



Heritage issues: Parktown Village II (1999-2000)

Parktown Village II:

Parktown heritage is preserved in
new residential complex

The University of the Witwatersrand is once again in construction mode. The redevelopment of Parktown Village II is one of the major 21st century projects of the University and its business partners. There is energy and enthusiasm in the air as Wits strides forth with a powerful vision to reshape Johannesburg's landscape and deliver on much-debated academic and infrastructure plans. The range and reach of its campuses, from Braamfontein to Parktown, makes the University a dominant and influential local property owner. There is a responsibility to the city and to the surviving suburban residents to preserve the heritage and memory of past lifestyles, at the same time redeveloping older city areas, as Wits responds to the challenge of new student residential needs. The growth in student numbers to today's figure of 29 000, and the desire to accommodate at least 5 000 to 6 000 students in residences, has led Wits to adopt creative solutions and embark on new ventures.

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The intention is to move between the present, the remote past and more recent adaptations in a successful preservation of built heritage and exciting new architecture.

From top, left to right:
1895 Victorian Colonial Home, Muzi Yami, later named Eridge House;
Vacant land in front of Eridge House being cleared for the new student residence;
Parktown Village II student residence with a glimpse of World Cup dressed Hillbrow tower



In March, Wits signed agreements with the Rand Merchant Bank Property Finance Division and Rowmoor Limited to fund the construction of new student residences (called Parktown Village II) in Parktown East for 1 000 postgraduate senior students. It is an imaginative turnkey investment of over R400-million to provide 1 000 new student beds in a pioneering public-private partnership between the University, the City of Johannesburg, the national government and the banking sector. At a recent ceremony, Vice-Chancellor and Principal Professor Loyiso Nongxa revealed that "Wits data show that resident students have a much better academic success rate."

This project has been in the incubation phase for four years and will reach completion by 2012,

in time for Wits' 90th anniversary. Ten new residence buildings will be integrated into the current mix of preserved heritage homes and associated buildings and existing residences, set in a landscape of well-established trees. The planning and design of the new residences combines four-storey residential blocks, open spaces and heritage properties. The intention is to move between the present, the remote past and more recent adaptations in a successful preservation of built heritage and exciting new architecture.

The important, detailed heritage impact study of the site, completed in 2008 by Johann Bruwer and Henry Paine, has enriched our knowledge of the original layout of the suburb and the architecture of the first late-Victorian mansions



10 Park Lane, dates from 1902 but successive additions record the architectural styles over its lifetime.

of the area as well as its subsequent evolution and history over the past century. The study adds to the literature on Johannesburg history and specifically the heritage of Parktown. Bruwer and Paine transport us back to the 1890s when Parktown was a newly settled suburb for the affluent business and mining people of Johannesburg, comprising a small number of desirable homes located around Junction Avenue and Ridge Road. This study makes the stones of the streets and gracious old homes speak. Ghostly voices share the ambitions, the aspirations and the relationships of the owners and their architects.

The geography of the area shows why Parktown was such a desirable residential suburb a century ago. Positioned on the Parktown ridge about 3km from Park Station and Eloff Street, its rocky elevation meant cleaner air and clear views north. Parktown East offers a spectacular view-site on the continuation of the Parktown ridge, with excellent vistas south towards Hillbrow and north towards Houghton, the Wilds and Killarney.

The Wits property, Parktown Village II, despite its size of over 5 000 square metres, is tucked discreetly behind the Sunnyside Park Hotel and lies to the east of the Netcare Park Lane Hospital. The perimeter roads are Boundary Road (it is here that the original beacon of Randjeslaagte was marked by a bronze plaque), Park Lane and Ridge Road. Junction Road intersects the site and was once the main avenue linking Queens Avenue and Boundary Road, although today the road terminates at Park Lane. A study of old aerial photographs overlaid on modern images from Google Earth gives us an overview of various tiers of residential habitation and later institutional use, as people ceased to call the streets home and institutions moved in.

Lifestyles and living standards began to change drastically in the 1920s. As municipal taxes increased steeply, it was no longer feasible to live in a mansion requiring repairs and maintenance, with a large garden needing constant attention. Parktonians started selling to developers, while others subdivided their properties, converted stables and coach houses to cottages, or took in paying guests.

