

# THE STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA.

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## THE UNION BUILDINGS AND THEIR ARCHITECT.

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### I.

Like people, cities have moods and temperaments. They must be studied with sympathy and understanding. No true impression of a place is ever obtained from a cursory glance on a passage through it. Pretoria, for all its historical past of strife and turmoil, its régime of Republicanism and Imperial rule, remains a town of peaceful quiet. In the early eighties the "Boskewild," or middle veld, on which it is situated, was the pasturage to which stockowners made their annual trek for the winter months. The farmers brought in their train business and traders, who in time extended the limits of permanent occupation from Potchefstroom—the original capital of the Transvaal—to the banks of the Crocodile and Aapies Rivers, where, in 1881, Marthinus Wessel Pretorius, son of an old voortrekker Commandant, proposed the foundation of a new town; and, with the sanction of the Volksraad, named it after his father. In selecting the site for the new deep the settlers were actuated by other reasons than those which compelled the founders of European towns to place these either in the protecting loop of a river or else on hill-tops where fortification was easy. The site on which Pretoria stands was chosen for its plentiful supply of water—the chief concern in the early days in South Africa—and for its rich soil.

From the point of view of health much depends on the openness of a site. It is not merely altitude which tells, and even in a cold climate a valley town does not enjoy the same health as one situated on open hilly country. It has been shown that

the death-rate in a Devonshire valley is greater than in the open lands of Norfolk. The hills surrounding Pictoria are therefore far healthier than the valley in which the town lies, and over which often hangs a pall of mist and smoke.

The nearest of these hills is Meintjes Kop, the most considerable eminence on the northern side of the town. Fortunately it is within a mile of the centre of Pictoria, and half-way to the principal suburbs. It forms part of the ridge which merges at its farther end into the plateau of Deynteron—the habitation of officials. Immediately on the west are the town lands, sloping from the boundary of the kagg down to the cultivated farms along the Aspies River, the Magaliesberg range leading into the dim distance beyond. To the south are the purple ridges of the Witswatersrand. And behind are innumerable houses dotted on the plain stretching towards Wauderbosch Poort.

On this kop, where the atmosphere is heating and invigorating—a contrast to that of the town itself—the Government have decided to erect a magnificent pile of public offices. The actual plateau on which the structure will stand is little more than half-way to the top. Here the natural shell formation is broken by a small fosse, widening out into a semi-circle, which suggested the plan of the Union Buildings. On either side of the ravine will be a rectangular block of offices, connected, where the ground rises above it, by a semi-circular colonnade, forming both a covered passage between the two blocks and connecting each to the necessary common rooms, which are placed behind the colonnade. Here the architect has displayed his genius for design. The effect of this colonnade, which is at a higher level than the main road and terrace in front of the building, and consequently necessitates a series of steps and terraces leading up to it, will be to give the building the appearance of rising with the hill, and of resting naturally upon it. These steps and terrace are arranged between the two office blocks, and against the large semi-circle, in the form of an open amphitheatre. Little substructure has been required for the rising tiers of the auditorium, which will be cut out of the face of the hill. Consequently the amphitheatre, designed primarily to serve purely utilitarian purposes, is one of the finest possible compositions.

Flanking the amphitheatre on either side, where the colonnade meets the main blocks, rise dome-capped sister towers,

Jan. 20, 1903



STUART BROWN.

bestowing a fine balance and sense of symmetry upon the entire building. The structure will rest mainly on rock, the strata of which runs in the opposite direction to the slope of the hill. I do not propose to define the style of the design. Great architecture does not concern itself with the all too prevalent clap-trap of "styles." The building is being erected to suit the needs of a southern climate, and consequently profits by the experience of other builders in sunny lands. The dominant feature is the long, low, red roof, with its great projecting eaves which run along the entire nine hundred feet of the building without a break. In their dignified simplicity the great columnar pavilions—four in number—which project at the ends of the eastern and western blocks, possess something of the grandeur of Greek architecture. The chief characteristic of the design is the absence of all unnecessary ornamentation. For its effect in detail it relies almost entirely upon the simplicity and durability of the materials used.

