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NEWS BRIEF – 031 – TWO MAUSOLEUMS

Howard College and the Memorial Tower Building

In June this year Franco Frescura led a tour around part of the UKZN which SANS missed. As we believe many members will appreciate the comments and observations he made during the tour we reproduce them here as News Brief 031.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Benjamin Frederick Davis was born on the island of Jersey in 1867, and moved to South Africa in 1899. Having first worked in East London and Port Elizabeth, he finally settled in Durban where, within ten years, he had built up a sizeable fortune and controlled most of the stevedoring business along the east coast of Africa, from Port Elizabeth to Dar-es-Salaam. Following the death of his youngest son, Howard Leopold Davis on 12 August 1916, as a result of wounds sustained during the battle of the Somme, he was moved to donate funds to a number of philanthropic causes. Over the years, until his death in Durban in 1942, a number of institutions benefitted from his generosity. The family home, named Port View, was located in Cowie Road.

THE HOWARD COLLEGE BUILDING

Today's visit shall be concentrating on two of the University's oldest and most prominent buildings, Howard College and the Memorial Tower Building. Although they were built only 18 years and less than a generation apart and belong to the same university, they have little in common, and their spirit and design philosophy lie in different worlds.

Howard College was designed by William Hirst in 1929, who won the competition while he was still a student in training, and completed in 1931. Although he was rushed back to South Africa to take the project in hand, he was permitted to submit its design as part of his treatise to the AA in London, where he was completing his studies. It shares in a Humanist tradition which goes back, via the Renaissance, to Classical Greece and Rome, and an aesthetic which it has in common with the Temple of Vesta in Rome (205 CE), Bramante's Tempietto of St Peters, in Rome (1502-10), Herbert Baker's Union Buildings in Pretoria (1910-12), and Lutyens' Government Building complex in New Delhi (1913-30). The colonnaded portico is a reference to the front quarter of the Durban Town Hall clock-tower, the dome makes reference to the central dome of the Government Buildings in New Delhi, and the large timber sash windows and shuttering are drawn from Herbert Baker's Cape Dutch revivalism.

The detailing and the ornamentation inside the Atrium uses elements of Art Deco, of Union Heraldry and of Cape Dutch timberwork. It was built at a time when the British had abandoned Italian Baroque as the preferred architectural expression of Imperialism and were struggling to find a language which merged the imagery of the past with the new technology of modernism.

The building has been raised on a generous stone plinth for additional height, and is set on axis with Howard Avenue, still extant below Princess Alice Road. This had originally been intended as the main entrance to the Campus, and the remnants of this are still visible below Howard College. Such

planning was in line with the design of campuses at Rhodes (1904), Wits (1922) and Cape Town (1932) whose planners preferred the use of sloping sites and dramatic outward vistas. This contrasts sharply with sites chosen for Potchefstroom, Pretoria, RAU, Port Elizabeth, Stellenbosch and UDW, to mention but a few, whose campuses were located on flat pieces of ground.

This opportunity to develop a strongly integrated campus was lost when, in 1947, the Memorial Tower Building (MTB) was located on King George V Avenue immediately north of Howard College. The new plan thus developed favoured the use of a narrow belt of flat land along the Cato Manor ridge along Queen Mary and King George V Avenues. Needless to say, it did not take long for the University to run out of building space, but that is another story.

Howard College has been designed with two distinct elements in mind: the central atrium whose sole function is to act as a pedestrian distribution point, and the two double-storied wings on either side, with large Cape Dutch shuttered fenestration but otherwise having none of the features expected of a Cape Dutch revivalist building. I believe this to have been deliberate for reasons that will soon become obvious.

The design takes strong cognisance of its eastward outlook as well as Durban's sub-tropical environment. The large sliding sash windows can be manoeuvred to take advantage of natural wind movements, while its sliding louvres attached to the wall can be entirely closed to keep out the glare of the early morning sun. The office plan has been articulated about two large internal courtyards to maximise on natural ventilation.

The atrium, on the other hand, has been designed as a metaphorical mausoleum, and although the body of Howard Davis, the young man whose life was sacrificed by incompetent war masters at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, rests still in the fields of France, the centrally-located glass caisson placed beneath his portrait might as well contain Davis' miraculously preserved corpse rather than a model of the ship he sailed in.

