

Ruins of the past: industrial heritage in Johannesburg

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Abstract

Industrial heritage is a phrase rarely used in South Africa. This is a huge setback in the heritage circles of this country since it constitutes a major part of its history. South Africa and indeed many other developing countries have fallen behind the rest of the world in recognizing, declaring and protecting their industrial heritage. It is this understanding that made us realize that the lack of attention and awareness of old industrial structures would in the future lead to their extinction. Buildings that would qualify as industrial heritage, when out of use, are left abandoned and later condemned then demolished, therefore remaining ruins of the past.

This paper endeavours to cast awareness on the high architectural and cultural significance that some industrial buildings from late 19th to mid 20th century possess. It aims to show how they form part of the urban landscape and provide the cityscape with visual historical landmarks. The inclusion of these buildings in the regeneration of the city will help protect the City's cultural heritage. The City of Johannesburg must look beyond its boundaries to understand the importance of the reuse of industrial heritage. The adaptation of these buildings will only be widely practised if a number of steps are taken with consistency. The ultimate protection of the buildings will require a shift in mindset where this kind of heritage is seen as equally important as any other heritage. Awareness campaigns, educational programs and tougher legislation need to be addressed to make the reuse of industrial structures sustainable and make them become part of the urban lifestyle.

Keywords: industrial heritage, architectural history, Johannesburg, Gas Works, redevelopment, identity, community.



1 Introduction

Johannesburg has been very much identified with its mining history, which many realise as having given birth to the City and the whole Witwatersrand metropolis. The camp, founded in 1886, quickly became a town of note in the region as rich deposits of gold were discovered. Prospectors, mining magnates and people who wished to change their fortunes began to move into the region to make their mark and to extract and to profit from the much needed resources. As the gold reserves proved to be vast and virtually endless, fears of a ghost town began to peter out and sprawling mansions, complex networks and high tech industries began to replace the corrugated iron houses, dirt roads and tents that had characterised Ferreira's town in 1886 [1]. The service industry blossomed as it responded to the boom of the mining industry, creating a network of industries that relied on each other and served the community around Johannesburg and beyond. Johannesburg as we know it today, the City of gold, had been born.

2 A glance at South African heritage

A glance at the tourist brochures and the official website of the City shows how to a large extent, the City marks its heritage and how it identifies itself as being a 'World Class City' priding itself with having world class facilities. It would be in this scenario that one would expect to find the City also treating its industrial heritage as other world class cities do. It is shocking however when one goes through the website to see that the City rarely mentions its rich mining and industrial heritage. In a gallery that displays 'historic Johannesburg' one encounters grand mansions and the popular art deco buildings of the 1930s [2]. History and heritage as is common in this country has been sanitised and recognition of heritage confined to the 'great houses' (with a few exceptions) with distinctive Victorian traits and trailings of a colonial past [3]. With the coming of independence in 1994 and a new heritage legislation in 1999 there has been hope that recognition and declaration of heritage be widened to include sites that were previously ostracised by the National Monuments Council. This hope was indeed fulfilled but not to the great advantage of industrial heritage. Focus shifted more to the struggle history and sites that commemorated and showed courage of people during the apartheid era and obviously the pre-history and the history of black communities that had otherwise been ignored in the past. Industrial heritage was somewhere in between and sadly; South Africa continues to lag behind other countries in the preservation of and declaration of its industrial heritage. Besides the reasons above there is a host of other reasons why this is so, we are however not going to go in the reasons here. We are more concerned with the result of that lagging behind; we as heritage practitioners want to boldly propose that a shift in the City's policy could have a turnaround effect in the way that City of Johannesburg and indeed the country handle its industrial heritage.



3 Johannesburg's examples

It is noteworthy that in Johannesburg where there has been a remarkable development in terms of preserving the cities industrial heritage there has been huge input from the private sector on the development of such precincts. One such example is the Newtown cultural precinct where remarkable work has been done to preserve industrial buildings as well as find new meaning and use for them, fig. 1. Newtown which once lay derelict and dilapidated has become a hip and arty area where there are jazz clubs, museums and galleries. The redevelopment of Newtown is clearly the pride of the City and Newtown is mentioned several times on the website and shows the commitment that the City, heritage bodies and the private sector had in redeveloping the area and making sure that it was clean and safe environment to work in. Several big companies are now situated in the area showing the confidence they have in that space.

