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# SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECTS, INCLUDING THE CAPE, NATAL, ORANGE FREE STATE AND TRANSVAAL PROVINCIAL INSTITUTES AND THE CHAPTER OF SOUTH AFRICAN QUANTITY SURVEYORS

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# THE PRETORIA NORMAL COLLEGE WOMEN'S HOSTELS

**Designed for**

**THE TRANSVAAL PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION**

**By**

**C. ERIK TODD. A.R.I.B.A., M.I.A., Architect**

**In association with**

**W. GORDON McINTOSH, A.R.I.B.A., M.I.A., Architect**

A view from the North-East, showing the four bedroom wings, running east and west, of the first or eastern hostel. All bedrooms face north and overlook grassed courts separating the wings. The wide, high wall on the street boundaries forms a continuous flower box. Sun control is effected by shutters.

These two hostels were planned to meet certain conditions laid down by the Principal of the Normal College and were erected in two stages under two separate contracts between 1945 and 1948.

Each hostel provides accommodation for 80 women students—one hostel was designed in such a way that it could be repeated on the same site and yet provide similar orientation and aspect. In order to provide a Northern aspect to all the bedroom-studies, the general plan comprised four bedroom wings running east and west, linked to a north-south wing containing the common rooms, matron's and staff flats, with the dining room and kitchen blocks being kept as separate units linked to the main buildings with a covered way.

Planned on two floors, each bedroom wing contained five bedroom-study units on each floor, with

provision for two students to each unit. These bedroom study units are well equipped with two wardrobes, wash-hand basin, and bookshelves with cupboards below, the study being cut off from the bedroom section by means of a low wall. A lavatory unit comprising a bathroom, w.c., shower and general washing and drying room was placed at the end of each wing on each floor level thus providing separate facilities for each group of ten students. The North-South wing with students entrance in the centre has on the ground floor two students visitors rooms flanking the entrance, students common room, and staff flats at each end for the teaching and housekeeping staff. On the first floor provision is made for an upper common room for students, and a large loggia balcony approximately 50 feet long by 18 feet wide, with matron's quarters and teachers' quarters at each end. The staircases were placed at either end of the North-South wing under direct control of the staff. On each floor there is an ironing room for the use of the students. All rooms and bathrooms and staff flats are supplied with hot water fed from a basement boiler room.

There is a separate dining room and kitchen block for each hostel. Each comprise a dining hall for about 90 students and staff, large kitchen equipped with Aga stoves, electric stove, dish washer, etc., china store, dry store, two cold rooms, matron's office, staff rest room and waiters change room. Each kitchen was designed to provide as much separation of European and Native staff as possible. Both hostels are identical in plan and accommodation except in case of the West Block, where a difference in level of site has been used to provide garages for staff and bulk dry stores, etc.

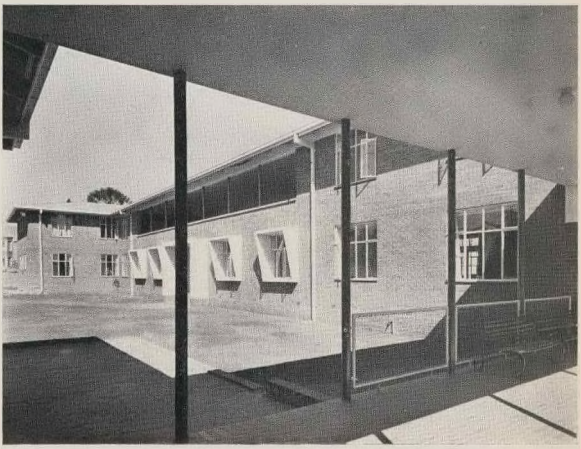
The two blocks face one another and flank a large central lawn and garden with access from Rissik Street on the south. This open lawn was required as a gathering centre and to provide a suitable area for displays or open-air exhibitions, which could be viewed from the balconies on either side.

The general finishes are as follows:—

External finishes : External walls, Kirkness red vertex facing bricks ; Windows, steel ; Roof, corrugated iron.

Internal finishes : Walls in corridors lined with golden yellow brick dado and plaster above ; plastered elsewhere, with bathrooms, w.c.'s, shower and washing rooms tiled ; Floors, Asphalt tiles in corridors, wood in rooms and brick or quarry tile paving elsewhere.

Photography by Alan Yates



An oblique view of the western hostel seen from the covered way linking it with its Dining Hall. The large balcony-loggia on the first floor, overlooking the grassed forecourt, is clearly seen in this picture.



A general view looking North-East towards the main entrance of the first or eastern hostel, with its Dining Hall at left.

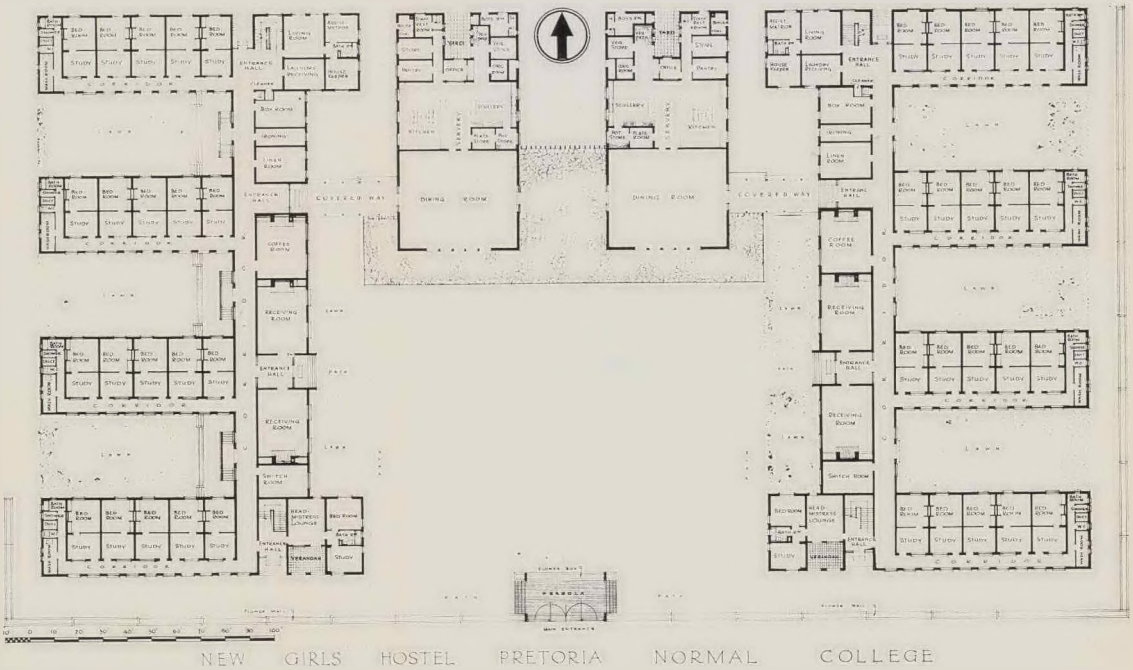
External walls are of Kirkness and "Vertex" facing bricks, chosen for ease of maintenance and appearance. The simple white contrasts are effective.



