

Chapter 2:
PLACE



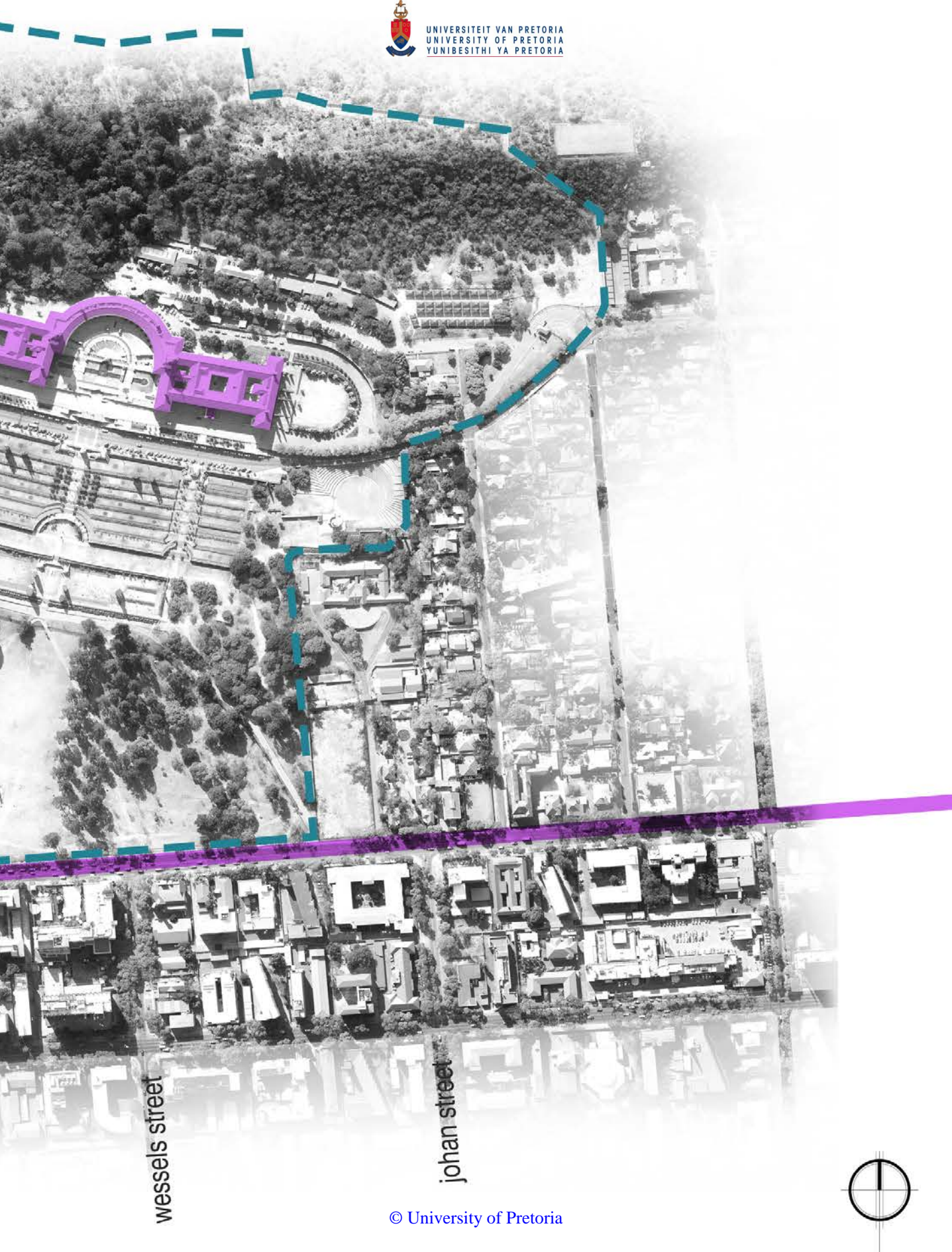
edmond street

madiba street

stanza bopape street

hamilton street

leyds street



wessels street

johan street



The Union Buildings and grounds are described as a place or site of significance [that] enriches people's lives, providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and city landscape, to the past (history) and memories. It is a tangible expression of a proudly South African identity and experience and as a place of significance it reflects the diversity of the South African society, telling us who we are, the past that has formed us as well as the South African landscape according to the Conservation Management Plan implemented by the Union Buildings Architectural Consultants (Schutte 2016).



