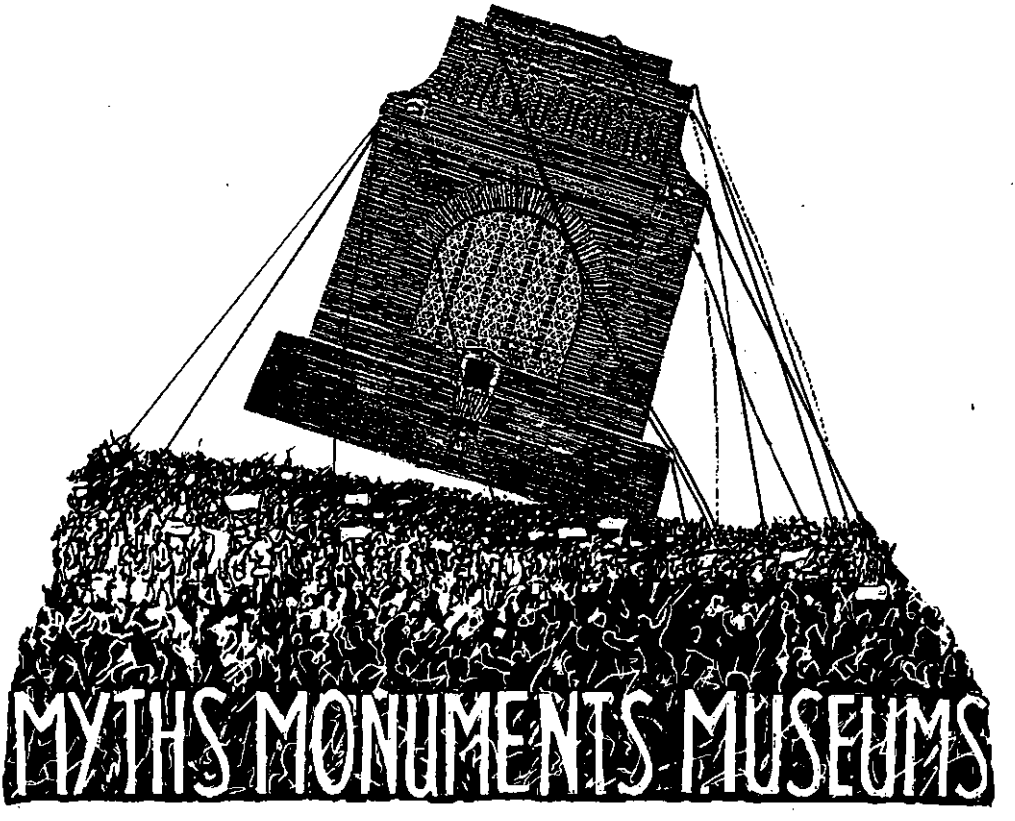

NEW PREMISES?

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

THE NEWTOWN COMPOUND:
RECONSTRUCTION OR RESTORATION?

J.P LEGER
UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
AND
W.A MARTINSON
NATIONAL MONUMENTS COUNCIL

THE NEWTOWN COMPOUND: RECONSTRUCTION OR RESTORATION?

INTRODUCTION

The Newtown Municipal Compound forms part of the Newtown Electricity site. As illustrated in Figure 1, the compound is located very close to the Market Theatre and the new site of the Africana Museum - on the south side of Jeppe Street where it borders the Mary Fitzgerald Square. Recently this building was threatened with demolition to form part of the "Turbine Square" commercial development.

The possible demolition of yet another early labour compound raises the question of what can be done to preserve the material evidence of labour exploitation in the first half of this century. Compounds were a key social institution which secured the exploitation and control of migrant labour in southern Africa. Theme parks such as Gold Reef City and the Kimberley Mine Museum have reconstructed the history of labour through the gentrification of white miners and managers housing. At the same time, mine and municipal compounds have been systematically demolished, especially since the early 1980s. For example after the opening of Gold Reef City (originally the Gold Mine Museum) in June 1981 on the original Crown Mines property, the historically valuable and massive 14 Shaft Compound, 16 Shaft Compound and the compound off Main Reef Road (corner Church, which included married quarters) were all destroyed. The only 'compound' that remains on the property is the extensively renovated 17 Shaft Compound, which today bears little resemblance to the original. The possibility of restoring the Newtown Compound provides an important opportunity to redress this biased representation of social history.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIGRANT LABOUR COMPOUNDS

Labour compounds were first developed on the Kimberley diamond fields, particularly by De Beers Consolidated Mines, as a form of control over the removal and sale of diamonds by black miners. Not only did the closed compounds at Kimberley inhibit illicit diamond sales, they proved to be a highly effective form of control over labour, drastically reducing desertions and labour turnover rates and providing for authoritarian control over the labour force.