A general view looking North-West across the wide grassed forecourt towards the second or western hostel, with its Dining Hall seen at right.

The contractors for the Eastern Hostel were : Engel and Ruyter (Pty.) Ltd., of Pretoria.

The contractor for the Western Hostel was : W. M. Pattison (Pty.) Ltd., of Pretoria.




THE PRETORIA NORMAL COLLEGE WOMENS HOSTELS : GENERAL GROUND FLOOR PLAN




# STANBERRA HOUSE, BULAWAYO

**ARCHITECTS**

**Manfred Berlowitz, M.I.A. (S.R.)**

**AND**

**Jack Furmanovsky, M.I.A. (S.R.)**

ABOVE : The main elevation fronting on Rhodes street. This west facing facade has a free-standing concrete screen containing adjustable metal louvres to provide protection against the penetration of the western sun and to permit a free flow of air over the windows. The spandril panels are faced with rustic slate walling. Fixed louvres are fitted in terrazza frames mounted in the glass brick wall of the staircase, seen on the right.

The Programme : A building was required comprising two large shops on the ground floor, each with a basement accessible both from the shop and from a back service yard ; a first floor of offices and a second floor of three-room flats. The permissable coverage for shops, offices and flats in this area is 90%, 66% and 50%, and the owners requested that in each case the maximum coverage should be utilized.

**EXTERNAL COLOUR TREATMENT**

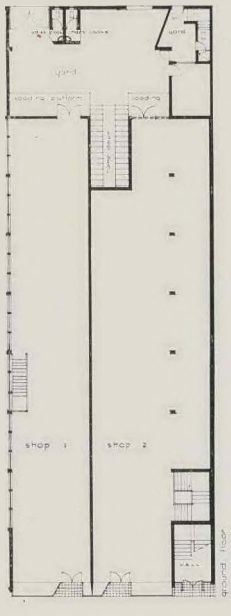
The use of colour on the facade gives a bright and attractive appearance to the building. The main surround to the facade is in buff rough cast with the concrete frames and balconies finished in white. The adjustable louvres are a pale sea green, the columns are maroon, the lettering is coloured maroon and canary yellow, and the shopfronts are faced with white "Vitralite."

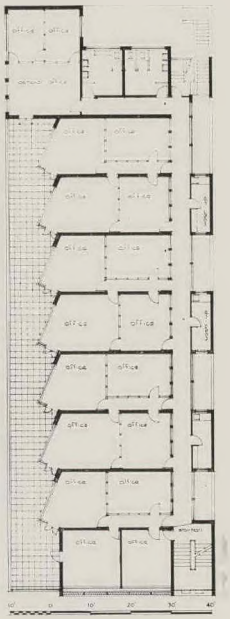
The Site : The site, 140' x 50', faces North-West and is situated on the outskirts of Bulawayo's business centre. The frontage is 50' wide and a sanitary lane is on the East boundary which contains the goods access to the shops and the service approach to the flats.

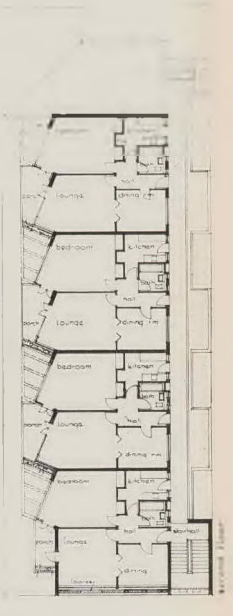
Solution : Since the building faces West a flexible system of sun control was essential. This West facade, which consists of slate panels with wall-to-wall windows above is fronted with a free standing concrete screen containing adjustable metal louvres. The handles of these louvres coincide with the opening sections of the windows behind.

The offices are arranged in pairs with interleading doors between each pair. The offices off the corridor have clear storey lighting over the doors and additional light is obtained from the corridor itself. The open area is on the North side and this

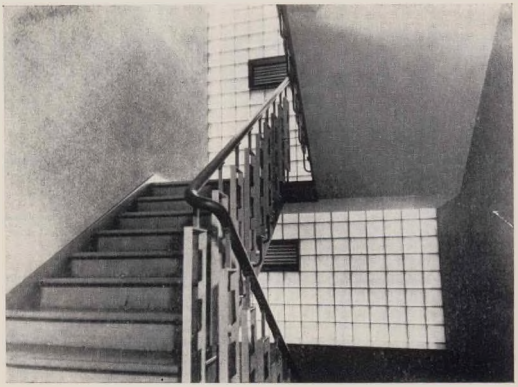








ABOVE : The northern terrace at first floor level with access from the offices. The balconies to the flats above project and shade the offices and in turn are shaded by the projecting slab. The staggered wall line is an ingenious means of giving each office and flat what is in effect a street aspect, as this side of the building actually fronts on an access lane.

RIGHT : The rough cast walls of the staircase flanking the glass brick panel are painted pale green, with pink on the rear wall. The smooth, continuous soffit is white, stringers and risers are pink terrazzo with teak treads. The metal balustrade is picked out in white, red and grey.




system appears to work well and the offices are pleasant to work in. The partitioning of each suite is arranged in accordance with the tenant's requirements, while saw-tooth arrangement of the offices gives the feeling of facing more directly on to the street.

The top floor consists of four three-room flats. Two of the rooms are interleading with flush 8' wide doors. Incorporated in the cantilever over the shops are blinds, which are operated by means of pulleys and counterweights within the shops. The counterweights are enclosed in a small cupboard and the blinds are raised or lowered by pulling one of the weights.

The main entrance doors are "Armourplate" set in a tapered concrete frame with plate glass surround.



The architect's office suite : the entrance with reception counter seen at right. The wall in the background displays photographs on standard size mounts fitted in adjustable wood framing.



LEFT : One principal's office. The walls are panelled and storage fittings fill the space below the window. All furniture is in Mukwa and floors are brown asphalt tiles broken by a pattern of light buff spotted tiles.



RIGHT : The two principals' offices are separated by a partition covered with fawn "Rexine," over which is laid a system of adjustable framing for the purpose of displaying perspectives and photographs.



LEFT : The second principal's office, showing panelling and fittings below the windows. The illustration also shows the adjustable louvres outside the window.

# THE CORONATION ANNEXE WESTMINSTER ABBEY

**Designed by Eric Bedford, A.R.I.B.A., Chief Architect, Ministry of Works. William S. Bryant, A.R.I.B.A., Senior Architect in charge**

The annexe is required to provide accommodation for the reception of the Queen by the Earl Marshal, and for the Peers. A large assembly space is required for the formation of the procession, with facilities for robing and refreshments. The annexe must adjoin the West door of the Abbey on the restricted site defined by the buildings and the existing trees. The first annexe, erected for the coronation of William IV in 1831, was constructed of "wood quartering and boarding with a cloth-lined roof." The designs since then have reflected the contemporary architectural thought : that for King George V, in 1911, was Gothic and very much in character with the Abbey itself ; the annexe of 1937 for the coronation of King George VI, illustrated below, speaks for itself.

The present structure is a gay and colourful design as befits a youthful Queen, and it illustrates the direction in which official architectural thought in England has moved in recent years. The raised canopy over the Royal Coat of Arms coupled with the vertical treatment of the windows of the hall imparts a lightness and scale to the annexe.

