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## HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM

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

**NAME OF PLACE:** Third Corner House

**Previous/alternative name/s** : Old Corner House  
 Rand Mines Building  
 Originally called 'Eckstein's Buildings'  
 Barclays National Bank (reference of 1976)

**LOCATION:** Street : Commissioner  
 Street number : 77,79  
 Stand number : 5292 (previously 883-885)  
 Block number : E

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

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:**

Nine storeys; one basement.

Façade treatment is bold and overpowering, with great projecting cornice at ninth floor level, and balconies to second floor. The stone is a deep grey colour, and has weathered well.

"Externally, the design of the building represents a strong, individual composition with an escalation of bay-windows sheathed in copper and glass on the Commissioner Street side... Internally, the ready-made finishes of this building belong to the fashions current in England at that time and amount to a hybrid mixture of ideas...Here are shiny green wall-tiles, mosaic floors in debased 'Roman' patters, art-nouveaeu light fittings and designs in the glass doors and windows and, in the foyer, some vaguely Greek symbolism in the plaster decorations of the vaulted dome. Unlike the external modelling of the building, these details lack depth and assurance. This eclecticism is redeemed by exceedingly good ironwork and the quality of craftsmanship to be found in the woodwork generally – they are of the same calibre as that which still survives in old office buildings in the City of London." (Doreen Grieg)

January 1947 – "All the floors throughout the building are breeze concrete. The roof is 12in. thick, constructed of concrete covered with bitumastic sheeting and tiled on top.

The building is equipped with 5 lifts, one of which, the goods lift, is capable of a speed of 200 feet per minute, and will raise at this speed an article weighing 3,600lbs., while the other four passenger lifts are capable of a speed of 250 feet per minute, and will carry a load of 2,400 lbs. The goods lift has a floor area of 30 square feet, and the passenger lifts an area of 35 square feet. The capacity [sic.] of the passenger lifts is 12 persons.

The building, excluding the basement, contains 240 large floor areas in its 9 floors, these being divided into offices. On each floor the building is fitted with a strong room, and in the case of the first and second floor, the strong rooms are lined with steel.

In the basement there is provision for the accommodation of bicycles, reached by descending a ramp. The basement includes six fireproof strong rooms, as well as the electric transformers, generators and boilers.

The building is fitted with its own electric light and power station, which includes two 150-h.p marine type water-tube boilers, two steam electric generating sets of 75 Kw. each, and one electric accumulator. The roof is fitted with a tank (capacity of 37,000 gallons) for the building's water supply and also for fire purposes. The structure is steam heated throughout. At the time of erection in 1903 facilities included a water-borne sewerage system.

The windows on the outside of the building number 493, and there are 590 windows for borrowed light inside the building. The total weight of the structure, including foundations, is in the neighbourhood of 20,000 tons, excluding furniture or occupants. The total height from bottom of foundation to top of finial of the dome is 181 feet 8 inches, while the height from footpath to the roof of the caretaker's quarters is 125 feet.

To-day it is interesting to note the following information connected with materials and quantities in 1903. The materials used were:-

239	tons of steel in foundations
1,220	tons of steel in frame, fire-escape and stairway
1,731,000	bricks
5,400	casks of cement
1,100	tons of sand for cement masonry
20,904	feet of telephone wire
15,620	feet of electric bell wire
61,710	feet of electric light wire
23,650	feet of insulating tube, for electric light and power wires
400	feet of electric power wire.

Van Der Waal mentions the building regulations which were promulgated by the Town Council in June 1903. According to these regulations, buildings in Johannesburg would be limited to a height of 140ft (44m), but they were nevertheless limited to a height equal to one and two-thirds the width of the street in which they were built. The interesting point here is that the third Corner House, the National Bank Building, as well as the third Thorne and Stuttafords Building were all built prior to the promulgation of these regulations and were all much taller than the regulations would have allowed; the result of this being that these three exceptional buildings dominated downtown Johannesburg for long. It is interesting to note that there were no historical models to follow in the design of the facades of the Corner House (or for that matter, the third Thorne and Stuttafords Building). "The problem was simply solved by repeating the storeys. At the same time, in accordance with the classicist tradition, the façade was horizontally and vertically articulated in three planes. The underlying grid system was suggested in particular in the central horizontal plane between the sections. The Commissioner Street façade has rather pleasant proportions and the classicist ornamentation and bronzed bay window section and dome make this structure a memorable milestone in the Beaux Arts mode and the architectural development of Johannesburg in general. The Simmonds Street façade is equally striking, but for a different reason. The building was

constructed in two sections to improve the illumination of the offices and these two sections were dramatically joined by a bridge on the ninth floor.”

