

Despite Sandrock's distinct lack of iconographic intent, his buildings attract nicknames. The Administration Building is 'Die Skip' because of its distinctive ship-like prow. The New Humanities tower is 'Die Konsertina' and the student hostels are 'Die Kaasraspers' ('The Cheese-graters'). The University of South Africa building, dramatically cantilevered from Muckleneuk ridge on a single foot, is called 'The Singer Sewing Machine'.

Sandrock was a large, shy man. He worked as a part-time lecturer in his younger days, when the School was still in the city centre, and some recall that he would cross the street if he saw a student approaching. Yet he inspired confidence in his clients, especially those relatively anonymous corporate bodies of universities and boards, with his efficient management of projects and budgets. The obituaries described him as enigmatic, and the reason why he received so many enormous commissions remains obscure. We do know how he first came to work with the Pretoria University authorities: Samuel Pauw, a young architectural student in his office, whose father was then rector of the University of South Africa, made the introductions.

6 Postmodernism and the Romanesque revival

What was the first postmodern project in Pretoria? Was it Bannie Britz's Sterland cinema complex? Louis Peens's De Bruyn's Park? Perhaps that garish roadhouse by the Frame brothers called The Crack? The question is still open to debate. But there is no doubt that postmodernism was given official sanction by the new headquarters building of the Human Sciences Research Council in Schoeman Street in central Pretoria. The project architect was Samuel Pauw, who had earlier designed the innovative Volkskas headquarters tower. It was Pauw, and young associates like Piet de Beer, freshly returned from postgraduate studies in New York, who brought postmodernism to the University of Pretoria campus in the late 1980s.

In those years the university approached Pauw to design a new building for the Faculty of Economic Sciences, then the fastest-growing and largest faculty on campus. The brief was simple: give us another assertive humanities building in the Sandrock mould. Style and size had been predetermined, all that was needed was some fine-tuning on the specifics.

It took Pauw three months to persuade the faculty, and another nine the university, that what was needed was a building that would create a feeling of unity and campus life. By scaling down an imposing tower to a three-storey office block, placed along the walkway that traverses the eastern campus, Pauw created a background building with three courts, each belonging to one of the divisions of the faculty.

The building reverts to the brick tradition, although the bricks are of cement rather than clay and are used polychromatically; the windows are standard steel sections regularly arranged, the only peculiarity being the staggered square configuration taken through the inner corners of the forecourts. In true postmodern style, elements are exaggerated and mannered – the squat, round-arched arcade on the ground floor seems sunken beneath the weight of the architecture. The scale – the human, the elements to the whole, the whole to its surroundings – is excellently judged. The building has created an atmosphere of campus life on a once isolated extension. It has even managed to enliven the dead space between the new Humanities building and the Law Faculty.

In the lecture hall concrete is used more prominently, while the conference facility, planned as a baptistry with a monastic loggia, is a light-hearted indulgence.

Pauw graduated from the Pretoria School in 1961. His Masters thesis was a critical reappraisal of Le Corbusier. Pauw approaches the postmodern as a liberation from modernist functionalism and an opportunity to recover the humanizing aspects of style, especially those manifest in eclectic pre-modern buildings. His design for the Economic Sciences Complex was a chance to concretize these thoughts on postmodernism. He turned a blind eye to the New Brutalism which dominates the campus and, instead, sought inspiration in those buildings where aspects of a Romanesque revival find a precedent – the old Arts building, Moerdyk's club building on the central campus, and the monastery which adjoins the site and now belongs to the university.