3.1 Newtown cultural precinct

The redevelopment of Newtown was inevitable and part of the reason why the City and heritage bodies decided to keep the facades of the old buildings and apportion new meaning to it was because part of the identity of the area was forged in the old buildings. It was known throughout its redevelopment as the Newtown cultural precinct it was therefore important to stage, old renovated buildings as the setting of the new precinct. Demolishing the old structures and replacing them with new buildings would not have achieved the same effect. Everyone played their part in the marketing, branding and the new identity of the precinct, the City, heritage bodies, heritage practioners, private companies all played a part. The old warehouse industrial buildings that once lay decaying in Newtown are now synonymous with culture and flair.



Figure 1: Newtown cultural precinct, Turbine Hall.

3.2 Richmond Laundries and 44 Stanley Avenue

Sadly such inspired development has not happened with the rest of Johannesburg. Rapid development in the City has seen many of the buildings seeing premature demolition. Developers, hasty to develop areas, often do not want to wait for months or until they can have proper approval to develop sites. Overzealous politicians are also quick to declare clean ups of decaying areas which often mean the demolition of buildings. Such decay led to the demolition of the Richmond Laundries in January 2008. The Richmond laundries were in use as early as 1890 when the need for washer men arose in a place where the majority of people who lived in Johannesburg were busy working men who had little time to do their laundry or other domestic duties. This resulted in the springing up of laundries such as the Richmond laundries [4]. The laundries showed a rich cultural and social history of the early mining days in Johannesburg. The structures which epitomised industrial architecture both inside and outside were brutally destroyed in 2008. Despite the stop orders to stop the demolition the company which owned the laundries at the time went ahead with the demolition of what they called an 'eyesore'. We assert that there was a lack of vision and imagination on the part of the owners which led to the demolition of the structures. A continuity of the village atmosphere that had been created in the early 20th century could have been recreated with residential apartments, coffee shops and commercial offices. This has been done successfully at 44 Stanley Avenue which forms part of the precinct in which the Johannesburg Gas Works lie. The 1930s industrial architecture has been transformed into classy boutiques and restaurants that are patronised by the middle to upper class residents and workers of the filming studios and offices that surround the area. The precinct has proved to be a popular centre and developers are interested to expand the area and connect it to the CBD. Johannesburg Gas Works a huge property of 14ha lies vacant and has been targeted for development. It is important to realise that this is an industrial landmark which we propose can be used to showcase the importance and the usage of industrial architecture.



Figure 2: View of demolished Richmond Laundries and Gas Works, far left.

4 Johannesburg Gas Works: history

Gas was one of the essential commodities soon after the discovery of gold. The Johannesburg Lighting Company realised this need and on the 23rd of June 1892 began the production of gas in Newtown. Three years after the supply of gas began, the Sanitary Board (branch of the Municipality) acquired the company assets and the Gas Works began to be managed by the City [5]. As the demand for gas grew so did the need for a more modern facilities that could deal with the demand. The council found a 14ha site in Cottlesloe on which to erect the new Gas Works, fig. 3. The new works began operating in 1928 and further additions were made year after year to meet with the growing demand of the City as the domestic market for energy grew. Operation of the Gas Works ended in 1992. Retorts had to shut down because of intense heat and blockage of the pipes that caused the yellow gas to pour out of the windows. Complaints about pollution of the river Braamfontein Spruit and the air in the area led to termination of the production [6]. For a while between the City of Johannesburg and the National Monuments Council (the responsible heritage body at that time) were at loss at what do with the massive site. The same year that the Gas Works were closed down the council toyed with the idea of the redevelopment of the site as a theme park (jewel City, electronic City) [7]. Other suggestions were also given such as the redevelopment of the Gas Works into a commercial or residential area. It was however recognised that the land had to undergo massive cleaning up and detoxification if there was going to be fruition of the ideas.