#### **CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:**

- Walls : steel framework (furnished and erected by Milliken Bros, 11 Broadway, New York); covered with walls of fine-grained , brownish-red Buiskop sandstone taken from a quarry near Warmbaths; socle (base/pedestal) of rough-cut sandstone.
- Roof : flat, concrete.
- Floors : timber; parquet.
- Windows: timber (sash windows).

According to Chipkin, the “main construction at Corner House comprised a steel frame designed on what was called the ‘American principle’. The floors were concrete and the flat roof slab was waterproofed with ‘bitumastic sheeting’. The building had its own electrical power plant to operate five lifts, and emergency water supply and a water-borne sewerage system connected to its own sewer, and ‘private sewage farm’ in the southern suburbs – and extraordinary example of entrepreneurial initiative. But clearly the most extraordinary demonstration of the spirit of innovation prevailing in the high capitalist sector of Johannesburg was the use of the structural steel skeletal frame imported from the United States. It was Chicago in the 1880 and 1890s that mastered the modern bridge-building technology of riveted steel framing for high buildings, a system quickly taken up in New York and elsewhere; and already by 1903 it had reached Johannesburg. The South African Mining and Engineering Journal of that year reported that some three or four ‘skeleton-framed building[s] on the American principle’ had been completed or were in the course of erection in Johannesburg, in addition to similar work in Cape Town”.

According to Chipkin, “A.P. Cartwright informs us that the design and supply of the steelwork at Corner House was handled by Milliken Bros., a New York-based firm operating in South Africa. This information indicates that the use of the American high-rise system of construction in Johannesburg (and the Cape) preceded its use in London – at least in major projects – since Hitchcock confirms that this technology only reached London in 1905 at the new Ritz Hotel on Piccadilly. This reveals, too, a new cultural factor, a growing New York-Johannesburg axis. Johannesburg’s cultural imports have partly switched from Europe to the United States, where design fertility in architecture was related to the increasing intensity of land use.”

#### **SITE FEATURES:**

#### **ALTERATIONS:**

No plans with respect to alterations / additions to the building could be found.

#### **INTEGRITY:**

The integrity of this building is unquestionable.

**INSCRIPTION:**

BARCLAYS BUILDING (CORNER HOUSE)  
THIS STEEL FRAMED BUILDING, DESIGNED BY LECK AND EMLEY AND COMPLETED IN 1904, TOGETHER WITH THE ADJOINING NATIONAL BANK BUILDING WAS FOR YEARS THE TALLEST BUILDING IN JOHANNESBURG. IT FORMS PART OF A GROUP OF ARCHITECTURALLY SIGNIFICANT BUILDINGS, LITTLE ALTERED SINCE 1907.  
THIS PLAQUE WAS DONATED BY BARCLAYS NATIONAL BANK LTD.  
National Monuments Council  
1979

**ARCHITECT/BUILDER:**

William Leck & Fred Emley

**CONSTRUCTION DATE:**

On plan : 1902  
Completed : construction started in 1903 and completion followed in 1904.

**BUILDING STYLE:**

The design followed the English trend of the late 1890's towards the classical style.

Chipkin states the following: "The Corner House embodies the classical dress front of Edwardian architecture, but the central dome, as well as the copper-sheeted bay window projections with armorial enrichment on the reveals, indicates an architecture that still retains the Victorian sensibilities of a decade earlier. These archaic references are themselves important as they represent an attempt to establish ancestral linkages for the parvenu rich from the gold-fields, who had by now obtained access on equal terms to venerable London boardrooms, where the world's major's financial transactions were concluded." (Chipkin)

"Goeie voorbeeld van die Amerikaanse kantoorgebou-styl waarby die domposisie-indeling en sierelemente van die Neo-Barok toegepas is." (RAU Report, June 1976)

**BUILDING TYPE:**

Office building.

**ENVIRONMENT:**

Next door stands The National Bank Building, designed by the same architects, viz. Leck and Emley. They are almost twin buildings sharing a continuous cornice and having many other features in common.

Van Der Waal describes the second National Bank Building – third Corner House relationship as follows: "While these two buildings apparently constitute a whole, there are important differences, such as a lack of articulation in the Simmonds Street façade of the National Bank,

and the poor statement of the main entrance in the same street (despite its monumental proportions). Even a cursory comparison with the Commissioner Street façade of the Corner House reveals that the National Bank does not have the same qualities by far. In any event, these two buildings provide an interesting sidelight on the force of example of a pioneering design (the Corner House). This generic power had not abated 50 years later when Gordon Leith extended the National Bank's façade over two stands in Market Street...and made it fit that of the existing building exactly."