2.1. Prehistory

The Pretoria area was home to the Southern Ndebele people who occupied it between 300 and 400 years ago (SA History 2013). The name of Pretoria's municipality, Tshwane, is allegedly derived from a legendary chief, of the Manala, a division of the southern Ndebele people (SA History 2013). They and other tribes occupied the greater Pretoria area relatively peacefully until the beginning of the Difeqane – the great strife between South African tribes at the hands of migrating Nguni tribes (SA History 2013).

The hill currently occupied by the Union Buildings, the southern slope of Meintjieskop, is said to have been occupied some 30 years before the first European settlers arrived in the area, by Mzilikazi, a general who had fled the army of King Shaka and conquered numerous smaller tribes in the process (SA History 2011). After shortly

occupying the Daspoort mountain range, Mzilikazi heard of the approaching Voortrekkers and after a number of battles, some won by him and others by the Boers, he fled north beyond the Limpopo River (SA History 2013).

Figure 6 - A linocut print depicting the Western view towards the Union Buildings (undated) by JH Pierneef

2.2. History

It was 1840 and the first Boers had begun to settle in the area today known as Pretoria. The first registered farms were *Elandsport* and *Groenkloof*. Thirteen years later the two farms are declared a town and in 1855 it was named after Andries Pretorius and declared the Capital of the *Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek*, his son, Wessel, later becomes the first president of the ZAR (Pretoriana 1960: 7 -12).

A year later the town was laid out by Andries du Toit who would own the Elandsport area farm called Arcadia (SA History 2015) for some time before a portion thereof was sold and named Meintjieskop. This would later become the seat of The Union, which was declared in 1910. The Union of South Africa was established as a compromise between the British and the ZAR, after the ZAR had spent some time under British control – collateral of the *South African War* (Sahistory 2015, Schutte 2016).

South Africa's unification sought to identify both colonial language groups as equal stakeholders in the country's affairs – negating of course the native South Africans in true colonial fashion. The Cape had originally been a British colony and the Transvaal the domain of the ZAR – with Pretoria at its capital. Upon the unification of the colonies there was conflict and thus compromise over the location of the country's capital. In the interest of balancing power, the leaders of the newly unified South Africa decided that having all government centralized in one place could render that place too powerful, so it divided the branches among three provinces, with the Free State and more specifically, Bloemfontein, housing the Judicial capital, Cape Town the Legislative and Pretoria the Administrative.

Notwithstanding the apparent division of power, Pretoria was awarded the honour of seating the government's administration, as well as the president – who would be accommodated in the Union Buildings. 75 years after the Union Buildings were built they were described as remaining the most monumental and imposing buildings in the country and as symbolising the national administration of South Africa more than another building in the country (Rencken 1989: 1).

Despite the apparent symbolism and meaning of the buildings, there is latent controversy regarding the commission. Specifically with regards to the political situation during the period leading up to the unification of South Africa as well as the decision to make Pretoria the

administrative capital of South Africa. The patronage of the buildings can be ascribed to a vast government network under the helm of Jan Smuts, then Colonial Secretary, and Louis Botha, then Prime Minister (Christenson 1996:1).

The 1908-1909 National Convention was held at Durban and sought to establish a draft constitution for the union, an idea that was advocated by Smuts and supported by the Milner Kindergarten. The Milner Kindergarten was the group of British civil servants during the post war time period, preceding the formation of the Union, who worked under Lord Milner (Christenson, 1996:4). At the convention the debate regarding the location of the capital of the new union was heated. After eliminating the British colony at Pietermaritzburg and the Boer colony at Bloemfontein, the argument rested on the size of the British Colony at the Cape and the financial power accredited to Pretoria due to its closeness to the gold of the Witwatersrand. The debate was eventually only settled once Smuts proposed the splitting of the capitals into the three we know today (Christenson 1996:2).

