Theodore and Co."

His Majesty's was also the setting for many of the best-known operas presented by the famous Moody-Manners Opera Company, and for a time the whole town was humming arias from "Madam Butterfly" and "Tosca".

The theatre also presented the first attempts in Johannesburg at indigenous drama for it was here that, in about 1911, Frank Wheeler produced the first South African musical comedy written by Lewis Rose MacLeod with music by H. Barlow Coulthard.

Other memorable productions of the time under the Wheeler management were "The Sign of the Cross", "Quo Vadis", "The Geisha", "The Dollar Princess", "Our Miss Gibbs" and "Floradora".

The Wheeler regime ended in 1914 after which the Australian firm of J.C. Williamson were in control for two years. A new era in the theatre's history was about to begin, however, in 1917 when His Majesty's theatre was taken over by Mr. I.W. Schlesinger.

The years after the first World War brought a galaxy of famous names who occupied the star dressing-room. Among them were Marie Tempest, Ada Reeve, Irene Vanbrugh, Maurice Moscovitch, Iris Hoey, Dennis Neilson-Terry and Mary Glynne, Owen Naries, Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson.

Later came Mary Clare, Percy Hutchinson, Olga Lindo, Athene Seyler and Nicholas Hannen; Glen Byam-Shaw and Angela Baddeley, Godfrey Tearle, Leontine Sagan, Vera Nemchinova and Sir Seymour Hicks.

On the night of January 16, 1937 theatregoers were offering as much as one pound for a seat for a gala performance of Jimmy Hunter's "London Follies" which closed the old theatre.

The following month the bulldozers move in and so the theatre's glittering reign as the city's premier playhouse ended for what was to be almost a decade.

But the marquee lights blazed again on 23 December, 1946 when General Smuts opened the new theatre and the curtain rose on the African Theatres pantomime "Robinson Crusoe".

Another historic chapter was about to begin.

The following year His Majesty's saw a milestone in the history of South African theatre - the first professional production in Afrikaans of a play by Shakespeare. Andre Huguenet played the title role in "Hamlet" with a distinguished cast which included Anna Neethling-Pohl, Gideon Roos, Siegfried Mynhardt, Berdine Grunewald, Jan Schutte and M.P.O. Burgers.

continued/...

The big American musicals that had come to London after the war soon followed when Philip D. Levard produced "Oklahoma!", "Annie get your Gun" and "Brigadoon". And there was Ivor Novello in his musical play "Perchance to Dream".

There was a string of pantomimes - Tommy Trinder as Buttons in "Cinderella" and Stanley Holloway in "Alladin" - and variety shows with big stars topping the bill. Andre Huguenet was back in another Shakespeare play in Afrikaans - this time "Macbeth" - and in Basil Dean's production for the National Theatre of "Hassan". He also electrified audiences as "King Oedipus" with Taubie Kushlick as Jocasta.

The theatre also played host to the Old Vic Company headed by Irene Worth, Paul Rogers and Douglas Campbell, and the Sadler's Wells Ballet when South African audiences were delighted to see many of their own dancers and choreographers on the bills - artists who had been forced to leave the country in those years and make their names overseas such as John Cranko, Alfred Rodrigues and Maryon Lane. Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies in "White Sheep of the Family" and many of the best of the Brian Brooke Company productions were seen in this theatre - "Worm's Eye View", "The Heiress", "Present Laughter" and "A Street-car named Desire" among them.

There were more pantomimes - Taubie Kushlick's "Desperate Hours" "Seagulls over Sorrento", the Wilson Barret Company, "The Little Hut" the Johannesburg Festival Ballet - shows devised and produced by Frank Rogally and George and Alfred Black revues.

But as time went on, more and more playhouses opened in the city - the Alexander, the Brooke, the Intimate, the Academy, the Adam Leslie - and His Majesty's became less of a theatre and more of a picture palace for spectacular "road shows" such as "Lawrence of Arabia", "Around the World in Eighty Days" and "Dr. Zhivago".

