GAUTENG DEPARTMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

BUILDING ASSESSMENT REPORT – HERITAGE REPORT

FOR

THE ABSA BUILDING (VOLSKAS)

AUGUST, 2014
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1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ABSA BUILDING (VOLSKKAS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF PROPERTY</th>
<th>ABSA Building (Previous Volkskas)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STREET ADDRESS</td>
<td>74-76 Market Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>PROPERTY IDENTIFICATION</td>
<td>Erf 5151 Johannesburg (Previous Erf 744-745)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BUILDING STYLE</td>
<td>Reinforced concrete construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUILDING USAGE</td>
<td>Commercial Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARCHITECTS</td>
<td>Louw and Louw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPLETED</td>
<td>Date of Construction 10/05/1946 and completed in 1950</td>
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1.1. Brief History

The victory of Malan’s National Party in 1948 engendered a strong sense of Afrikanerdom entrenched in deep seated nationalistic sentiment which, among others, prioritized the eradication of challenges facing the poor whites and fostering Afrikaner economic empowerment in order to develop Afrikaner businesses. A case in point was in April 1934, when J.J. Bosman established Volkskas as a Co-operative Loan Bank in Pretoria which later became a commercial bank in 1940 and later opened its first branch in Johannesburg in 1950.

Riding on the success of the Nationalist Party, the Bank’s performance relative to their competitors gained favour from the Afrikaans Community. 1991 saw the formation of ABSA, following a merger of Volkskas, Allied and United Bank respectively. Trust Bank only came on board in 1992. The building was designed by Gerard Moerdijk in 1946 when he was still in the employ of Louw and Louw Architects.

According to (Chipkin, 1993: 280) “when the architects Louw & Louw were working on the plans for the new Volkskas Bank Building considered to be the first major piece of architecture to be erected in Johannesburg by the ‘emergent forces of Afrikaner finance capital – they too decided (such as was the case with the Voortrekker Monument (1938-49) to adopt a distinctive national style, a volksargitektuur based on volksgeskiedenis”.

1.2 Description of the Building

This building is clad with golden-brown face brick in the Cape-Town house style with the first three storeys cladded with polished red granite. The window design comprises of Cape residential-style windows in hardwood. There are fluted pilasters, a disselboom frieze and other ox-wagon motifs. The work of Willem Hendrikz is visible on the bronze door-panels and in the marble engravings depicting images of agriculture, commerce and industry at pavement level.
The construction of this ten-storey building by Reid and Knuckey (PTY) LTD started in 1946 and completed in 1950 and was constructed over the full width of two Johannesburg erven with the plan arranged in a broad L-shaped. In terms of information from Artefacts.co.za\(^1\) the symmetrical front façade was divided into ten modules within which the fenestration was arranged while externally, the design of the façade was based on three separate zones; a heavy base or plinth, a tall vertical “shaft” and a narrow “capital” all clearly rooted in a strongly classical idiom.

The building was erected on the site of the original African City Properties development on Market Street. The building comprised of two basements, a banking hall at Ground Floor with mezzanine offices, rental offices in the remaining nine floors above and two roof levels divided to accommodate three separate tenants. Two of the tenants enter the building off Albertina Sisulu Street (Absa tenants and Absa bank); whilst the last tenant (Road and Rail Agency) enter the building off Fraser Street.

The previous Absa bank tenant occupied the entire ground and first floor level, allowing only a very small reception for the other tenants. Therefore, whilst the other tenants did have a ground floor reception, their actual office space only began on the second level.

1.3 Statement of Cultural Significance

The building has ornate additions which define its aesthetic appeal, despite the alterations to its interior. Designed by Louw & Louw, who also designed the New Library Hotel, the building is an important example in the evolution of South African architecture. Historically, the building was a symbol of the growing of locally mobilized capital – Afrikaner finance capital. The Volkskas was established by the Broederbond which had a nationalist ideology. Volkskas has evolved into present day ABSA. Before the building, the telegraph and postal service had opened at 74 Market Street in Johannesburg in 1887. The building has historical significance as it symbolizes the dawn of ‘volkskapitalisme’ in South Africa. In support of this assertion Chipkin (1993): states that “At the time of its construction, the building was considered to be the first major piece of architecture to be erected in Johannesburg by the ‘emergent forces of Afrikaner finance capital’ – they too decided, (such as was the case with the Voortrekker Monument 1938-49), to adopt a distinctive national style, a volksargitektuur based on volksgeskiedenis.

