

Pretoria's heart is ugly and cold, say architects

By WILLIAM SAUNDERSON-MEYER
Pretoria Bureau

PRETORIA'S obsession with towering concrete, glass and steel monoliths has given it one of the ugliest city centres in the world, an architect claims.

Mr Alan Konya, of the University of Pretoria's architectural faculty, said that after eight years' travel in the United States and Europe he was shocked at the deterioration which had taken place in the city's architecture.

"Pretoria's architects and town planners have identified closely with the brash and discredited US architecture of the 60s — and this has led to the razing of almost all the old buildings of the turn of the century.

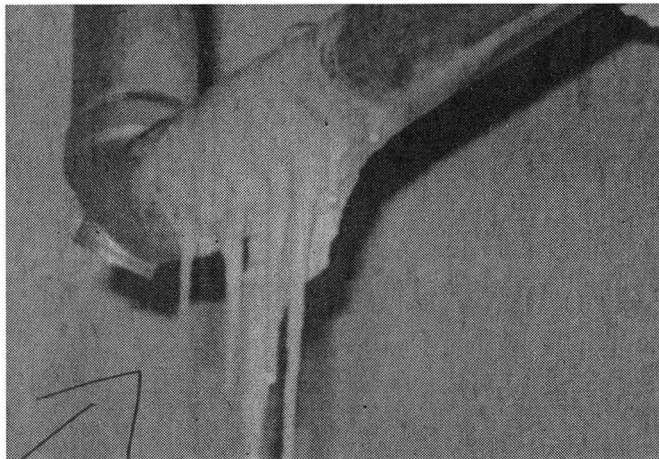
"Many of the modern developments, like Strijdom Square, seem hell bent on destroying the city centre for people," he said.

The square is dominated by what is snidely referred to by locals as the "pregnant oyster" — a cupola enclosing the massive carved head of J G Strijdom, 12 times life size. In front of the cupola is a marble column surmounted by a herd of galloping horses.

The chairman of the committee in charge of the design, Dr Hendrik F Verwoerd, promised that it would be "more than a mere statue".

When the design was unveiled there was an immediate public outcry that it was a copy of a monument in Rio de Janeiro, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, in honour of a Brazilian politician.

Others warned gloomily that the cupola's design was structurally unsound and that it



Water seepage from the cracked floor in front of the legs had caused stalactites like this one in the parking garage.

would collapse.

Despite the outcry, work started on the R80 000 cupola in 1970. Since then it has cost more than double that amount to prevent its collapse. Structural difficulties delayed the completion for two years and work was done in secrecy. It was not until May 1972 that it was unveiled.

When supports were removed from the shell in December 1970, the two front legs "crawled" and the one lifted 8cm. Large cracks appeared in these legs and the engineers commissioned to repair it said the shell was "completely unstable".

They wrote in an article for an engineering magazine that the supports had rotated when the shuttering was removed from the concrete, deflecting the dome and causing cracks throughout the structure.

To prevent it from toppling, they braced it with two jacks. After much head-scratching, they decided that if the cupola wanted to take off, the best solution would be to moor it.

Cables were fixed to the cupola frame and anchored to foundations below the two-tier underground parking garages. Total cost of repairs — R90 000.

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