The construction of residential apartment blocks on the periphery of Hillbrow introduced a different type of lifestyle. It was a logical development when blocks such as Clarendon Court and Ridge View were built in the 1920s. Lyndon Court dates from 1944, and other apartment blocks such as Williston Court and Royal Crescent went up in the 1950s.

As the residential character of Parktown became even less viable in the 1950s, educational institutions, under government auspices, gradually acquired many of the older Parktown residences. Much of baronial Parktown with its stately homes and manicured gardens was subsequently demolished to make way for the College of Education and the Johannesburg Academic Hospital and Medical School.

In 1966 the state took further ownership of eight remaining Junction Avenue and Ridge Road private properties. In the early 1970s the dominant Park Lane Clinic was built and other homes on Junction Avenue were demolished. It was a slow process of redevelopment, consolidation of stands, and recycling of valuable land.

Old residences had become too valuable, too generously proportioned and too close to Braamfontein and the inner-city to remain gracious landed estates and private homes. It was an oddity of circumstances that determined which homes were demolished and which were adapted to new uses - such as nursery schools, college buildings and doctors' consulting rooms. Those fighting for the preservation of a relatively recent Victorian heritage in a city not yet 100 years old were the first to raise an awareness of built history slipping away, but were unable to

prevent rapid and often quite brutal change. The sense of place was lost and we grapple today to find, feel and preserve the past fingerprints and memories of these once-proud streets. At the same time, redevelopment of city land for modern use is an inevitable development.

During the 1990s, the area known as Parktown Village II (now a single consolidated erf) came into the possession of Wits. In 1993, numerous small low-density residences were built at the rear of the Wits Business School at the Parktown Campus, following the approach adopted with Parktown Village I. Parktown Village II remained a well-treed and grassed expanse, with a visible fingerprint of an earlier residential history. Three of the original eight homes were demolished, but five remained and were adapted to new uses as part of the residential complex.

Today, the University of the Witwatersrand is making a concerted effort to conserve and celebrate the area's history, while adapting its infrastructure to modern and dynamic purposes. Drawing on the Australian Burra Charter of 1999 (the ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance), the University is committed to understanding the cultural significance of its buildings through documenting and researching the history of all its properties, and has responded to the heritage framework set out in the National Heritage Resource Act 25 of 1999. Working with the South African Heritage Resource Agency (SAHRA), buildings older than 60 years acquire a new status and new life within new development projects. Wits has therefore committed and positioned itself imaginatively to preserve its built heritage within the new residence complex.



Old sepia photos of "Kangela" and "Emleigh".

Gazing into the past

As Wits embarks on a major development of new residences and more extensive development of the Parktown Village II site, it is worth capturing something of the charm, imprint and significance of the older residential nature of the property.

In 1894 the site comprised nine separate erven which were acquired by different individuals under leasehold from the Braamfontein Company owned by Hermann Eckstein. The lease was to be paid for 99 years, in addition to a nominal sum for ground rent, which was payable to the landowners of the township. Under Lord Milner's administration, this system

was abolished after 1902, when owners of property became entitled to acquire the freehold of their ground.

From the layout, it was intended that "Park Town" was to be "the superior part of Johannesburg", and included strict servitudes to prevent trade, renting of rooms, poultry yards, and any other objectionable features which might lower the tone of the suburb. Only one residence was allowed on each plot, in keeping with the notion of being a garden suburb. Houses to the starting value of £500 or more were to be built within the first year of ownership. Properties were to be fenced neatly, and no galvanised iron sheeting was to be used.

Servant quarters were allowed, but only to house those employed by the owner or tenant.

The streets were wide and followed the natural contours of the land, instead of the rectilinear grid in the centre of Johannesburg. Trees were planted to line the streets. In the 1890s, the area was fenced to assert the rights of the property owners of Park Town. The thoroughfare gate was located on the southern side near Clarendon Place.

Early drawings show nine private residential plots in the area that is today Parktown Village II. Each plot had an area of one or more acre of land. By 1939, eight private residences had been built and were occupied by personalities such as architect Frank Emleigh and entrepreneur Otto Lenz. The suburb was incorporated in the Johannesburg Municipality in 1901. Three decades later it had become a well-established area, flanking the properties of the Randlords. Hence, it was referred to as the "millionaires' suburb".

