



## WEST STREET DURBAN 1977 (1)

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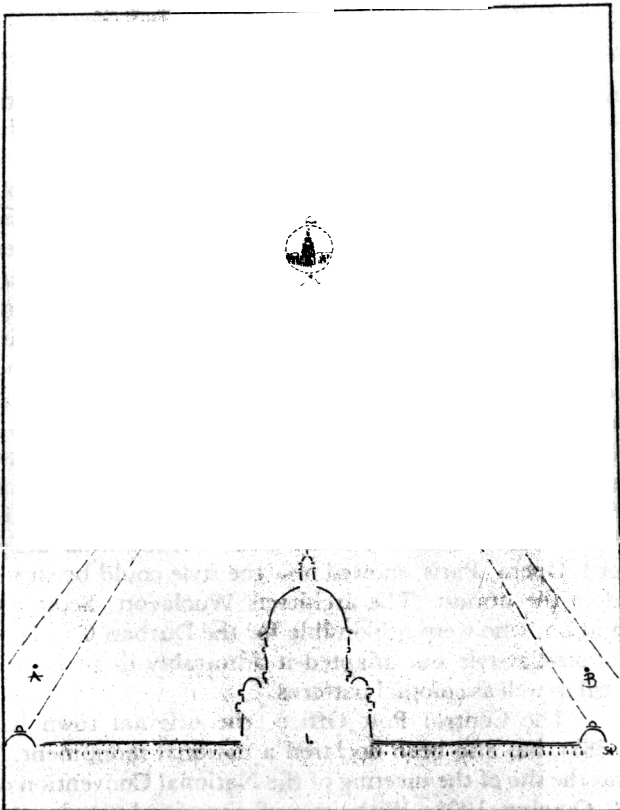
Parallel-running West and Smith streets form the hub of sprawling, ever-expanding Durban. The city's most prosperous stores and most prestige office-blocks are lined up in between and alongside these two traffic lanes. West Street is the official main street and the accredited favourite — a fact which comes into evidence every time a central building is erected and rentals on the Smith Street side are found to be considerably lower. However, these two streets are complementary rather than rival in their aspects and activities.

Farewell Square is the heart of the city. This designation might have nostalgic overtones, but there is no Montelban's Tower, as in Amsterdam, from where Dutch wives could wave goodbye to their sailor men, and no Fado's are sung here. The Square has been named after Lieutenant Francis Farewell who first hoisted the Union Jack on the Bluff in 1823 and proclaimed the area round the bay British territory.

Viewed westwards from this square the two main thoroughfares intersecting the city both have their visual fullstop in the striking Memorial Tower of the University of Natal, situated on a far-distant hill. Its shifting vistas

*Durban, 1977: diagram indicating shifting viewpoints from the City Hall (1) with the University Tower (2) acting as visual full-stop from both points. A — up Smith Street and B — up West Street.*

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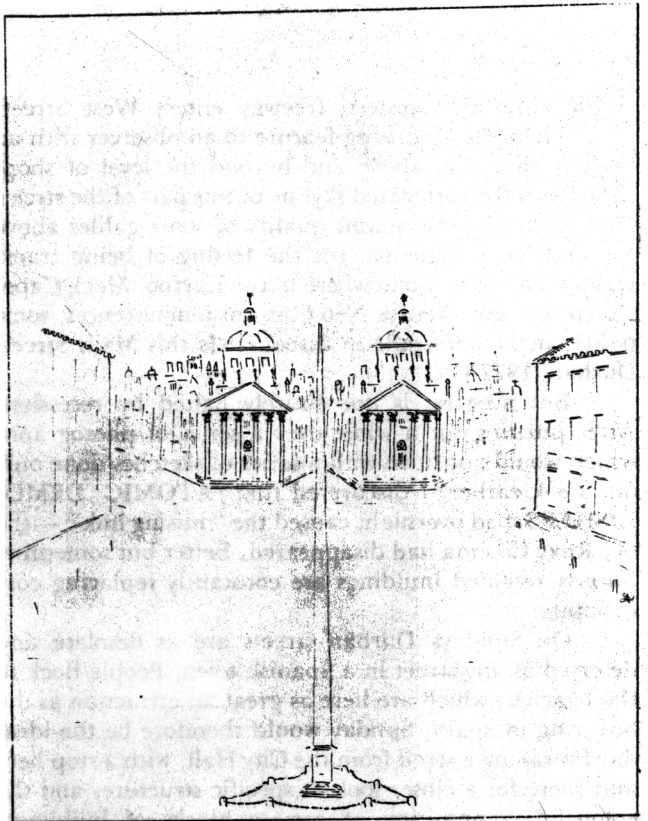