On the Witwatersrand the theft of low grade gold ore was never a major issue. But in 1901

mine wages were reduced, resulting in the labour 'crisis' of 1903. Migrant workers 'struck' by refusing to return to the Witwatersrand mines after the Anglo-Boer war. Very high rates of desertion characterised those that did return. Gold mine owners sought new institutions to tighten control over the labour force and sent a Chamber commission to Kimberley to examine at first hand the system of control in the compounds there. The models for compound accommodation of miners gleaned from Kimberley were to form the basis of a large number of compounds built specifically for Chinese indentured labour in the period 1903 to 1907. Rand Mines, at the time the largest mining house, was at the forefront of the standardisation and construction of a large number of these compounds.

The Johannesburg Municipality adopted the migrant labour model together with the compound system for the accommodation and control of the vast majority of municipal workers. Even the design of compounds was almost identical to the earlier mine compounds. In part this arose from the design of compound accommodation proposed by the *Coloured Labour Compound Commission* of 1905 (Jameson, 1905). The Commission recommended that the "'Rand Mines' type of hut", a standard compound room design used by Rand Mines, should be adopted in the construction of compounds. This design is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

DESCRIPTION OF THE NEWTOWN COMPOUND

Significantly, it was the Rand Mines design that was widely adopted by the Johannesburg Municipality. In 1915 construction was underway on two compounds, namely the Smit Street and the Sanitary Department (between Jeppe St, Goch St and Avenue Rd) compounds. Each was "designed on the method known as the 'Rand Mines' type of hut, in a series of rooms about 625 sq. ft. each" (Minute of the Mayor, 1913-1915:26).

The exact date of construction of the Newtown compound has not been established, nor have the original plans and supporting documentation been traced. The compound and two houses immediately to the north of the compound appear in a 1922 aerial photograph. It is likely that the Newtown Compound was built some years prior to the the Smit Street and Sanitary Department Compounds.

Our site measurements show that the Newtown and Smit Street (corner Solomon Street) compound rooms followed very closely the standard Rand Mines model. A standard Rand Mines room housed 40 workers in 625 square feet, that is 1,45 m^2 square metres per

worker. Most of the Newtown Compound rooms were 575 square feet and housed 36 workers, that is 1,48 m^2 per worker.

The Newtown Compound is a U-shaped single storey building with a south facing courtyard and is illustrated in Figure 4. The total area of the compound (including showers, urinals and toilets and the original compound manager's office), comprised 560 m^2 for 312 workers in nine rooms, that is 1,79 m^2 per person. As shown in Figure 5, workers slept side by side in 'double storey' bunks with nine workers per level. Each set of upper and lower bunks was separated by a common area 2,7 metres wide (Figure 6). The lower level bunks were a solid concrete slab with rounded concrete ridges 75 mm high by 75 mm wide separating each bed. The upper level beds consisted of wooden boards supported on an angle iron framework - all of which has been removed. It is likely that a single ladder per row was provided for workers to climb on to the upper level. Each room had one small coal stove.

No ceilings were provided in any of the rooms. The dividing walls between the rooms stop at the (non-existent) ceiling level (Figure 7). Permanently open, louvered ventilators and fixed glass panes were installed at the apex of the roof. The open roof apex and the open eaves (where the roof joins the walls) no doubt ensured 'adequate ventilation', but must have meant that the rooms were bitterly cold and draughty in winter.

One of the two ablution areas survives virtually intact. Each ablution area consisted of a toilet room, a urinal room and a shower room. Six high level openings provided permanent light and ventilation. The toilet room had eight squat pan toilets without any partitions. The urinal room was separated by a low wall ($\pm$1,5 m high) from the toilet room. The shower room did not have any partitions and it is not clear how many shower roses were installed. While the shower room could be reached under cover of the verandah, workers had no covered access to the toilet and urinal rooms.

What appear to have been washing and cooking areas were located on either side of the building (see Figure 4). These areas have a reinforced concrete ceiling. It appears that at a later date a small 'lock up' room - or 'stocks' (a workers' colloquial term) - was formed in part of the space between rooms 1 and 2. This room has a heavily barred high level window. A heavy iron ring is built into one wall, and may have been used to chain up unfortunate 'inmates' as was the case in the mine compounds.

In general, the compound is in a reasonable state of repair. The compound was surprisingly well built with reddish facebricks and carefully detailed, as evidenced by the brick verandah columns and the sandstone quoining. The structure appears to be in a generally sound condition apart from localised cracking. A number of the brick columns supporting the verandah are missing. Most of the original entrance door and window combinations for the rooms have been replaced with metal doors. All the timber windows and louvered ventilators are in need of maintenance. The corrugated iron roof requires painting. Since compounds were originally low cost buildings, in relative terms it will not be overly expensive to restore. An estimate of the cost of restoration will require a detailed evaluation of the condition, but will be a fraction of the cost of building a structure of similar floor area with minimal finishes.

A row of white working class semi-detached houses is separated from the compound's north wall by a narrow service alley. The close proximity of white housing to the compound provides a striking contrast to the model of urban development adopted in the post 1948 era. Although on their own they are not of special significance, they do provide an immediate comparison between white and black working class living conditions. It appears a practical and desirable project for the Africana Museum to restore one or two of these houses in conjunction with the compound.