**CONDITION:**

Good.

**URGENT ACTION:**

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

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

General protection:	Section 34(1) structure/s	<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)

In 1977, Barclays National Bank DCO was approached by the NMC with a view to a proposal to declare the building as a national monument. This was not favourably received by the owners. The latter were thereupon requested to enter into a discussion with the NMC with a view to reconsidering its position. NMC in the interim, suggested that an appropriate plaque be installed at the building and decided not to pursue the matter of declaration further.

**NOTES:**

Listed as one of Johannesburg's 100 most outstanding places of cultural significance.

## **DEEDS INFORMATION:**

Original ownership:

By 1976: Barclays Bank D.C. & O

T79356/1999 Firstrand Bank Ltd

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

(a) Stand Nos. 883, 884

1888: H. Eckstein & Co. - Single storey corrugated iron building

1889: Corner House - two Storey brick building

(b) Stand No. 885

1889: City Chambers - Double storey brick building

1904: Valuation of ground £78,000

1910: Valuation of ground £37,000

Valuation of building £94,000

## **HISTORY:**

It was Alfred Beit (of the firm Wernher, Beit and Company) who sent Hermann Eckstein and J.B. Taylor to the Rand to open an office of the Company in the newly-laid out township of Johannesburg. The two men were instructed to acquire a lease on ground near the Market Square. Soon after his arrival, Eckstein paid £1 000 on behalf of his firm for the preferment rights on a block of six stands on the north-east corner of Commissioner and Simmonds Streets. There the first offices of the firm H. Eckstein (this was really not a firm in its own right but simply the Johannesburg branch of Wernher, Beit and Company) were housed in a humble wood-and-iron structure with a hipped roof. This building soon made way for a two-storeyed brick edifice with wooden verandahs that were replaced in 1895 by the most elaborate wrought-iron work (balustrade) in the town, some of which is today in "Dolobran" in Parktown.

Hermann Eckstein proved rapidly that he was a business genius. He became Johannesburg's 'first citizen', the man to whom everyone turned for advice and financial assistance. Wernher and Beit gave them their full support. The result was that H. Eckstein became by far the largest holders of mining land on the Central Rand. In addition they owned the Braamfontein Company and through it a vast acreage of land on which some of Johannesburg's most attractive northern suburbs were laid out. Eckstein so impressed his principals in London that they invited him to join them there as a partner in Wernher, Beit and Company. He left Johannesburg in 1892, but died shortly thereafter in Germany. He was in Johannesburg for little more than six years. In that time he became the first president of the Chamber of Mines.

After Eckstein, Sir Lionel Philips came (after his arrival back in Johannesburg in 1906) to play a leading role in the company in Johannesburg. The activities of the company had by now assumed national importance. Not only did it control the largest and most profitable gold mines on the Witwatersrand, but was also financing the National Bank, started the first South African cement company (the forerunner of the Pretoria Portland Cement Company), etc Following the Jameson Raid in 1896, Philips was banned by the ZAR Government from the Transvaal for having taken the leadership of the so-called Reform Committee. He was followed by Georges Rouliot at Corner House.

At the end of 1900, mining representatives took a decision in Cape Town of far-reaching importance. They established the *Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA)*, under the auspices of the Chamber of Mines. The function of the association was to replace the unholy traffic in migrant workers from across the country's borders with an orderly flow under regulated conditions of employment. It was formed to operate outside South Africa and would become known to generations of mineworkers as Wenela.

Despite high hopes for Wenela at its launching in 1901 it failed – partly because the wages offered initially were too low – to solve the burning question of the days following the Peace of Vereeniging: where would the mines find the labour to put them back in full productive business? Rouliot had left for France and Percy Fitzpatrick of *Jock of the Bushveld* fame became a leading figure at Corner House.

Following the Anglo-Boer War, the firm was hamstrung by the shortage of men to work underground. This was how approximately 50 000 Chinese labourers were brought to the Rand. It was this which saved the mining companies from disaster and re-established the profitability of the mines. The Chinese left through a process of gradual repatriation.

In 1902, it was decided to replace the double-storeyed building with a larger and more functional building. The building was designed by Leck & Emley and it was the first building to be built round a steel framework in the city. It was to remain the tallest building in Johannesburg until the 1920s.

Serious work was begun, with the erection of the steel frame, on 1 April 1903. In making the excavations, pits were dug in the hard, decomposed sandstone to an average depth of about 22 feet below the level of the footpath. In the pits were placed concrete bases to take the main stanchions of the building, which are 50 in number.

