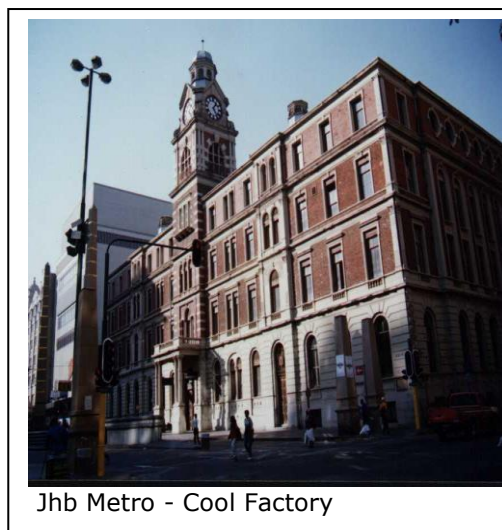


## JOHANNESBURG METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

### HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM

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

**NAME OF PLACE:** Rissik Street Post Office



**Previous/alternative name/s :**

**LOCATION:**

Street	:	Rissik
Street number	:	40
Stand number	:	354, 353, 355/1, 355re, 356, 347, 346, 348 (previously 532-535, 633-635)
Block number	:	I

**ZONING:**

Current use/s	:	Post office
Previous use/s	:	Post office



## DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:

Four storeys; one basement level.

According to the NMC's records, the building (by March 1981), was still serving the purpose for which it was erected and the attractive interior of leaded glass, woodcut and brass work was essentially still intact.

It is a building designed in brick with lavish painted plaster accents and with the same Beaux-Arts approach and Franco-Flemish features as at the Raadsaal and the Palace of Justice in Pretoria. The Post Office however is more restrained, perhaps because less money was spent on it, and the result is a building of architectural merit. Wierda's composition of classical columns, balustrading and decorative surrounds, entablatures to window openings and land mouldings marking the different floors on the main façade is predominantly horizontal. It is relieved by contrasting vertical motifs on three projecting bays, each crowned with a cupola, and on the north and south sides by tall window openings.

The building fronts onto Rissik, Market and President Streets. Planning and elevational treatment is on a symmetrical basis... A covered entrance portico with Classical balustrading is on the Rissik Street frontage. The building originally faced onto the Market Square, now the site of the City Hall.

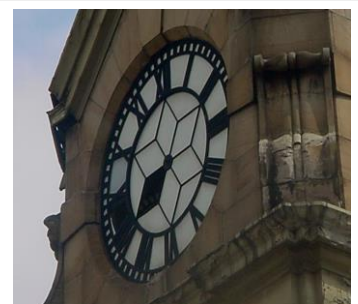
Van Der Waal describes the 1895-7 building as follows: "The three-storey building (with basement) consisted of offices, sorting areas, corridors with private post boxes and a central public hall with counters on the ground floor. The latter was illuminated through a domed glass roof...On the Rissik Street side the façade was articulated by means of a rusticated ground floor with pronounced mouldings marking the various upper floors and eaves. Vertically, four brick surfaces of equal width and a portico were separated by three rusticated parties crowned with little towers. The higher tower in the middle was designed to accentuate the broad smooth façade while the towers and skylights served to vary the roof silhouette. The formal subdivision the façade and the classicist form elements were in line with the Neo-Baroque building style used during that period for government buildings in Europe and America. There were two schools within that style: the Beaux Arts mode which was dry, academic and archeologically correct; and the so-called Second Empire mode, freer and more picturesque in conception, with distinctive high-pitched mansard roofs. The ZAR architects gave the Second Empire mode a typically Dutch flavour by alternating between red brick and white sandstone or plasterwork on the facades. This variation in colour softened the official and often utilitarian aspect of the buildings."

After the South African War when the Transvaal was no longer a republic, the accession of King Edward VII in 1902 was commemorated, on the instructions of Lord Milner, the newly appointed Governor of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, by the addition of an extra storey, the removal of the existing cupolas and the building of a new clock tower crowned with an elaborate cupola. The English architect Wilfred Tonkin treated the new tower with its cypher "E.R." in a thoroughly Wren-like fashion.