PROSPECTS FOR RESTORING THE NEWTOWN COMPOUND

When it became known that the Johannesburg City Council was about to redevelop the Newtown Electricity site, the National Monuments Council (NMC) requested one of its honorary curators to compile a survey of all the buildings. No building plans were found for the older structures, and the compound was incorrectly identified as municipal workshops (its use at the time of the survey). A document prepared on behalf of the Johannesburg City Council by urban design consultants Gallagher Aspoas Poplak Senior did not identify the Newtown Compound, but noted the site as an "opportunity area" for development.

In July 1990 as a result of an NMC site inspection the original function of the building as a compound was identified. Any building more than fifty years old is protected in terms of the National Monuments Act (Sect. 12.2a(f)). Since in the initial survey the compound had not been identified to be retained, the NMC immediately informed the City Council's Town Planning Department of the compound's significance. It was subsequently discussed

by the NMC's Transvaal Regional Committee, which proposed it be declared a national monument. The owner, the City of Johannesburg, was approached accordingly in May 1991 but no reply has been received at yet.

It seems, however, that the Council has accepted the retention of the building as part of any new development. The Council's recent proposals for developing the area as the *Newtown Cultural Precinct* requires that the compound be retained in terms of conditions laid down by the NMC. As a minimum these conditions would include the retention and complete restoration of the complete exterior facades. In respect of the utilisation of the compound, the Africana Museum would like to retain the entire building as a Museum of Labour, but lack the funds to do so. As a scaled down option, the museum would like to retain the east wing and ultimately recreate the interiors. The NMC has required that the two dormitory rooms, the ablution block and the punishment cell in the east wing be retained unchanged and not adapted to a new use. The museum staff have already undertaken extensive photographic documentation of the compound.

The NMC would require whoever uses the remaining portion of the building to conduct their internal alterations in such a way as to be reversible. As in the case of alterations to any buildings of national significance, plans of proposed alterations would have to be submitted to the NMC for approval. Parties who have expressed interest in utilising the building include Mega Music, The Workers' Library and the Johannesburg Institute of Social Services.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are number of important reasons for preserving the Newtown Compound. Firstly, as an example of the 'Rand Mines' compound design, it is representative of many mine and municipal compounds built in the first two decades of this century. Secondly, it is smaller in scale than most compounds. Therefore the Newtown Compound can be retained in its entirety without incurring prohibitive maintenance expenses and 'lost opportunity' costs (many compounds are located on sites which have become prime land).

Thirdly, it is located very closely to the Africana Museum and strategically in relation to the Johannesburg CBD. A number of advantages flow from this. A high proportion of visitors to the Africana Museum will visit the Newtown compound as part of their excursion. The area is becoming a major cultural, retail and financial precinct, thus the Newtown

Compound is likely to attract a much larger audience than it would if it were more distantly located. For example the Smit Street, which could also be considered for restoration, is poorly located in comparison. It is likely that it would draw far smaller numbers of visitors unless an exceptional drawcard was incorporated as part of these sites.

Fourthly, the Newtown Compound could be incorporated as part of the Africana Museum without incurring all the costs of a separate museum. This would make the possibility of preserving a compound far more financially viable. Fifthly, the incorporation of the adjacent white housing lends an added dimension to the historical contrasts and contexts possible for representing Johannesburg's labour history.

If the resources could be obtained, a strong argument could be made for the restoration as a museum of the compound in its entirety. However, an appropriate tenant could act as 'drawcard' which would result in many more visitors than the museum could attract on its own. Careful consideration will have to be given to the choice of tenants who may share the compound buildings with the museum if this is seen as desirable. Possible criteria for selecting tenants could include compatibility with the spirit of a labour and social history museum and the ability to draw people to the area. Thought needs to be given to how funds could be raised from the municipality, Transvaal Provincial Administration, the Regional Services Council, the Department of National Education, the private sector and non-governmental organisations.

Once the Witwatersrand's compounds were an apparently immutable social institution, designed and run to ensure control over black migrant labour. As an embarrassing relic of the precursors to grand apartheid, most of these compounds have been destroyed. Where history is presented in theme parks, a mythical and romantic past is being reconstructed. The possibility of restoring the Newtown Compound is a singularly valuable opportunity to restore a sense of the living conditions of migrant workers. If this opportunity is lost, future generations will grow up with a sanitised understanding of the primitive and exploitative conditions that provided the infrastructure and wealth of the 'new' South Africa.

Reference

Jameson, Adam, 1905. *Report of the Coloured Labour Compound Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Cubic Amount of Air Space in the Compounds of the Witwatersrand*, Pretoria.