Although the split-capitals decision was then drafted in the constitution, most people, politicians, the public and the press alike, believed it only temporary and that ultimately Pretoria would become the sole capital. At a meeting of the Assembly in Cape Town, concerns were raised that the over investment into buildings in Pretoria would ultimately become an argument for the declaration of a singular capital at Pretoria (Christenson 1996:3). It cannot be said with certainty whether Smuts and Botha kept this idea in mind when commissioning the monumental acropolis (Rencken 1989: 1) from Sir Herbert Baker.

Early sketches by Baker do, however, reveal that the possibility of Pretoria as singular capital was well known, because of Baker's inclusion of a parliament building on the koppie behind the semi-circular colonnade, as well as a vast complex of government buildings down the hill in front of the buildings. It is not documented whether the design of the capital precinct was suggested by Botha and Smuts to Baker, or whether Baker dreamt up the vision of a singular capital and the Union buildings as part of a governmental complex.

It is worth noting the importance Christenson associates with the connection between both Smuts and Baker and the Milner kindergarten (1996: 4-5). RH Brand was one of

the Transvaal delegation's secretaries during the transition period to the union and worked closely with Smuts in drafting the documentation for the Durban convention. In earlier years, Brand was also responsible for many of Baker's other governmental commissions. Christenson (1996) insinuates it was this mutual connection that earned Baker the commission.

control would be temporary and that the union would improve conditions in South Africa, encouraging an influx of British citizens, who would ultimately outnumber the Boers and ensure the election of British control, thus once more expanding the empire. Despite their different motives and the difference of both these from the motives heralded to the public, the Union was declared. The construction of the buildings, however, had already begun in late 1909.

The Kindergarten was also responsible for rallying British support for the unification on behalf of Smuts, although their motives weren't in line with his. Botha and Smuts believed that the unification of South Africa under a Pretorian capital would return control of South Africa to the Boers. The Kindergarten, under Milner, believed this