In its entire conception the scheme has been subordinated to a dominant idea. On entering the city through the Fountains Valley the Union Buildings will create a dignified and beautiful first impression of Pretoria. The architect has proved himself worthy of a great trust, and it is the duty of those in power to extend to him that sympathy in the realisation of his work which was shown to great artists in previous ages.

There has been a great deal of criticism as to the expensive nature of the site, due, perhaps, to a certain lack of imagination on the part of the critics. I commend to them the words of the Earl of Selborne when laying the foundation stone of the Pretoria post office:—

"The site of the Union Buildings has been criticised [he said], but I have no sympathy with the critics. I say that the people who chose that site have imagination, and that they have chosen one of the finest sites in the world; and when these buildings are erected—these 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 foresight and courage of the men who selected it.

## II.

To come now to details of the design and plan. The Archives Department extends under the greater portion of the building. The 45,000 superficial feet of space provided will be sufficient to store the records of the Government for many generations to come, and will justify a thousandfold the cost of the exorci-

trans, which has been the subject of some irresponsible public criticism. These basements are placed partly in the old stone-quarries which existed on the site, and will almost throughout rest on solid rock. They will therefore be quite dry and secure, and owing to the rapid rise of the ground will for the most part be well lit and ventilated without artificial aid. Though solid walls and thick reinforced-concrete floors separate them from the superstructure, they can be partly used for ordinary offices until they are required for housing the accumulated records of future years. Under and quite disconnected from the Archives floors, partly in an old quarry, are sub-basements, in which are arranged central stationery stores, book-binding departments, heating rooms, and store rooms for caretakers. These are connected with the train lines by a subway, and with the offices in each block by separate lifts. By this arrangement all fuel, dust and waste may be carried straight from each floor to the street without being brought along the public corridors. The hill site, of course, has made this possible, and wise use has been made of it.

Each of the east and west blocks has three floors of offices. To each of these offices every bit of available outside light has been given. They represent over 100,000 superficial feet of floor-space, providing accommodation for a thousand officials in addition to offices for Ministers and the Governor-General. The whole of the floors and ceilings throughout the building are fireproof. The woodwork and flooring throughout are of teak, as this is the only wood which satisfactorily stands the dry climate. In the centre of these blocks is arranged, on each floor, a large fireproof working-room, where current records will be dealt with before they go to their permanent resting-place in the Archives Department. Ministers' rooms and Executive Council chambers are placed in the projective corner pavilions. These have colonnaded balconies, which give the building its fine sense of dignity, and are perhaps the most original feature in the design. In each block the offices are grouped round three internal courts. The central or main courts are open to the sky, paved with stone, colonnaded, and have central fountains. Their incorporation in the design makes good ventilation easy, even on the hottest and most windy day. They connect all the offices to the main staircase, lifts (of which there are two in each block), and messengers' rooms.



AN EARLY VIEW OF THE UNIVERSITY, TAKEN FROM THE EAST OF THE TORONTO HARBOUR.

Under the four columnar pavilions and the Ministers' rooms are large vaulted entrances, through which limited vistas of the building will be obtained. From one of these in each block is a staircase leading to the train subway. Between these entrances are terrace walks, 12 feet above the main road. On these, where it is not possible or desirable to plant trees, oranges will be grown in large terra-cotta vases, as in the Italian gardens; or myrtles, and perhaps some South African oval, in wooden tubs, in the manner of the French at Versailles and the Tuilleries. Beneath these terraces, hidden from the building and yet accessible from the public road, are covered cellars, providing accommodation for five or six hundred bicycles and a few motors, until arrangements are made for these to be housed elsewhere. At the point where this main front terrace is cut by the central axis of the entire building, and where the vistas through the vaulted airways meet, a site is provided for a King's statue.