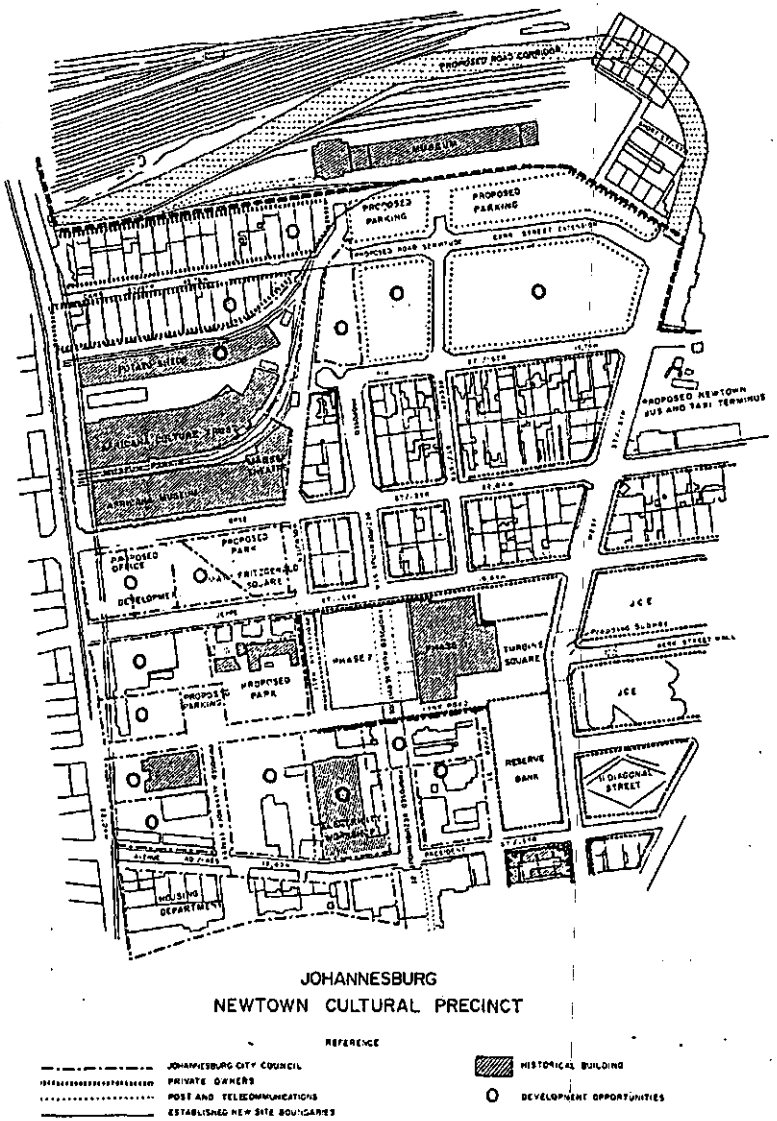

Figure 1: Locality plan showing Newtown Compound and adjacent semi-detached houses (Source:Planning Department, 1992. Newtown Cultural District, *Mimeograph*, Johannesburg City Council, April).

