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United Buildings/Somerset House

Fox Street Johannesburg

Mark Hindson (B. Arch.)

See cover photograph

Introduction

Somerset House (formerly United Buildings) is an Edwardian manifestation with the ingredients that render only particular works of architecture timeless jewels. Its glass roofed gallery and intricate detailing, although outwardly appearing to be slavishly following Edwardian fashion, obey principles which develop its sense of place and artistic unity. What caught the attention of a few architectural students casually passing by, was thus not only its "historical clothing" but its inherent and seemingly eternal lessons. Inspired by the building's attributes three enthusiasts: Anne Williams, Christos Daskalakis and



An early view of United Buildings from Fox Street. Note the large glass panes and statue in its niche. The two balconies on either side of the pediment have been removed. The building to the left of the photo remains, although altered.

Photo: Africana Museum, Johannesburg

the author documented it, the drawings being executed without any original prompting material.

This historical account was assembled from pieces of information found coincidentally along the way, and thus must not be regarded as being a thorough or authoritative scholarly narrative.

Brief history

The United Building Society having been founded in 1889 under the scrupulous and energetic directorship of Frank Blackwell, had grown into a prosperous and successful organisation. By 1904 plans were being made to establish the United Building Society's first permanent home (having been housed only temporarily then in the Jeppe Arcade). A site was acquired that ran between Fox Street and Government Square¹ (now Van der Bijl Square). Plans for the new building were commissioned (the architect at present unknown) with the requirements of a "banking hall", a safe deposit section, administrative offices for the building society and additional office space for letting purposes. By late September 1905 the United's address became: The United Building, Fox Street, Government Square, P.O. Box 1012.

The "United" Transvaal Directory of 1908 gives the occupants of the four storeyed United Building as:

- Basement – United Safe Deposit Company
- Ground floor – United Building Society
- First floor – Baumann and Gillfillan
- Second floor – Williamson A.E.A.

The basement's tenants still remain on the premises under the same name and continue to use the original furniture and safe.

The first floor's tenants were a group of lawyers who were conveniently situated next to the law courts in Government Square (south of the building).

The second floor was occupied by an accountant. Financial dealing within this city block is emphasized by the fact that adjacent to it was the Reserve Investment Building and the Rand Provident Building on the west side.² The eastern neighbour, called High Court Building (a series of suites for the legal fraternity) is still there although drastically altered.

The United Building Society remained in their building until 1930 when through an agent (L.K. Jacobs) it was sold to a purchaser of the name Arnolds. The building with its change of ownership lost its financial institutional function and assumed a small commercial trading role, being thus comprised of several shops. Its name also changed from United Building to Somerset House. The large front arched windows were taken away and replaced by shop fronts. The banking hall thus became a shop (only its floor pattern and panelling remain today). Two additional kiosks were added under and next to the staircase in 1931.

In 1972 the arcade was sealed off completely, by a kitchen blocking off the Van der Bijl Square side, and an iron gate closing the original entrance from Fox Street. The court and its galleries became a depository for heaps of second hand furniture and other merchandise belonging to the auctioneer (who now occupies the banking hall's position). The building as it now stands houses the auctioneer, a dress manufacturer, two snack-cum-take away bars, and the safe deposit company. Somerset House is still owned by the Arnolds and their company Middelburg Coal.

In 1975 a tall office block was built next to Somerset House and due to poor lateral support during excavation, the building has cracks along its western flank. Damage was also done to its roof by falling debris.

Architectural merit

The building's architectural importance lies predominantly in its unique control of space rather than in its imagery or its facadal details. It has a central light well or court three storeys high covered by a glass roof which is supported on arched wooden trusses with cast iron infills. The entrance into this space from Fox Street is through a thin intensely decorated and purposely dimly lit passage. This tunnel, through contrast, raises expectations before the major internal space is revealed, thus heightening and enriching the experience – (a similar experience to the explosion of space when emerging from a tight restricted passageway at a sports stadium). The court was introduced as a solution to the problem of providing light and air to the offices which were in the middle of the long enclosed site. Several arcades existed in Johannesburg at the turn of the century which were governed by the same necessity. *Somerset House was thus no innovation, but stands today as the last remaining example of this simple yet harmonious and ingenious solution.*

The gallery's balustrades are of wrought iron. The floor of the upper gallery has glass blocks set into it so as to let light through to the lower levels. The ground floor within the court has a marble and slate chequered floor pattern with rich decorative green tiles for the dado on the peripheral walls.

It has already been mentioned that Somerset House was an Edwardian manifestation. I would like to qualify this and at the same time clarify its artistic intent. J.B. Priestley relates to the spirit and aspiration of Edwardianism in this quote which is significant when examining the vision of the architect of the building: "I have felt for a long time that the Edwardians, whose taste and style in public decoration have often been challenged and condemned, were in fact extremely adroit in creating an air of vague luxury . . . There are times when most of us like to feel rich, idle and luxurious – . . . and it seems to me the Edwardians were supremely successful in creating the appropriate atmosphere."⁹

Stylistically, the Building Society's first building was obviously conceived of in terms of "luxury" and "appropriate atmosphere" in the Edwardian sense – after all they had to lure their clientele somehow: "Our new building . . . is furnished with all the modern appliances that up-to-date architecture can suggest. The offices . . . are superbly fitted and replete with all conveniences which experience has taught are necessary to the comfort of the public and of the officials."¹⁴ This was a circular the directors sent to society members. Indeed, scrupulous care was taken over the smallest of details so that a consistent and high standard was maintained throughout the building.

