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WITS JUNCTION – Student Housing and Heritage Adaptation

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consulted the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust (now the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation, JHF) and the Parktown Association. Initial concerns revolved around the finalisation of site development plans, the retention of heritage buildings, parking, the loss of views, the scale of the new buildings and building heights to match older buildings and old houses. A process of consultation, better understanding of the challenges and that the university was contributing to new solutions for a decaying suburb in flux converted objectors into supporters. Flo Bird, chairman of the JHF, sees the new development as an expression of the university's founding principles: 'Wits is a university not of patronage but of the people of Johannesburg. Wits was created in the crashing spirit of protest of Johannesburg's people rather like the clash of the tectonic plates in the formation of the Witwatersrand ridge.'

Incorporating all that the HIA report advised, such as the retention of wall remnants or old street lights, was challenging within the requirements of the brief, but ultimately a better product emerged. The topography of the site was retained and shaped the design, rather than the adoption of a proposed civil engineering solution to construct platforms for the buildings. Five heritage houses were retained and R80 million was spent to retain and integrate the heritage buildings into the complex. The oldest of the heritage houses, Muzi Yami (later Eridge House), is now a student centre with others functioning as an administrative centre, apartments for visiting academics and wardens' cottages.

Prinsloo commented that an exciting lesson learnt was 'to find the balance between being precious about heritage and a forward-looking design and use for the buildings'. Heritage provides constraints, he explained, the fingerprints of the past that need to be retained. 'The full restoration may not always be possible, but you must make it functional and make decisions without being reckless,' he said.

THE IMPORTANCE OF URBAN DESIGN

While the developer continued to be responsible for construction, the role of urban designer became more important with Hansen representing university interests. Hansen understood that Wits is an urban university possessing the size, resources and influence to change the entire spine of the city ridge from Braamfontein to Parktown. The foregrounding of urban design for this type of development is unique, with the development bringing urban renewal to Johannesburg and spearheading revitalisation of the edges of Hillbrow.

The heritage impact assessment became an important starting point for the design process. The historic street layout, buildings and gardens were respected in the design, with new courtyard buildings responding to these.

Landscaping and parking were also part of this vision. The impact of parking on the development was limited by the insertion of covered parking under the centrally located Shosholoza building, the use of grass block paving for any surface parking and through a shuttle bus service provided by the university to its other campuses. Landscaping by the Landscape Studio strove to incorporate heritage into the gardens, with the preservation of big old trees (including pepper trees, a declared invasive species, kept for its heritage value), taking into account existing kerbstones, low walls and the geological formations around the historic Randjieslaagte surveyors' beacon. This is one of three diagonal markers defining the original edges of Johannesburg and is now marked with a mosaic work of public art by Andrew Lindsay. 'This is where students meet, these are the spaces of chance encounter,' Professor Paul Kotze of Wits School of Architecture and Planning commented. Prinsloo enthused, 'We