Figure 3: Historical image of the Gas Works, 1928.

4.1 Current status of the Gas Works

It was obvious that a cleanup of this area was going to be very expensive and that the City Gas Department had limited funds which could not deal with a project of such enormous proportions. The plans for the redevelopment were put on ice, the City deemed the site to have negative land value, the only way they

could enhance the value of the site was by clearing the site this included demolition of some of the structures on the property. A tender to demolish the outbuildings, old bunkers and pump house was advertised in The Star classifieds on 8 December 1993 [8]. An intervention by the National Monuments Council saved the buildings and led to the development of a Spatial Development Framework by the City of Johannesburg in 2005. The design framework laid out in this document set out to among other things to:

- Protect and enhance the identity and character of areas, communities and spaces
- Ensure a clear distinction between public and private spaces
- Promote successful and attractive public areas and routes
- Promote places that are easy to get to and move through
- Promote adaptability with variety and choice [9]



Figure 4: Gas Works in 2009.

Heritage practitioners who were working on the case at that time suggested that they establish a conservation policy for the site. Although this was never done there was a concerted effort on the part of the City to reevaluate the buildings and their worth and to see the buildings as part of a larger precinct.

5 Strategies for handling industrial heritage

It is important if industrial buildings are to be conserved in Johannesburg for them to be regarded as single buildings with different merits but to perceive them as part of a network. The Gas Works form part of the industrial heritage network in the wider inner City circle that informs us on how the industries in the early 20th century depended on each other. Rather than obliterating that dependency it can be revived although somewhat altered. The industrial network in this case would have been bound by 44 Stanley Avenue to the north, Richmond (with the laundries) to the west and University of the Witwatersrand and Newtown to the south east of the site. The Richmond laundries were part of the bigger expansion project that was linked to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, Atlas Filming Studios, Milpark, University of Johannesburg and Cottesloe suburbs [10].



Figure 5: Map showing precinct surrounding the Gas Works.

The Gas Works are flanked by a vibrant community of artists and students. It is also within walking distance from two international hotels. It is centrally located within 1km radius within the media and university precinct and therefore can play a huge role towards contributing to the community in which it lies. If both the Richmond laundries and the Gas Works were to be viewed singularly they would seem isolated because they are bounded by major arterial roads that are cut them off from the CBD and other residential areas. It would be difficult therefore to develop these areas singularly but in connection with other places they will form part of the broader network. In this case the Gas Works redevelopment could be seen as part of the development of the SABC media precinct or as part of the Newtown cultural precinct also connected to the 44 Stanley Avenue restaurants and bars. Perhaps an industrial heritage museum, restaurants and shops would not be out of place at the renovated Gas Works.

What needs to be thought through perhaps before any plans are made for the redevelopment is how the City and indeed the country can mobilise people in becoming more interested in the seemingly uninteresting buildings. As many researches have shown if public participation and community involvement does not take place it is difficult for authorities to make local people identify with a particular place. It is our belief that one of the reasons that Gold Reef City is such a popular theme park is because local people identify with the personification of Johannesburg as a City of Gold. Many residents want to experience what life in an early 20th century mining town felt like. But this has been to large extent the way in which the City has been portrayed as Egoli, or place of gold. The identity of the place as a mining town replica has helped market it and generate interest around the theme park. It is therefore perhaps not too far fetched to propose that the honouring of industrial heritage will help the residents to feel a sense of pride towards a certain type buildings. As most of

these buildings are sometimes not aesthetically pleasing as the turn of the century mansions in the northern suburb it would take a lot more marketing on the part of the City to have residents identify and begin to look at industrial heritage as part of their history.

The involvement of the community is integral to the survival of the industrial heritage. Not only is it important for the sustainable survival of the heritage but it would also send a strong message to developers that Joburgers love their heritage and they appreciate it. The Gas Works in this way would not really face a huge problem in that effect as the area is flanked by two major universities and a technikon and it would be an ideal place for students, intellectuals and local people to spend time. With the right facilities at the Gas Works there would be the focal point in the area that would zoom in not only on the architectural features of the buildings but also dwell on the history and the importance of the site.