In the middle of 1974 it looked as though history would repeat itself when once again the rumble of the bulldozers threatened and it seemed that the footlights would be dimmed forever to make way for more offices in the city.

But, if miracles happen anywhere, they happen in the theatre, and there was now an urgent need for one to save this much-loved theatre from making way for an office block.

That the miracle happened at all is due to a handful of people - Louis Burke, Joan Brickhill and Graham and Margaret English - thanks to them and their herculean efforts, it was the drums of Africa and not the shriek of the jackhammer that filled this historic theatre with sound, heralding yet another golden age for His Majesty's.

ontinued/...

Under the new management the theatre saw a parade of shows that recalled its most glorious years. After "Meropa" came Shakespeare's "The Tempest", which was seen by thirty-two thousand school-children from all over the Transvaal- "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat"; "Pippin", "Equus" and "Presto"; "Stars of the American Ballet"; "A Little Night Music", "Gypsy", "Henry IV, Part 1", again for the benefit of schools; "The Sound of Music"; Ballet International; "Follies Fantastique", a return of "The Sound of Music" and "The Night of January 16".

With the last three productions running simultaneously in one or other of the main cities of the Republic and Rhodesia, the management were employing more than 200 actors, singers, dancers, stage staff, musicians, designers and wardrobe and administrative staff.

Now, suddenly, the spectre of demolition and the death of the last remaining historic playhouse in the country, looms again.

The need for yet another miracle has never been more urgent.

\* \* \* \*

Credit: This brief history of His Majesty's theatre was written by ROBERT LANG forradio, and was broadcast by him in his series "GILT AND RED PLUSH" on the SABC programme "Sunday at Home" during July, 1975).

#### GENERAL NOTES:

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

#### THEATRES:

The development of theatres in Johannesburg, is described as follows by Van Der Waal: "Prior to 1900 a theatre was concealed behind a distinctive theatre front, but after 1902 the theatre space was integrated with the surrounding support rooms to such an extent that the structure was no longer



readily identifiable as a theatre from the outside. The older theatre buildings had a tall front gable in the classicist style and the entrance was distinctive. Later theatres were distinguished from commercial buildings only by large billboards announcing current and future attractions. During this period Johannesburg's theatres did not develop a distinctive identity of their own. This is probably partly explained by the fact that theatres then began to provide for cinema shows as well, and that there was still some uncertainty about the future of these film shows. In addition, it would appear that, for financial reasons, the owners decided to include shops on the ground floor of their buildings and flats in the upper storeys. The most significant theatre building of this period was the five-storey *Orpheum Theatre* (1912), 160/2 Jeppe Street ...The *Orpheum* was the second theatre (after the *Bijou* of 1910) to be built in this area where the *Plaza* [at 150, 152 Jeppe Street] would also be erected in 1930. [The *Royalty* - also erected during 1930 - at 68 Pritchard Street also falls in this category and is longer used as a theatre.] Thus there emerged a second concentration of theatres after those in Commissioner Street - on the boundary between the commercial district and residential area and close to a number of club buildings. After 1910 this area

must have been particularly lively during the evenings. Like the *Orpheum*, the *Empire* [*Empire Place of Varieties* (1905-6), 135/7 Commissioner Street] provided a focal point in its environment, in which several well-known theatres, such as the *Colosseum* and *His Majesty's* were destined to arise later. During this period several existing buildings were converted into theatres. An example is the *Goldreich Building* (1893), 118 Commissioner Street, which was used as the post office while the Rissik Street Post Office [see Document I-1] was being constructed. In 1903 it was converted into the first *His Majesty's Theatre* with seating for 1 100 patrons. In 1912 similar extensions and alterations converted the *YMCA Building* (1894), 71 Pritchard Street, into the *Vaudette Theatre*. This process of conversion was taken a step further in the case of the *Palladium Theatre*, 69, 71/3/5 Commissioner Street. In 1912 the interior of the empty *Exchange Building* was converted into a theatre while the exterior was altered to such an extent that it was no longer recognisable...With the exception of two, theatres did not play a significant role in the cityscape of Johannesburg during this period, but the relatively large number (seven) of new theatres was a pointer to the rather lively social activities of the city centre. The theatres were a popular form of relaxation where residents sought respite from the tensions brought on by feverish business activities. The fact that the theatres were located so close to the financial and business districts would seem to indicate that the former were regarded as a perfect foil for the latter. Compared with the hierarchical and insulated formalism of the banking and office buildings, the theatres represented a democratic and integrated approach to architecture." (Van Der Waal, G-M.: From Mining Camp to Metropolis...).