Classicism, being then the symbol for stability and permanence, was the style employed in the main facade on Fox Street. The ground floor being the United's main office space was given extra emphasis by virtue of two large arched windows filled with uninterrupted panes of glass, a feature which was then as expensive as it was rare. This arcaded bottom level was thus the pedestal for the upper two tiers, which incorporated a simplified relief temple front (a pediment (with the UBS's initials therein) supported on two pilasters).



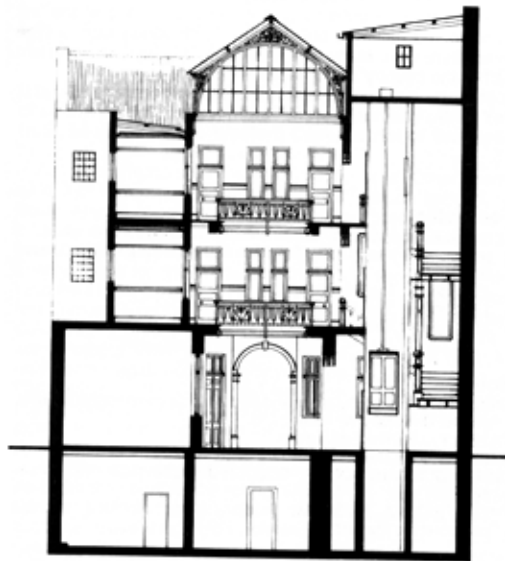
Tiling dado on the inner walls of the internal court.

Sculpture too was woven into the language of the building, the niche on the first floor containing a figure of significance for the United Building Society: "Frank Blackwell seemed to think of everything . . . and while attending to a score of matters, recommended an emblem for the United." This is the classical figure from the fables – a strong man, kneeling on one knee while trying to break a bundle of sticks against the other – the sticks symbolizing strength through unity. In Italy, a model was especially carved in marble and exported to Johannesburg where it has come to occupy an honoured place in the foyer of the new United Buildings. The emblem is reproduced on pass books issued to clients and on the Society's house tie. However now " . . . the pedesal on which the strong man knelt is vacant."¹⁵

The two balconies on either side of the temple front have unfortunately been destroyed and replaced with windows of less complimentary proportions.



Tiling on the walls in the basement.



CROSS SECTION

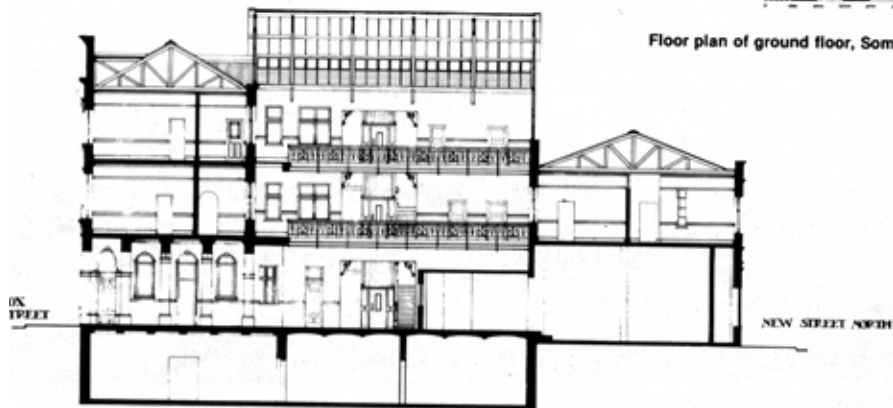
Cross section of Somerset House



GROUND FLOOR

NEW STREET NORTH

Floor plan of ground floor, Somerset House.



LONGITUDINAL SECTION

Longitudinal section of Somerset House



Somerset House today, Fox street elevation.

Conclusion

It may be said that Somerset House's present condition is reaching the stage when justification for its removal is imminent. It also occupies extremely valuable ground in central Johannesburg and has not the bulk or floor area to warrant its continued existence economically.

However, as a building type it remains as one of the last glass roofed galleried buildings in South Africa from a time when there were many countrywide, and is thus an important part of the country's architectural heritage.

Footnotes:

1. United Building Society Golden Jubilee 1889 – 1939: pamphlet.
2. Nicholaëff Grinker: United Buildings and Hyde Park Project. University Wits.
3. J.B. Priestly: The Edwardians.
4. J.R. Shorten: The Johannesburg Saga, p. 1044
5. J.R. Shorten: The Johannesburg Saga.

Sources:

GRINKER, N.: United Buildings and Hyde Park: a comparative analysis: project University Witwatersrand.
 PRIESTLY, J.B.: The Edwardians
 SHORTEN, J.R.: The Johannesburg Saga
 UNITED BUILDING SOCIETY GOLDEN JUBILEE 1889 – 1939: Pamphlet
 THE AFRICANA MUSEUM, Johannesburg, provided valuable photographic material.



View from Van der Bijl Square (New street north side) Somerset House is situated between the Home Trust and High Court Buildings (Millews). The glass lantern over the gallery can be clearly seen. The United Building Society's present head offices are situated on the right of the photograph.