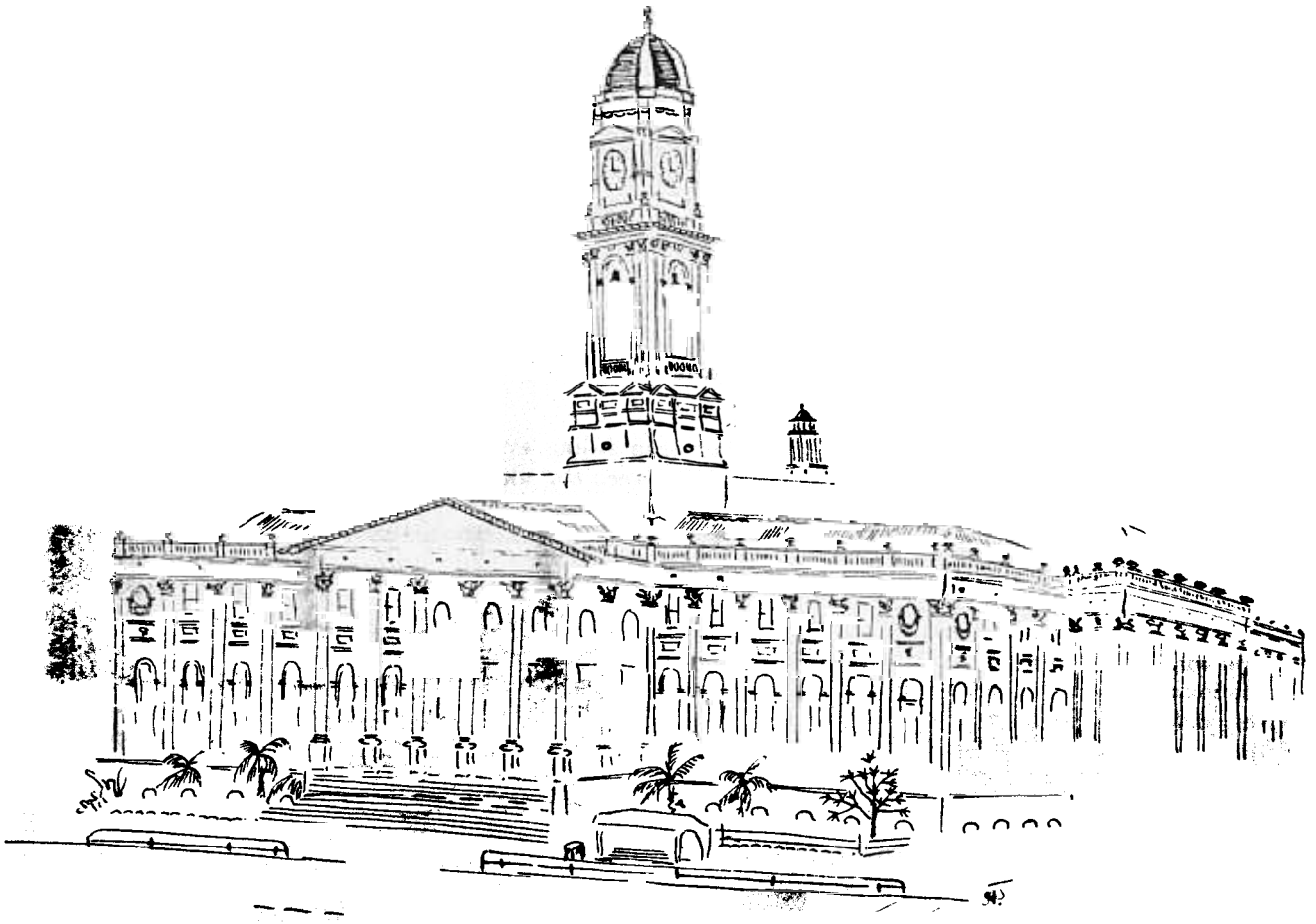
might well be described as dramatic. Although its occurrence as a focal point for both streets is a case of happy coincidence, it proves how a single point in space can become a powerful design force. The impact in this instance is comparable to Sixtus V's imposition of order on an environment of chaos in Rome (1585). An obvious metaphor would be the Piazza Popolo with its twin churches and its single Obelisk, illustrated in Edmund N. Bacon's *Design of cities* (London, 1974, pp.131—155).