By 1903 the steel skeletal frame of the new Corner House building had reached a height of nearly 38 metres above Commissioner Street – 125 feet from footpath to janitor's quarters. This became the town's favourite spectacle. Halfway through the proceedings, one entire floor of the building was loaded with bricks packed to the ceiling. This was a test, designed by the engineering department, to prove to their own satisfaction that the steel girders supporting the floors could safely bear about ten times the weight they would eventually have to carry.

We obtain some idea of the pace of change and the technological sophistication attainable in Johannesburg at the time when we analyse the Corner House building – already the third Corner House, now the largest, tallest commercial building in South Africa. Contemporary reports described it as a skyscraper, the first legitimate use of this new, characteristically American term in Johannesburg. The building was three storeys higher than the company's London Head office – a clear indication of the new scale of capital formation on the Witwatersrand during the Edwardian period. (Chipkin)

The building had its own boiler and plant in the basement to drive the lifts, provide light and steam heat. A borehole in the basement provided water for the building. A special feature of the building was the lift, reputedly the first in town and now preserved at the Transport Museum. All this only 18 years after Johannesburg was founded. Stories of the luxury the fortunate inhabitants of the new skyscraper would enjoy spread round the town. There was to be a marble staircase lined with green tiles, electric lights in every room, as well as the ... wonder of wonders, water-borne sewerage on every floor.

In 1904, the drawing office of Messrs. H. Eckstein & Co. occupied an entire wing on the top floor. Messrs. Grocott and Shery, the Stationers, established themselves on the ground floor, corner of Commissioner and Simmonds Streets, while the National Bank of South Africa was established in the ground floor portion on the corner of Simmonds and Market Streets.

In 1905, Wernher and Beit formed an investment trust in London – the new concern was called The Central Mining and Investment Corporation Limited. This was based on their belief that

deep level mining would produce satisfactory profits and prolong the life of the mines. Wernher, Beit and Company, which included all the assets of H. Eckstein and Company was taken up in Central Mining – which was to become one of the most powerful and successful mining-finance companies in the world. The Corner House, Johannesburg, became the offices of the Corporation. The owners was the major gold-mining consortium which in 1905 became known as the Central Mining-Rand Mines group of gold mines; already a decade earlier, Rand Mines had emerged as the biggest mining finance grouping in the world.

The year 1909 was a memorable one for The Corner House for it saw not only the launching of Crown Mines Limited, which was to become the most profitable gold mining company in the world, but also the establishment beyond doubt of the richness of the ore of Modderfontein B, soon to become a producing mine. Julius Wernher died in 1912. He was regarded as the father figure of the gold mining industry.

In 1911 Lionel Philips became chairman of the Corporation. He was to hold that position for the next ten years and under his direction the company prospered despite wartime and post-war difficulties. In 1913 the Corporation acquired leases over oil-bearing ground in Trinidad. There a company called Trinidad Leaseholds was formed. This concern which was later renamed Trinidad Oil, played a very big part in the Corporation's subsequent development. In 1915 the administrative and financial control of East Rand Proprietary Mines was taken over by the Corner House.

Sir Lionel Philips was succeeded in 1924 by Sir R. Southern Holland.

When the country abandoned the gold standard in 1933, the gold mining industry received the fillip it desperately needed at the time. The new lease of life for the mines of the Rand Mines Group was to have a profound effect on the company's future. Mines such as Nourse, City Deep, Geldenhuis, Rose Deep, and ERPM has seemed to be nearing the end of their long lives. Now, with gold at £8 an ounce, their ore reserves were doubled and their productivity extended for at least another twenty years. It was at this time that the company took over the Blyvooruitzicht Mine on the Far West Rand. In the meantime, Central Mining had widened its interests by acquiring shares in gold mining companies in Australia in 1933 and in base metal mines in Yugoslavia. After the war, the Corporation floated the Harmony Gold Mining company in the Free State. At the beginning of 1965 autonomy was transferred from London to Rand Mines Limited. Central Mining remained the other company of the group and the largest single shareholder in Rand Mines.

In 1963 Rand Mines sold the eight-storeyed building at the corner of Commissioner and Simmonds Streets that had been its home for sixty years and prepared to move to a new and more modern building. The old Corner House, completed in 1905, had in its day been one of the landmarks of Johannesburg and the hub of the mining world.

In May, 1965, the new Corner House was opened by Mr C.W. Engelhard, the chairman of the Corner House Group.