Left: by 1954, the *His Majesty's Building* with its famous crowns. (Stark, F. [Ed.]: *Seventy Golden Years...*).

See table below for relevant Surveying / Assessment Form numbers and status of buildings. The *Goldreich Building*, which included the first *His Majesty's Theatre* was refurbished and the building was thereafter known as the *His Majesty's Theatre*. The *Starlite Cinema* in President Street, was demolished to make way for a parkade.

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Document Number And Or Previous Name</b>	<b>Status of Building:</b>
<i>Bijou</i>	Pre-History, AS-1	Demolished
<i>Colosseum</i>		Demolished
<i>Carlton Theatre</i>	Pre-History, AA-1	Demolished
<i>Empire Palace of Varieties</i>	Pre-History, BA-1, <i>Globe Theatre</i>	Demolished
<i>Gaiety Theatre</i>	Pre-History, A-1	Demolished
<i>Goldreich Building</i>	Pre-History, BG-1	Converted to theatre
[second] <i>His Majesty's</i>	BG-1	Converted to store
<i>Orpheum Theatre</i>	Pre-History, AF-2	Demolished
<i>Palladium Theatre</i>	Pre-History, D-4	Demolished
<i>Plaza Theatre</i>	Pre-History AG-4	Demolished
<i>Standard Theatre</i>	Pre-History, I-2	Demolished
<i>Starlite Cinema</i>	Pre-History, M-2	Demolished
<i>The Royalty</i>	Document AC-5	Use discontinued
<i>Vaudette Theatre</i>	Pre-History, AD-5, <i>YMCA Building</i>	Demolished

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 at least once a month and to the cinema, 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 also interesting to note that at least three of the above mentioned theatres [*Carlton Theatre*, *Gaiety Theatre* and the *Palladium Theatre*] were in one way or another connected to the I.W. Schlesinger Organisation. The destruction of these buildings, left a void in the City's 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. –Catharina J M Bruwer.

"As in the pioneering days", according to Van Der Waal, "theatre buildings had a more important role than church buildings in the architectural development of Johannesburg from 1920 to 1940, during which period four enormous theatres and cinemas were built in the city centre. This would seem to indicate that after 1920 the interest and taste in entertainment shifted to new and experimental social activities, including spectacular shows. It is probably also explained by the acknowledged need for entertainment in times of stress, such as those of the world-wide depression and the searing drought

in the South African countryside around 1930 [the year *The Royalty* was constructed.]. The development of talking pictures, which were shown in Johannesburg for the first time in 1929...gave conventional theatre an important partner. Both created a rich new fantasy world and these buildings reflected the attraction of the unusual. Moreover, these developments were also a reflection of a more democratic tendency, in that an effort was made to entertain the masses, just as the infant broadcasting system was doing at the time. Previously, when British imperialism with its autocratic approach held sway, entertainment of the masses was considered unimportant. The excitement created by the theatres and cinemas made the city centre a very lively place every night – not only by drawing large numbers of people and vehicles into the streets but by enlivening the area with large illuminated bill-boards. Theatre and cinema buildings occurred in two groups in the city centre. One was in Jeppe and Bree Street, and the other in Commissioner Street. The *Bijou Theatre*...just north of the shopping district and near the *Orpheum*, was rebuilt in 1931 and given a new façade while the interior was also refurbished. The interior and exterior decoration was reminiscent of Oriental architectural styles. Nearby the *Plaza Cinema*... was built in a bolder, more experimental form. The modernist design by Kallenbach, Kennedy & Furner must in fact have come as something of a shock to most Johannesburgers. Whereas the buildings in the Edwardian and Traditional styles still articulated the building mass by moulding the façade and interrupting the roof-line, the *Plaza* was a simple block with a broad roof overhang. 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.”

