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WITS JUNCTION – Student Housing and Heritage Adaptation

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evolve and be refined over the life of the project, was to provide accommodation for over 1 200 students (up from an initial 998 on condition of a grant from the Department of Higher Education and Training). The complex provides this accommodation in bachelor, two-, three- or four-bedroom units, as well as accommodation for visiting academics and additional facilities (such as a laundry and student centre) as part of a secure urban community of 14 new three- and four-storey buildings set out between five original heritage buildings and established trees. These supplement an existing residence dating from the 1980s, Parktown Village, which can accommodate up to 96 students.

The realisation of the project required the team work of project managers, an urban designer, architects, developers, a landscape designer, town planners, quantity surveyors, traffic consultants, engineers, tax and legal advisors, financiers and bankers, procurement officers and, ultimately, the residence officials, together with a strong internal campus planning drive. New thinking about finding finance and a design that spoke to a layered history, the preservation of a sylvan atmosphere, promoting a green environment, challenging geology and an imagined future student community was also needed.

DESIGN PROCESS

The development was initially envisaged using a public-private partnership (PPP) model where the developer would find the finance, commission the architects, build

and then operate with a lease agreement for 20 years. Only thereafter would the complex be transferred to the university for direct management, what is known as the build, operate and transfer (BOT) model. The successful developer, Rowmoor 615 (the special project vehicle of Synfin and Crowie) appointed their own architects, Boogertman + Partners, for the project.

In addition to this, the university appointed urban designer Ludwig Hansen of Urban Solutions and architects Henry Paine and Partners for the heritage component of the project. The director of Wits Campus Development and Planning, Emmanuel Prinsloo, commented on the many challenges of the Wits Junction project, extending over the period 2007 and 2011.

Spencer Hodgson, the chief project manager for all of Wits' infrastructural developments, describes the process as a 'rollercoaster'. Plans evolved as budgets were revisited and specialist inputs were sought. Achieving a balance between commercial viability and university needs meant that finding the right developers, consultants and contractors was essential.

FINANCE AND OPERATIONS

While a PPP model was initially proposed, the business case for Wits was revisited in 2009 with a review of the legal and financial structure, the nature, purpose and goals of the proposed property development, as well as financial cash flows, repayment projection values and returns and tax considerations. By late 2009, the decision was taken to shift to a more hands-on

- 1 The courtyard of block 17, Amagumbi
- 2 Restored historic homestead that now functions as the Mzini Wami student centre.
- 3 Established trees retained between heritage buildings and new student residences
- 4 Heritage UDF

operational approach. Wits decided to finance the project itself with Rand Merchant Bank advancing the capital. The finance was the bank's first ever 20-year loan to an institution.

The DHET's contribution of R60.5 million offset the loan's financing costs and ensured government approval and support for the project as part of the national plan for residential provision at universities. The final project budget on completion was R511 million, substantially higher than the national average of R240 000 per bed (DHET, 2011).

It was decided that direct responsibility for operations should be taken over by the Wits Office of Residence Life. It was realised that a university, with its hard-earned experience of running residences, was the best management option. The scheme had become a 'build quickly, transfer early and operate efficiently' model, despite the very expensive nature of the project.

HERITAGE - A TOOL FOR PLANNING

Heritage and the earlier suburban street layout informed the layout and design of the development, with Junction Road being retained as the central spine and main access route. The Heritage Impact Assessment report (completed by Dr Johan Bruwer and Henry Paine) became a critical design tool. Heritage Stakeholders