



Photo: William Martinson

The John Moffat Building (1956), School of Architecture, University of the Witwatersrand

THE ARCHITECT AS PATRON

BY: **ROGER C FISHER**

IT IS WELL KNOWN that architects need patrons, otherwise they would have no commissions. However, many a successful architect has in turn become a patron to his own profession, either in his lifetime or through bequests. This article highlights some notable South African personalities.

Louis Michel Thibault (1750–1815), a Frenchman, was South Africa's first formally trained architect. De Bosdari, in his tome, somewhat misnamed as *Anton Anreith – Africa's first Sculptor* (1954), tells that Thibault had offered his services as gratuity in lieu of a subscription when the Freemasons of the Lodge de Goede Hoop created an education fund to 'assist youths with

an inclination for the arts and sciences, who themselves lacked the necessary means' (p. 50), but later relented and donated about 25 rix dollars. The Technical Institute of the Lodge opened its doors on New Year's Day, 1815, teaching mathematics, surveying, architecture, free-hand drawing and sketching. But Thibault's life's course was run and he died that same year.

Anton Anreith (1754–1822), sculptor-architect and oft associate, took over as full-time instructor, a position he retained for the rest of his life. This then was South Africa's first formal teaching of architecture and it gave priority to grown men of experience who wished to improve their theoretical

understanding within the discipline or young men who wished to equip themselves as professionals in the field of surveying, building and architecture. This institute delivered South Africa's first home-born and trained architect, Andreas Georg Hendrik Teubes (1792–1858).

The story of the Englishman Herbert John Baker's (1862–1946) patronage through his scholarship for young South African architects is probably well known, but worth retelling. In his published memoirs *Architecture and Personalities* (1944), he recalls that 'in gratitude for my patron's [Cecil John Rhodes'] generosity and foresight, I established an architectural scholarship

at the British School at Rome for young South African architects' (p. 35). The grants were disrupted during the two World Wars, but he added 'I hope South Africa will never allow this gift to be diverted from my purpose'. Unfortunately, this has in fact occurred because of his will stipulating that it required South Africa to be a British dominion for its citizens to benefit from his bequest. While we have returned to the fold of the Commonwealth, the scholarship remains withdrawn (a shame!). It had seen the flowering of many of South Africa's most gifted architects, including Gordon Leith (1886–1964 in 1912), Norman Eaton (1902–1966, in 1929), Jack Barnett (1922–1996, in 1949) and Julian Beinart, the last recipient before the withdrawal of the scholarship by the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1961.

The Australian immigrant architect John Abraham Moffat (1871–1941) bequeathed about £100 000 to the University of the Witwatersrand, which was to be paid 15 years after his death on condition that the fund be used for some purpose such as a building. He had run a successful practice in Johannesburg in partnership with John Harvey for some 30 years. In 1904 he designed the layout of Waverley, a residential suburb in Johannesburg and seems to have been an owner and speculator in land himself since several areas bear his name, such as Moffat View (proclaimed in 1946) and Moffat Park in Johannesburg. In his last years, he turned his hand to farming, spending most of his time on his Lowveld smallholdings, where he died and is buried. His bequest was appropriately put towards the John Moffat Building for the School of Architecture at the

University of the Witwatersrand, as the first of the buildings to be completed in the university's post-war building programme.

Monty Bryer (1912–1987) in his essay 'The Faculty of Architecture of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and its role in the community' (1977) records that 'in 1959 the Faculty of Architecture and the Department of Fine Arts had moved to a home of their own on the campus, a new building designed by Professor J Fassler in association with WD Howie, G Herbert, J Morgenstern, J Shunn and U Tomaselli, all of whom at the time were members of staff of the Department of Architecture [jointly called Studio Seven]. The building was a notable addition to the university's facilities for teaching and study, comparable environmentally as well as architecturally to buildings of a similar nature and purpose at universities elsewhere throughout the Western world, a feature of the facilities being the divisional library serving not only the Faculty of Architecture and the Department of Fine Arts, but also the university as a whole.'

More recently we have the example of early Wits graduate architect Kenneth Stanley Birch (1914–2010) as artist and philanthropist. After fighting in World War 2, he was commissioned to build new technical head offices for Anglo American at 45 Main Street, Johannesburg. This he did in partnership with Francis Lorne. From 1948, Lorne & Birch were responsible for 12 large integrated mining communities, comprising industrial plants, housing, hospitals and welfare and recreation buildings. Ken Birch donated money for all kinds of projects. He is known among the

heritage and museum community for donating money for the restoration of Joubert House in Montagu. He also bequeathed collections of his own art to both UNISA and the University of Pretoria. The KS Birch Collections housed in the UNISA Library Archives consist of 93 watercolour sketchbooks, dating from the 1930s to the late 1980s, which contain about 3 000 well-annotated sketches of South African scenery of special Africana interest. One of his sketchbooks contains a drawing of Le Corbusier after they met for the first time in Paris in 1936. At the University of Pretoria, the Birch Collection consists of a series of watercolour paintings of gold mines on the Witwatersrand, done between 1960 and 1975. A large part of the collection consists of documents and several mining maps related to his intimate connection to the mining industry, as well as books and photographs of old Johannesburg. These collections are valuable documentation of a neglected aspect of our local heritage, namely industrial archaeology.

I recently sat on a panel of assessors for the awarding of scholarships by Boogertman and Partners to post-graduate architectural students showing design flair. I am glad to report that the spirit of patronage is still alive and well. Long may architects and the wider public continue to support this valuable profession.

END NOTE

The factual information in this article derives from the website www.artefacts.co.za.

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CONTEXTUAL

BY: CLIVE CHIPKIN

I HAVE VISITED House Najmeh (Mira Fassler Kamstra, 2014) in Mountain View, Johannesburg as a 'work in progress'. Now that I have seen published photos of the near complete house and garden and read Roger Fisher's text (*Architecture SA*, Mar/Apr 2014) I am filled with admiration. One responds initially to the street context with the adjacent Edwardian Cape end-gable and the Arts

& Crafts roof dormers of the new work. Roger refers to such details as 'borrowed precedents'. In Mira's design, there is a regional and local rapport, but in my reading these detail are not eclectic. There are influences from various sources, but the result is coherence with a modern sensibility.

We may look to another contemporary example—Pierre Swanepoel & StudioMas'

additions at the Jan Celliers School in Parkview – here, in a Cape Dutch revival context dating from the 1930s. Swanepoel and his colleagues respond with wide, stretched curvilinear gable gifts to the street that are neither neo-Cape Dutch nor neo-Gabriël Fagan, but may be *Nederlandisch*. A wild thought occurs – perhaps neo-Postmodern.