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).

#### PREVIOUS TENANTS:

1946: His Majesty's Cellar Restaurant.

1950: J. P. Bosch & Powrie; Dollar Book Shop.

By 1954: Smith & Co.

Rand Radio Co.

Silbers Hardware & Motor Spares.

Harris & Jones (Pty) Ltd.

Portable Typewriters Ltd.

MB Korp & Sons.

Parsienne Chemist.

Holland Diamond Cutting Works.

Dollar Book Shop (Pty) Ltd.

On the 117 Fox and 20 Joubert Streets corner – Freedman's Furniture Mart.

On Joubert Street:

Continental Carpets.

C Keir & Co; JA Powrie.

Ralph L Morris & Son.

Saambou Bouvereniging.

D Fraser & Schultz (Pty) Ltd and Smith & Co.

Room 211 – Tropic Airways (Pty) Ltd.

Plein & Co, Government Sworn Appraisers.

Sixth floor:

Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce, PO Box 687, telegraphic address “Chamber”, telephone 011 33-2548, Secretary - HS Mabin.

Legal Practitioners by 1954:

Room 511 - P. Bersohn.

Room 300 - H. S. Bloom & Warner.

Room 201 - D. H. Epstein & F. Epstein.



Room 302 – Miss G. Horvitch.  
Room 636 – D. Isserow.  
Room 307 – A. Kantor.  
Room 300 – J. Kantor.  
Room Katzen & Katzen.  
Room 401-2 - Le Sueur, De Jager & Barker.  
Sixth Floor - Nathan, Friedland & Mansel & Lewis.

By 1957: Domino Coffee Bar.

By 1961: "Kurt of Vienna Ladies Hairdressing Saloon".

By 1967: His Majesty's Cellar Restaurant.

By 1968: Eight Floor - J. Cooper & Partners (Attorneys).

#### JOE SLOVO:

"Joe Slovo was born in Lithuania in 1926 and moved to South Africa with his parents at the age nine. His father was a van driver in Johannesburg, and Slovo worked as a dispatch clerk for a chemist while studying law at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he graduated with BA and LLB degrees. He volunteered for the South African forces during World War II and was subsequently active in the Springbok Legion, a radical ex-servicemen's league. Slovo was an active member of the South Africa Communist Party (SACP) from the 1940s and after becoming an advocate at the Johannesburg Bar became well known for his work as a defence lawyer in political trials. He married Ruth First, daughter of SACP treasurer Julius First, in 1949. The following year the couple was among the first 600 people 'named' in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, and thereby subjected to various restrictions. Slovo was a founding member of the Congress of Democrats in 1953 and represented the organisation on the national consultative committee of the Congress Alliance created at the time of the call for a Congress of the People. In 1954, he was banned from attending all gatherings under the Suppression of Communism Act, but continued his political activities covertly. Slovo contributed to the drafting of the Freedom Charter, but was unable to attend the Congress of the People in Kliptown because of his restriction order. He watched the proceedings through binoculars from a nearby rooftop. In December 1956 Slovo, together with other Congress activists, was charged with treason. He acted as a member of the defence team as well as being an accused. During the preparatory examination of the Treason Trial, as it came to be known, he was charged for contempt of court when objecting to the magistrate's handling of the examination, but was acquitted on appeal. Treason charges against him were dropped in late 1958. During the state of emergency in 1960, following the Sharpeville shootings, Slovo was detained for a four-month period. Slovo was one of the earliest members of the military wing of the ANC Umkhonto we Sizwe, and regularly attended meetings of its high command at Lilliesleaf Farm, Rivonia. He left the country in June 1963 on an 'external mission' and a month later police captured the remaining key figures on the high command, including Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki. A month after the arrest, Slovo's wife - Ruth First - was detained for almost four months. On her release she left the country, together with their three daughters. Slovo continued to work for the ANC and the SACP abroad and in 1977 moved to Maputo, Mozambique, where he established an operational centre for the ANC. In 1982, Ruth First was killed in a parcel bomb explosion in Maputo. Two years later, Slovo was forced to leave Mozambique following the signing of the Nkomati Accord between that country and South Africa. In January 1986, a British court awarded Slovo substantial damages against a South African newspaper group over a report in The Star newspaper that he had orchestrated the murder of his wife. Slovo was chief of staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe until April 1987, a member of the central committee of the SACP, and served on the revolutionary council of the ANC from 1969 until its dissolution in 1983. At the ANC consultative conference held in Zambia in 1985, Slovo became the first white member of the ANC's national executive. Following the death of Moses Mabhida in 1986, Slovo was appointed general secretary of the SACP. Early in 1987, the SACP asked the ANC to relieve Slovo of his MK position as a result of the pressure of his duties as general secretary of the SACP. As a result he vacated the position of chief of staffs of Umkhonto we Sizwe in April, but retained his position on the ANC national executive and its political-military council. In June 1989, the SACP congress adopted a new programme of action to replace its 1962 guidelines. It is accepted that the strategies of armed struggle did not rule out the possibilities of negotiations and compromise. In January 1990, Slovo circulated a document entitled Has Socialism Failed?, indicating that the SACP would commit itself to a multi-party post-apartheid democracy, freedom of organisation, speech, thought, press, movement, residence, conscience and religion; full trade union rights for all workers including the right to strike; and one-person, one-vote in free and democratic elections. The SACP and ANC were unbanned in February 1990, and Slovo's name as party general secretary, but in 1991 he retired from this position largely because of ill health, he was subsequently elected party chairman at the SACP conference held in December 1991. At the ANC conference held in Durban in July 1991, Slovo was reelected to its national executive committee.