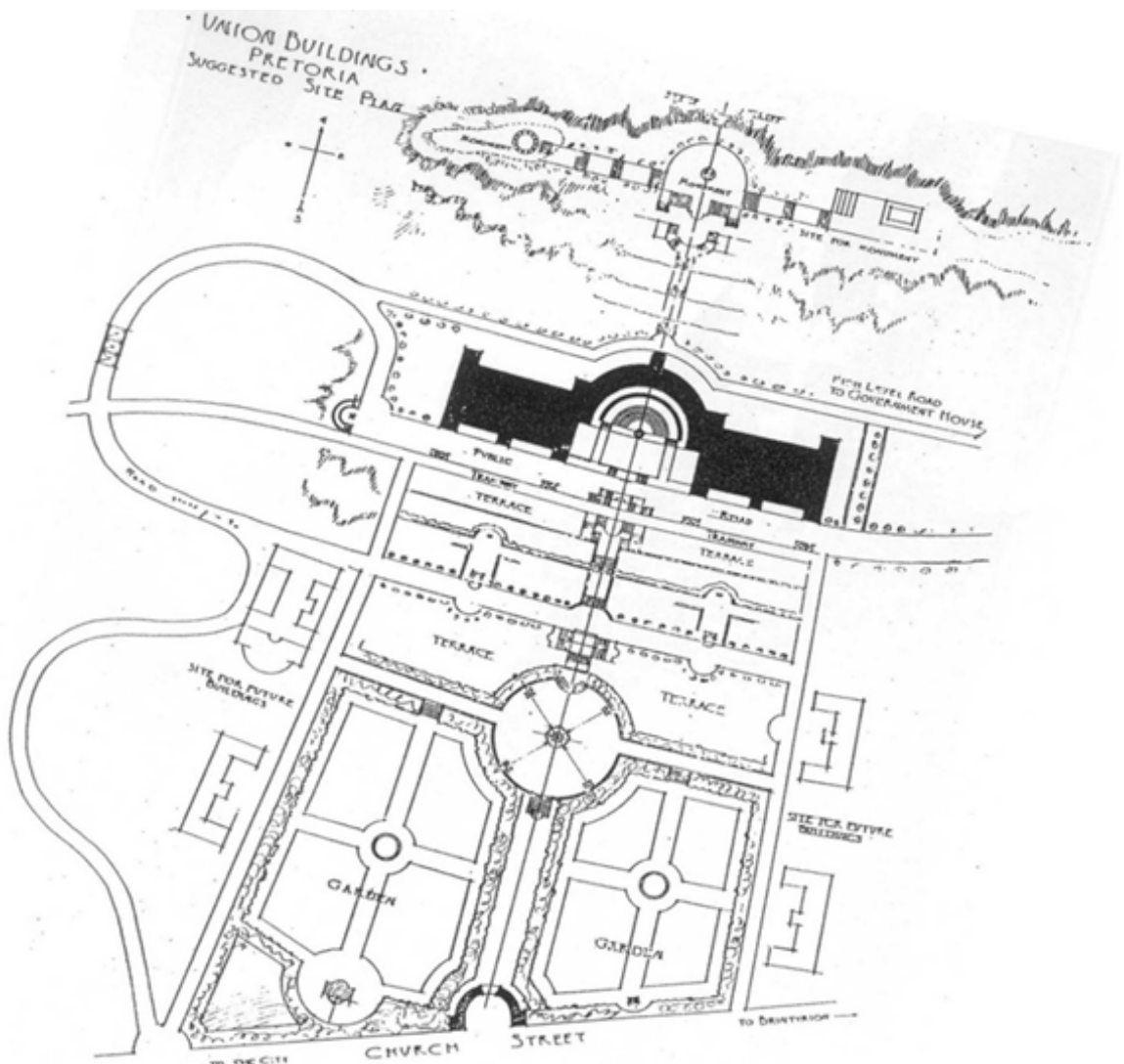


Figure 7 - 1909 plan showing baker's intention for the grounds.
 (Baker 1909 in Muller & Young, 2005)



Figure 8 - An early sketch of Baker's intention for the Union Buildings (25 June 1909) (Baker, 1909 in Christenson, 1996)

2.3. Story

The early sketches of the design showed a government precinct resembling an acropolis. The concept of an Acropolis appealed to Botha and Smuts (Rencken 1989:1) because of the implied grandeur. The site selection also tied in with this idea perfectly. The British High Commissioner, Lord Selbourne, described the site as being *one of the best sites in the world* and suggested that future visitors to the buildings would admire the *forethought and courage of those who chose it* (Rencken 1989:1).

Baker proposed an array of buildings on the site. The main building was formed by two wings connected by a semi-circular colonnade. The semi-circular colonnade framed an Amphitheatre and from the center, the stairs to the upper *koppie* would lead one to the parliament building which was flanked by a monument to the Union, also described as a temple of peace. The main building would be framed by landscaped terraces supported by other governmental buildings all the way to Church Street.

Baker's understanding of politics was clear in his proposal for the precinct to be constructed in phases as the funding became available. His inclusion of a parliament building testified to his belief in a singular capital, one that spoke to the agenda of Smuts and Botha (Rudford 1988:65). Baker later denied ever intending for such a building in Pretoria. His insight into political process was also shown in his focus on the amphitheatre which was to accommodate the important ceremonies and rituals of government. By using the natural elements of the site to induce hierarchy of space and by selective positioning of buildings along the natural

slope he ralted the design to the concept of *The Grand Manner* as outlined in his 1909 article *The architectural needs of South Africa* (Baker 1909, cited in Christenson 1996:6).

In the research for his paper, Baker studied the architecture and urbanism of a variety of civilizations worldwide and through different eras. He compiled a list of aspects he considered important that were derivable from ancient societies including; the acropolis site; monumentality; a careful use of scale; and the asymmetrical arrangements of buildings on different levels. All of these aspects are visible in his proposal for the Union Buildings (Baker 1909, cited in Christenson 1996:6).

The Grand Manner Baker refers to deals with the way architecture and urbanism convey their political intention to the viewer in their arrangement in space and their impression from a distance. He believes it is primarily through this arrangement and impression that architecture makes its political nature and value known embodying the *idea of civic and national dignity and power* (Baker 1909:513 cited in Christianson 1996:6).