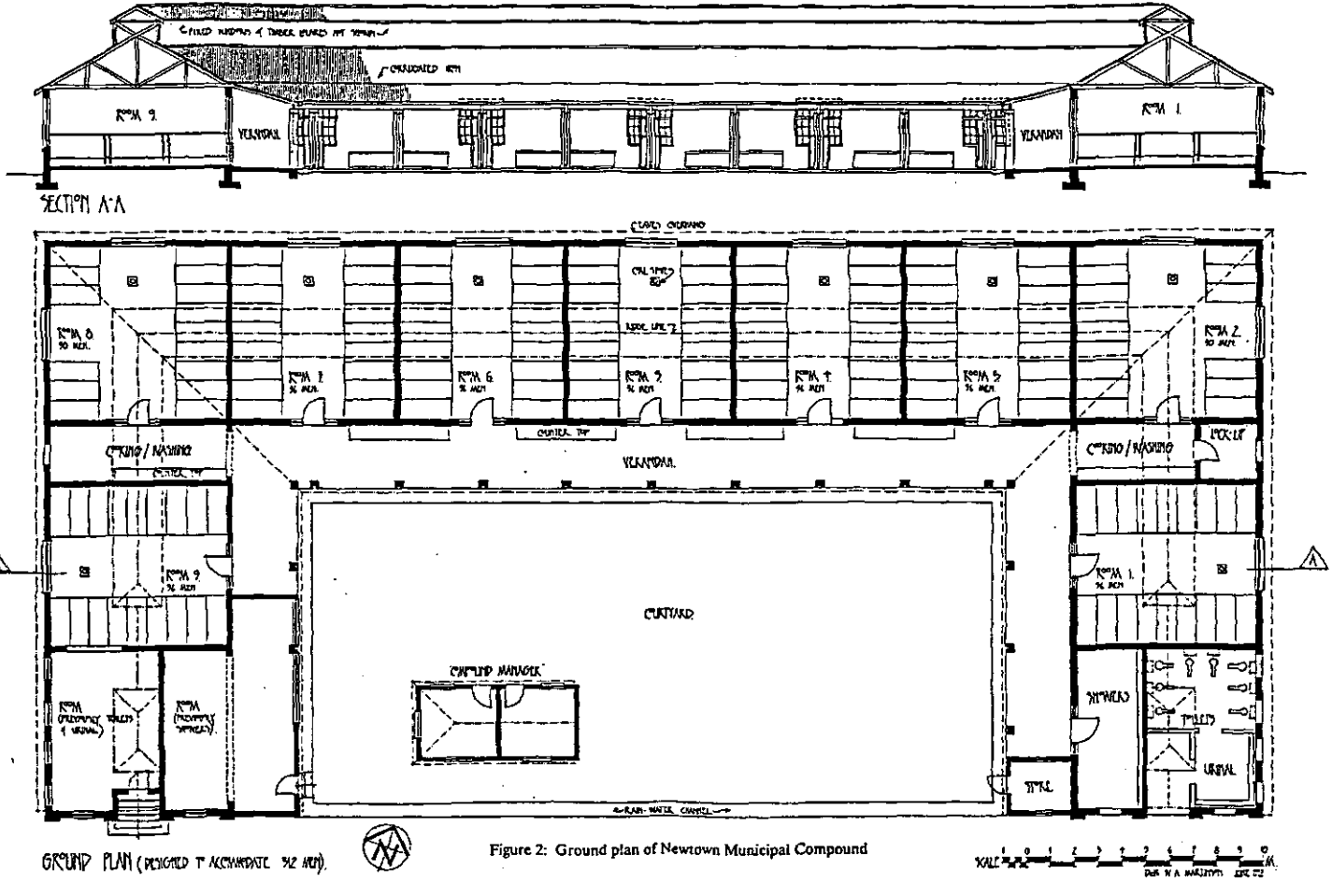

Figure 2: Ground plan of Newtown Municipal Compound

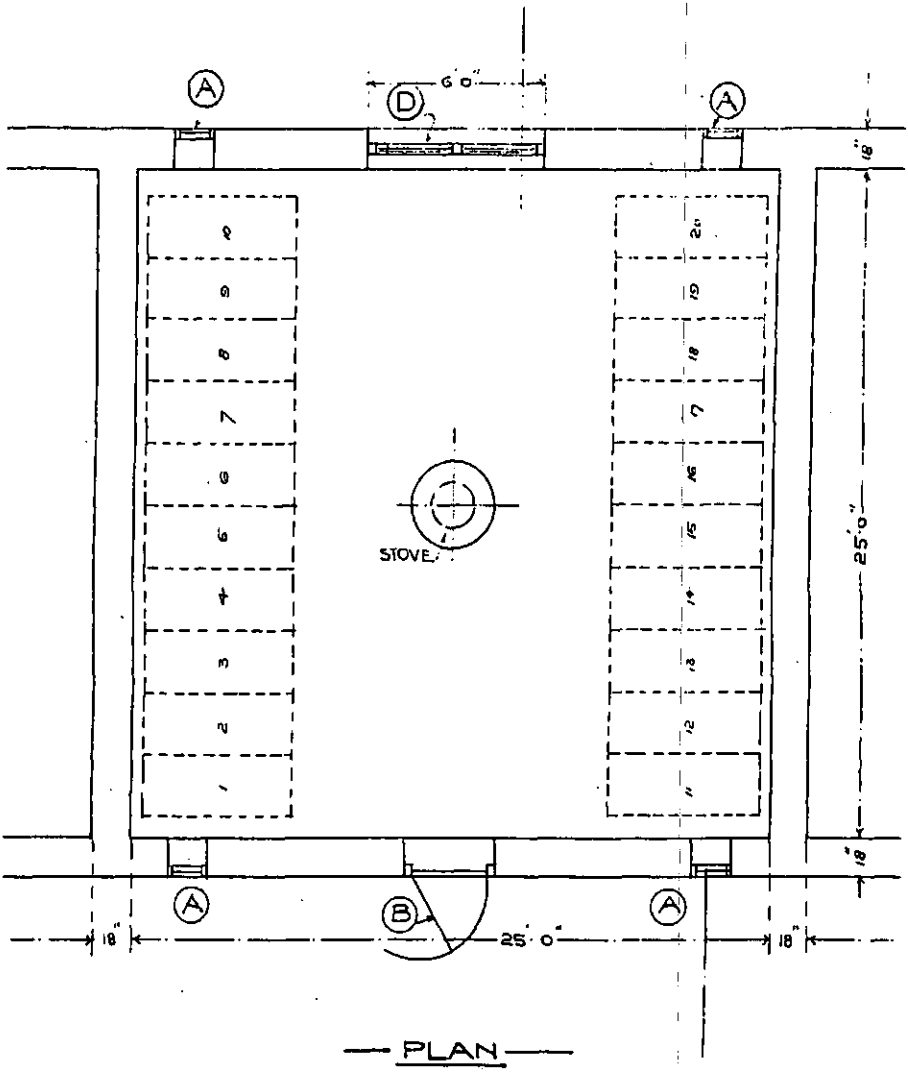

Figure 3: Plan of "'Rand Mines' Type of Hut" standard compound room (Source: *Coloured Labour Compound Commission of 1905*).

