

THE GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS OF PRETORIA.

Pretoria was formerly the capital of the Transvaal Republic and is now the Administrative capital of the Union of South Africa, having been the seat of Government for some 70 years.

Judging from photographs and illustrations and from one or two buildings still in existence the earliest Government buildings were of the simplest type as perforce they had to be with the facilities then in existence for building, and considering the great distances from the nearest rail heads. Materials had to be brought by ox wagon from Kimberley and a great deal of it direct from Durban and Port Elizabeth.

The original seat of Government under the Republic was a small thatched roof building on the site of Van Erksoms Buildings in Pretorius Street and the Supreme Court was situated in St. Andries Street on the corner of Bureau Lane, afterwards it became Turkstras First coffee House. Two historic buildings the old gaol where the Reformers were kept and the Old Mint, were demolished a few years back and the new Mint now stands on the site of the Old Gaol.

With the opening up of the Gold fields on the Rand the general expansion and increased importance of the Republic, it became necessary to provide more suitable accommodation for the various Government Departments and many buildings were projected and carried out during these years. Of these the most important were the Raadzaal, the Palace of Justice and the new Government Offices.

These buildings were planned on spacious and ambitious lines and though somewhat lacking in design they are interesting and pleasing with their cupolas and domes and do great credit to those who carried them through to completion in the face of the many difficulties of obtaining suitable and competent labour.

The shaped double flight external staircase

at the rear of the Palace of Justice is of particular interest. The Raadzaal has been altered and adapted to fit it for use by the present Provincial Council and additions have been made to the Palace of Justice on the Vermuelen Street frontage. The other buildings carried out during these years are the Artillery Barracks. The old Museum, the Z A S M offices and Director's House in Market Street, the Magistrates Courts on the site of Mosenthal Bros. Store, also the Veterinary Research Laboratory was opened up by Sir Arnold Theiller at Steen Oven Spruit.

A large area of land was acquired later at Onderstepoort near Pretoria, and the permanent Research station was erected there, to-day one of the largest institutions of its kind in the world.

Just before Union the Postal work had outgrown the original old building and the new Post Office was built. This building, situated on the West side of Church Square, was designed by the Public Works Department. The building is faced with Steenpan stone on a granite base and has arched and colonnaded loggias, the treatment being classic Renaissance.

The building was planned on what was thought to be lavish lines but the rapid growth of Pretoria during the last nineteen years has necessitated considerable extension including the new Post Office Annexe. This latter building has been criticised for its lack of Architectural character, the public not realising that this is an internal building which will eventually be cloaked by further extensions on the Church Street and Vermuelen Street fronts.

The New Museum in Market Street and the New Railway station were erected at this time. The Museum designed by the P.W.D. is a dignified and Monumental building of severe character with a bold colonnaded front. Internally there is a lofty entrance and sculpture Hall with a grand staircase leading to the upper floor. On either side are the large /...

large Halls for exhibits.

It is a portion only of a large scheme which will not have proper Architectural value until completed with the end and back wings.

The new Railway Station was designed by Sir Herbert Baker and is finely placed centrally at the South end of Market Street. Until recent years Railway stations were designed by Engineers and had very little Architectural character but in Pretoria we have a fine architectural building in a design peculiarly suited to our climate.

The building has very nicely designed and decorated Public rooms and is substantially built with stone frontages and Italian pattern tile roofs.

The Union Buildings was the next work of magnitude and the names of those responsible for the conception of this magnificent building will go down to posterity, for their imagination and forethought in choosing a beautiful site, This building, designed to provide suitable accommodation for the public offices of the Government of South Africa, is situated high up on the slopes of Meintjes Kop, and dominates the whole town with its beauty. There was some criticism of the site, and in this connection it may not be amiss to quote the words of the Earl of Selborne:

"The site of the Union Buildings has been criticised, but I have no sympathy with the critics. I say that the people who chose this site have imagination and that they have chosen one of the finest sites in the world and when these buildings are erected - those most important buildings - of the new and greater Pretoria, people will come from all over the world to wonder at the beauty of the site, and to admire the forethought and courage of the men who selected it".

