

WEST STREET DURBAN 1977 (2)

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Subject Inspector: Art, Natal Education Department

THE facades surrounding Farewell Square may be considered representative of four phases in the architectural development of Durban: the Central Post Office — nineteenth century Classical revival; the City Hall — twentieth century Baroque revival; opposite the City Hall — turn of the century Art Nouveau to Art Deco; opposite the Post Office — post World War II modern.

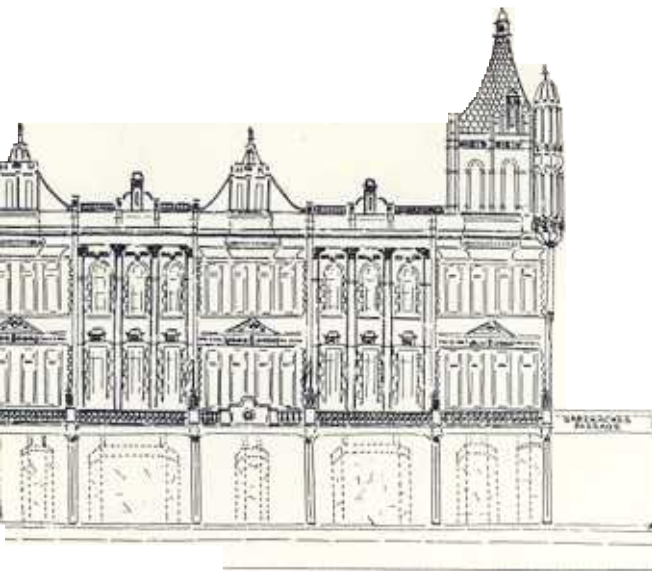
The Art Nouveau-Art Deco alignment along Gardiner Street consists of the Allied, the Old Mutual, Gardiner and Trust Buildings.

Trust Building, corner of West and Gardiner Streets, is in the early American skyscraper style. Skyscraper architecture was America's contribution to Art Deco, and various factors promoted its development in the U.S.A. The great fire of 1871 in Chicago proved the necessity for methods of construction that would be fireproof. Since unprotected metal structures buckle when exposed to excessive heat, skyscraper construction was to comprise an internal metal skeleton and an external masonry or concrete sheath. A significant skyscraper style was not developed until c. 1890. Earlier and lower "cloudscrapers" resembled huge cubes. But once the height was raised beyond ten storeys the horizontal earth-bound aspect of downtown architecture was superseded by vertical sky-bound outlooks. Architects took pains to emphasize this tendency through skilful use of architectural components, for example incorporating uninterrupted piers from the first floor to the cornice. (This practice might well be considered merely a modern variant of the classical "giant order" — an order of pilasters carried through the whole

height of a facade and uniting several storeys. Michelangelo (1475 — 1564) was reputedly the first architect to use this structural device — on Roman palazzo's.) Another method adopted to increase the upward surge of a building visually was to step back the top storeys to end in a spire or spirelet. The Empire State Building, New York (1930), exemplifies both these methods. The piers are present in Trust Building; the absence of a spire is to its advantage and serves to render an even more modern idiom. Locally, Trust Building relates to the Memorial Tower, Natal University and Greaterman's Departmental Store (discussed in "West Street Durban 1977 (1)").

Passing by the indispensable tobacconist — where "What not ... and the rest" is readily available, and the inevitable Wimpy Bar — standard menu from Cape Town to Amsterdam — one enters the busiest business section of the street.

Not to be overlooked is a white marble-clad building of modest but pleasing proportions — a little brother born to the Standard Bank Building, corner of Smith and



Greenacres departmental store.

SKETCH: P. FERREIRA

Gardiner Streets. The refined composition of linear components reminds one of the designs of the Japanese-American architect Minoru Yamasaki (1912–....), for example, in the project for the World Trade Centre, New York.

Next door, more match-box like, but more conspicuous since taller, with glistening white tile finish, is “Sanlam Sentrum”. The architects seem to have been concerned with the perspicuous arrangement of the formal image of walls plus windows — a purely functional approach. The observer is reminded of A.W.N. Pugin’s (1812–1852) comment: “There should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction, or propriety”¹

Then follows Adams Stationers and Booksellers. Erected in 1931 this building features Art Deco decorations — but sparsely, and its facade reads rather like a tastefully designed book-cover. At present under the management of the fourth generation of the Adams family who established it in 1860, it has weathered all economic climates in an imperturbable, good-humoured way. Neither T.V. nor sales taxes have interrupted its sound trade. The three crowded floors dealing in general books, university books and artists’ materials and stationery respectively have retained their fascination for layman and connoisseur, for regular and occasional customers alike.

The boutique “Feathers” in this area is one of several in the centre of town — all notoriously cacophonous. It would be worthwhile to disregard the “sound of music” for a few moments to enter its West Side world and view inside a supreme instance of maximum use of minimum space. The combination of imagination and skill displayed by the young people who organised and decorated it is quite extraordinary. Only once have I seen better elsewhere — in Victor Horta’s (1861–1947) Horta House, Brussels. There I had admired the magical sense of space achieved around a steep stairwell, all through the architect’s ingenious manipulation of mirrors.