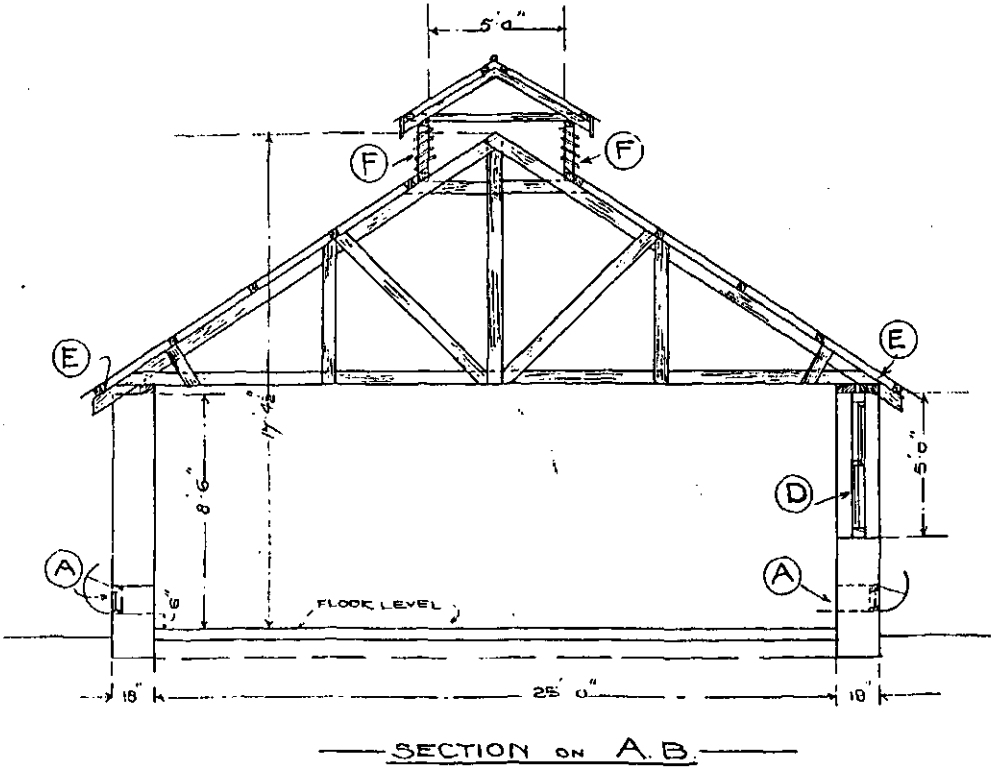

Figure 4: Section through "'Rand Mines' Type of Hut" standard compound room (Source: *Coloured Labour Compound Commission of 1905*).