If one refrains from questioning Baker's allegiance with British imperialism, one can see why Botha and Smuts thought of Baker's ideas as well-aligned with their intentions. These ideas were aligned with the ideas of Christopher Wren (also a British Architect) who suggested *a public building should be national ornament which 'establishes a nation, draws people and commerce and makes a people love their country'* (Rencken 1989:1)..

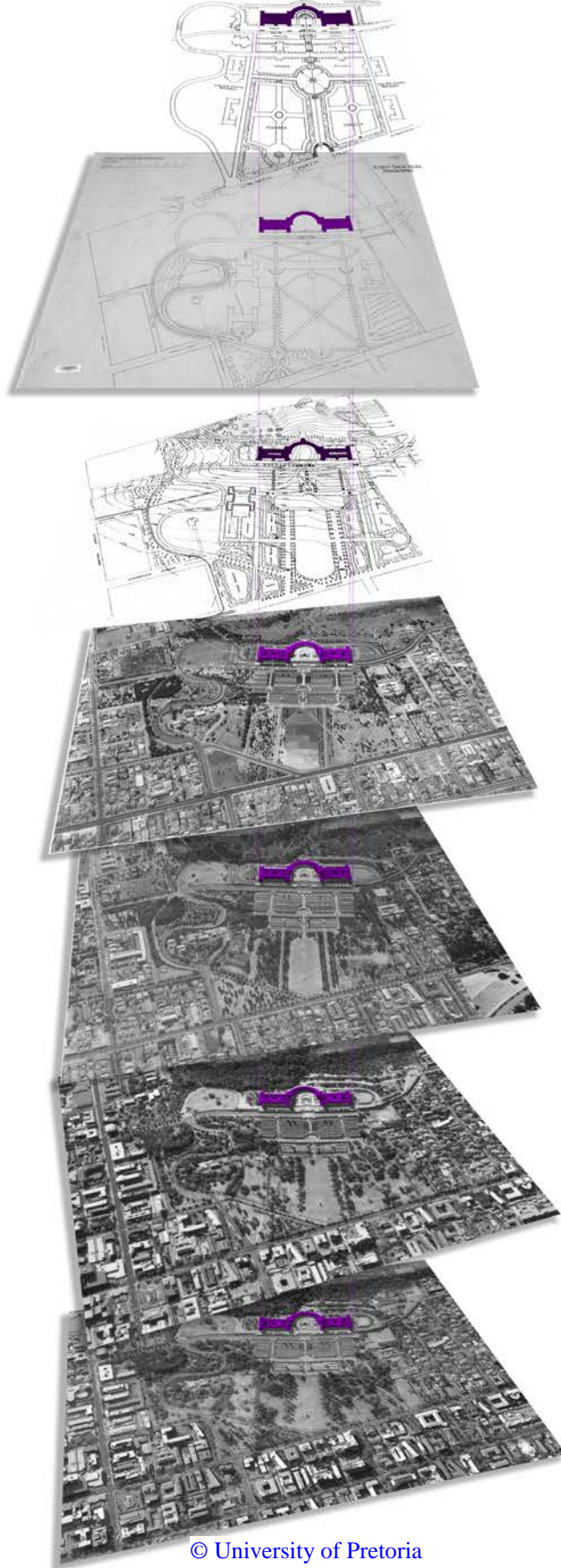


Figure 9 - A series of schematics (plans and aerial photographs) showing the changes from intention to present day of the Union Buildings Estate.
From top to bottom: 1909 plan (Baker, 1909 in Christenson, 1996)
1910 plan (DPW, 1910 in Muller & Young, 2005)
1911 plan (n.a., 1918 in Muller & Young, 2005)
1939 Aerial Photo (ibid.)
1954 Aerial Photo (ibid.)
2001 Aerial Photo (ibid.)
2009 Aerial Photo (ibid.)