Economy in cost of such a temporary building is important. The construction consists of a light tubular framework with asbestos and felt roof and walls of timber and hardboard cladding.



The Annexe (model) seen from Tothill Street.
Photograph : Ministry of Works Crown Copyright reserved.



The building comprises three elements—the entrance, the hall and ancillary rooms. The entrance, adequately lit by its transparent roof, is the focal point of the design and it has been emphasised on elevation. As it is the point of arrival and departure of the Queen, a good view from as many vantage points as possible is essential.

Colour and sculpture is to be used liberally on the exterior. The brilliant note of the Royal Coat of Arms over the entrance is to be supported by the colours of the Dominion and Colonial emblems, while the sculptures, designed by Mr. James Woodford, R.A , will include the Queen's Beasts.

The total cost is expected to be about £50,000.

# THE VANDERBIJLPARK SHOPPING CENTRE

Professor John Fassler, B.Arch., A.R.I.B.A., M.I.A.,
Dean of the Faculty of Architecture,
University of the Witwatersrand.

Towns in ancient Greece and Rome concentrated their inhabitants within the confining circuit of defensive walls. As they were very carefully planned a logical consequence was the establishment of centres for the distribution of foodstuffs, goods and the trading of surpluses, as well as further centres needed for administrative purposes, religious observances and recreation. In this way the convenience of the populace was assured. The civic centre, the agora in Greek times, and forum in Roman, was usually kept apart from the market place. Thus the higher and the more mundane facets of daily life were separated. Both were carefully laid out. In civic centres particularly a dignified setting was achieved seldom equalled in the average run of modern towns. As the population of the average classical cities was small by modern standards, one market place and civic centre invariably sufficed. This position continued in Mediaeval and Renaissance times.

The rapid growth of cities in size and population since the middle of the nineteenth century, coupled with the more complex pattern of life which the Industrial Revolution evolved, created fresh problems. The civic centre and business and principal shopping areas expanded considerably and have become component parts of the central core of towns remote from suburban zones. For convenience, the need to establish additional shopping centres as integral parts of residential areas arose, and has been met by the well-known modern approach of planning neighbourhood units, making each a complete entity as regards the provision of government and municipal facilities, clinics, shops, and cinemas in cases where population density permits.

The planning of these business and administrative cores for neighbourhood units poses the problem of relating various types of buildings to one another, to form a successful architectural group. It is only in recent years that it has received the attention it deserves. In South Africa commerce has insisted on approaching projects of this kind along certain conservative lines. It is argued that shop frontages can be valued in terms of the vehicular traffic and pedestrians which pass them. Shops have therefore come to be planned along streets with the pavement as a separation from traffic. While more adequate parking provisions have been made in recent years, the feeling that neighbourhood centres constitute a group of buildings has been entirely lost. The most advantageous positions facing streets on plots zoned as neighbourhood centres are usually given to shops. All remaining facilities, namely government, municipal, clinical, etc., have to be tucked in wherever possible.

One of the newest suburban centres in Johannesburg, that established during the past five years in Emmarentia Extension, exhibits all these negative tendencies (1). From the civic design point of view, it is entirely unsatisfactory in conception. It offers a marked contrast to the Vanderbijlpark centre, which will be described later. Before proceeding to analyse what may be regarded as a possible approach to the planning of neighbourhood centres, let me refer again to the attitude of commerce to the matter. As was mentioned above, it is held that the value of shop frontages are in proportion to the traffic which pass them. In practice, this has automatically meant lining streets with shops. Now I doubt whether commerce in South Africa has considered the alternative ; the grouping of shops about an open space in which pedestrians can circulate freely, away from traffic, and which by virtue of the inclusion of flower beds, trees and sculpture, can be made so attractive that in itself it becomes an extremely pleasant place in which to make one's purchases. Such a centre can exert an attraction, it is submitted, which is potentially greater than that exercised by the uninspired rows of shops which are customary in our suburbs. This does not mean that within the new type of shopping centre there will not be sites, which, because of their prominence, will be more valuable than others. It does mean, however, that in spite of the fact that individual shops do not face streets directly, they can nevertheless be successful commercially. This fact has been demonstrated at Vanderbijlpark.

If the design of a neighbourhood centre is to be tackled on the basis of creating a group of build-

ings arranged about an open space, all freely approachable by pedestrians, then the next step is to find a suitable approach for executing the design of the group. The history of Western architecture can help here for it reveals that there are three possible types of group plan.

* * * *

The first is formal and symmetrical in conception. One side balances the other about a series of well-defined axes. The Renaissance places at Nancy, designed by Hèrè de Corney for Stanislas Leszinski, are examples. So is the ancient Forum of Trajan and the more recent Frederiksplatz in Copenhagen.

The second type of group is formal and asymmetrical. Although the geometry underlying the group is clearly evident, the sense of balance is not so obvious and is more subtly achieved. The Greek temple temenos at Sunium is an example. So is the Piazza San Marco, Venice. The third type is informal. Buildings appear to have fallen into place naturally. Most mediaeval piazzas in Italy and in Europe generally fall into this category. To be more specific, there is the brilliant piazza della Signoria in Florence, and the equally fascinating Piazza del Duomo in Pistoie. They are both notable for their picturesque quality.

The question which needs consideration is the advisability of approaching the planning of the neighbourhood group in terms of one of the three possibilities outlined above.

* * * *

Visually the effect of the formal and symmetrical group demands that all parts shall be disciplined by the necessity for symmetry and balance. One half must reflect the other. The question is not whether such a group is successful visually ; it certainly is in practice, and does give rise to an atmosphere of great dignity, order and repose. The problem is rather, can we expect buildings which are as diverse in shape and size as shops, clinics and branch libraries, to assume appropriate positions in a lay-out of this form ? Added to the diversity of form of the building types, there is also the fact that in our democratic society practically every building will be designed by a different architect ; many will not be the work of architects at all. The chance that a formal and symmetrical scheme can successfully and efficiently form the basis of a modern neighbourhood centre under normal circumstances is therefore slight. It could only be utilised under special conditions, where the scheme is being developed by one authority, but this condition does not normally prevail.

The formal and asymmetrical approach offers greater flexibility in the play of mass and form, and has been successfully exploited by Frederick Gibberd, in his project for Harlow's town centre and others. Architects erecting buildings as constituent parts of such a group would, however, have to be prepared to discipline themselves in order to ensure that their contributions do not attract undue attention to themselves, and that generally in their designs, they will have something in common with adjoining buildings.

The informal approach appears to offer the greatest freedom and flexibility. Care must be exercised in relating heights of buildings to space between, and in the placing of principal accents. in these circumstances, a satisfactory result can be achieved. Some freedom is also permissible in the location of building lines, so that right angles are not ubiquitous. These may take advantage of existing trees and topography. The latter should be reasonably flat or at most, gently sloping.

