

One hundred years!

Watercolour drawing by Tony Grogan

VANESSA DAVIDSON

Operations Manager, Centre for the Book

The Centre for the Book celebrated the centenary of the building it occupies at 62 Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town on the 7th of December 2006. Approximately two hundred people attended a cocktail function sponsored by the National Library of South Africa, Flagstone Winery and the Centre for the Book.

The CEO of the National Library, John Tsebe opened proceedings and officially switched on the floodlighting installed by the Department of Public Works at the front of the building. The event was marked by the opening of the first phase of a permanent exhibition documenting the history of the building and its occupants.

The Centre manages a number of projects that promote a South African culture of reading, writing and publishing and the provision of free and easy access to books for all South Africans

The exhibition, designed by Jos Thorne and Tina Smith, was funded by the Cape 300 Foundation and the Book Development Foundation and conceptualised by Vanessa Davidson. The exhibition seeks to answer some of the questions posed by visitors to the building: 'Why was it built?' 'Who were the architects?' 'What is the Centre for the Book?'

Originally the building housed the University of the Cape of Good Hope, the first degree-conferring institution in the country. Designed by Hawke & McKinlay, the

building was constructed in two phases, and the first foundation stone was laid in February 1906, where a silver trowel was presented by the architects to the University. The silver trowel, on loan from Iziko Museums was recently purchased by the Roland Leta Hill Trust and is displayed at the Centre.

In 1918 the University of the Cape of Good Hope became the University of South Africa (UNISA) and moved to Pretoria and the University of Cape Town (UCT) was inaugurated as a new institution. UCT leased the buildings and it moved a number of its departments from the Hiddingh campus to the building for several years. Tennis courts were built at the back and dances were held in the basement.

In 1931 the building was renovated and converted into a suitable home for The Archives who occupied the building for the next 49 years.

By 1992 the building was in need of extensive repair and restoration and in the next five years it underwent a full renovation under the guidance of architects John Rennie and Michael Scurr.

The building was allocated to the then South African Library and the idea of establishing a Centre for the Book was developed following Director Piet Westra's visit to the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

Elisabeth Anderson was appointed as the first head of the Centre in 1998 and under her leadership, the Centre, now a specialist unit of the National Library, is a catalyst for book development in South Africa. The Centre manages a number of projects that promote a South African culture

of reading, writing and publishing and the provision of free and easy access to books for all South Africans.

Above: The CEO of the National Library, John Tsebe with Mpho Matthews and Elitha van der Sandt at the cocktail function

Left: The large circular shape of the main auditorium provided ample space for the two hundred guests who attended the function