"When" according to Chipkin, "we turn our attention from the commercial sector with its provincial representations of commercial architecture in London and Paris to the architecture of De Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), we recognise a distinct culture change. Clearly the public works of the ZAR have a late-nineteenth-century Dutch emphasis affected by Continental sensibilities. The ZAR architecture of Johannesburg, originally part of the public works programme carried out by a reluctant Boer government, possesses a fascination deriving from its sound architectural qualities as well as from its archaeological remoteness. The most prominent example was the Rissik Street Post Office, a wide three-storey edifice, which defined

the eastern perimeter of the vast Market Square, like a nineteenth-century version of the Renaissance Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome. The main elevation in red facebrick with cream stucco and sandstone alternations was infiltrated with French Second Empire influences. These included window profiles and ventilator enrichment; and the long façade with its pavilion-like divisions marked by two ornamentally roofed elevated towers and a central turret and belvedere at the fifth-floor level, overlooking the activity on the adjacent square. With its play of silhouette, symmetry and Renaissance details, indeed with its grace and elegance, even its provincial affectations, it soon became a benign presence in the townscape and the backdrop to principal historic events that occurred in Johannesburg at the turn of the century...(it was a) most ambitious Republican building in the rising capitalist city...Sytze Wierda, a Hollander, was the engineer-architect who... 'interpreted President Paul Kruger's vision of the new Republic'. Wierda's major work is at the Raadsaal (1890) and the Palace of Justice (1897) – both in the hoofstad of Pretoria – and at the Post Office (1897) in Johannesburg. All three buildings form part of a cognate series that include the 'pavilioned and mansarded' Sætorvet building (1880) in Copenhagen as well as the more overpowering Reichstag building (1880) in the new capital of the German Empire. There are links too with the Rijksmuseum style in Amsterdam but with the medievalising tendency reduced and the Renaissance content augmented. Wierda's monumental style was Renaissance in context, Francophile in derivation but understandably Netherlandish and north-western European flavour, and formed part of an unacknowledged yet persistent Europeanising process on the Highveld, looking not to Victorian England for inspiration but to the nation states of the Continent. Not only is there reason to believe that Wierda was familiar with the work of his celebrated contemporary Hendrik Berlage in Holland, but circumstantially we may deduce (as Le Roux and Holm suggest) that he was aware of the monumental new Reichstag in Berlin, which played a not insignificant role in the nation-building programme of the new Germany. Certainly he was at home with the architecture of the Italian Renaissance: this is evident in the palazzo façade of the Rissik Street Post Office. Even the word "palace" used for the court of justice in Pretoria suggests an adaptation of Renaissance terminology, although there are Dutch precedents for the use of this word. The routine ZAR buildings designed by the Public Works Department under Sytze Wierda were distinguished by their Dutchness, embodying the strong Hollands influence and discipline operating within the Kruger administration in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These facebrick constructions revealed in their details – decorative walling insets, triangular gable forms with Flemish strapwork and pinnacle elaboration, French roof silhouettes – an understated nineteenth Gothic provenance. In essence they were good, honest brick statements of intent whose modernity derived from underlying Arts and Crafts modes of production."

The Post Office (and especially the clock) and the Park are two places I knew very well. Working in a nearby building on the seventh floor, I had a birds-eye view of both. Eight big dongs meant you had to be at work, this started the counting down for the day (I can't ever remember the clock not working), a quarter of the tune meant it was quarter past, half the tune was half past, three quarters was quarter to the hour and the best of all was the full tune, a small pause and a deep dong for every hour, everybody paused to count the hours, you never used your watch, twelve dongs meant lunch hour (which really was only a half-an-hour) and four dongs time to pack up and go home. The sound of the clock was never boring, although you heard the same tune in sections and in full, several times a day. This was almost thirty years ago and I still hear the clock. Sadly the clock is gone, fighting the tears, fond memories marred by the neglect of the building, I stood in a state of disbelief seeing the building for the first time in twenty odd years. (cjmb)



Jhb Metro Inner City Project

## CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:

Walls : partially plastered brickwork; socle of dressed sandstone.

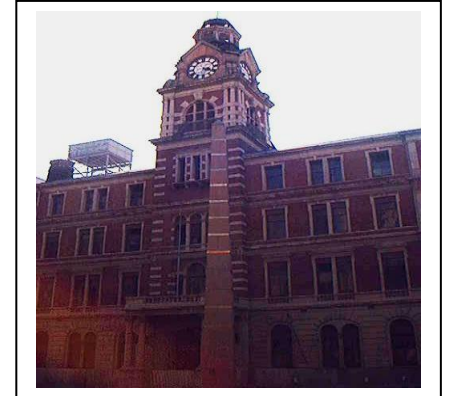
Roof : hipped; corrugated iron.

Floors : public hall – coloured stoneware tiling; remainder of building – timber.

## SITE FEATURES:

## ALTERATIONS:

All three towers, two lesser turrets and a series of dormers were taken down and replaced with a fourth storey and new tower (W.W. Tonkin, 1905)



The ground floor underwent various structural changes in 1920, when the Public Hall was enlarged.

## INTEGRITY:

The English architect Wilfred Tonkin treated the new tower with its cypher "E.R." in a thoroughly Wren-like fashion, which was out of keeping with the original building and unlike his treatment of the additional floor which he carried out in harmony with those that Wierda had designed.