* * * *

At this stage a further reference must be made to the importance of establishing satisfactory relationships between heights of buildings and the spaces between. It is a well known principle of civic design that the visual effect created by a group of buildings stems largely from this relationship. For example, there is the dramatic effect of the narrow approach to the Piazza della Signoria, between the Uffizi Galleries in Florence. Here the height to width ratio is about 1 to $\frac{3}{4}$. The effect is canyon-like and focuses attention very powerfully on the campanile cantilevering dizzily from the external wall of the Palazzo Vecchio over 300 feet above the pavement beyond. In the opposite direction, a climax is afforded by a lofty loggia which frames a view of the banks of the River Arno and the town on the rising ground beyond. Moscow's Red Square offers a complete contrast. Here the spacious Square is flanked on one side by the forbidding walls of the Kremlin, and on others by buildings which are low in proportion to the width of the open space in front of them The Square creates the feeling that it has been conceived as a setting for grand spectacles. It calls for the massed march past of the Red Army or athletes of the Soviet Union, and so on. It is a common fault that the plan of a group is conceived with insufficient thought of the third dimension. Usually too much space is allowed, consequently, the moment a sectional elevation is drawn, the inability of the buildings to form a satisfactory boundary to the space becomes apparent immediately.



1

The Emmarentia shopping centre is typical of many on the Witwatersrand. Shops hug the streets closely, and to move from those illustrated to a similar block on the left outside the picture, shoppers have to cross a wide street. The atmosphere is towdry. Tarmacadam and parked vehicles predominate. There is a total absence of any civic dignity.

The height to width relationships of the important European piazzas are well worth study. The use of tall vertical accents such as the Campanile in the Piazza San Marco, or the Obelisk in the Piazza San Pietro, or that in the Place de la Concorde, Paris, also give point and emphasis to these squares. It follows from what hase been said that a tall feature requires enough space in front of it for it to be appreciated to the best advantage as part of a composition. Now whereas campaniles and obelisks were favourite elements used as vertical accents in historic times and are such delightful features of these Piazzas, they are neither suitable nor approprite in the modern shopping centre. The question we therefore have to ask ourselves is : what is a suitable contemporary alternative ? A solution may very likely be found along the lines suggested by Gunnar Asplunds' steel pylon, which he designed for the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. This pylon (5) shows how Asplund used advertisements imaginatively. He achieved a central feature which was meaningful and must have been extremely decorative both by day and night. It indicates that in place of the Mediaeval Bell Tower which served to summon the populace in time of alarm, we can legitimately substitute tall silvery slender steel pylons, bedecked with advertising signs and slogans, employing rich primary colours and illuminated gaily for night use. It must be emphasised that unless such pylons are designed carefully by architects, employing lettering of excellent quality, they could be potential blemishes, and not the things of beauty which sensitive imaginations can make them.

* * * *

Reference can now be made to the new Vanderbiljpark shopping centre. This is the first of a series of sub-centres projected in the overall plan to supplement the town centre which has not yet commenced building. As a shopping centre it breaks with the traditional arrangement referred to previously. Shops in this instance face on to an open plaza which is enlivened with sculpture, brightly coloured cannas and shimmering green

2

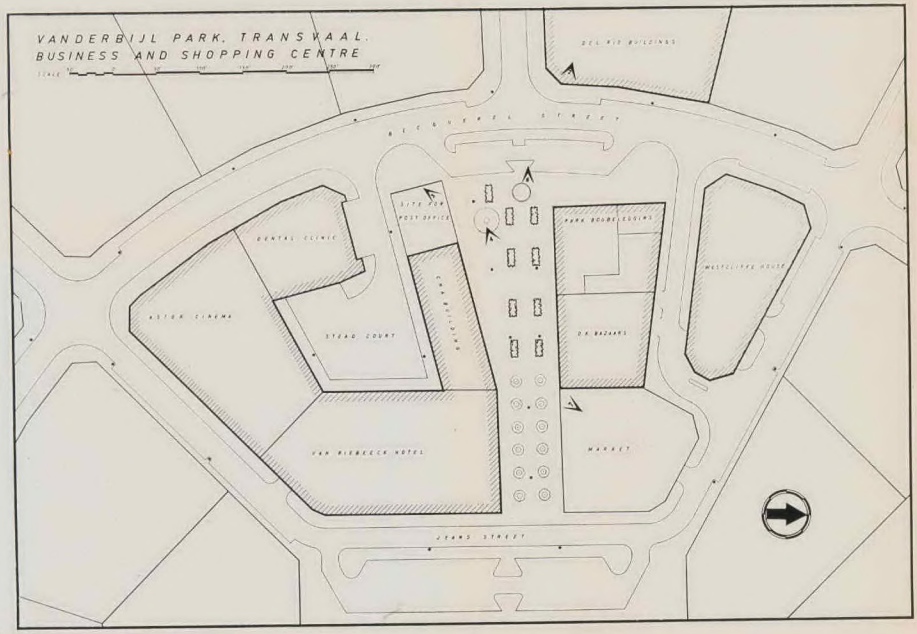


Vanderbijlpark shopping centre affords a complete contrast. The separation of pedestrians and traffic is the main theme. The roadway and parking bays are for vehicles, the paved area is for pedestrians. Flower beds, sculpture and trees help to engender a feeling of civic dignity.

lombardy poplars (2.) The plaza is lined on the south side with a long low building accommodating shops on the ground floor and professional offices above. A three storey hotel adjoins. A site for a future post office has been allocated. The north side also has a block of shops and professional offices and a moderately sized department store. The site next door for a market has not been developed.

Although the group is incomplete the atmosphere it already possesses is quite startling by comparison with the Emmarentia example cited previously (3 and 4). The experiment has been entirely successful from the point of view of the promoters, the Vanderbijlpark Estate Company, the shop proprietors, tenants of professional suites, and, most improtant, the people who use it. They have a feeling of pride for it, and it is fascinating to visit the centre on a busy shopping day. The accompanying photographs were all taken on a Saturday between nine and ten o'clock in the morning. In many of them, fathers, mothers, children and the family dog all appear moving freely and easily about the central space.

Temporary stands have been made available for flower sellers. Their booths add a further touch of colour to the scene. Thought has been given to the design of lighting standards. These are neat and are of pleasant form. The photographs also reveal a most pleasing absence of overhead wires or " wirescape " to use the term the " Architectural Review " coined recently. With regard to the character of the individual buildings, the C.N.A. Building by Messrs. Cowin and Ellis is pleasantly quiet and broad in treatment. It fills its position unobtrusively. The Van Riebeeck Hotel by Messrs. Gibbs and Dixon is rather strident and is heavy in treatment. A row of poplars immediately opposite softens the effect, and helps to combine building and group. On the other side of the plaza the relationship of the block by Messrs. Meiring and Naude with the O.K. Bazaars by H. H. le Roith and




Sufficient detail has been shown to indicate the general lines of the scheme. Vehicular access for the service of hotel and shops has been arranged from the rear. Parking facilities for shoppers are located at each end of the plaza. The general arrangement is asymetrical and informal. The numbers relate to the views which have been illustrated.




3

This view illustrates the easy informality of the centre. The complete freedom of movement enjoyed by pedestrians is obvious from the various directions in which people are moving. The family complete with dog in the foreground strikes a note which is characteristic of the way in which the centre is used.