I should like to discuss in some detail the "north bank" of West Street from the Church Street crossing to the Warwick Avenue diagonal. At the latter junction the

*Rome, 1677: visual organisation of the Piazza del Popolo; the twin churches Santa Maria dei Monte Santo (left) and Santa Maria dei Miracoli (right) directing "shafts of space" towards the focal point — the Obelisk.*

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Central post office.

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traffic from the western freeway enters West Street.

The most surprising feature to an observer with an interest that rises above and beyond the level of shop-windows is the variegated skyline of this part of the street. One might, by the quaint quality of some gables above the arcaded pavements, get the feeling of being transferred to a "dorp" somewhere in the Karroo. Mock Cape-Dutch and self-assertive Neo-Classical reminiscences, some petite, make one smile in disbelief. Is this Main Street, Durban, 1977?!

But progress is not entirely halted by recession. After puzzling for a while over a series of photographs which would not fit in with a series of sketches done only one week earlier, I discovered that ATOMIC DEMOLISHERS had overnight caused the "missing link" — the old Roxy Cinema had disappeared. Better but sometimes bitterly resented buildings are constantly replacing cosy canopies.

On Sundays Durban streets are as desolate and deserted as any street in a Spanish town. People flock to the beaches, which are here as great an attraction as the bull-ring in Spain. Sunday would therefore be the ideal day for taking a stroll from the City Hall, with a stop here and there for a closer look at specific structures and the colourful composition of certain blocks of buildings.

The City Hall, officially opened by Lord Methuen

in 1910, has been declared a national monument. More or less a replica of the town hall in Belfast, Ireland, it has been lauded as the most stately municipal building in the southern hemisphere. Its style is Baroque revival. In spite of Art Nouveau (1890–1910) objections, Renaissance and Baroque revivals remained far into the twentieth century the official styles for public and monumental buildings. In Baroque architecture the Renaissance ideals of harmony and equilibrium are replaced by a striving after theatrical effect. Yet the essence of the Baroque is not waywardness, but — as in a Bach fugue — the extraordinary richness of texture obtainable within a rigid and formal structure. The characteristics of the style can best be seen in the work of the great Roman Baroque architect and sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Charles Garnier (1825–1898) in his design for L'Opera, Paris, showed how the style could be strained to the utmost. The architects Woolacott, Scott and Hudson, who were responsible for the Durban City Hall, adopted a style but adapted it admirably to fit in with local as well as colonial patterns.

The Central Post Office, the original town hall (1885), has also been declared a national monument. It was the site of the meeting of the National Convention on 12 October 1908. With its well-contained proportions and restrained decorations it is one of the most elegant

existing examples of the Classical revival style in the country. Neo-Classicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an attempt to revive the ideals of the Greeks and Romans in architecture. The basic idea was to attain perfection and harmony through prescribed limits. The use of the Classical orders — Doric, Ionic, Corinthian — was implied. The Corinthian order was in this case incorporated to embellish the capitals of the pillars and pilasters that run right round the body of the building.

Gardiner Street, named after Captain Allan Gardiner — author of the *Narrative of a journey to the Zoolu country of South Africa in 1835 and 1836* — separates the Central Post Office from the business centre of the city.