The rotunda was probably based upon an introverted design of the Tempietto di San Pietro in Montorio, in Rome, built by Bramante in 1502-10, which marks the spot where St Peter was supposedly martyred. Its drum is surmounted by a small dome raised on a sizeable drum for greater effect, which has been punctuated by a series of window openings. The entrance portico is a truncated reference to the Tempietto in Rome, also supported by a set of plain Doric columns. The ambulatory passage which runs on the outside perimeter of the Tempietto here runs on the inside instead.

The bulking of the rotunda also gives us a further clue as to its classical intent. The proportions and raised parapet walls projecting above the portico define the outlines of a cube, whose form interfaces with the closed circle of the dome above, thus making obvious reference to da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, whose proportions dominated much of European architectural design up to the 1900s.

Apart from the fact that the rotunda is a mausoleum, the use of a dome is in itself of obvious symbolic significance. The circle is considered to be the most perfect shape, simultaneously signifying perfection, infinity and the self. In this context it means the abolition of time and space. In other words, it has been used to signify immortality.

The circle used with the square is an integration of heaven and earth. The circle is also the sun, linked to the sun-god Re, and therefore the cupola is symbolic of the heavenly dome which the sun must travel daily. Thus the dome is also a symbol of resurrection, the process daily birth and

rebirth, of renewal and cleansing, which like the sun undergoes as it emerges each morning from the vulva of the goddess of the sky Nut.

Many groups whose ideology incorporates elements of mysticism and the movement of the sun have used the coincidence of the sun's rays at a specific time upon a particular aspect of a building, such as the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, but I have not been able to determine if Hirst has made use of such a device. Propitious dates which might have been used are the now-proverbial "eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month", when the Armistice was signed, or 12 August, when Howard Davis died of his wounds.

Inside the Mausoleum four heraldic bosses on the balcony mark the cardinal points of the compass, a mariner's device which may be a reference to Davis' sea-based roots. Pride of place on the western wall of the drum has been given to the giant portrait of George V, a lousy father who spent most of his private life sticking stamps into albums, and nearly gave Britain its first Nazi king. Nonetheless he was an important symbol of the British nation, and in 1934 Davis commissioned an old school-friend, the portrait painter John St Helier Lander, to execute a giant portrait of his king. Davis was so pleased with it that he commissioned Lander to make four copies which he then donated to Howard College, Canada House, Australia House, and New Zealand House. The Australian bequest now hangs in the Australian Parliament Building.

Today the portrait of His Royal Majesty looks down upon the space where Howard Davis would have been buried had this design for a mausoleum been taken to its logical conclusion. His presence validates the sacrifice made by Davis and his generation of young men who went off to fight the "Boche". Without his blessing their deaths would be rendered meaningless, and the repetition of the King's presence outside in three-dimensional form, is as much part of this Mausoleum as is the inner atrium. To the illiterate this statue is a statement of British Imperialism, but to the designer, and the family who paid for it, it is a memory of their dead son.

Internally, the space has not been softened by use. The lawyers have put up their paste boards and apart from the imposition of two glass caskets, the space has been little altered by time and use.

William Hurst travelled to London in 1927 on the Emma Smith Scholarship, and won the competition for the project while still studying at the AA for his degree. It was agreed that he could remain there until March 1929, and when returned to South Africa by mail-boat, the cabin adjoining his was outfitted as his office so that he could continue working on the design.

Inside the entrance lobby the decoration was kept to a minimum. Lintel panels surmount each door opening and contain an Egyptian sunburst pattern. In the context of a mausoleum, these are significant for the sun's rays are a reference to Re, the sun god, who was also represented as a fiery or golden sphere. Later on Re merged with falcon-headed Horus, and was believed to rule all parts of the created world, including the sky, the earth and the underworld. Thus, his symbol, the golden orb, surmounted on the apex of the dome, can be seen as a symbol of that rule, the dome (sky), the earth (cube) and the underworld, the resting place of Howard Davis.

Panels set in the openings where the lights are normally located contain a number of other designs, including a zig-zag pattern which signifies water, coolness, fertility and youth. The papyrus design is representative of the swamp where the first gods were created, and are therefore symbols of eternity and the afterlife, while the waves contained above may be a reference to the family's links to the sea.