#### **GENERAL NOTES:**

P.H. Anderson in 1965 in his *Foreword* to Cartwright's work states as follows: "The Corner House building, which began in 1886 as a single-storeyed wood-and-iron shack ...was replaced by a larger, more modern, building first in 1890 and again in 1904. The building that rose after the South African War has been one of the landmarks of Johannesburg for 60 years and certainly can claim to have played its part in the history of the city and of South Africa...This is the appropriate moment to tell The Corner House story, for the companies it has housed these many years have recently moved to a new Corner House."



Eckstein's name is commemorated by the Hermann Eckstein Park, on which the Johannesburg Zoological Gardens and Zoo Lake were established. The ground was presented to the city by his partners as a memorial to a man they all admired. Soon the more impressive two-storeyed building, that had replaced the original shack in which Eckstein's was first established, became known as the Corner House. It is a name that has signified a great deal in Johannesburg and though, over the years, other names have changed, there has always been a Corner House. Hermann Eckstein represented Julius Wernher and Alfred Beit on the Witwatersrand. He founded Eckstein & Company and together with Wernher and Beit formed Rand Mines. It was a very public spirited company, presenting Hermann Eckstein Park for to Zoo and Zoo Lake, Wemmer Pan Park, Arcadia and the Hope Home to Johannesburg.

Cartwright states as follows: "The Corner House, that fine old building at the corner of Commissioner and Simmonds Streets, Johannesburg, is both a landmark and an institution in that city. It was once the tallest building in the country and, as far as the gold-mining industry was concerned, the most important. It housed the partner in H. Eckstein & Company (the representatives of Wernher, Beit, of London), and the consulting engineers and staff of Rand Mines Limited and The Central Mining & Investment Corporation. It was also the head office of the Braamfontein Company (the landlord of Parktown, West Cliff and the Sachsenwald Forest) and the home of the Transvaal Consolidated Land and Exploration Company, probably the biggest landed proprietor in South Africa at that time. There had been other buildings on the site – an iron shack built in 1886 and "improved" when bricks and cement became available, and a more impressive double-storied building, with balconies, built in 1889. They were of the type that one expected to find in a mining camp in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the new building, designed by Messrs Leck & Emley, was the symbol of the prosperity of the gold-mining industry and of the magnificent future that the deep-level mains had opened up for Johannesburg. Indeed, had 'The Corner House' not already become the best-known name in South Africa, this 'skyscraper' built in 1904, might appropriately have been called 'Deep Level House'.

If The Corner House were nothing more than the name given to a building it would scarcely justify a book. But it also became the generic name of a group of the richest gold mines in the world. It was more, even, than that. It was the descriptive phrase that stood for all that was most up to date in mining practice. Thus 'Corner House policy' and 'The Corner House says...' became part of the vocabulary of Johannesburg. Many famous South Africans were "Corner House men". It is also true to say that the words stood for integrity and fair dealing at a time when the industry needed these qualities. But the extraordinary fact about this name is that it was never the official title either of the building or of the group of companies it housed. You would have looked in vain for a brass plate inscribed 'The Corner House'. The name was conferred on the old building in the nineties, partly because Extern, the name of the founder of the original firm, meant "corner stone", and partly because it occupied the most important corner site in the town.

After the Boer War, as soon as peace was restored, the Rand Mines Group erected a new 'Corner House', which was nine storeys high, the first building in Africa of this height. This did more than anything to give confidence to the populace, not only of the Rand but of South Africa. The large mining houses knew better than anyone how long the Reef would last, and if *they* could build such well-built and expensive 'skyscrapers', then the future of the town was assured. Then, and then only, was there a real forward march in the social and cultural life of the city; and then only came a permanence in civic administration and planning. The building of the 'new' Corner House marked the final end of the mining-camp days. It stood on the north-east corner of Simmonds and Commissioner Streets."

## **SOURCES:**

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Photographs (coloured) ca. 1988 and photocopied drawings of elevations : NMC File 3/1/3/Joh/124

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Cartwright, A.P.: The Corner House; The Early History Of Johannesburg, Purnell & Sons, 1965 (Contains numerous interesting pictures of *inter alia*, the construction of the building's steel framework in 1903, The Treasury where bullion, specie and diamonds were stored in the early days, detail of hand-carved teak arches on the ground floor, one of the old lifts, section of the ground floor vestibule in Italianate style, interior of the Board Room with original furnishings, an executive office with original furnishings and Burmese teak panelling, bas-relief of Tyche the goddess of fortune on the frieze of the vestibule dome, the leaded light dome of the vestibule etc.)

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Registrar of Deeds, Johannesburg

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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