32 Ridge Road is the most important of the old residences. Built in 1895 for Otto Lenz, it was the first residence to be developed in Ridge Road and was named "Muzi Yami" (later "Eridge House"). Lenz was the partner of Theodore Reunert, and together they created a powerful mechanical engineering and contracting firm, with their fortunes firmly rooted in the mining industry. The home is a single-storey Victorian-colonial bungalow-style house. The wide-columned verandah, corrugated-iron roof, stone foundation plinth, distinguished entrance steps and pleasing chimney provides a visual statement of solidity and importance. In 1933 architect Frank Fleming undertook various additions and

alterations to the property, with further additions effected in 1952 by Cowin and Ellis. The interior of the house delights with its leadlight windows, arched glass doorways and imposing fireplaces. In recent years Wits University Press was the ideal institutional tenant to preserve the fabric of the house.

18 Park Lane is sited closest to the Netcare Park Lane Hospital at the entrance to the Wits site. Its location on Park Lane is important, although the development of the nearby apartment blocks and the hospital itself has destroyed the original locational ambience. It is a single-storey dwelling which was completed in 1911 in Arts and Crafts-style, with a touch of eclecticism in its Cape Dutch gables. The architect was Theophile Schaerer. This house will be preserved together with its significant stone gateposts and wrought-iron gates.

20 Junction Avenue dates from 1917. The original style was Arts and Crafts, with its distinctive red facebrick and tiled roof. The home was designed by architectural firm Howden and Stewart, with extensive outbuildings added a year later (for which the architects were Cowin and Powers). Further additions took place in 1926, and in 1949 a new double-storey wing was constructed. An interesting feature of this property is the original low stone boundary wall and gateposts, which mark the line of the original street. These features will be retained. This house highlights the changes in design and structures implemented by successive owners, as well as the contributions of a number of notable architects.

At **22 Junction Avenue**, an original stable (later called outbuildings) dating from 1903 is all that

survives of a residence named "Mi Mi", built in 1902 in late-Victorian style for a Mr E Y Peel. The architects Leck and Emley were also responsible for "Savernake" (the home of the Wits Vice-chancellor) and "Emoyeni" in Jubilee Road. The house was demolished in the 1970s but the stables give a wonderful sense of the past, and signify the importance of horses and domestic animals even in an urban environment. Two old telephone poles, pepper trees, the imprint of the old driveway and stone boundary walls are archaeological relics of the early 20th century and will be carefully preserved. The stables will form part of the new residence complex.

The Bruwer and Paine report records - with some nostalgia - the houses, such as "Emleigh" at **24 Junction Avenue**, which were demolished decades ago. The expanse of vacant, almost derelict land looks towards Louis Botha Avenue. The house was an important late-Victorian mansion, built by architect Frank Emley in the late 1890s. It was one of the first residential plots to be developed and was demolished in the 1980s, having served as the location of Grantley School. Two new residences will be built on this land. The Randjeslaagte Beacon on Boundary Road and close to this site is a national monument.

Another vacant stand is **34 Ridge Road** where the house "Kangela" once stood. This house dated from 1904 and was still standing in 1966. Today nothing remains but two sets of stone gateposts and a kopje stone pillar, which will be retained as part of the modern boundary fence of the new development.

The substantial home at **20 Park Lane** (corner

Junction Avenue) reveals its layered series of additions and alterations through a succession of five owners. A long single-story house was first completed in 1902 (by architects Leck and Emley), added to in 1922, with a further storey added in 1939. The house is a relatively late example of the Arts and Crafts style as designed by architect Brendan Clinch. Less-intrusive alterations were made in 1950 and 1960. The dormer windows, corbelled chimney and terracotta roof tiles are of architectural interest, but there is no cohesion of style and the upper storey fails to form a seamless part of the design. A stone wall and two sets of sandstone gateposts indicate the original early-20th century entrances to the property. The importance of the property lies in the strategic entrance position of the house and its outbuildings.

30 Ridge Road is a more attractive and coherent home in Cape Dutch farmhouse style. Symmetrically balanced by two Cape Dutch gables, the home was completed in 1929 (by architect William Tait Conner) with beautifully crafted plaster mouldings on the gables. The original layout and fabric of this house remains intact. This house will be retained, although the relational positioning of the dwelling will be compromised by the new residential blocks.

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