Taking this line of argument further, the central placing of the round atrium surmounted by a dome, itself a truncated orb, as the centre point of two equilinear wings may well have been intended as a representation of the twin pylons which stand at the entrance to an Egyptian temple, themselves a metaphor for the solar boat that transports Re, the sun, across the heavens during the day and into the stygian darkness of Nut's body through the night. The boat also transports the souls of their ultimate fate. Thus Howard College becomes a mythical means to convey the soul of Howard Davis into the afterlife. Unlike King Tutankhamun, whose tomb was packed with mere earthly belongings, Howard Davis' eternity is filled with the debates of countless academics whose intellects are more likely to keep him entertained than mere goods and chattels.

William Hirst designed this building in 1927, only five years after Howard Carter opened the Tomb of Tutankhamun, in the Valley of the Kings, revealing to an astonished world the trove it contained. Hirst cannot have been unaware of the treasures that were discovered there, or of the music hall songs about "King Tut", and would have been swept up in the excitement of the golden images then emerging from Cairo. He designed the building too early to make extensive use of the Egyptian forms and symbols that would eventually be incorporated freely into Art Deco architecture, but would have known about the symbolic interpretations that archaeologists were now placing on Egyptian architecture.

THE MEMORIAL TOWER BUILDING

By comparison with the richness of meanings inherent in the design of Howard College, the Memorial Tower Building provides us with the barest of readings. Designed in 1947 to commemorate the young men and women, staff and students of the University, who went to war to fight one of the most evil political systems yet devised by man, their death is commemorated by a building whose aesthetic was more likely to have been used by the vanquished fascists than by the victorious democrats.

The building has been located on axis with Smith Street, since renamed after Anton Lembede, and owes more to the proto-fascist and still-born Italian Futurist movement than to Art Deco. It straddles the Cato Manor ridge and has provided the city with a landmark visible from many miles around.

It consists of a ten-storey tower block framed on either side by sweeping four-storey wings. Their bulking may remind one of the Main Building of Moscow State University, but that is as far as all resemblances go. The MTB uses a stripped-down idiom more reminiscent of Mussolini's EUR40 Olympic Village in Rome, typified by its narrow vertical elements terminated by a bold projecting cornice. Even so, any references to history are obtuse and little evident to the casual observer. Given the fact that it is a memorial to the democratic dead, the building is better suited to celebrate the values of fascism and anti-historicism that signify the Modern Movement in architecture.

The building itself can be likened to a bully who shoulders aside its less imposing neighbour and thoroughly ignores the historical height lines established 18 years previously. One dreads to think what the campus would have looked like if a counterpart had been built on the other side of Howard, as had been proposed.

The MTB is also little more than a façade, which hides behind it an encrustation of additions and alterations made over the years with little regard for their design or that of the original building itself. Apart from the main door, which does display some token Art Deco decorative elements as a gesture to a building style which, like the lives it celebrates, was truncated by WWII, generally it is too little too late, and the interior is stark, unloved and unlovely.

In the final analysis, a fine view doth not fine architecture make. Ironically the MTB was, for a while, the home to the Natal School of Architecture which, using it as a role model, may explain the dearth of good modernist buildings on the rest of the campus.

CONCLUSIONS

And that, I am afraid, sums up the comparative view of these two buildings. The one is rich, layered and open to historicist interpretation. The second is tall and powerful and singularly devoid of any further meaning. Howard College harkens back to an era when architecture was expected to provide a multiplicity of readings, whose forms set out to tease the intellect and expected the general public to have the intellect to understand the games being played. Eighteen years, 70 million lives and one world war later, architects of MTB were prepared to batter the general public into submission by brute force, on the understanding that they were lumpen and, by definition, had no intellect to comprehend an architecture of the intellect.

Modern Architecture is the architecture of the lumpen, because it equates simplicity and technology with stupidity and visual illiteracy. Less became more not because it is so, but because a totalitarian-minded Nazi fellow traveller said so, and like sheep, a flock of money-minded capitalists and bottom-line accountants followed him. Lenin once remarked that western capitalists were so stupid that they would invest their money in the rope that would be used to hang them. Modern Architecture has proved Lenin right.

And that, ladies and gentle-minded people, is the end of the tour.

Franco Frescura
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