Salisbury House accommodates one of the oldest arcades in Durban. Salisbury Arcade existed long before Durban realised the charm, the cosiness and the business prospects of little lanes of penetration. Fortunately the “steeg” and the “deurloop” have now become familiar and much frequented mini-malls link West Street with

Smith and Pine Streets. But Salisbury Arcade is probably unique in being the only arcade in the city of which the entrance is locked up over weekends as a security measure. In addition it has an unusual stairwell, windows being cut to coincide with the angle and slant of each flight of steps. One of the attractions here is “The Dragon” coffee-bar — one of the most popular venues for Capuccinos and Espressos with its festooned, old-fashioned, sad-eyed flower children.

The cavalcade of architectural styles along the course of Durban’s West Street is as varied as Chaucer’s company of Canterbury pilgrims. A visitor will search in vain for a specific character to the city. This is so with almost every vital modern city — for example, Brussels, “the Capital of Europe” — as opposed to faithfully restored and carefully preserved towns and citadels — e.g. Lubeck (Germany), Toledo (Spain), Carcassonne (France). And while in many a city dating back to ancient times one could still discover a “barrio Gotico” (Barcelona) or a “plaka” (Athens), the streets of more recent towns are constantly being brought up to date and attuned to the rhythm of the era.

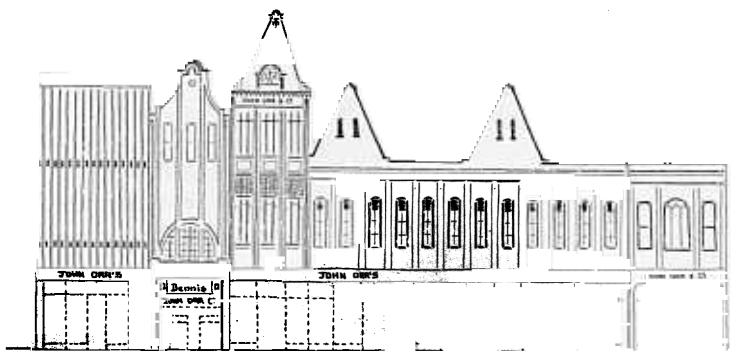
“The architect is a sort of theatrical producer, the man who plans the setting for our lives ... the actors are quite ordinary people. He must be aware of their natural way of acting; otherwise the whole thing will be a fiasco. That which may be quite right and natural in one cultural environment can easily be wrong in another ... In the same way, it is impossible to take over the beautiful architecture of a past era; it becomes false and pretentious when people can no longer live up to it.”²

“If Peking’s rhythm was a processional rhythm, a pedestrian rhythm, New York’s is a motor rhythm.”³

Stuttafords, one of the most sophisticated shops in the city, proffers both in the interior and on the exterior an excellent example of how modern extensions may be adapted not to mar an existing eclectic style — in this instance revival Rococo.

John Orr’s departmental store.

SKETCH: P. FERREIRA



Its neighbour is the O.K. Bazaar — as indispensable and inevitable as the Tobacconist and the Wimpy Bar.

More boutiques along the line, including some of the numerous branches of Foschini and Truworthe, provide for people not interested in buildings.

Greenacres Departmental Store, however, will not fail either to attract patrons or to fascinate the student of architecture. Although erected in 1921 its style relates to nineteenth century Victoriana. The opulent Flemish-

1. N. PEVSNER, *The sources of modern architecture and design* (London, 1968), p.9.
2. S.E. RASMUSSEN, *Experiencing architecture* (Cambridge, 1973), pp.10–11.
3. *Ibid.*, p.147.

Renaissance front is adorned with cast-iron enrichments from MacFarlane's catalogue. (Walter MacFarlane's Saracen Foundry at Glasgow produced castings that ranged from plumbing requisites to decorative accoutrements, from school desks to commemorative fountains — for example, the Vasco da Gama clock and fountain on the Esplanade, Durban — and examples of their wares are still to be found from London city to Karroo "dorps".) The architect, Notman Gallagher, placed a slated tower in honeycomb pattern above the fifth and last vertical division of the facade instead of using it as a central feature, thereby lending a surprisingly asymmetrical aspect to the whole. (This tower carries on the corner a turret that bears semblance to the Scottish pele tower — a small tower projecting from a corner of the house and used as a keep.) The alternating gables, regular Renaissance windows, giant Corinthian pilasters, miniature Rococo pediments all add up to create an almost deliriously joyous assemblage of architectural borrowing. The Natal Provincial Institute of Architects listed it as a building of unique merit — one of those that cannot be replaced.

The lesser splendour of "The Hub" — an inbetween shop — is virtually obscured by the festive gaiety of Greenacres to its left and the quiet dignity of John Orr's series of gables to its right. "John Orr's" consists of five distinct parts. Such successive additions are typical of the growth of commercial enterprise during boom periods. The complex at present comprises a modernised men's and boy's shop next to a neat row of simplified Amsterdam gables with rectilinear paraphrases of classical components.

