

TWO UNREALISED VISIONS

SIR HERBERT BAKER RECOUNTS STORY OF UNION BUILDINGS

IN an article written for the London weekly "South Africa," Sir Herbert Baker, the famous architect, recounts the story of the Union Buildings and the artistic ideals which his design embodies.

It was about the end of the National Convention when the Administrative Capital was fixed at Pretoria, and before the first Union Parliament met at Cape Town, that the Transvaal Government appointed me architect for the Union Buildings, writes Sir Herbert.

I was given a free hand in suggesting sites in and around the city. I was shown the blocks which the Government had bought on Market Street (now Paul Kruger Street) leading from Church Square to the new station (which I was then building); the Museum now stands there. But with the high ideals we all had at that time, I thought this site unworthy of the capital buildings of the now united South Africa. So I explored the surrounding kopjes, and selected two ideal sites overlooking the city.

One on the kopje to the south had the advantage of flat land on the top for the building and for extensions and gardens; and also of sunlit front facades. The other was opposite to it on the northern Meintjes Kop, which rises on the east of the city like an acropolis, and terminates in Government House at the other end. The only possible site on it near the city was a narrow platform half-way up, so that without the expense of colossal retaining walls it had to be a long narrow building with its front facade almost always in shadow. But there was in the rock-platform a depression such as the Greeks might have chosen for an amphitheatre.

A VISION

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was not built too exactly, with regular tiers of seats, but rather as a formal terraced garden with water pools and pedestals for statues.

A DENIAL

The platform on which the building stands is about 150 ft. above the main road below. This slope is built up in terraces and a great flight of steps like those of the famed Villa d'Este garden at Tivoli. It is another 150 ft. to the ridge of the kopje. There on the central axis, and seen from below between the twin dome-capped towers, symbolising the two races of South Africa, I imagined a low dome, it might be a library, a Heroon or monumental hall, a symbol of the final union of the two races.

Rumours that I designed a Parliament House there are unfounded. For my part, I favoured the dual capital, as I thought it would help to remove the mutual prejudices of the folk who lived at the coast and on the high veld.

Below, on the central axis, is now set up on a high pedestal a bronze replica of the Delville Wood statuary, the young manhood of the two races joining hands over the warhorse in the common cause. The idea was inspired by the two statues on the top of the steps to the Capitol of the Twin Brethren, Romulus and Remus, who "fought in the ranks of Rome." Above them, on a higher terrace, are two vacant pedestals. For whom? For a "Romulus" and a "Remus" who, though former enemies, went across the seas to fight in the ranks of the Commonwealth for the cause of civilisation?

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A VISION

The place and its position overlooking Pretoria reminded me of Segesta, with its temple and theatre, and of Agrigentum with its rows of temples on the hillside overlooking the Sicilian seas.

These had fascinated me when I was there on my study-travels, which I owed to the generosity of Cecil Rhodes and to his forethought for the greater buildings of South Africa that he imagined would be when South Africa was all one country. So the vision came to me of two great blocks built round an amphitheatre.

I went there with Lady Selbourne, climbing through the thorn bushes and over the rocks. She stressed the importance of nearness to Government House as well as to the heart of Pretoria. These factors, and the charm of the site, determined my recommendation. I made some rough sketches and then went there with General Smuts. He, with his quick insight and imagination, at once visualised the idea with its power to give dignity and beauty to the instrument and the symbol of the Union. He and Botha thought, as Rhodes thought, in Christopher Wren's famous words, "Architecture has its political Use; public Buildings being the Ornament of a Country; it establishes a Nation, draws People and Commerce; makes the people love their native Country, which Passion is the original of all great actions in the Commonwealth."

SCHEME ADOPTED

General Smuts told me there and then to go ahead with my sketch plans. The kopje side was surveyed, and I developed the plans and estimates. These were submitted through E. P. Solomon, Minister of Public Works, to the Cabinet, and soon the whole scheme, to my surprise and delight, was accepted. At a Cabinet meeting which I attended, General Botha asked me to do my utmost to complete the contract drawings for quantities and tenders in less time than I had said I thought possible; he said there were urgent reasons for his request. I shall always remember his look of trust and confidence—the cause, I

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VIA SACRA

Beside the imagined domed Heroon, another unrealised vision was a Via Sacra along the ridge of the kopje to the apex overlooking the city. It was to be a broad stepped pathway with bastions and pedestals on either side for sculpture as it neared a little circular columned Temple of Peace crowning the apex.

Distinctive features of the buildings are the columned "temples" leading out of the Ministers' rooms. These were perhaps inspired by Rhodes's way of taking men of narrow vision out on the Groote Schuur stoep to look at "The Mountain." Here high above the little town can ministers look over the surrounding kopjes and the vanishing distance of the high veld.

The foundation and lower walls are built with large blocks of Transvaal granite. Above was used a Transvaal sandstone with the approval of the Government geologist. But it was discarded above the basement and retaining walls, as it was feared that nodules of iron pyrites which it contained might prove a weakness. Time, however, has shown that they have not done so; rather has the iron colouring matter spreading through the stones, stained the lower walls with soft tints of amber, yellow and red. Another sandstone from the Free State was chosen for the superstructure.

THE CONTRACTORS

There were two firms of contractors employed on the building. Mr. Meiske, a Hollander, built the two outer blocks; Messrs. Prentice and Mackie the centre, with the amphitheatre. The Secretary for Public Works, Charles Murray — who recently died—combined efficiency as an official and engineer with the talents and imagination of a poet: a happy combination, as he could understand the artistic ideals which the building embodied.

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THE AMPHITHEATRE

When the plans were made public the chief criticism, apart from Pretoria's complaints of the distance from the centre, concentrated round the amphitheatre. What was the use of this expensive and unheard-of thing? It is interesting now to recall that it had been adopted on the authority of Botha and Smuts—perhaps with some influence from Milner's young men—and that the value of it was first proved when a large crowd gathered there to welcome Botha back from the conquest of South-West Africa; and a second time when Smuts returned victorious from the long campaign in East Africa. He told me that from the tribune he spoke to 8,000 people there who all could hear.

Was not the building of this amphitheatre prophetic in view of the development of loud-speakers, which makes great gatherings of people an important instrument of government; open-aired, too, in the climate of South Africa? This amphitheatre

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When I returned from my first visit to Delhi in the middle of 1913 the final work on the building and its surroundings was drawing to a close.