Parners is less fortunate. The columns supporting the overhanging slab in the former building strike a false note in a composition in which cantilevered slabs prevail (6). The successful overall character the group achieves has already been mentioned. It remains to consider a number of criticisms which might usefully be borne in mind when another is developed. To commence with there is the intensity of reflected light from the light grey cement paving slabs, 18 inches square, used to surface the whole of the plaza. This glare can be unpleasant especially on bright sunny days. It could be lessened by using a slab which has some contained shadow such as would be provided by an indented pattern and rougher surface. Alternatively the combination of cement slabs and a darker material such as brick would deepen the tone value. Then there is the design of the pedestal supporting the bronze sculpture at the entrance to the shopping centre. The huge granite base is out of scale with the figure above it, and is far too cumbersome in conception. The design of the protective rail—concrete posts and chains—is banal, to say the least. How lacking in subtlety this detail is, may be appreciated by comparing the neat and satisfactory form of the lighting standards with the rail in illustration (6). But why have a protective handrail at all? Sculptures in Italy are not barricaded.

* * * *

Some comment is necessary on the subject of lettering. Illustration (7) shows how the C.N.A. Building has suffered. Windows at first floor level have been used not only to give the name of the firm but also to convey information about it. It is reasonable for a firm occupying offices at first floor level to wish to indicate its presence to the public by the use of some signwriting. The manner in which this has been done, however, is damaging from an architectural point of view. In all fairness it must be stated that the occupants are not entirely at fault, and that some measure of blame must also be assumed by the architects, who apparently did not make provision for lettering at all. Various possibilities offer themselves. A basic assumption must be that windows are for the admission of light and ventilation, and no lettering should be permitted on them at all. Provision could be made for signs projecting from the facade between windows, designed as an integral part of the building. Alternatively, though affording less play plastically, panels could be arranged above windows upon which such information as is necessary could be suitably inscribed.




The long narrow shape of the plaza does not need to be accentuated by the row of poplars beyond. They should preferably have been used to close the view. As it is, a strong perspective has been created with no focal point sufficiently important to justify the arrangement. The inclusion of a slender pylon of the type described is a possibility here.

4




5 Gunnar Asplund's cleverly designed steel pylon incorporated in the famous Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 contains a wealth of suggestion for the modern shopping centre. Sensitive handling of this type of element is essential in order to make something artistic of advertising.



6 A detail of the piece of sculpture at the entrance to the shopping centre.

There is also an excessive variation between the character of letters signwriters have employed. As a group of tradesmen in South Africa they are rather insensitive to the quality of good lettering. In the absence of a good tradition of lettering which could be relied upon, the next best thing would be to specify a series of types which could be employed, and in this way obtain a better overall standard.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Illustration 1 by permission "Die Transvaler". Illustration 5 from "Gunnar Asplund, Architect, 1885–1940," Ab Tidskriften, Byggmastaren, Stockholm. Photography by E. Robinow.

7 The use of window panes at first floor level in the building opposite is unsatisfactory particularly when these are opened. Words which run across more than one pane are chopped giving rise to some curiously incomplete words.



The possibility of using a light steel pylon for the support of advertisements has already been mentioned. Placed at the end of plaza to relate its height to the length of the open space, the inclusion of such a feature could provide an interesting and colourful accent by day and night.

Finally there is treeplanting. Poplars because of their tall columnar form are useful for the definition of planes, spatially speaking. In this case as the space already has a well defined longitudinal form, there was no need to emphasize it any further by adding poplars in the manner shown on plan. A few spreading deciduous shade trees would have been preferable. Their cast shadows would also have helped to lessen glare.

The importance of the Vanderbijlpark shopping centre is clear. It shows how, on the basis of an informal plan, and buildings added by different architects, a pleasant atmosphere has been achieved. In this case building alignment could have been varied a little more than has been done, with consequent gain to the quality of the space between and to the atmosphere of the whole ensemble.

Perhaps it is not too much to expect that with this excellent example to refer to, further progress can be made in the design of the many new centres still to be built in this rapidly expanding country.

# A MATTER OF TASTE

**By Leopold Grinker, M.I.A.**

It is twelve years and more since I last visited the South Coast of Natal. Coming along the main coastal road from Durban to Ramsgate, I was forcefully struck by the difference in my visual impressions then and now. In those days the drive was something of a battle, with almost continuous turning, and constant gear changing. I remember my car used nearly a whole gallon of oil in the hundred miles. Today the road is not only very well made from a practical point of view, but is most attractive to look at. Obviously careful thought has been given to the adjoining environs. There is not the usual plethora of advertisements and signs. The telegraph poles have been specially designed, as have the attractive concrete pylons for the future power lines. There appears to have been a general cleaning up process, and we saw no dilapidated structures. Even the occasional native huts and courtyards were spick and span and neat. The frequent river bridges are also well designed. All this, combined with the luxuriant Natal foliage, and the glimpses of the Indian Ocean to port, make the drive a most attractive one. The whole is a credit to the engineers and the landscape architects (if any) concerned.

During our stay we saw many seaside cottages, and other buildings, and various estates and gardens, etc., and I have been thinking what a queer thing visual taste is. It is something which is not quite capable of definition or explanation, and yet there is positively no doubt about it. Some things are in good taste, and some in bad—and some merely indifferent. What then is taste? It is by no means a question of orderliness, for I can think of many buildings which are so, and are yet not in good taste. It is not a question of conforming to the latest tenets in modern design, or using the latest chiches, such as the monopitch roof, for I saw many of these, and often they failed completely. It is not even a question of good proportion ; right use of materials ; or suitability of function, though all these may of course enter into it. I think it is really a matter of balance, and of harmony with the environment. Let me illustrate to you by a digression :

When my wife makes tomato soup (using the fresh fruit of course), I generally find it a trifle acid. I add a very slight amount of sugar, and a pinch of salt, and the result, a wonderful concoction giving joy to my particular tastebuds. A little more sugar, and the mixture cloys. A little more salt, and it is too sharp. There must be a perfect balance between the different ingredients !



" Taste is really a matter of balance . . ."

To achieve a perfect balance in architecture there are no rules that I know of which will guide infallibly. On the contrary, you will often find that the man who talks very glibly of proportion, fitness of purpose, modules, and the rest of the architectural jargon, is often totally unable to turn out a good building. He is liable either to exaggerate or over-emphasise widely ; or on the other hand he may be too tame and stodgy. He is quite likely to make the building an exhibition of modern building materials and techniques, with glass bricks, slasto walls, V poles and incredible cantilevers all over the place. I am driven to the conclusion that the great, or good, architect acts to a large extent instinctively to produce a balanced work. Of course he must know his technique inside out ; he must have a thorough knowledge of the practical requirements, and he must have a feeling for the environment (both natural and otherwise). The merely competent architect designs (like Shakespeare's Tybalt in Romeo and Juliet was supposed to have duelled) " by the book of Arithmetic." The true architect in the last analysis, designs by instinct, often quite contrary to the book of Arithmetic.



" It's all a matter of individual taste, and I know what I like!"