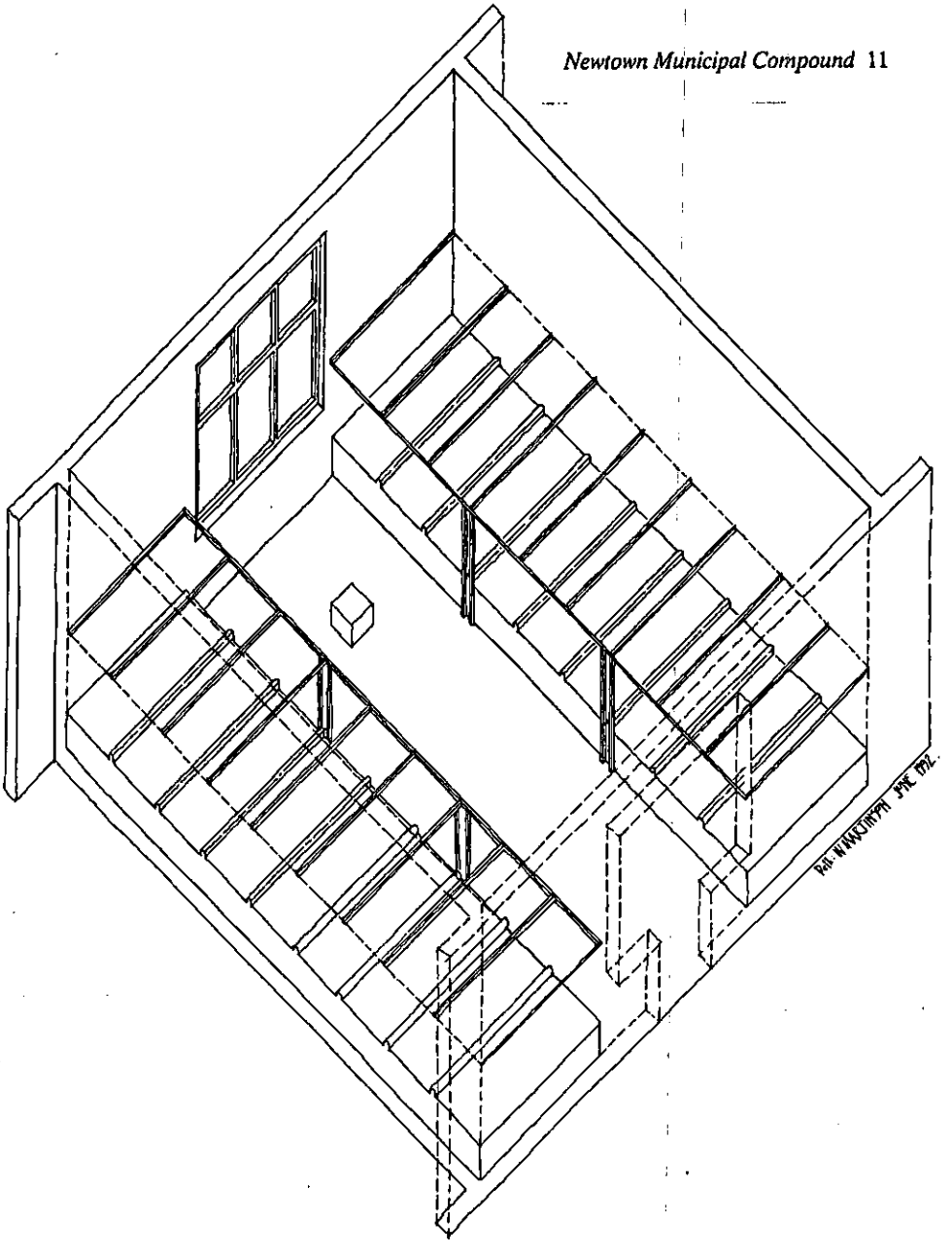

Figure 5: Three dimensional drawing of typical Newtown Municipal Compound room illustrating bunk bed arrangements.

