

Wynberg Library



Example of

fifties architecture

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Wynberg Library is an excellent example of an important building style in the architectural history of South Africa. Together with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) building at Three Anchor Bay, mentioned in *Drie eeue van Suid-Afrikaanse kuns* by Hans Franssen, it represents one of the few civic buildings built in the modernist style in Cape Town.

Proposed alterations

This year the Wynberg Library building is 45 years old. In 2001 it circulated 316 780 books and has by far the highest audio circulation of all the municipal libraries in the Western Cape Province. When extensions became necessary to provide more space for the children's section and to add a much needed hall for library activities and public use, Vivian Jones, the librarian in charge, had plans drawn up for extensions to the front of the



Top left: Librarian Vivian Jones at the entrance with its 'floating' concrete roof, supported by slanting, slim steel columns, cast-iron railing and decorative stone wall, all typical examples of fifties architecture. The administration wing on the left-hand side shows a sculptural effect achieved by positive and negative spaces

Top right: The concrete shading feature, also supported by slanting, slim steel pillars, is visible on the north elevation, as well as the large windows, interspersed with a narrow wall structure. The stone surface at the entrance is repeated on the northwest corner

Above: The stone wall is also visible from the west elevation. The sculptural effect achieved by formed concrete can be seen on the western side, as well as the administration wing on the north elevation

building where at present the stoep and a garden are situated. It was only at this stage (April 2002) that the historical value of the building was realised, as the South African Heritage Resource Agency asked for the extensions to be reviewed and even offered to assist with drawing up alternative plans, so that the present front elevation could be preserved.

Modernism in Cape Town

Similar to the SABC building, the Wynberg Library was designed in the 1950s as a rare example of Cape modernism. Modern technology, especially reinforced concrete, was used innovatively in both buildings. Form and space have been treated in a 'surprising measure of freedom and playfulness'. Wynberg Library is also a noteworthy step in the progression of South African modernism: Transvaal architects had been experimenting with modernism since the thirties, but there was hardly anything similar in Cape Town at the time the Wynberg Library was built.

While the originality of its design is

an important factor, formal trends, for example, making use of stone and concrete surfaces and angled steel columns, were used by architects Le Corbusier, Eric Mendelsohn and Helmut Stauch (the latter from Pretoria). The north-south orientation of the building, unusual in its time, is typical of a Stauch design. The building is visually pleasing from all angles and 'constitutes an expressive sculptural presence'. Because of its setting, it can be appreciated from all angles as well as from a distance.

The entrance is located in the highly-sculptured north elevation. A heavy pre-cast shading feature is supported on slim slanting steel columns. A 'floating' concrete roof at the entrance is supported on similar steel columns. These features, together with the 'highly ordered' administration wing on the left-hand side are excellent examples of the technical innovation of fifties architecture.

At the east and west elevations (on the narrow sides of the building) the zigzag line of the roof creates a 'distinctive "dancing" roof shape'.

New plans

The proposed new plans follow the guidelines and have the approval of the Heritage Resource Section / Urban Conservation Unit of the South Peninsula Administration. The architectural aesthetic appearance is respected, with no development along the northern façade. Timber mezzanine decks, suspended from existing columns, will provide the desired space for a bigger music section, reference section, and coffee shop, with a lift for easy access. Because of the high ceiling, the roof does not need to be altered. At consequent stages a children's wing and hall will be added (as separate buildings) at the back of the building.

Googie Style

The library building contains elements of the Googie Style, which peaked in California between 1954 and 1964. The term 'Googie' was coined by Professor Douglas Hall of Yale to describe modernistic roadside architecture of the fifties. When he drove past a coffee shop in Los Angeles named Googie's he immediately recognised the



Above left: **Bob's Big Boy** c. 1950 in Pasadena (demolished in 1982). The formed concrete shading feature and stone covered walls are similar to Wynberg Library

Above right: **Googie's** in 1985. It has since been demolished

Left: **Googie's**, 1949, Los Angeles. The red slanting roof, with economical structural steel decking and plate glass walls led to the name of this coffee shop being used to describe the fifties style of architecture

elements that create the 'extremes, metaphorical qualities and humour' that characterise this style. Googie has also been known as 'Coffee Shop Modern' and 'Extreme Modernism'.

Googie's red painted roof, made of economical structural steel decking, tilted upwards at a 45° angle as if swung by a hinge, with the building seeming to move skyward with it. A large window underneath provided a view of Hollywood Hills. With the use of sturdy steel support structures and sheet glass, roofs often appear to be floating - seemingly defying gravity. These features of Googie's typically describe this style.

Fifties architecture also includes rock and fake rock walls. Vast plate glass windows

(often angled) broke the traditional barriers between inside and outside.