As you cross the river bridge near Southbroom on the way to Ramsgate, you catch a glimpse of a group of bungalows set high above the road, and half hidden by trees and greenery. The barntype roofs are of silvery brown shingles, the walls are colour-washed pink, and the wood windows and shutters are the most brilliant pillar-box red. I am sure no colour charts or previous examples could have led the architect to that wonderful and unusual colour scheme, but the effect in that particular setting is simply breathtaking.

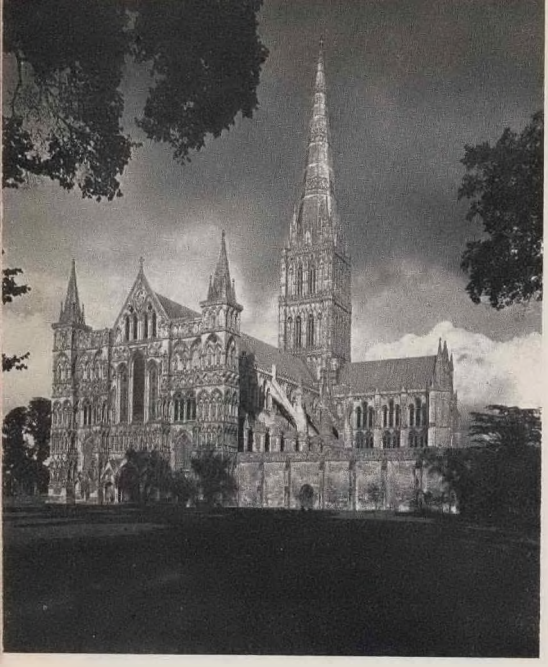
What little things determine the line between good and bad taste ! The tilt of a roof, the texture of a brick, the shape of a window, the line of a gutter. Most of these coastal cottages have magnificent views over the ocean, yet the designers often seem to grudge them to the tenants, because they use the pokiest stock windows with 18" x 12" panes, spoiling the prospect from both inside and out. The wind, they will probably tell you, makes this necessary. But I have seen several houses with large view windows which seem to stand up all right, and the real reason is probably ordinary human stinginess.

Again you get two almost identically planned cottages. One has a nicely textured roof of shingles or plain brown tiles, gaily painted windows, a massive stone chimney. A grassy drive leds up to it, and some brilliant red flowered shrub flaunts its shape against the whitewashed walls.

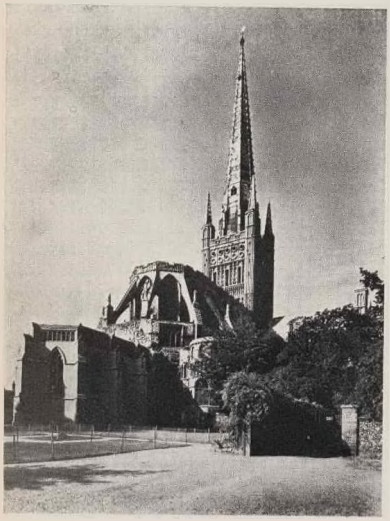
The other is built in dark grey precast cinder blocks (left unpainted), the roof is of heavy hard red Marseilles tiles, the windows are a shade too small and some dowdy colour, an insignificant brick chimney with a chimney pot crowns the roof. The forecourt is covered with ironstone grey gravel, and a few unconvincing flowers and shrubs complete the ensemble. Logically speaking there is no significant difference between the two (they may have been built to the same plan)—and yet what a world of difference in reality. One proclaims the joy of life—the other is just dismal, unimaginative, flat, commonplace.

Talking of seaside cottages in general, the average leaves much to be desired in ordinary practical planning, never mind aesthetics. The one in which I am staying devotes 100 square feet out of a total of 750 feet to an utterly useless incomprehensible passage. The kitchen is so small that the refrigerator has to be kept in the living room ; which in turn is so cramped (12' x 10') that it is impossible to place a divan or an easy chair once the dining table is in. So if we want to lounge at any time, we have to retire to the bedroom. There is no stoep or terrace of any sort, nor even a bit of lawn ; so to look at the sea we all crowd into the front door. Of course there is lots of putty plaster and glossy painted walls a la mode. But for our part we say to the devil with your shiny walls and electric geyser (that doesn't work) and give us some " lebensraum," particularly a wide shady old-fashioned stoep with a broad view of the sea.

Taste does not only apply to the design of buildings and accessories. It is just as noticeable in the layouts of gardens, and whole estates and farms. Travelling along the road you will suddenly notice a definite change, as it were, in the atmosphere, and as like as not you will find that you are travelling along the border of some properly controlled estate owned by a progressive landowner. The fields are ploughed along the contour, the pastures are lush and properly defined by trim hedges or trees ; there are fine windbreaks ; the fences are in order and the gates work. The finest examples of this sort that I have seen are the Hall and Crocodile Estates near Nelspruit. Here the citrus trees form regular rhythmic patterns over the landscape, and the silver oak windbreaks and the hibiscus hedges add the final touch. The point is that the undoubted aesthetic effects in these cases proceed from utilitarian motives, but the harmonious way in which the farms blend with the natural environment creates a result both positive and completely satisfying.



Above: Salisbury Cathedral. Below: Norwich Cathedral.



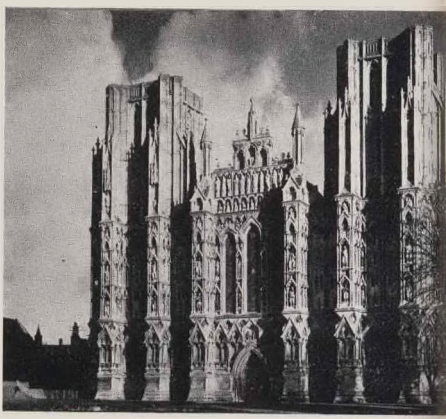
# THE CATHEDRALS OF BRITAIN

"Mankind was never so happily inspired as when it made a cathedral," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, who would have had a field-day at the Exhibition of Photographs of British Cathedrals organised by the British Travel Association at Johannesburg Cathedral in January. Upwards of 50 superb photographs (three of them reproduced here) illustrate vividly the solemn charm of these buildings and their varied settings—green lawns, maybe, or clusters of rooftops (as at York) or even the desolation of blitz-fired London around St. Pauls. In every case, the Cathedral dominates—effortlessly, serenely—and no amount of subsequent building or restorative man-handling has yet made a mark on its ineffable superiority. It is impossible to view these pictures without a host of associations —ecclesiastical, architectural, historical, literary—flooding the mind.

The collection will be seen at Witswatersrand University in March and at the Springs Public Library at the end of April. It is available for exhibition and enquiries should be addressed to the British Travel Association, P.O. Box 8755, Johannesburg.

R. I. B. WEBSTER.

Wells Cathedral.



# BOOK REVIEWS

**The Heart of the City.** Report of C.I.A.M. Conference No. 8. Edited by J. Tyrwhitt, J. L. Sert and E. N. Rogers. Lund Humphries, London. 185 pages. £2 10s. 0d. nett.

Since Louis Sert's presentation of " Can Our Cities Survive ? " which reported a pre-war C.I.A.M. Conference, much has happened in the world. It is therefore all the more encouraging to find that although in some quarters " Modern Architecture " is thought to be as extinct as the Dodo, the members of C.I.A.M. have not slid back into the sleepy escapism of a Victorian revivalism and that their early work has formed a foundation on which they can truly build.