However in exploring the possibilities of the Gas Works as a cultural focal point in the area the extent of the challenges that are going to be met and overcome should not be underestimated. According to Flo Bird, a leading Heritage Activist in Johannesburg, part of the reason why there has been little or no activity with the redevelopment of the Gas Works is because of the contamination of the soils and buildings that have to be disposed off before any operation can be started. Apparently such an exercise would require that at least 2 metres of the soil being removed from the premises which would undoubtedly be expensive. Another daunting task is what the buildings could be used for as some cannot actually hold heavy loads. Adapting them to an income generating use would no doubt require a lot of research and a huge amount of innovation.

Although the National Heritage Resources Act clearly changed in terms of the heritage that is recognised and protected, a lot has to be done in terms of enforcing the law to those who break it. The wanton destruction of the Richmond laundries is clear case in point. Stern action if not taken will send a message that the authorities are not quite serious about the protection of heritage. There seems to be lack of information among developers on whom to contact if they have to develop property that has heritage value. Often documents are sent to the wrong offices and get lost in the bureaucratic maze. There City and provincial heritage offices have to try and inform the architects and developers on where they have to go when they have to develop an area of heritage value and steps to take when they have to have a Heritage Impact Assessment. For those who pretend ignorance and go ahead and destroy the valuable history of Johannesburg prosecution has to take place so that the paying of the crime becomes more expensive than committing the crime.

The educational programmes should play a central role in the whole process to enable the community to be more sensitive and to care about the industrial heritage. Visitors should be offered to go on industrial tours as part of educational programmes which teach about industrial heritage. Live performances and artistic presentations in which the visitors can fully participate in will help the visitors in making the precinct their own and patronising it. The architecture and the theme of the reworked Gas Works should endeavour to

present industrial heritage to the people without being imposing. The usage of the building must be one that is not intimidating, but rather confront industrial heritage in the way the people would like to experience it. Identifying of the heritage is very important and how people understand the industrial heritage should inform the heritage practitioners on how to explain, interpret and present the Johannesburg Gas Works.

6 International examples

Other successful examples in some parts of the world could have given us comparatives on how to work with industrial heritage in a successful way.

6.1 Gas Works became an Arts Park, Melbourne, Australia

The Gas Works in South Melbourne, located 3 km from the CBD, holds since 1992 a park, theatres, a gallery, a cafe and a children's bookshop which is used by the people around the area. The current annual program addresses all kinds of social interests and tries to incorporate all sorts of artistic activities. The park owned by the City supports the community life and created identification within the industrial heritage of South Melbourne.

6.2 Ruhr area – reuse of industrial heritage, Germany

The industrial area in and around a number of cities is located along the river Ruhr in the Middle West of Germany. Around 1986 most of the industrial activity in the area came to a standstill and a high number of people moved away



Figure 6: Art display on industrial building, Duisburg, Germany.

to look for new job opportunities. Over a period of 10 years between 1989 and 1999, 89 projects were introduced and divided into 6 different themes. The so called IBA (International Building Exhibition) – Emscher Park tried to establish a contemporary use for industrial buildings and structures which started to become overgrown by nature. The project included the creation of new landscapes, the ecological re-working of the polluted river systems and creation of jobs with establishing new office spaces. The cities developed a language in which the area could be read as part of a new identification with the industrial past. People moved back and started a more nature orientated way of living with several tourist attractions and more sustainable way of living.

7 Summary

To summarise the development on the Gas Works in Johannesburg it is necessary to point out the redevelopment plans that were presented by Gapp architects to a client who are interested in investing in the property. After 17 years of neglect there seems to be renewed interest in the Gas Works and the proposal put forward, is progressive as it tries to integrate the industrial precinct with the surrounding while trying to retain the architectural importance of the buildings. It remains to be seen whether the boutique hotel, residential park and commercial centre can be fully embrace the industrial heritage and still be functional and sustainable. South Africa has huge challenges if it is to overcome the mammoth task of recognizing and declaring its industrial heritage.

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