The "structure familiar to Johannesburgers of today is substantially different from the original 1897 version. The addition of an extra storey in 1905 badly spoiled its looks...That addition unfortunately destroyed the original proportions and replaced the charming variation of the roof line with one that was straight and functional, dominated by a heavy clock tower (and a large square water-tank!)." (Benjamin)

## INSCRIPTION:

At the corner of Rissik and Market Streets: -

The following items in a cylinder were placed behind the cornerstone by Van Alphen in 1897 : a copies of the Postmaster General's annual report, the 1896 edition of the postal guide, a Government Gazette, as well as the Standard and Diggers News and a list of those who were involved in the project. (Die Vaderland: 29 July 1993)

GEDENKSTEEN  
GELEGD DOOR  
J VAN ALPHEN  
POSTMEESTER GENERAAL  
26 JANUARI 1897  
M.C.A. MEISCHKE  
CONTRACTER S. WIERDA  
  
HOOFD. V. PUBL. WERKEN

**ARCHITECT/BUILDER:**

S. Wierda, Department of Public Works, ZAR

Builder: M.C.A. Meischke

Wilfred Tonkin – fourth storey

**CONSTRUCTION DATE:**

On plan	:	1 July 1895
Completed	:	1897
Fourth storey	:	1905

**BUILDING STYLE:**

As was the case with many government buildings erected during the ZAR period, the Rissik Street Post-Office was designed in the so-called Second Empire Style. This little-known style originated about 1850 in France at the insistence of Napoleon III and is characterized by int. al. the classical composition of the façade with an accentuated centre module, high mansard roofs and tall windows.

Besides the Old Fort in Kotzé Street, the Rissik Street Post-Office is the only remaining structure of importance built in Johannesburg by the government of the South African Republic.

See also DESCRIPTION OF PLACE.

**BUILDING TYPE:**

Post office building.

**ENVIRONMENT:**

Van Der Waal comments as follows in regard to the building: "The three-storey Rissik Street Post Office dominated Market Square because of its strategic position on the elevated and busy eastern section of the square and its sheer size (it was one of the largest buildings in the centre at the time). Nevertheless the ZAR probably over-estimated the effect of this building. Six years later it was found to be far too small and a fourth storey was added and by that time...the Post Office had to cede its dominant position in the visual aspect of the square to new high-rise financial office buildings. However, the Post Office was quite impressive in those times and to this day it is an important visual component of one of the busiest parts of downtown Johannesburg.

Historically and stylistically it is interestingly counterbalanced by the City Hall Complex and together these two buildings also form one of the most important building complexes in the city.

In commenting on the Civic Spine project (1989-91), Herbert Prins stated as follows: "A major road – Rissik Street – passes between the City Hall and Rissik Street Post Office and divides the space. The architects have deflected the road around a fountain on the east-west axis of the



space. This device seems to minimize the division of the urban space by a traffic route through it. The relationship of the buildings on all sides of the square has been maintained. No damage has been done to the relationship between the Post Office, the Town Hall or the buildings on the northern and southern sides. The buildings form the walls of the urban room. In short, the changes made have enhanced the architectural qualities and historical character of the place. I question the need for some of the alterations made to the walls and steps immediately adjacent to the east entrance of the City Hall and the appropriateness of the obelisks...my reservations relate more to the detailing of the elements and their close proximity to the Post Office than to the use of forms which some critics have found to be alien to our culture and environment."

## CONDITION:



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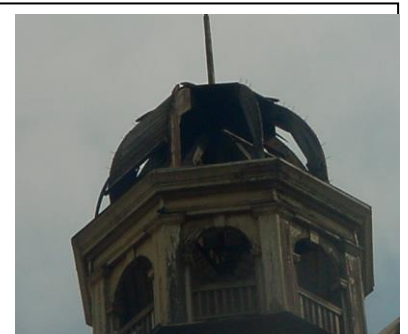
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The building is in a state of serious disrepair. Generally, broken window panes and open windows (refer to many windows that can no longer be properly closed and secured) make the building appear to be exactly what it is - abandoned! If ever there was an example of demolition by neglect, the current state of affairs at this site is it! This certainly calls for drastic action, as was also recently called for by the Central Johannesburg Partnership. (Mr Neil Fraser in Citichat: No. 36/2002, 13 September 2002). The building is

nonetheless, still in a structurally sound condition.

It appears that there has been a systematic pilfering of parts of the interior fabric such as door handles, light fittings, fanlight catches and casement fasteners. Considerable damaged has also been caused to the interior timber work, in particularly the lower sections of the building.(e.g. tongue and groove floor boards, the counters as well as the balusters and handrails of staircases).

The irreplaceable clock and bells have also been removed. There is nothing left of this former treasure in the bell tower. The copper sheeting covering the cupola of this tower is also missing.