" The Heart of the City " is heart-warming to all those who still believe that " Modern Architecture " has lost none of its validity in a changing world.

The betrayal of Modern Architecture at South Bank and Fifth Avenue fades into insignificance when set against the projects for new towns in India and South America.

The book is introduced by Sert with a long quotation from a recent work, " The Revolt of the Masses," by W. W. Norton, and takes the form of a series of written contributions on Urban Communal Life by men well experienced and qualified to pronounce on their particular aspects.

Giedion and Paulson write on Urban History ; Holford on Town Planning Legislation ; Dr. Scott Williamson on sociological matters in a report of the Peckham experiment ; while Le Corbusier writes on the place of the Arts in the Modern City and makes an inspiring appeal for greater spontaneity in Urban environment.

Neutra deals with the splitting up of the heart of the American City occasioned by traffic and parking problems and illustrates this brilliantly with the example of his own work at Elisian Heights.

The latter part of the book is devoted to illustrations of schemes for New Towns in many parts of the world, including work by Sert in the Argentine and by Le Corbusier in India and Columbo.

Some of the most profound reflection on matters of living is packed into the pages of this book, which is a must for all Architects and Town Planners, and one which should reach a wider intelligent public, for it speaks not only of matters of building vital to everyone, but paints a vision of how we might live if we came to our senses and regained the art of living, of working, and above all of enjoying ourselves.

H.C.P.

**Thermal Properties of Building.** By N. S. Billington, M.Sc., M.I.H.V.E. Cleaver House Press Ltd., London. 208 pages. 25s. nett.

The amount of misconception rife in the architectural profession concerning the subject matter of this book is quite frightening.

In South Africa an effort to correct some of the misinformation and fallacy surrounding the problems of building for coolness and for warmth would not be misplaced.

" Thermal Properties of Building " deals admirably with its subject and while there is plenty of mathematical documentation on the one hand there is also plenty of verbal good advice and explanation.

Readers in this country are likely to be more interested in the ways of keeping buildings cool than in ways of keeping them warm, though in many respects the treatment is the same. Particularly interesting for the local reader is the subject of thermal delay and the way in which heat is stored and re-radiated from dense constructions long after the sun has left them, compared with the behaviour of light constructions under the same conditions.

While we are using traditional modes of design capable of giving fairly tolerable comfort conditions, we have small need of such books as this, but the moment we step off the beaten track we would be wise to have some knowledge of the likely performance of our new materials and methods. This book is highly recommended to those adventurous enough to brave the hazards of pioneering work and who at the same time have an eye for the comfort of their clients.

H.C.P.

**Economical Domestic Heating.**—By Henry Gordon Goddard, M.A., F.R.I.B.A. E. and F. N. Spon Ltd., London. 150 pages. 21s. nett.

It seems to be the avowed policy of Spon the publishers to provide the Architectural profession with a series of technical books designed for use. Like the publications of Spon that have preceded it, " Economical Domestic Heating " is a book that will find constant use and will not collect much dust on the shelf.

So many books get published because someone has seen a very hypothetical gap in the field of architectural knowledge, or because someone has had a nice idea of re-classifying work already amply illustrated, and so many books are bought because of the same sort of compulsion on the part of the purchaser, that it is refreshing to have books which someone has written because of a genuine need.

The present book does not cover much new ground, but it presents the subject of Domestic Heating in the way that architects would like to have their technical subjects treated—by economic comparison.

It is useless to present practising architects with highly theoretical books on the sciences of heat, light and sound, because they simply do not understand them, and are too busy to go back to school. Goddard has no illusions about this. He treats his subject in a scientific manner but presents it in a way that can be both understood and applied without resource to text books and log tables.

The material is up to date and although written for Britain's atrocious climate, the author has not omitted to refer to problems in other lands of a more sunny countenance.

No doubt we shall see many more books of this type from Spon, for the field of technical subjects allied to architecture is ominously wide, and if they are written in the same clear and concise style, they will always be more than welcome.

H.C.P.

**" Plastics in Building."** By Joseph B. Singer. Architectural Press, London, 1952. 175 pages. 18s.

The scope of this book is, in the author's own words, " to provide technical guidance for the use of plastics in the building industry." Its objective is therefore the practical application of the material and building problems and this objective has controlled the form of the book. It consists of four parts : a general introduction of the nature and history of the material ; a discussion of its internal uses ; then its external uses ; and finally an estimate of its future potentialities.

To the layman in chemistry, the first part describes a wide range of the various types of plastics, with a like range in physical characteristics, followed by a frank discussion of the limitations of the material, and ends with an historical outline starting in the late 19c. and ending with various proprietary types of prefabrication, including some used in the Hertfordshire Schools in England.

External uses are summarised in the second part under headings such as walls, roof, windows, glazing ; with most emphasis on its use with wood—plywood, laminated wood, impregnated and compressed wood—and on its use as glazing, such as " Perspex " and safety glass.

Internal uses are summarised under partitions—with some very useful details on lavatory cubicles —wall and floor coverings, insulation, plumbing and electrical equipment, and applied finishes.

The last part on future possibilities leaves the reader with two general impressions : firstly, that great as future possibilities are, much more research is needed before the real nature and limitations of the material becomes fully defined for practical purposes ; and secondly, that if the uses of the material are to be as widespread as some protagonists forecast, the cost of the material must be drastically reduced. The high price of the modern synthetic material, of any type, is one of the reasons, if not the most important, why the older and cheaper traditional materials and techniques still dominate the building industry.

There are fifteen pages of clear and informative photographs, including an attractive view of a map of South Africa on plastic panels, at the entrance of the South African Tourist Corporation offices in Piccadilly, London. In addition, there is a very useful glossary of Trade Names with descriptions of the materials concerned.

This book is a thorough, practical treatise on the subject, amply supported by both figures and comments, and should be of real value to anyone who has to make decisions as to the use of plastics in any building operation.

E. W. N. Mallows.

## TRADE NOTES AND NEWS

**NOVOBORD.**

An historic milestone in timber utilisation has been reached in South Africa by the completion of negotiations for the establishment of a factory by Boxes and Shooks Limited for the manufacture of a synthetic board.

This outstanding board was originally developed by Fred Fahrni, a Swiss engineer, ten years ago, and today the board is being manufactured successfully under licence in ten countries in different parts of the world. The acquisition of the African

franchise by a South African company will be of the utmost value to the country.

It is anticipated that 25% of the output will be exported and since all the raw materials will eventually be of South African origin there is an expected annual nett saving in foreign currency of close on half a million pounds.