The central block, which connects the eastern and western portions of the building, contains the necessary common rooms, linked together by an open colonnade of stone Ionic columns, 24 high and 2 feet 8 inches in diameter. Here are placed two committee rooms, with teak paneling and vaulted concrete ceilings, to hold fifty or sixty people each. On the east side is a circular conference room, 50 feet in diameter, with alcoves, galleries, and vestibule, affording accommodation for approximately 300 people. A reading room is placed on the west side of the colonnade, and this can be used as a second conference room in case of emergency. Next to this is a reference library, which runs the full height of the two storeys and will hold about 4000 volumes. This is divided from the dining room by a central vestibule, leading on to a covered porte cochée. The dining room has a barrel plaster ceiling, and is panelled in teak. Between this and the Ministers' private luncheon rooms are the kitchen and servants' accommodation. Under these rooms are placed the General Post Office and a large tea room. Outside the tea room will be cool resting-places under the vaults of the colonnade and amphitheatre. The internal corridors are to be faced with red stone from the quarries at Warm Baths and paved with locally made tiles, reducing the cost of maintenance to a minimum.

The whole of the façade of the building will be in a pinky white stone, obtained from the Balmoral quarries north of Pre-

terrace, on a base of rough granite. The long, unbroken line of roof will be covered with dull-red circular, locally-manufactured tiles, which are known as "pan" or "Italian." Owing to their curved shape these are believed to be hail-proof.

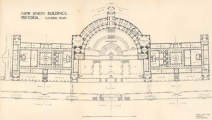
Great care has been taken that each portion of the building shall be easy of approach. The public road is 12 feet below the main terrace of the building. It is 80 feet wide, with a pavement and double row of trees. Twenty feet below the public road is the tram-line, which is hidden by a high terrace wall. From this level two subways lead to staircases in each block. The construction of these again has been possible only because of the hilly site. The building will be approached from the railway, city, and southern suburbs by an easy winding road; and on the north, where, at the back of the semi-circular central block, is a colonnaded *porte cochère*, by a high level road from Bryntirion and Government House, which will be used on rare occasions. Behind the plateau on which the building will stand rise the high peaks of Meintjes Kop. Below the building the ground is at first rocky and steep, enhancing the simplicity of the horizontal lines, giving a monumental effect to the main outline, unbroken by any details, and thus joining the building aloft, like the rocky fortress temples of Tibet. From here the deep soil slopes gradually down to the main street connecting the city with the suburbs, and will be laid out, on the principles of the great Italian and French models, in broad, formal lines and masses, with avenues and grass, and wide central vistas. Sites will be arranged for statuary, with evergreen backgrounds.

### III.

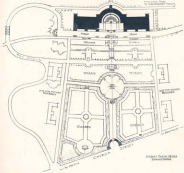
It is customary to believe that in South Africa we have little or no creative art. This may be true of its pictorial or plastic forms, but we belittle our land when we do not realise that in our architecture we possess work that stands in the same relation to modern art as does a portrait by Sargent or a bronze by Rodin. I refer to the creations of Herbert Baker, who came to live amongst us nearly twenty years ago. His early studies were in the office of a Church architect—a pupil of Sir Gilbert Scott—to whom he was articled. He worked afterwards for several years under Mr. Ernest George, A.R.A., the distinguished architect who to-day occupies the presidential chair of the Royal Institute of British Architects. During this period he was a student at the Royal Academy, and also



NEW BRONX MEMORIAL  
REYNOLDS. GENERAL PLAN.



• UMBRICAL BUILDING II •  
 PARTICULAR  
 DIMENSIONED FIRST PLAN



Original Drawing by  
 [Name]

attended the lectures of the Institute, where his time was not spent without honour, for in the examination for association he headed the list, shortly becoming Assisted Practitioner for his year.