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Externally, the condition of the building appears worse than it actually is. Besides the problem of disintegrating plasterwork and sandstone mouldings / cornices etc., there is nothing that a capable restorer would not be able to repair.

In order to better understand the problematic condition of the building, refer to HISTORY.

### **URGENT ACTION:**

It is recommended that steps be taken immediately to arrest the deteriorating condition of this valuable building.

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

In October 1978, the NMC approved the proposed installation of an outside door at President Street, the re-positioning of a security fence at the back of the building, as well as the provision of a concrete surface area in this area.

During November 1984, the NMC approved the proposed installation of an automatic teller machine in an existing door opening of the building on the President Street frontage, on condition that the door be properly documented prior to its removal.

In August 1988, the Department of Post and Telecommunications (Regional Director) submitted specifications in respect of the proposed external repairs and renovations to the building to the NMC for approval: repair of defective plasterwork, replacement of defective moulded plaster, replacement/repair of defective sandstone, replacement of defective corrugated iron roof sheets, replacement of broken glass, re-pointing of brickwork etc. Approval was given on 30 September 1988.

On 4 April 1991, Fassler Kamstra & Holmes Architects met with the NMC for introductory discussions pertaining to the rehabilitation and restoration and adaptive re-use of the building. The NMC on this occasion, visited the building and in a letter to City of Johannesburg, expressed concern over conditions of dilapidation/neglect at the building, as well as the problem of water leakages and resultant damage caused to sandstone and brickwork. Following further discussions with Fassler Kamstra & Holmes Architects, the NMC issued guidelines in regard to the conservation and any redevelopment of the building in the form of a letter dated 7 June 1991 to the above architects. See GENERAL NOTES.

During June 1993, the NMC approved the proposed first phase restoration work to the building as detailed in 'Preliminary Scope of Work', submitted by Fassler Kamstra & Holmes Architects; the NMC requested that the hardwood telephone booths and the adjacent attendant's office on ground floor be documented photographically prior to demolition, so also the glazed hardwood cubicle in the South-East corner of the Postal Hall, and that the to-be-demolished telephone booths and cubicle be offered to the Africana Museum prior to demolition (the latter offer was subsequently declined by the Africana Museum).

In July 1993, the NMC expressed concern over the recent damaging of the two original glazed signs mounted beneath the front portico. Both of the original signs stated (in copperplate script) "*Buy National Savings Certificates*".

City of Johannesburg (Department : Architecture of the Planning Directorate) in a letter during August 1993 to the Regional General of the SA Post Office, stated as follows: "I wish to draw your attention that this building is owned by the Johannesburg City Council, is a declared national monument and is thus protected by the National Monuments Act. In terms of the latter, any change to the building, including to signage affixed thereto must be submitted to and approved by the Transvaal Plans Committee of the N.M.C. Consequently any damage to any component of the building deemed to be of historical value by the N.M.C. is required to be fully restored to its original condition at your expense. As the signage in question certainly falls

into this category, the Council expects you to ensure that this damage is made good as soon as possible."

The Post Office subsequently agreed to remove the red and blue acrylic sheets which were affixed without NMC permission to the outer faces of the signs.

During September 1993, Fassler Kamstra & Holmes submitted plans / applications with respect to the proposed adaptive re-use of the building, i.e. use as a post office and as public orientated sub-lettable retail space (ground floor), sub-lettable office space for use by the SA Post Office and others (first, second and third floors), basement as public orientated sub-lettable retail space, demolition of boiler house, header tank, telephone kiosks, staircase dormer, lifts and cages (north and south) etc; NMC in-principle approval was given dd.3 September 1993, on condition that detailed applications be submitted together with a Conservation Policy.

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

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

Government Notice No. 851 of 28 April 1978 as published in Government Gazette No. 5999 of 28 April 1978 and Correction Notice No.1019 of 19 May 1978 as published in Government Gazette No. 6024 of 19 May 1978.

Gazette description:

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

In a letter dd. 8 October 1971 to the NMC, the Johannesburg City Secretary objected to the proposed declaration of the building as a national monument. This was followed by a letter dd. 12 January 1972 from the Postmaster General in which reference was made to an agreement dating from 1940 (confirmed on 8 February 1964) between the City Council of Johannesburg and the State. See HISTORY.

**NOTES:**

**DEEDS INFORMATION:**

Original owner: ZAR, till 1899



Transfer of the stands occupied by the Post Office were transferred to the Council under Deed of Grant 31/1964 dated 31 March 1964.

G31/1964 Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

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

Originally, the Government Building stood on Rissik Street between President and Market Streets. This was a single storey building with a neo-French Baroque façade with cornices, balustrades, segmental pediment and rusticated wall. The building was designed by H. Lindhorst for the government in 1888. This was the administrative offices of the Golden City and the gold fields for nine years.