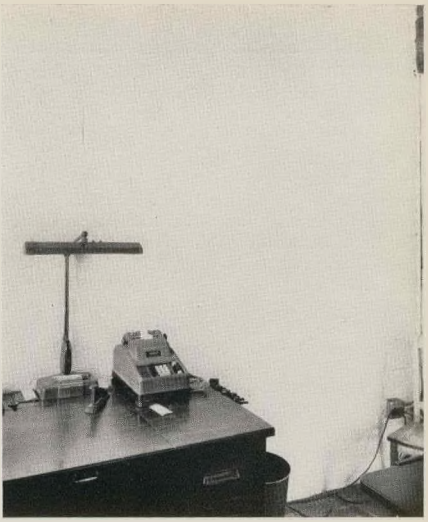
The product, which will be sold under the South African trade name of NOVOBORD, is an inexpensive material for use in the building trade, in cabinet and furniture manufacture as well as for panelling and allied industries. Because of its outstanding qualities of toughness, nail and screw holding properties and workability with standard woodworking tools and equipment, this new wood product is already in enormous demand in diverse industries in both Europe and America.

Whereas most compressed boards tend to warp, Novobord is, as a result of the specialised method of manufacture, practically warp-free. The secret of this rigidity and freedom from movement lies in the highly delicate method of manufacture. In the process wood chips and specially prepared shavings are coated with synthetic resin and compressed under heat and pressure in such a manner as to produce a " sandwich construction " consisting of two highly polished surfaces of heavily compressed shavings enclosing a core of more lightly compressed wood chips.

Novobord has a naturally beautiful appearance and finish which is one of its main attractions. Consequently, Novobord, which is produced in any thickness from $\frac{3}{8}$" to $1\frac{3}{4}$" and in sheets 9' x 6' can be used in its natural state, or can be painted or veneered without crossbanding. The factory will be in operation by the end of 1953 and will cost £325,000. The plant will be housed in a 480' long three-storey building situated on a seven-acre site in Deal Party Industrial Township, Port Elizabeth. It is designed to operate 24 hours per day and will produce 10 million square feet of Novobord per annum.

**VINYLITE PLASTICS.**

A new protective, decorative and easy-to-wash coating for interior walls of public-type buildings is based on Vinylite resins and applied by spraying. This Vinylite resin-based coating resists moisture, mould and mildew, oils, fats, grease, ink, salt spray and most chemicals. Resistant also to abrasion and scuffing, the Vinylite resin-based coating increases in strength the thicker it is applied ; thickness may vary without changing appearance of the coating, permitting extra protection for areas exposed to heavy wear. Textures resemble rich leather grain, and colours can be matched for integration with general decorative colour schemes. Repeated washing does not affect thickness or appearance of the coating, which is easy to clean with soap and water. These qualities make the Vinylite resin-based coating particularly useful in offices, restaurants, hotel lobbies and bathrooms, for example, where durability and washability are important in decorative coatings. Sprayed directly on walls of cinder block or concrete block, the continuous coating completely seals the surface. This combination offers a functional and attractive yet economical wall for many building purposes. In a large New York hospital the Vinylite resin-based coating is used to protect the walls of the sterilizing room against abrasion, steam and moisture. The new coating is particularly useful for redecorating. Webbing characteristics of the Vinylite resin-based material enable easy closing of holes, cracks and gaps in a surface during the spraying process.



" Cocoon Plasti-Spray " coating on cinder block wall.

# NOTES AND NEWS

## NUFFIELD DOMINION TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIPS FOR THE YEAR 1954.

Applications are invited not later than the 5th May, 1953, for the following very generous senior fellowships offered to South African nationals by the Nuffield Foundation for the year 1954 : Two fellowships in the Natural Sciences ; One fellowship in the Humanities ; One fellowship in Medicine; One fellowship in Medicine.

Applicants should normally be between 25 and 35 years of age, have high intellectual and personal qualities, and have shown capacity of an unusual order for advancing knowledge and education in some branch of their fields. They must undertake to return to South Africa as soon as possible after the termination of their fellowships.

Copies of the regulations and application forms may be obtained :

(a) by university applicants from the Registrars of their universities ;

(b) by others from the Honorary Secretary, Nuffield Foundation, South African Liaison Committee, c/o University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Applications received after 5th May, 1953, will not be considered until 1954.

## RENT SURVEYS IN NATIVE TOWNSHIPS

Surveys to find out how much rent Natives can afford to pay will be conducted by officers of the National Building Research Institute of the C.S.I.R. in Durban and Vereeniging this year. The work has been made possible by a grant of £3,200 from the National Council for Social Research which last year made a grant of £1,600 for a similar survey in Port Elizabeth.

The Port Elizabeth survey and those to be made at Durban and Vereeniging stem from the one made at Payneville location, Springs—under a contract with the Springs municipality—the results of which were used in the planning of the highly successful Kwa Thema Township.

This survey revealed that there were three classes of urban Natives—those who could afford to pay an economic rent (about 40 per cent. of the population) ; those who could pay a sub-economic rent (about 13 per cent.) ; and those who could afford to pay no rent at all (about 47 per cent.).

The field work in the Port Elizabeth survey has been concluded and Mr. H. J. J. van Beinum, under whom it was made, is now tabulating and evaluating the results.

## TRANSVAAL PROVINCIAL INSTITUTE REGISTRATIONS

The following members have been registered in the salaried class : Mr. D. C. Benington, Mr. R. N. Densen, Mr. M. Sack, Mr. W. R. Wolff and Mr. D. R. Yetton.

INTER-GRADE TRANSFERS

from Practising to Absentee Practising : Mr. A. Axelrod.

from Absentee Practising to Practising : Miss R. Levinsohn.

from Practising to Salaried : Mr. K. Grossman.

from Practising to Retired : Mrs. B. Berghaus.

from Salaried to Practising : Mr. E. I. Graff, Mr. J. A. Schofield.

INTER-PROVINCIAL TRANSFERS

Mr. M. C. Eksteen, Mr. E. J. Bloem from T.P.I.A. to O.F.S.P.I.A.

Mr. J. R. Burg, Mr. L. W. Vaughan from C.P.I.A. to T.P.I.A.

Mr. C. Bristol from N.P.I.A. to T.P.I.A.

Mr. H. S. Hartwell from T.P.I.A. to C.P.I.A.

Mr. P. T. Fourie from T.P.I.A. to N.P.I.A.

PARTNERSHIPS

Mr. D. F. Crofton has withdrawn from the firm of H. H. Le Roith and Partners and is practising under his own name at P.O. Box 22, Northlands, Johannesburg.

Mr. C. E. Sondt has joined the firm of Messrs. Stucke, Harrison, Ritchie and Watson as a partner and is opening a practice at 35 Shelton House, West Street, Durban.

Mr. J. J. Janse van Rensburg has become a partner in the firm of G. Mark Hussey and Partners in the Cape Province of the practice, the name of the firm remaining unchanged.

Messrs. Carrigall Crickmay and Partners have opened a branch at Ladysmith, Natal, under the management of Mr. W. V. Hain, and another in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, under Mr. T. T. Steer.

The partnership of Messrs. Stauch and Wepener has been dissolved ; Messrs. Stauch and Partners will continue to practise from Bauhaus and Hochstetter House, and Mr. Wepener on his own account from Bauhaus, Pretoria.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Messrs. Liknaitzky and Kaplan have changed their address to 610-612 Accountancy House, 134 Fox Street, Johannesburg ; Phone 23-9626.

Messrs. H. W. E. Stauch and Partners, Pietersburg office is now in Van Riebeeck Buildings, Grobler Street, Pietersburg.

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