

# THE CENTURY CELEBRATIONS OF THE UNION BUILDINGS

BY ROGER C FISHER

THEY CAME IN their thousands to pay homage, with many eventually being turned away. As Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918–2013) lay in state, the significance and meaning of the Union Buildings seemed yet again to evolve. On the eve of his inauguration as the country's first democratically elected president nearly 20 years before, the Union Buildings, washed in electric light, the amphitheatre set up with raked seating for the dignitaries right into the columned hemicycle loggia and decked out with new South African flags, made it all seem that this was the very moment for which these buildings had been intended.

In 1909 the unilateral appointment of Sir Herbert Baker to the project had drawn criticism, the profession believing that such a prestigious project should be put to competition. But the government of the Transvaal Colony was keen to get the monies spent quickly as it became apparent that Union was looming. In developing the scheme, the amphitheatre was considered an expensive and unheard-of thing. An advisory board consisting of two architects, Piercy Eagle of the Public Works Department and Willem De Zwaan, was consulted. They adjudged the colonnade 'extravagant and expensive' and condemned the amphitheatre as being of 'no practical value' since 'the tiers of stone, unprotected from the weather, offer very poor comfort to the visitor as they will either be too warm or too cold for sitting upon'.

In his biography, Baker states that 'its value was surely proved when a crowd gathered there to welcome Louis Botha [as the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa in 1910] ... and a second time when Jan Smuts returned victorious... [from his East African Campaign in the First World War]'. We might add that its value was affirmed a third time when President Nelson Mandela was inaugurated in 1994, and a fourth time, at his lying in state in 2013.

During Mandela's memorial service held at Soweto's FNB Stadium, President Jacob Zuma renamed the



amphitheatre the Nelson Mandela Amphitheatre: 'I have the honour today to announce that the Union Buildings Amphitheatre, where Madiba was inaugurated as president in 1994 and where his body will lie in state, will with effect from today be called the Nelson Mandela Amphitheatre.'

Zuma said it was Mandela who had transformed the Union Buildings 'from a symbol of racism and repression to one of peace, unity, democracy and progress'.

It is interesting to hear in Baker's own words where the concept for the amphitheatre originated. In 1927, he had written a reflective piece in the *RIBA Journal* 'The Government Offices of Pretoria and the New Delhi' (Vol 35(3): 63-73):

*The amphitheatre is formed for the main part on the natural levels inherent in the site and the design. Between the level of the ground-floor terrace and that of the upper or back road, rising steps and platforms fit naturally into amphitheatre form round the outer portion of the semi-circle under the colonnade. The inside portion of the semi-circle facing the central rostrum has been deliberately sunk as a little amphitheatre. ... All over the Empire, where the climate can generally be depended upon, such out-of-door meeting places do and will, I believe, still more in the future, become of public and national importance. I have seen many such open-air durbars, as they are called in India, and two indabas recently in Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe]. The place is sometimes temporarily built, if built at all, and therefore lacks the dignity*

*which an ordered architectural form can give. Surely, too, with the advent of loud speakers, large stadia or amphitheatres may become in the future essential architectural necessities in all countries.*

There seems some prescience there. It is also recorded that, at the time of construction, in the place of the amphitheatre once grew a coral tree (*Erythrina lysistemon*) as a natural feature. *Palgrave Trees* records that in Mpumalanga, a truncheon of such a tree growing near the deceased's home is cut and put onto the grave to mark the spot and honour the memory of a loved one. Perhaps that is how it found its way here. It was also customary for a chief to bathe in waters in which the bark of the tree had been soaked in order to retain the respect of his people.

Although penned in 1927, we may perhaps permit Baker the courtesy of a last word:

*The South African dominion is yet young, and who knows what may yet come there? A capital expressing some great national, greater African or imperial ideal, or a parliament house, when the centre of gravity moves northwards with the Union.*

We now know that it is in service of that 'greater African' ideal, but somewhat different to the imperial visions of its creator. Perhaps the genius loci preserved and monumentalised by Baker's conception retains the mystical powers of the lost vegetation and is blessed by its associations with past ancestors.

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