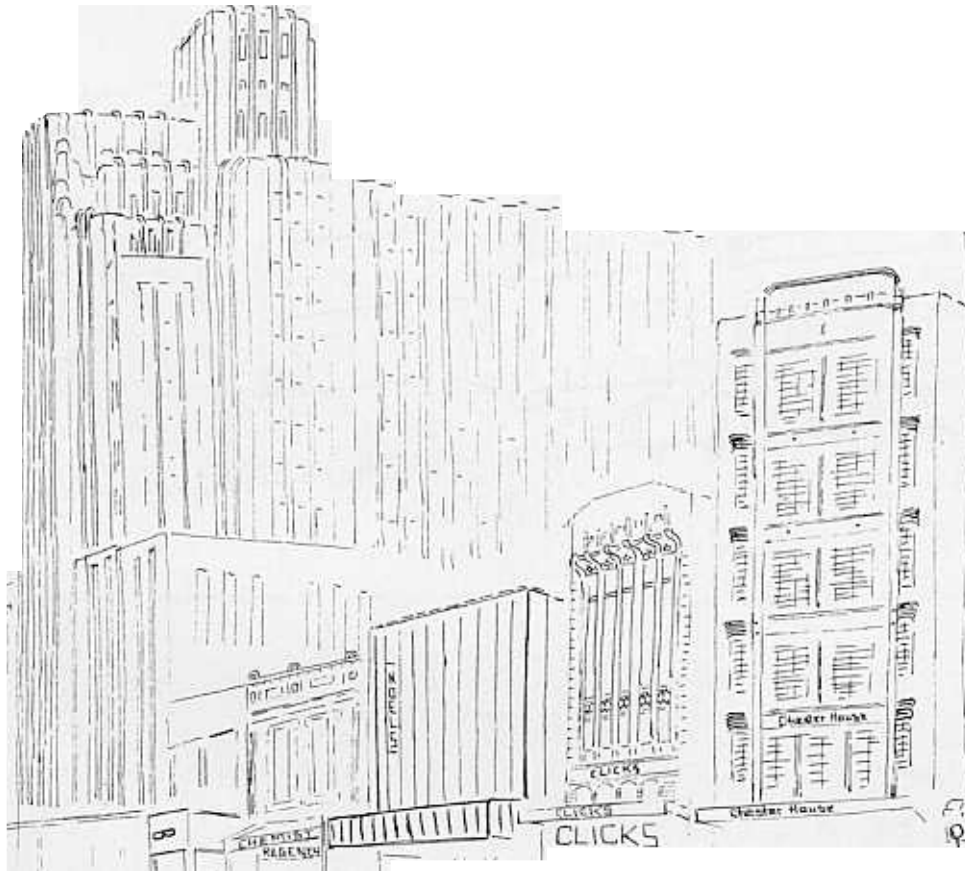
Barclays National Bank, corner of West and Gardiner streets, was one of the first bank buildings in Durban to be erected in a modern idiom. It illustrates perhaps a reversal of Mies van der Rohe's architectural dictum "Less is more". The aim seems to have been variety — in the organisation of structure and the application of texture. It lacks the cool sophistication and the sense of preciousness of materials of the older Barclays Bank Building, corner of Smith and Field Streets.

The 320 Building in the modern International Style — a style immortalised by Mies van der Rohe (1886—1969) and made popular by his disciple Philip Johnson (1906—) with the SOM-firm (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) — was at the time of its completion one of

the most controversial buildings in the city centre. It has nevertheless become a local landmark, if not by architectural virtue, at least by ambitious architectural virtuosity. The added attraction of a giant aviary does its bit to call customers to the business premises on the mezzanine floor. In the building's own shopping mall at ground floor level a bright series of glazed tile panels depict the history and the industry of the Province of Natal.

The 320 Building, the tallest on this side of West Street, is situated next to the Colonial Mutual Life Building, which was at its date of erection (1933) the tallest building in South Africa — and with its thirteen storeys Durban's first skyscraper. In style it is typically Art Deco, its most immediately apparent features being the rectangularity of the basic structure and the geometric shapes of the decorative motifs. The discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1923 accounts for the predominance of the Egyptian influence in the architecture of the twenties. This explains the occurrence of "zig-zags", "sunbursts" and "sphinxes" on a conspicuous number of Art Deco buildings, here and elsewhere in Durban, e.g. Berea Court, Berea Road, and the Enterprise Building, Aliwal Street. Other Art Deco buildings in the area under discussion include Adcock Building, Chasler House, Woolfsons and Clicks.

Several stores economised in bringing their shops up to date by using durable light-weight modern materials to improvise and superimpose streamlined facades.