In considering these buildings, one must realise that half way up/...

up a range of hills overlooking the city, nature had formed a terrace divided by a depression such as the Greeks would have chosen for an amphitheatre, so an amphitheatre became the centre of the design built up with stone seats and terraces surrounded by a colonnade, which is flanked by two tall domed towers standing up as sentinels. Between these towers is the great sweep of curved building to enclose as it were a space for an audience.

The amphitheatre is flanked on either side with a great range of buildings looking over the valley and each supported at either end with a strong portico of columns. A fine idea carried out with great breadth and simplicity in a free treatment of the Italian Renaissance period with long roof and broad overhanging eaves - a treatment particularly suited to our climate. Against such main ideas eccentricities of detail do not count and the building ranks with the great buildings of the world and is the greatest modern work in the Southern Hemisphere. It accommodates the Ministers of State and some 1,500 departmental officials.

The amphitheatre with a Rostrum in the centre and formal lawns, ornamental water and fountains, is used for National functions and can accommodate some ten to twelve thousand people.

Internally there are beautiful open columned courts with fountains and the Ministers Rooms, Executive and Conference Rooms are finely treated and furnished. The materials, with the exception of some of the timber, are all local or of South African origin and mention should be made of the fine stink-wood panelling in some of the rooms.

The gardens are laid out in the "grand manner" with fine terraces and lawns and ornamental ponds and fountains and are a source of pleasure and delight to the public who use them a great deal.

On the lowest main front garden terrace of
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the gardens is situated the Memorial to the men of Pretoria who fell in the great war and on the centre axial line of the building on the top most garden terrace is placed the National Memorial to the men of South Africa who gave their lives in the same war. Designed by Sir Herbert Baker it is in the form of a finely proportioned stone pedestal surrounded on top with a replica in bronze of the magnificent bronze at Delville Wood "Brotherhood" by Mr. Alfred Turner symbolising the unity of the two white races.

Sir Herbert Baker was the Architect of the building and on its completion he was chosen to carry out the still larger scheme at Delhi and at the present time is carrying out vast schemes in England including the new South Africa House, Trafalgar Square, London. Sir Herbert Baker was responsible for reviving the old traditional Dutch South African character work of the Cape and adapting it for modern times and conditions. It was felt that there was no one better fitted than he to deal with this very important building in London, and to give it the character, particularly internally which will give visitors the feeling of Home in that vast city.

The Government Authorities of the day together with the Town Authorities very wisely reserved a large area of ground at the Eastern end of the Town for Educational purposes and here we have the Pretoria University, Girls High School and Boys High School, all designed by the Public Works Department.

All these buildings are well designed complete with Hostels and with provision for all the necessary departments required for modern Educational purposes. They are provided with very spacious grounds and playing fields.

At the University the stone building was the first to be erected and then came the Hostel and the main brick building, the latter having a very interesting modelled panel over the front entrance symbolic of the progress of Agricultural knowledge through the ages.

The Girls High School has fine architectural treatment and is in brick with stone dressings and enrichments and internally a large and lofty hall with stage and organ.

The Boys High School is situated in a commanding position on the hills to the South. It is somewhat restless in design and a simpler stone or brick treatment would have been more suitable for the site.

Many other schools have also been designed and completed by the P.W.D. during the last few years, the more important being the Boys and Girls Afrikaans Medium High Schools, both buildings being very interesting architecturally.

At the present time three further Government Buildings are being provided for. A new office building in Vermuelen Street, now just being commenced, which will provide office accommodation for various Departments and Sections of Departments, which are at present scattered over the Town, in some instances in hired premises. This building, as previously mentioned, will cloak on the North side the Post Office Annexe and should be a valuable addition to the Architecture of the Town.

Additional buildings for the Government Census Department in Schoeman Street are now in course of erection and another building projected for this year is the new Native Pass office to go on the site of the present ramshackle buildings in Church Street West.

In conclusion the Government in recent years have given much consideration to the arrangement and general amenities of their building schemes in relation to the Town - all in close co-operation with the Town Authorities, who have done a great deal to add to the natural beauties of Pretoria.

Pretoria is now at a stage in its existence when a comprehensive scheme for the Lay-out of the future development of the Town is required and serious responsibility rests with the Town Authorities to tackle the problem in a spirit of civic pride and it behoves them to obtain the best advice possible.