2.4. Analysis

2.4.1. A Colonial Symbol

Many of Baker's original intentions were lost due to budget constraints brought about by, amongst other issues, World War 1. The site was imagined as an *acropolis* of the city (Rencken 1989: 1), signifying the majesty and importance of the matters of government. The monumentality of the project was still captured, albeit without the temples and extremely formal landscaping.

In their analysis of post-colonial capital cities, Bekker and Therborn (2012) discuss the importance of architecture, public space, monuments and street names as a Nation State's symbols of power and authority. The Union Buildings are both a building, monument and public space. The intention behind the building was to serve as a symbol of the power and authority of the Union and also implied in its very design the ideas of segregation and exclusion of all those who were not represented by the two wings and connecting courtyard. Bekker and Therborn discuss these symbols in cities after independence and what happens to them thereafter, *these symbols are subject to change – and their symbolism may change* (Bekker and Therborn 2012).

Despite the very blatant inequality that still plagues South Africans' daily lives it has, for the most part become known by an array of symbols of democracy, citizenship and new forms of power in the form of changes in administration, universal suffrage, equity systems and so forth. These symbols, however, appear largely on paper. For the most part, the continual importance given to the Union Buildings until this day is evidence of this.

In a discussion over the ways in which entities enforce their power there are, according to Dovey (1999), a number of ways in the built environment plays a role. The Apartheid government largely relied on the principle of *authority* and its implications to control behavior of those it favoured and the principle of *force* on those it oppressed. Other forms of doing so involve *manipulation, seduction and coercion* – although most often different variations of all these techniques are present at any one time Dovey (1999:11-16).

The Union Buildings are heralded as imperial architecture and should thus, upon first thought, be an unlikely seat for a post-apartheid government. According to Bekker and Therborn (2012: 180) *the insertion of local elements and use of materials makes it perhaps an unlikely, but nevertheless a highly successful centre for the power of post-apartheid government.*

This is a statement the author both agrees and disagrees with. Bekker and Therborn (2012) suggest that the site was easily appropriated and herald the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as an example of how appropriate the site is for state celebrations of this nature. They also allude to the point the author wishes to make, *the careful division of the crowd into three, separated by fences (dignitaries at the top, necessary members of the ceremony and close associates ranged down the gardens, and perhaps 100 000 ordinary people on the lawns below), prefigured the maintenance of a steep hierarchy in government and society after apartheid* (Bekker and Therborn 2012: 180, emphasis added by author).

Perhaps it was mere practicality of site choice, or the economy that resulted in the maintaining of South Africa's capitals post 1994, and thus also the adoption of the edifices of power, like the Union Buildings. Perhaps the lack of a series of buildings upon the new regime's election can be ascribed to the fact that the new regime was a democratic one; that the nation had faith in the idea and was not in need of new symbols in order believe in it. In a well-functioning democracy there is no need to legitimize power in the form of built form and rituals of state authority.

Despite a well-functioning democracy having no need for symbols of authority, South Africa is an ill-functioning democracy and the continued attempt at grandeur and the increased security at the Union Buildings may be evidence of the new regime borrowing authority from the past. *The historical role of the Union Buildings is assured, it seems – documents describe them as being 'the best precinct to the Presidency - the top level of government and heart of governance'* (Department of Public Works 2005 cited in (Bekker and Therborn 2012: 186). The Apartheid government used institutions like the Union Buildings to speak their authority over the oppressed. Authority as means of power manifestation in built form is institutional and is therefore accepted without question (Dovey 1999:11). There is an absence of argument. We recognize it because we see it as serving a greater purpose. The inclusion of the Union Buildings in the logo of Tshwane, the new South Africa's attempt at repackaging the colonial capital for democratic consumption (Bekker and Therborn 2012: 180), raises these questions. This does not necessarily insinuate the democratic government consciously adopts Apartheid techniques of intimidation and authority, but remains speculation.

It is the visibility of authority over citizens that has them making institutions of that authority the target. *Pretoria is a common, but far from exclusive, physical focus of such protest* (Bekker and Therborn 2012: 183). The Union Buildings has, time and again, been the location of civil protest and public outrage. Beginning with the 1913 march to protest the jailing of boys who did not concur to military service (Sa History 2011) and culminating recently in a series of marches to the Union Buildings, the most influential perhaps being #FeesMustFall in October 2016.