*Greatermans departmental store: note (a) the elegant use of the structural elements of pure line and basic form, and (b) the vertical emphasis of external composition.*

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*A typical instance of persistent and co-existent twentieth century styles: Bales Building (epitome of Art Deco), Homeleighs and Dents (eclectic Neo-Classical), and Bargain Centre (modernistic idiom).*

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The obvious result of such a system is box-like uniformity, but it does tend to obliterate the disparity between low- and high-rise building. Among conversions in this vein are Edgars, ABC Shoe Store, Smalridges and Beare Bros.

The practice of modernising some buildings has the further effect of acting as a foil to those buildings brave enough to retain their original gables, thus rendering their charm more specific. The complex consisting of Bee-Gee, "Antiques & Bygones", the Neil Sack Gallery, Universe Fashions and Motala Tailors comprises a motley mixture of styles, freely borrowed from Neo-Classical predecessors. The exterior of course often belies the interior, which can be tailored for efficiency.

Very loyal to the styles they are built in are Jay's (Victorian), Regent Chemist (Regency) and Georgian House (Georgian), each erected in the period which it portrays and, by the sound of the name, seems to commemorate.

The odd little "Markhams" affectionately assembled emblems and elements distinctly Queen Anne and Robert Adam. It evokes a sympathetic smile. We sentimentally adore it! This must be what Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) called "fiasco al fresco" in his *The future of architecture* (New York, 1953, pp.88–89), continuing: "Any popular avenue ... will show the polyglot encampment displaying ... châteaux, manor houses, Venetian palaces, feudal castles and Queen Anne cottages ... copies of copies of original imitation."

The manifest aim of Art Nouveau was to make a clean sweep of this, to abandon all stylistic imitations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Adolf Loos (1870–1933), the harbinger of "purism" in architecture, considered all ornament crime. Gradually the functional approach with emphasis on structural necessity superseded the romantic approach with its preference for decorative detail. During the next decade (1920–1930) this functional style developed into the formal and fashionable Art Deco, and although there was an Egyptian interlude as explained earlier on, simplicity was considered stylish – as exemplified in Bales Building. (The recent addition of an enormous Pop-Art advertisement for Coca-Cola belongs so absolutely to the general style of the building that one cannot but notice the importance and the relevance of the breakthrough in architecture of some fifty years ago.) Related buildings in Durban are Manhattan Court, Willern Court, Hollywood Court, etc.

*Dove's and Adlam Reid, funeral undertakers.*

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Of special interest are the two Greatermans buildings (formerly Payne Bros). Greatermans Departmental Store was an "avant garde" mini-skyscraper on the West Street skyline. The general structural composition of this building bears a marked resemblance to Natal University Memorial Tower. The set-back arrangement originated in obedience to contemporary zoning laws, and is evident in a number of epoch-making buildings elsewhere:

Chicago Tribune Building, Chicago (1922);

Daily News Building, New York (1930);

McGraw Hill Building, New York (1931).

Greatermans Home Centre is in capricious Rococo style – displaying the curves and counter-curves, the prettiness and the gaiety which provide relief amid the still persistent Neo-Classical elements.

The first quarter of the twentieth century also saw the initiation, development and consummation of Cubism: the breaking down of forms to their basic shapes – cubes, cones, cylinders, spheres, etc. It originated with painters working in Paris, and had a marked influence on architecture through Bauhaus teaching in Germany and the Dutch De Stijl movement. Similar influences may be noted in the buildings occupied by Randles, U.F.S. Furnishers and Port Natal Furnishers.

Part of the Grey Street Oriental complex borders on West Street. The Mosque belonging to the Masjid Mahomedan Institute can actually be seen through the West Street gateway. Stepping through this gateway you leave behind the hustle and bustle of the street and enter a different world. Mosaics along the passage include inscriptions from the Koran and prepare the visitor for the peace and placidity of the Mosque itself, where white-clad priests chant their prayers.

Another gateway farther up the street gives access to the City Cemetery, and through this gateway the Emmanuel Cathedral comes into sight. The Cathedral, Gothic revival in style, was when completed (1904) reputed to be the finest example of church architecture in Natal.

Onwards furniture dealers abound and flourish. Rentals are lower and prices consequently more reasonable. In this area nobody begrudges rentals down town their elusive exclusiveness.

Going west along West Street, you finally arrive at Dove's and Adlam Reid (funeral undertakers). ■