Van Der Waal states as follows: "While the Government Building was favourably located at the higher end of Market Square, the design was not conducive to this edifice ever assuming a dominant or authoritative position on the square. The building was conceived as a row of rooms articulated symmetrically, much like all the other little buildings around the square. A façade with classicist rustication, parapet, arched windows and shallow relief ornamentation was placed against the rooms facing the square. Even the raised gable of the higher middle section failed to disguise the utilitarian effect of the rooms behind."

## **HISTORY:**

Between 1886 and 1888 the Johannesburg post office was successively situated at several places in the town.

A.B. Edgson was the first postal agent for Johannesburg. He kept a canteen in Ferreira's Camp and the post was kept in a gin box. Towards the end of 1886 postal services between Pretoria and Johannesburg were introduced three times a week. The mail was read out at an open window and the audience claimed their post. At the end of the first year of such a service there were 10 000 unclaimed letter, 130 being for the great family of Smith.

In 1888 the post office moved from Ferreira's Camp to the Government building erected on the Market Square, in which the post office occupied a wing.. See PRE-HISTORY OF SITE.

The first pillar boxes were erected in 1889 and the first house-to-house deliveries started in 1896. However they were stopped because when the Volksraad refused to sanction money to cover the cost of deliveries. In 1887 the first telegraph service was started.

In 1892 the entire Government building was made available to the post office, but on 1 April 1895 it was vacated in order that a new building could be erected on the site. The temporary move was to the Goldreich Building in Joubert Street between Commissioner and Fox Streets. Here the Post Office remained until the new building was completed.

The new "Post and Telegraph Offices" were designed by the ZAR's Department of Public Works, which stood under the direction of Sytze Wierda. The corner-stone was laid on 27 February 1897 by I.N. van Alphen, the then Postmaster General. The building contractor was M.C.A. Meischke, who later also erected the City Hall Complex. (It was rumoured at the time that materials that were surreptitiously dropped off the delivery wagons as they drove down Market Street were used in the construction of the Meishke's Building on the south-east corner of Market and Harrison Streets).

Being the only remaining 19<sup>th</sup> century government building of note in Johannesburg, the building represents one of the most ambitious and well-built buildings of the 1890's. The building cost about £65 000, was opened on 1 July 1898, and originally consisted of three storeys.

In 1902 the Government (on the insistence of Lord Alfred Milner) voted the town £3 000 to purchase a clock as a memento of the coronation of King Edward VII. The clock itself cost approximately £1 400 and was officially started in December 1904, by Mrs Frank Brown, the wife of the Postmaster-General. The Big Bell stroke the hours and was called 'Little Evelyn' after Professor Bozzoli's mother. One of the smaller bells was called 'Wee Peggy' to celebrate the birth of the building contractor's daughter.

Johannesburg grew so rapidly that a fourth storey, designed by Wilfred Tonkin, was added to the building as early as 1905 at a cost of £20,000. In the process the original modest tower was replaced by a bell-tower.

As early as 1919 when plans were revealed to carry out extensions to the Rissik Street Post Office, the architectural press surprisingly suggested that the latter should rather be demolished and that a new post office should be erected on the western portion of Market Square. (This was before the construction of the Public Library). A lengthy memorandum was submitted by the Association of Transvaal Architects and the Town Planning Association (Transvaal) to the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs in which the following proposals were made: "1. The Rissik Street Post Office was an 'obsolete building' which did not warrant additional expenditure. It should rather be demolished to make way for a larger square in front of the City Hall. 2. At the same time the Standard Building and Theatre should be abolished and a worthy modern city theatre built instead. 3. For practical and visual reasons, the new Post Office should be built on the western end of Market Square." These representations however came to nothing. In 1920, the City Council decided not to transfer the western section of Market Square to the government for its post office, but to use it for the Library Building instead.

For 38 years this building was in danger of being demolished and its preservation was hampered by a barter agreement drawn up between the Government and the City Council of Johannesburg in 1940. According to this agreement the Government transferred to the City Council the land upon which the Post Office was situated, on condition that the Government demolished the building. For 20 years voices were raised in favour of the building's preservation and when the City Council in 1976 resolved to waive the challenged clause, the way was paved for the declaration in 1978 of the Post-Office as a national monument. See FORMER PROTECTION STATUS.

In 1991, the NMC became concerned over general conditions of neglect at the building. See SAHRA RECORD REGARDING ALTERATIONS, RENOVATIONS, RESTORATION. By 1992, pieces of moulding were constantly falling onto the pavements. Inside the building, paint was peeling away. There was clearly no upkeep or maintenance done to the building! The Regional Manager Witwatersrand of the Post Office during November 1992, informed the NMC however, that plans were afoot to invite tenders for restoration work on the exterior of the building.