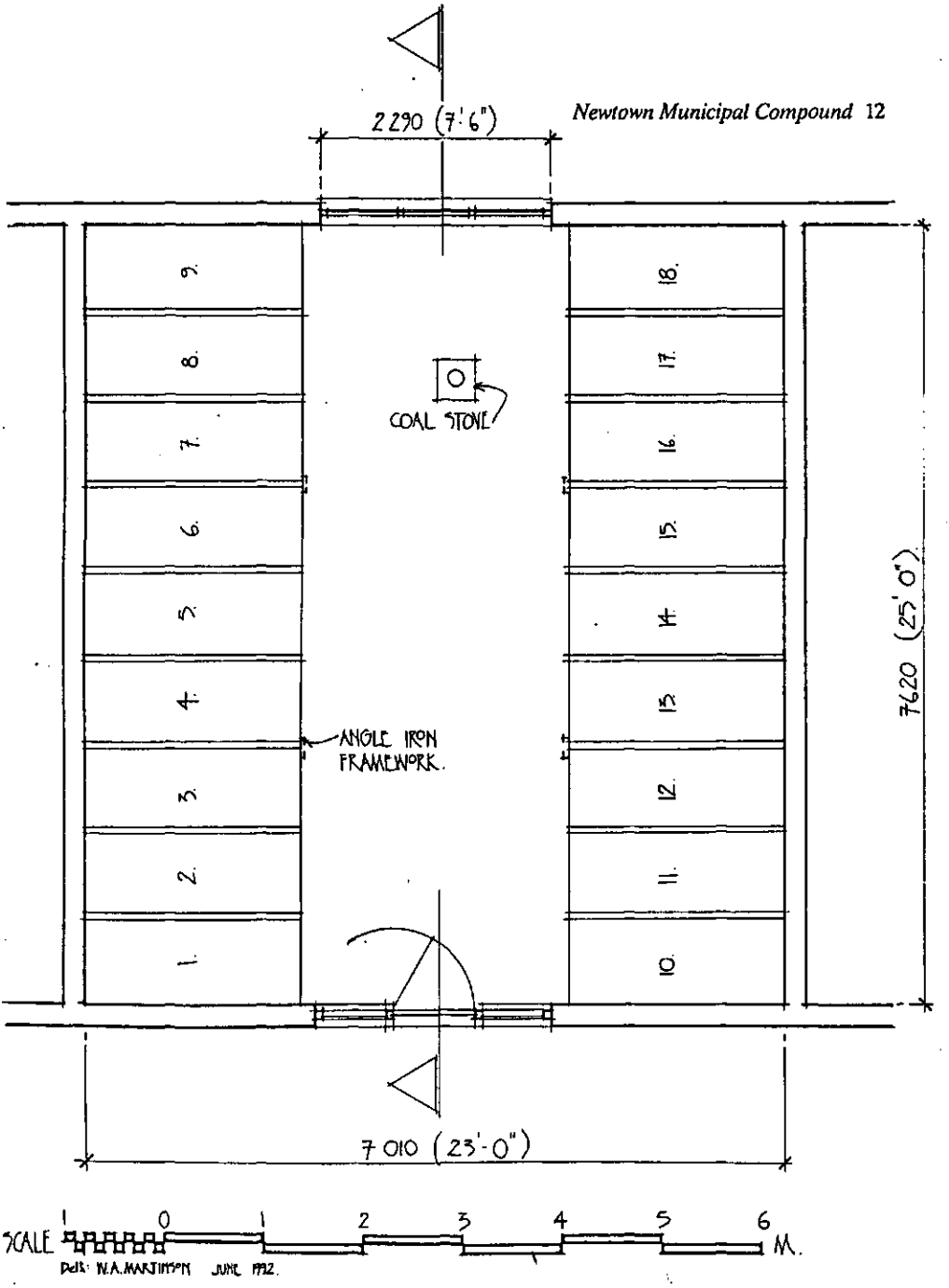

Figure 6: Plan of typical Newtown Municipal Compound room.

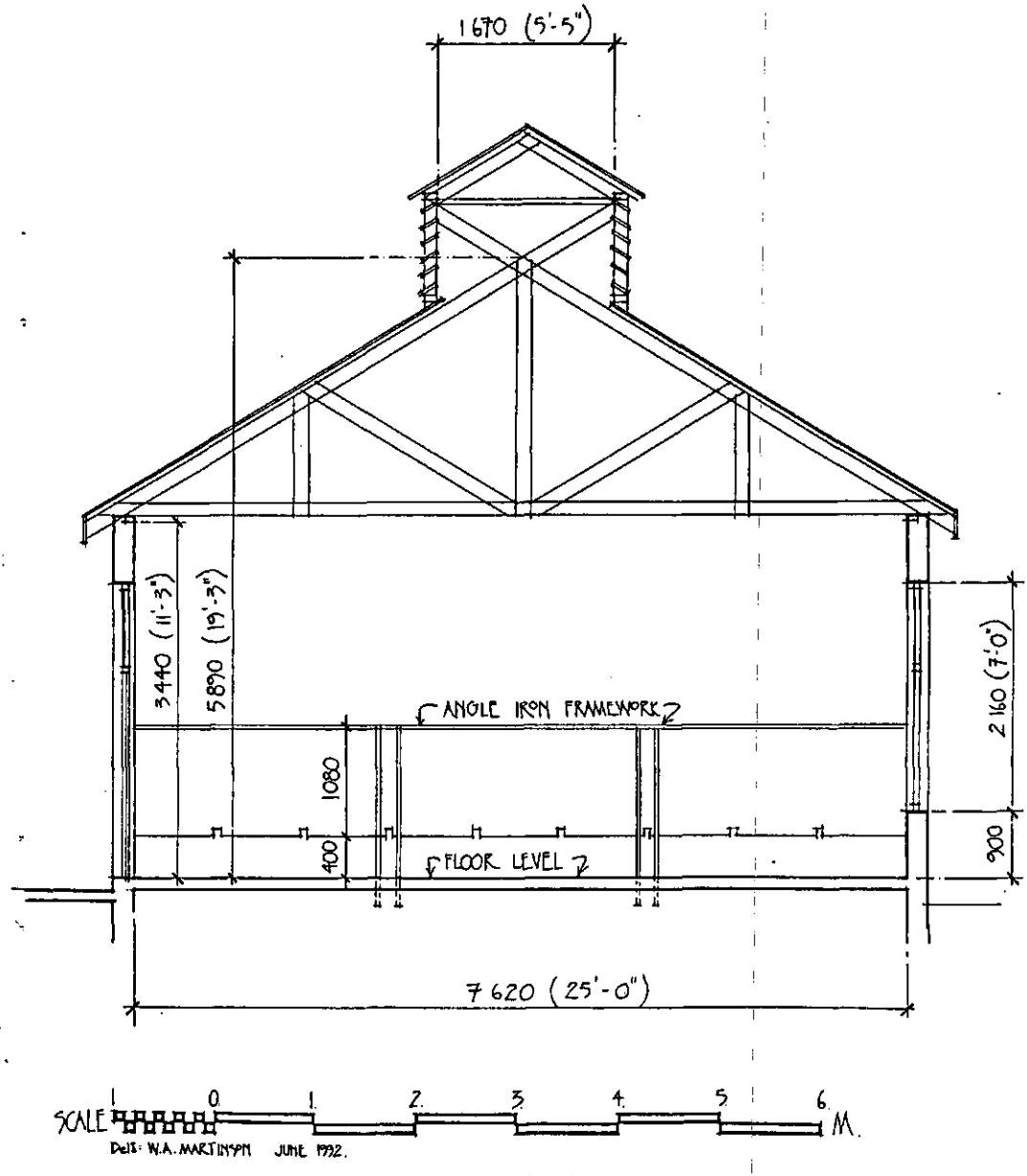

Figure 7: Section through typical Newtown Municipal Compound room.