2.4.2. A Park

The following section is based on the Author's observations.

The unrealized vision for the Union Buildings and surrounding precinct becomes very apparent when walking through the grounds, despite the site still being relatively well maintained and used for recreational activities. The buildings that were meant to frame the terraces were never built. As a result the lowest lawn feels poorly contained and difficult to use for much more than large events that use temporary structures or informal picnics under the surrounding trees.

The site has been used to host a world-renowned extreme sports event which attracts a massive crowd to the lawns, where temporary event space and grandstands are erected

and cleared away afterwards. The Union Buildings provide an impressive backdrop to the event which makes the decision to host the event there apparent.

Figure 5: The Redbull Xfighters event saw the grounds transformed into a series of dust mounds with the buildings making for an impressive backdrop to the action shots of motorcyclists (Primi Patti, 2015)

However, on a daily basis the site sees very few visitors, compared to its size and the density of the area it finds itself in. A number of people use the space for exercise purposes, over weekends people have picnics under the trees during the day you can see a few tired bodies napping under the trees while some have lunch and chat softly. The site is used as a public park..

The grounds are used recreationally but the lack of structure, perhaps the polar opposite of the strict classical regimented plan proposed by Baker, leaves the space less legible to the user. The potential of the space as public space is unfulfilled. The reality is that the park is fenced off with limited points of access. The number of people using the sidewalks just south of the fence is relatively low, there are more pedestrians on the southern side of Stanza Bopape street, perhaps this is due to the edge condition



being more accommodating on this side of the street, the location of vendors here and the high traffic speeds in the street discouraging people to cross the street and walk on the wider side, next to the park edge.

During protests and marches to and at the Union Buildings, protestors are bottlenecked at the small gates to get into the grounds. Not only does this undermine the efficacy of their movement, the secondary fence that has been placed at the top of the main lawns has lockable gates that are locked during demonstrations to contain protestors in an easily targetable camp, with those the protestors usually wish to address, being safely inside the buildings, behind a wall of police in riot gear, or in times they are not even on the property.



Opposite page, this page top to bottom:

Figure 10 - The Union Buildings make for an impressive backdrop to extreme sports events (Primi Piatti 2015)

Figure 11 - (Vandalised signage near the pedestrian gate from Stanza Bopape street (Author 2016)

Figure 12 - The view from behind the fence (Author 2016)





2.4.3. A Street

The following section is based on the Author's observations.



Stanza Bopape street runs South of the Union Buildings estate. The street became known as stanza Bopape street in 2012, named after a freedom fighter from Mamelodi who was tortured to death by the Apartheid government.

Originally, the street was a part of Church street, name after the first church in Pretoria - the reason farmers originally gathered in the area (SA History 2013). Over the years Church street has undergone numerous changes and the portion of the street in front of the Union Building Estate presently carries 6 lanes of traffic. This renders the street very busy and not conducive to easy pedestrian movement from ones side to the other. From early in the morning the street is bustling and the number of taxis travelling East out of the City and West into the city is overwhelming.

There are a handful of pedestrians, a number that increases when the city embarks on its daily commute. At lunch time, the triangular traffic island at the base of the estate is littered with tired bodies. The traffic increases again towards the end of the day when the commute begins again.

At the Southern side of the street, vendors sell snacks and sweets to passersby. Late in the afternoon and into the evening, residents of the buildings surrounding the traffic island gather outside under street lights, children play soccer and mothers chat until its time to go inside.

The closeness of all necessary amenities renders the place densely populated, and the community knows its people - there is a distinct sense of surveillance. However, this sense decreases as one moves east, towards the Hilton Hotel, where diplomatic cars race through the street and a handful of homeless people use its walls to support their daily stupor.

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Figure 13 - The safe side of the fence during #FeesMustFall (SABC, 2015)

Figure 14 - The other side (SABC, 2015)

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Figure 15 - Photographs of the streets surrounding the triangle at the base of the grounds, Stanza Bopape street and Madiba Street. Taken at sunrise, and already the streets are abustle (Author 2016).