The key architectural elements are:

- Fluted pilasters.
- Frieze of ox wagon motifs.
- Bronze door panels.
- Marble engravings by W. Hendriks.

\(^1\) http://artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/bldgframes.php?bldgid=7431
1.4 **Building Condition Survey (2007)**

A condition survey of the building was conducted in 2007 at which time a permit was lodged for alterations and rehabilitation of the building. The following is a summary of findings:

- Roof proofing and rainwater drainage system was damaged or dysfunctional.
- The wooden doors and windows frames exhibited signs of decay.
- General weathering/erosion of plaster and paintwork especially in the external courtyard was seen.
- Interior fittings such as doors, staircases, vinyl joinery were in bad condition and in need of replacement.

1.5 **Recommendations**

1.5.1 Repair and Maintenance.
1.5.2 Restoration and Cleaning.
1.5.3 Custom-redesign of interior for proposed new use.
1.5.4 Retain interior features with heritage value.

2. **CURRENT CONDITION SURVEY (2014)**

A detailed multi-disciplinary condition survey was carried out with the following objectives.

- Assess the current condition of the building,
- Ensure that the building complies with building regulations,
- Assess and make recommendations for high-level spacing,
- Provide design input for the preparation of a high-level cost estimate.

The summary of findings and recommendations below are detailed in the Architectural Assessment Report. It was determined that the building, in its current state, is inhabitable.

The Report recommends minor internal renovations/upgrading in line with acceptable office accommodation or building standards.

- The building envelope on the street facing facades remains intact and appears to be in fairly good condition.
- The street facing façade on the corner of Albertina Sisulu and Fraser Street comprises of pre-cast concrete panels, with window openings, clad with marble stone on the ground and first floor level, followed by brickwork on the levels above. The remainder of the street façade on

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2 Condition Survey Conducted by Gandhi Maseko Architects in 2007
3 For details on the structural assessment of the building refer to the Creative Axis Architects Architectural Assessment Report of October 2014
Albertina Sisulu Street contains a large strip of cottage pane windows (from ground floor to the highest level) followed by more brickwork. The walls would need to be cleaned with a high pressure jet spray and then treated with a sealant. All existing windows will need to be replaced with new energy efficient windows.

2.1 FINDINGS

The following are some of the findings that surfaced during the conditions assessment study.

- Each entrance to the building (for the various ex tenants) has a height difference with only steps to enter the building making universal access impossible.
- The higher levels (offices) are in a better condition, despite bouts of water damage being spotted throughout the building. However, the highest level of the building is in the worst condition. It is filled with rubble, broken walls and missing windows.
- The building does not comply with the latest energy efficiency regulations in the National Building Regulations, SANS 10400.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of the condition assessment of 2007 are consistent with those of 2014 with an acceleration of decay and damage which calls for the following intervention measures to be applied in order to arrest decay:

- Although the external façade of the internal courtyard is in an average state, the walls would need to be cleaned with a high pressure jet spray and then treated with a sealant.
- All gutters and downpipes will need to be removed and replaced.
- Plastered walls, where water damage has created cracks, will need to stripped, replastered and repainted.

It is further recommended that in instances where the heritage fabric is going to be impacted upon necessary permit application in terms of section 34 of the National Heritage Resources Act of No 25 of 1999 should be lodged with the Provincial Heritage Resources Authority to ensure utmost care is taken based on sound conservation guidelines and principles.

4. REFERENCES
• Creative Axis Architects: Architectural Assessment Report. 2014
• Gandhi Maseko Architects Condition Survey, Preparation and Submission of the PHRAG Application Form 301

Links