He also served on the ANC's national working committee. During 1991, Slovo served as a SACP representative on the National Peace Committee. In December, he was present at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and served on its working group dealing with constitutional principles and a constitution-making body and process. After the 1994 elections Slovo was elected to the cabinet where he served as Minister of Housing until his death on 5 January 1995. (Who's Who in South African Politics IV: Pg 291)"

(Information sourced from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/slovo.j.htm>).

#### MAX ROSETTENSTEIN:

Max Rosettenstein, grandson of the late pioneer Leo Rosettenstein, the founder of one of the older and largest of the southern suburbs of Johannesburg, Rosettenville, had his office in the *second His Majesty's Building*. Ian Rosettenstein son of the late Max and Jane Rosettenstein remembers as follows:

"My late father had his office on the third floor of the East Wing (No 307) so, although a youngster at the time (born in 1949) I clearly remember the building in its heyday. You were taken up in the lift by a uniformed lady who operated the mechanism manually by means of a handle and called out the number of each floor as required. Dad's office was on the corner of Eloff and Fox so I used to watch with interest the progress on the construction of the United Building Society across the way (Notable in that it had underground parking - unlike His Majesty's). Also being built at the same time was the Permanent Building Society at the corner of Eloff and Commissioner. It too was special as the design incorporated huge steel beams spanning the main hall thus allowing a large open ground floor space unimpeded by vertical columns – Perhaps watching all this construction activity influenced me to take up Civil Engineering as a profession later in life! The Cellar situated under the Theatre was a very smart restaurant, not to be frequented by young children such as myself, so I only remember visiting it with my father on two occasions. It was designed to look like a cave with nooks and crannies and tables dotted around and hidden to a large extent from each other. The theatre above extended for some 7 floors into the building so if you wanted to cross from the East Wing to the West Wing without exiting building you had to take the lift up to around the 8th Floor, walk across the top of the theatre, and then take the lift down again. Further down Commissioner Street was the Colosseum which had a wonderful atmosphere, with all the lights in the ceiling and a real theatre smell. Across the street was another theatre the name of which you will have to look up - Giorgio Barnabo, a school friend, celebrated his birthday one year by asking his parents to take six of us to the Jhb Premiere at this theatre of the early Beatles film 'A Hard Days Night'. (His father Marcello Barnabo came out to SA from Italy after the war and started Concor Construction). After the show we were given an authentic Italian dinner at their house in Parktown (cnr Eton and Oxford) - Sadly the beautiful old Cape Dutch style home was destroyed by the construction of the M1 Motorway in 1967. Adjacent to the Permanent Building Society in Commissioner was the Delmonico Restaurant which was housed in a large cavernous hall. I used to be taken there for a treat at the end of school term and remember always ordering Vienna Schnitzel followed by strawberries and cream from what appeared to be a vast menu. Eloff Street at that time had electric trams that used to run on rails - Every now and then the brakes would fail on a tram coming down Twist Street resulting in chaos and loss of life and for safety reasons these trams were finally replaced in the 60's by buses operating from overhead electricity." (Letter – Ian Rosettenstein to authors, 25 April 2004).