Getting tired of the drudgery of a London office, he decided to visit South Africa on a holiday. He had been preceded by his brother, who had come out to farm. The moment was opportune, for Rhodes was beginning to find expression for the rough untutored art that was in him by planning colossal ideas of building and in the young Englishman he discovered one who could adequately carry into effect the thoughts of his "immense and bounding spirit." Both men had realized the rich heritage which South Africa possessed in the architecture of the early settlers. Rhodes expressed a genuine appreciation for its low, good quality, its simplicity and strength, and the artist in the younger man was quick to detect in its quiet taste and originality a style that might be carried further. He spent his time measuring and sketching its details, and his collaboration with Rhodes began on the remodelling of "Groote Schuur," which, however, was shortly afterwards destroyed by fire. Rhodes commissioned his architect to rebuild the house on a new model, yet retaining the characteristics of the old homestead; and the result is familiar to most South Africans. "Groote Schuur" now ranks, alike for its peculiar beauty and associations, as one of the historic and artistic homes of the English-speaking world. The younger man's proved ability to carry into effect Rhodes's dreams of laying under contribution the great Greek and Roman models in his schemes for memorializing those who had served and given up their lives for their country, such as Alan Wilson, and his desire for stately buildings to be an influence reaching the people of a new country, led Rhodes to send Herbert Baker on a visit to the land of those "dead but accepted sovereigns" who still rule the spirit of builders from their urns. The commission, characteristically written in pencil on a scrap of paper, I am privileged to quote:—

March, 1900.

I desire you to see Rome, Florence, Agrigento, Tivoli, and Athens. I am thinking of making a monument to those who fell at Kimberley; a visit and a copy of Florence. Your expenses as to trip will be paid; and in case I undertake any of these thoughts, you will receive the usual Architect's fee of 1 per cent.

C. J. Rhodes.

The fine memorial at Kimberley was the result. Greater schemes were under way when, in 1901, Rhodes's life-work was cut short. Herbert Baker's tribute to the memory of his patron was the building of the great granite memorial on the slopes of the mountain behind "Groot Schuur." As in all lofty art, the beauty of this temple is inexplicable, the mystery incommunicable. Its sincerity and nobility are apparent. To see it is to realize with Goethe that "Architecture is frozen music."

Herbert Baker's advent in South Africa found domestic architecture at its lowest ebb. Designers whose ideas of beauty found expression in cheap splendour had made the beautiful Cape Peninsula almost as pitiable a place to the artist as Hamlet found life:—

... of his wretched garden  
That grows to weed.

Houses "rank and gross in nature" were being built everywhere, and, still worse, were being admired; so that when the newcomer began to build, and to aim at truth and simplicity, his work was called eccentric, just as the first tulip that blossomed in England was rooted up and burnt for a worthless weed by a conscientious Scotch gardener. Today the "Baker" houses are the choicest possessions of South African architects. Indeed, I hold that in this branch of his work he shares with Mr. E. I. Lutyens the distinction of being the ablest house architect practicing today. What this means will best be understood when I say that it is an admitted fact throughout the world that English domestic architecture is now nearer perfection than similar work in any other country. I say this without any desire of circumscribing a particular art within the confines of any country. Art is universal, and should know no distinction of nationality. The great artist is a citizen of the world and of no country in particular. Perhaps, therefore, I may permit myself a single criticism. Herbert Baker does not, or will not, realize the universality of art. When he chose his sculptor to collaborate with him on the Rhodes Memorial, it was suggested to him that the great bust of Rhodes which is to fill the central niche should be the work of the greatest living sculptor, the Frenchman, Rodin. He, however, refused to look beyond that little island "set in its silver sea." Swan was in the foremost rank, a fine sculptor, and, above all, an Englishman, and so he got the work.



Pennsylvania State Capitol Building.



Panoramic View of San Francisco.

I mention this because I am inclined to believe that patriotism in this instance has robbed the world of a great creation. Still, he has been loyal to South Africa in all he has done, and the country owes him a great debt of gratitude for his influence and work.

From a wider horizon than ours his magnanimity will be watched, and those who wisely entrusted to him the great task of erecting the new Union Buildings are assured of the approbation of posterity. His work is now at its most equitable level of good architecture, nurtured by considerable experience and study. This is evident both in the studied simplicity and quiet dignity of the "Villa Jacaralia" now nearing completion at Parktown, and in the new Railway Station which is just beginning to rise in the administrative capital. There are many years of useful work before Herbert Baker yet; but whatever he may do in the future, the creations he has already wrought are more than sufficient to signalise him as one of the master builders of our age. His work has the power of wielding a great influence on future generations, and leaves them a rich heritage of which they cannot be robbed.

J. M. SOLONIOS.