The NMC in a letter dd. 18 November 1993 to the City Secretary, again voiced concern over condition of the building. "We have written to yourselves, we have had meetings with the tenant's architect but nothing is being done. No work has commenced and everything has come to a standstill. It is the duty of the City Council to ensure that the building is properly maintained. It is now a matter of great urgency that the work begin..."

This was followed by a report in The Star of 17 December 1993 ("Laughable for dingy Jo'burg to try for Olympics") in which pertinent mention was made of the condition of the building: "For Johannesburg to think it is worthy or capable of hosting any prestige event, let alone the Olympic Games, is laughable!... Have a good look at that National Monument, the Rissik Street

Post Office. It is literally falling to pieces...Instead of being a monument to the past, it is a national disgrace."

In trying to deal with the problem, City of Johannesburg in a letter dd. 31 March 1994 to NMC, indicated that its attorneys had been instructed to force the Post Office to comply with its obligations in terms of the lease agreement (i.e. to properly maintain the building). The Post Office thereupon requested a further extension of time but this the City of Johannesburg refused.

By 1995 the Post Office still had 17 years on its lease, which had been set at a 'peppercorn rental' of R49 a year on condition that the building was maintained. The Central Johannesburg Partnership (CJP) had at that stage proposed to the Provincial Government that it should relocate from Pretoria to Johannesburg. In a NMC letter dd. 31 January 1995 to City of Johannesburg, mentioned was made of the possible taking over of the building by the Gauteng Provincial Government and the need to sensitively deal with its adaptive re-use (This followed from the Provincial Government's expression of an interest in taking over the building - and its refurbishment as offices for the Premier - which is conveniently situated directly across from the main entrance of the old City Hall which houses the provincial legislature).

Although the City would make the Post Office available, it was however not in a position to finance its restoration. A private sector consortium was therefore put together by the CJP, the finance raised and a lease deal offered to the Provincial Government. Meanwhile, negotiations between City of Johannesburg and the Post Office to cancel the latter's lease of the building had been completed. The deal included a payment to City of Johannesburg of R3,5 million in compensation for the lack of maintenance that had led to the poor condition of the building.

The NMC subsequently in a letter dd. 11 April 1996 to Premier Mr Tokyo Sexwale, expressed its disappointment over the Provincial Government's decision not to take over the building and asked that this decision be reconsidered. "The longer the old Post Office remains empty the greater the costs ultimately of restoring it and the greater the eyesore it will be, detracting from the City Hall and the whole new government enclave you are creating." In letter dd. 12 May 1996 from the Legal Adviser: Office of the Premier, to the NMC, it was stated that the projected costs of converting and maintaining it - i.e. of what was seen by many as a problematic structure, would be too high." (See also The Star, May 2 1996: "A monument with an uncertain future" by Karin Schimke and the Sunday Times Metro, April 7 1996: "Deal for Post Office scrapped")

In June 1997, the NMC was approached by agents of the City of Johannesburg with a view to the latter's intention to call for proposals for the development of the building site aimed at obtaining a suitable use for the building thereon, which would be profitable to the Council and contribute towards the rejuvenation of the city centre.

Representatives from the NMC and City of Johannesburg subsequently met on 22 January 1998 to explore ways of co-operating to obtain a use for the building, funding for its repair and thus its preservation. Not much came from this meeting. An NMC Councillor subsequently commented as follows: "...the Council (i.e. City of Johannesburg) shouldn't be loaded with expense and that interested parties should find ways of raising money and public awareness about the building. She would like to see a campaign around the issue involving ordinary Johannesburgers." (March 1998)

According to a report in the Sunday Times Metro of 15 March 1998, an idea had been mooted to establish either an apartheid museum or a broader museum of human rights in the building. By this time, the building had already been standing empty for almost two years.

Conditions at the building were continuing to deteriorate and in June 1998, the NMC received a report that the doors to the main entrance along Rissik Street were wide open, the ceiling in

the building was dripping of water which stagnated on the floor and overflowed onto Rissik Street...furniture and fittings in the building were being vandalised.

Suddenly, news was received of an interest by an overseas party in the Post Office. This was after City of Johannesburg had called for proposals for the future use of the building. It was reported in Business Day, November 30 1998 ("Safuan plans to build city hotel") that the Malaysian property developer SAFUAN Group International were negotiating with the City of Johannesburg for permission to turn the building "in the city's ailing central business district" into a five-star hotel at a cost of about R35m ...The project is likely to be hailed by city officials as a much-needed mark of confidence in the business district, especially after the closure of the Carlton...and the decision by the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to relocate to Sandton." Many were sceptical of the proposal as well as of the feasibility of turning the building into a hotel. Nothing eventually came of the deal which only had the affect of blocking other possibilities for a number of years.