#### CURRENT TENANT:

Clicks.  
Family Life Centre.

Below: copy of the original completed application form dated requesting permission from the Sanitary Board of Johannesburg to erect a verandah / balcony; this particular form refers to the *Goldreich Buildings*.

Stads Ingenieur's Kantoor,  
Johannesburg, 25 Oct 1894

H. de ondergeteekende verklinden zich om het volgende na te komen en zulks, naar aanleiding van een verkregen permissie van het Gezondheids Comité van Johannesburg om eene veranda of balkon op te richten voor standplaats No. 296-7, 300-1 Soubat Commissionen en Fox Straaten.

1. Om de kosten te betalen welke mogen ontstaan door het verhoogen der Telegraaf draden, welke bedrag aan het Telegraaf Departement betaald moet worden.

2. Om aan het Telegraaf Departement een geschreven volmacht te geven (zoodanig als gezeegd Departement zal verlangen) om op het dak van het huis, of balkon, of veranda, haken klampen of haken te bevestigen, als moge noodig zijn voor het spannen der draden en te zorgen dat het gebouw, of balkon, of veranda sterk genoeg zal zijn om gezegede draden te dragen.

Getuigen:

C. B. Buntline  
J. Goldreich

**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:

Heritage Resources Management team Johann J and Catharina JM Bruwer.  
Unless otherwise indicated photographs by Catharina JM Bruwer.

## ATTACHMENT: ADDITIONAL SOURCES

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/slovo.j.htm>.

<http://www.johannesburgbar.co.za/earlydays.html>.

Letter – Ian Rosettenstein.



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HIS MAJESTY'S BUILDING



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ON THIS SITE IN 1887 THE THEATRE ROYAL,  
THE CITY'S FIRST OPERA HOUSE, WAS SET UP BY  
LUSCOMBE SEARLE, OTHERWISE ISRAEL ISAACS,  
COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR AND IMPRESARIO.  
A WOOD AND IRON STRUCTURE BROUGHT BY OX-WAGON  
FROM THE RAILHEAD AT PIETERMARITZBURG.  
IT OFFERED FULLSCALE GRAND OPERA.  
TWO OTHER THEATRES NAMED HIS MAJESTY'S  
LATER OCCUPIED THE SITE.  
(ERECTED 1992 BY THE FRIENDS OF THE OPERA,  
SAMRO AND ANGLO-AMERICAN PROPERTY SERVICES)


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CLICKS  
NEW STORE

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HIS MAJESTYS BUILDING



1782

KRANS  
KOLA  
PIVO



JOHANNESBURG



CITY HERITAGE

## HIS MAJESTY'S

African Consolidated Theatres commissioned J.C. Cook & Cowen to design a new theatre and office complex in 1937, to replace the theatre of the same name which had opened in 1903. Construction was interrupted by World War II and only completed in 1945. Decorated with the plushness befitting royalty, His Majesty's Theatre became the venue for spectacular productions. The theatre occupied the central block between the office towers which were topped with steel crowns, lit up at night. Advocate Joe Slovo, a leading communist and later Chief of Staff of Umkonto we Sizwe in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle, had chambers in the office towers.

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