Newly-available materials were exploited innovatively: sheet glass, glass blocks, asbestos, plywood and plastic. Steel and cement were also used in difficult ways. Instead of the previously-used box-like spaces, with holes broken into walls for windows and doors, concrete shells could be shaped with curves and angles. Thick, supporting walls at regular intervals were not necessary any more. Space could be exploded. Curving roofs could sweep upwards (to create a light, expansive mood) or downwards (resulting in a more sheltering form). Upswept 'butterfly' roofs look like they could take off and fly. There is no boring repetition - elements of this style could be adapted and were applied to a variety of buildings.

The main objective of this eye-catching, eccentric style was to attract the attention of motorists and potential customers to businesses along the side of the road: motels, bowling alleys, car washes, car dealers and coffee shops. To coffee shop



entrepreneurs the architectural style for a successful restaurant was therefore as important as a well-designed kitchen. Buildings do not only require good taste, they need to 'taste good' as well: The practical use of the building was seen as more important than the conventional structural requirements. Careful attention given to materials and the space used shows that the design was not superficial either. The needs of the California 'car culture' were met successfully, where every commodity offered was available by car, from buying doughnuts to banking along shopping strips.

Signs and extravagant roofs were an excellent answer to the commercial demand for visibility and an appealing image. Symbols like sputniks and rockets celebrated the dawning of the Space Age on bright neon road signs and billboards. Other typical Googie motifs were boomerang and amoebae shapes used for furniture, roadside signs and textile patterns, atomic models for decoration, star bursts (including shining stainless steel surfaces) and flying saucer shapes.

To achieve the Googie look, the following rules had to be followed:

- a house can look organic, but must be abstract (for example, an abstract mushroom)
- gravity had to be ignored. It had to look as if a building hangs from the sky. Classical architecture, columns counteract the downward pull of gravity by pushing the roof away from the ground. Using the Googie style a heavy stone wall can easily be made to rest on a glass wall, while it appears not to be supported by anything. By 1958 supersonic jets, earth-orbiting satellites and atomic power suggested new forces that surpassed the forces of gravity. Popular architecture mirrored this freedom
- multiple structural elements had to be used as opposed to minimalism, applied by architects of the current modern architectural style.

The Googie style became a symbol and cultural expression of the fifties. It reflects the post-war prosperity and optimism for the future. The continuing trends in American culture of originality, novelty and newness are reflected in Googie.

Googie architecture was modern as well as popular. The common design language used was understood by a large cross section of the American population. A landscape of Pop Art developed, with bright primary colours, bold delineations and



Large, bold signs attracted the attention of roadside travellers that incorporated star bursts and decorative arrows

popular symbolism. The elaboration and excess found in this style has been equated with jazz. This gaiety reflected in Googie architecture, contrasts with the seriousness of the current modern style. Because of the disregard for 'good taste', as it was conventionally known, conservative architects of the International Style rejected Googie originally as 'honky tonk developments'. Roadside buildings in the Minimalist International Style, with their right angles, limited materials and massive glass walls were not popular or successful. The creative solutions applied by Googie commercial architecture eventually influenced the work of these high art designers.

Googie went out of fashion in the mid-1970s when popular taste shifted towards traditional materials and styles. Instead of aiming to grab attention, an attempt was made to blend in. Googie buildings had to make room for more trendy ones. Road signs were taken down or changed because television advertising and computer reservations now fulfil the same function. For the sake of conformity town planners provided guidelines for the size and look of billboards. Between the initial popularity and popular rediscovery in the future, the fifties style has become vulnerable to destruction. At the same time the prejudice of critics decreased and books were published on roadside architecture. A Society for Commercial Archaeology was also formed to document and preserve the Googie phenomena.

Googie elements of Wynberg

At Wynberg Library elements of Googie are:

- the solid concrete structures of the shading structure and entrance roof that seem weightless as the slim, angled steel pillars seem their only link to the earth and appear to be floating
- the stone wall sections on the western side and at the entrance, contrasting well with the plastered walls of the rest of the building
- the large sections of the north and south elevation that consist of strips of floor to ceiling windows, interspersed with narrow wall structures. This feature allows plenty of natural light into the building and expands the feeling of space inside by breaking down the barrier between the interior and the exterior
- the zig-zag shape of the roof visible from the eastern and western façades
- cast-iron railings at the entrance
- light fittings suspended from the ceiling, also found in Googie interiors.

Other reasons for conservation

According to the *Wynberg CBD integrated study* the library is situated in an important 'civic zone'. It is also built on the same erf as the Maynardville Park, which has historical significance. The park will also form part of the proposed Coghill Conservation Area, as identified by a conservation study.

Bibliography

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Note: More can be read about the significance of the Maynardville Park in Wynberg a special place, by Helen Robinson, recently received by libraries.