The building meanwhile continued to stand empty, and its decay and demise continued. In a report in The Star of May 2 2002 ("Will this grand oldie also bite the dust?"), the following was stated: "Its clock has been stolen, the bell tower is collapsing, and squatters now live in it...another South African national monument is sliding into decline. Two years ago, there were promises that the Rissik Street Post Office, one of Johannesburg's oldest buildings, would be turned into a five-star hotel. Malaysian property developers Safuan Group International presented a proposal to the Johannesburg authorities to restore and convert the stately, but dilapidated, building. The deal was supposed to have been done in exchange for a land swop[sic.] ...Soweto. But now the plan seems to have ground to a halt, and City of Johannesburg spokesperson Nthathisi Modingoane says there is nothing the council can do about the continuing decay because the Malaysian group still has a legal right over the building. And this is just one setback that this grand old lady of the city has suffered over the years."

## **GENERAL NOTES:**

The following guidelines were issued by the NMC during 1991 with respect to the conservation / any redevelopment of the building:

Attention is drawn to the fact that the Rissik Street Post Office is a National Monument and the full protection of the National Monuments Act applies thereto. The object in conserving this building is to retain its essential architectural historical character whilst adapting it to a new use.

- 3.1 The building stands in what has been termed the civic spine of Johannesburg. Together with the Library and City Hall the Rissik Street Post Office comprises the most important civic precinct in Johannesburg. The west façade of the Post Office and the east façade of the City Hall define a square which is the major landmark in the city. The north and south facades are also important. These three faces to the building should be restored. Any changes to their appearance would have to be very carefully motivated and would be permitted only under exceptional circumstances.
- 3.2 The fourth side faces onto the Oppenheimer Gardens. It was not designed for this purpose and the National Monuments Council would consider properly documented proposals for the design of this now very visible part of the building.
- 3.3 The building has several fine internal spaces which need to be restored.
- 3.4 The fabric of the building shows serious signs of weathering and disintegration. Proposals must include the restoration of the interior and exterior of the building.

All proposals for the conservation of the Post Office should be submitted for approval at an early stage. It is suggested therefore that tenders be conducted in two stages. The first should

involve the submission of concept proposals and the second detailed proposals. Tenders for the work from a short list of tenders would be drawn up after consultation with the Monuments Council after consideration of the concept proposals. Before any tender is accepted the approval of the Monuments Council will be necessary to any proposed alteration. Early consultations with the National Monuments Council will ensure that abortive and costly work is not undertaken.

The following elements of the building must be retained / repaired:

- a) Façades and Elevations (which includes roof lines and roof geometry) to Rissik Street President Street Market Street;
- b) Internal spaces to be retained intact: Main Postal Hall Basement Vaults Portico, Main Entrance and Upper Entrance Lobby Secondary Entrances Ground-First Floor Mezzanines Ground Floor Perimeter Space;
- c) the following components: all external joinery, all internal joinery at ground floor level, all cast iron columns, bases and capitals, all leaded-light assemblies, all coloured ceiling lights;
- d) the following detail: pressed-metal ceilings over ground floor architraves, skirtings, plinth blocks, picture rails, dados, etc floor tiling reeded tongued and grooved ceiling boarding cast iron treads, balusters, balustrades, etc.

Proposal to alter the interior of the Rissik Street Post Office above the ground floor will be considered, but must be fully motivated.

Development should be confined to the existing Rissik Street Post Office 'envelope'.

Attention is drawn to the need to respect the integrity of building components, materials, scale, texture, colour and overall form; to large and small scale detail; and to any junctions between the old and new work.

During November 1998, the NMC issued a new set of guidelines with respect to the conservation/development of the Post Office site and the adjacent Oppenheimer Gardens.

1. It goes without saying that, under no circumstances will the demolition of the Rissik Street Post Office be sanctioned by the National Monuments Council.
2. The National Monuments Council are happy to sanction the demolition of all inappropriate alterations and/or additions to Rissik Street Post Office. Listed hereunder are those alterations and/or additions which may be demolished:
  - ❑ The Boiler House to the East of the Eastern Façade
  - ❑ The Opaque Roof Sheeting applied over, in particular, the coloured ceiling light above the main Postal Hall and the Old Box Hall
  - ❑ Superimposed floor finishes and those floor finishes which are patently not original (eg. Terrazzo Tiles in Upper Entrance Lobby)
  - ❑ Lift Motor Room (and Water Header Tank above) above the northern most lift/Staircase Core
  - ❑ 'Dormer' above access the stairs to Bell Room
  - ❑ 'Chimneys' in the Eastern Elevation
  - ❑ Asbestos Cement and Steel Metal Gutters and Downpipes which are patently not original
  - ❑ Obscuration of old Pavement Lights (especially those which faced onto President Street)
  - ❑ 'ad hoc' partitioning, internal walling, cupboards, shelving, etc
  - ❑ All surface mounted distribution boards, wiring, cabling, trunking, sprinklers and other services
  - ❑ Internal staircases, concrete slabs, ablution facilities, etcetera contained within the easternmost "cores" of both the northern and southern wings
  - ❑ The Telebank (and enclosure) facing onto President Street
  - ❑ All other extraneous additions (eg: security grilles, etcetera)
3. The National Monument Council are adamant that the following Facades and Elevations(which includes Roof Lines and Roof Geometry) must be retained and may not be altered:



- ❑ Rissik Street
  - ❑ President Street
  - ❑ Market Street
- 4. The National Monuments Council are adamant that the Qualities of the following spaces must be retained, restored, and conceivably, enriched:
  - ❑ Main Postal Hall
  - ❑ Basement Vaults
  - ❑ Portico, Main Entrance, and Upper Entrance Lobby
  - ❑ Secondary Entrances
  - ❑ Ground-First Floor Mezzanines
  - ❑ Ground Floor Perimeter Space
- 5. The National Monuments Council are adamant that the following Components must be retained:
  - ❑ All external joinery
  - ❑ All internal joinery at ground floor level
  - ❑ All cast iron columns, bases, and capitals
  - ❑ All leaded-light assemblies
  - ❑ All coloured ceiling lights
- 6. The National Monuments Council are adamant that the following Detail must be retained:
  - ❑ Pressed-metal ceilings over ground floor
  - ❑ Architraves, skirtings, plinth blocks, picture rails, dados, etc
  - ❑ Floor tiling
  - ❑ Reeded tongued and grooved ceiling boarding
  - ❑ Cast iron treads, balusters, balustrades, etcetera
- 7. The National Monuments Council accept that little of the interior of the Rissik Street Post Office (above ground floor and mezzanine levels) has any particular merit- internal partitions walls (assuming that they are not load bearing) could therefore be substantially removed or rearranged. However, in doing so, the qualities of volume, cellular space, and passage must be retained.
- 8. The National Monuments Council are convinced that the Rissik Street Post Office should be developed in keeping with its Original architectural Intent, and they are fundamentally opposed to any notion of 'facadism' or 'pastiche'. They will not give support, nor will they sanction, the use of the facades (or any other element- either old or new) as 'decoration' for new Development.
- 9. The National Monuments Council recognise that the Rissik Street Post Office gains most of its current importance from its relationship to Rissik Street and the 'Civic Square' and its juxtaposition with the eastern façade of the Johannesburg City Hall. Anything that can be done in the way of new Development as so to address the relationship of the eastern façade of the Rissik Street Post Office to the Ernest Oppenheimer Gardens would be favourable considered by them were it to be to the mutual benefit of both the Rissik Street Post Office and the Ernest Oppenheimer Gardens.
- 10. The National Monuments Council consider it desirable that every attempt be made to retain not only the Physical Structure of the Rissik Street Post Office, but also, in an appropriate manner, its very Name.
- 11. The National Monuments Council have no objections to:
  - ❑ The repositioning of columns to the Entrance Portico so as to allow for a 'Porte Cochere'
  - ❑ The development of a 'Fourth Façade' on the western side of Ernest Oppenheimer Gardens

so as to create a 'finish' to the eastern façade of the Rissik Street Post Office. However it should be noted that any such façade must respect the Horizontal and Vertical Scale (and considerations of detail) of the Rissik Street Post Office. Such a 'Fourth Façade' will require very careful Design and detailing – it will, after all, draw attention to a most significant Historic Site in Johannesburg and act as a backdrop to a significant Centre City Park. The National Monuments Council consider it essential that the architecture of

the Rissik Street Post Office explored surface and aperture, it would be appropriate that, in the development of any Design, such aspects should be considered.

12. The National Monuments Council oppose the location of any further Bulk in close proximity to the Rissik Street Post Office. They are convinced that all appropriate development can take place within the existing confines of the Rissik Street Post Office 'envelope' and beneath the level of the redeveloped Ernest Oppenheimer Gardens (the uppermost surface of which should not rise higher than the window cill[sic.] level of the ground floor of the Rissik Street Post Office).
13. The National Monuments Council consider it of considerable importance that an appropriate Architecture for any new Redevelopment of the Rissik Street Post Office be developed, one that will respect aspects of Components, Materials, Scale, Texture, Colour overall Form, and of large and small scale Detail. All Restoration Work and all New Work, and all junctions between Old and New will receive their detailed consideration.

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Registrar of Deeds, Johannesburg

## **RECORDED BY:**

Johann J and Catharina JM Bruwer.

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