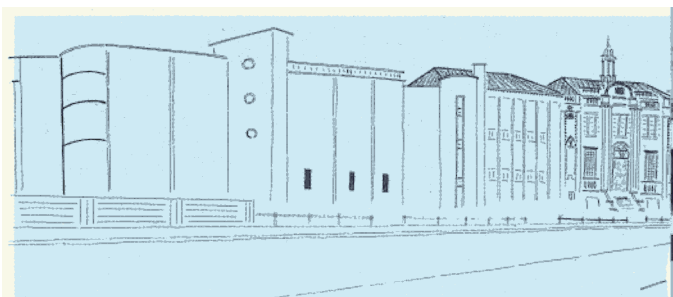
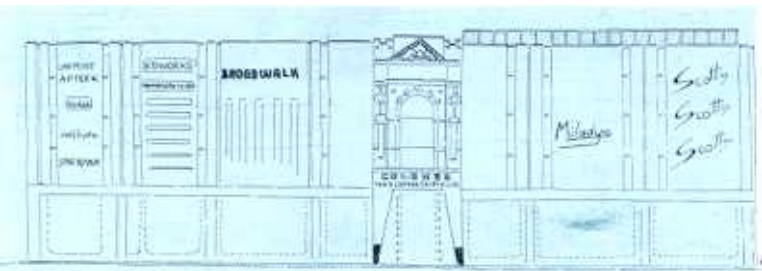
McIntosh House — unobtrusively Art Deco — corresponds in style with Bales Building (discussed and illustrated in "West Street Durban 1977 (1)").

Progressive businessmen met with opposition when the extensive corner site between West and Smith Streets and on Broad Street was due for redevelopment as the "Broadwalk" complex — a latter-day version of earlier jazz-buildings. Norman Richardson, owner of the Colombo Tea and Coffee Shop in the "outdated" complex, courageously refused every offer to sell this shop. The outcome of the case: not only did the shop remain intact, it was also allowed to retain its original facade. Today the sober little shop unambiguously asserts itself among its technicolour neighbours.

Across Broad Street those dealers who used to thrive on the furniture trade now vie with one another to put through T.V. transactions: McNamees, Royal Furnishers, "Art" Furnishers, Lewis, Geen and Richards, Cels, Chix, Unity, Peerless, Progress, etc., etc. Outwardly mostly nondescript in style, many of these stores contain grand and luxurious display spaces. At least two of these buildings are of special merit and ought to be retained: Geen and Richards, erected in 1897 by the architects Methven and Ritchie, and Chix, erected c. 1904. Geen and Richards offers a good example of a simple Neo-Classical facade in brick and plaster. Chix is one of a very few remaining

Broadwalk development.

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Natal College for Advanced Technical Education and Students' Union.

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Victorian verandah structures in the city centre. The ground-floor stoep juts out across the pavement, so that its curved canopy forms an arcaded walk for pedestrians. The building itself is of Georgian simplicity, but the four-storeyed facade is enlivened with cast-iron railings simulating intertwined plant forms. These are precious survivals of items from MacFarlane's catalogue. (This catalogue provided in particular for verandah poles, spandrills and railings, since "stoeps" were considered ideally suited to Colonial climates.)

The imposing buildings of the Natal College for Advanced Technical Education occupy the premises towards the end of West Street and face Warwick Avenue. The style of the main building may be described as "Free Renaissance" with random borrowings from classical prototypes. It is a lofty and spacious building with an undeniably collegiate atmosphere in and about it. As such it exerts an unmistakable influence on the loyalty and dedication of its students.

It is, however, the Students' Union, erected in 1938, which might justly be considered an epoch-making edifice in the city. For their prize-winning plan the architects Ing, Jackson and Park Ross were awarded the Gold Medal of the Natal Institute of Architects. In appearance it is deceptively plain, but in fact a fine "Dudok"-type building in a completely modern idiom. The Dutch architect W.M. Dudok (1884—....) displays in his buildings — of which the Hilversum Town Hall (1930) is the best known — the controlled aesthetic of the native "De Stijl" movement. "De Stijl" implied, in every respect, a break with tradition. In its interest in basic geometric shapes, flat surfaces and clearcut edges it showed an affinity with contemporary Cubism, as practised by the painter Picasso (1881—1973) and the artist-architect Le Corbusier (1887—1965). In common with most of Dudok's buildings the Students' Union is a self-contained unit. It appears rather seclusive — probably due to the absence of traditional window openings. It is indeed internally orientated. Whether this was intentional or not it must be counted an attribute, considering the location of the College in a particularly noisy area: at a junction of traffic-ways and in the vicinity of the city market.

Finally — a little advice to the stroller-observer "The only result of trying to judge architecture as you would a school paper — A for that building, B for the one, etc. — is to spoil the pleasure architecture gives. It is quite impossible to set up absolute rules and criteria for evaluating architecture because every worthwhile building ... has its own standard. If we contemplate it in a carping spirit, with a know-it-all attitude, it will shut itself up and have nothing to say to us. But if we ourselves are open to impressions and sympathetically inclined, it will open up and reveal its true essence." ⁴ ■

4. *Ibid.*, p.236.