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Inner city revamp

Eugene Barnard was commissioned to renovate a 40-year old building in the centre of Pretoria

By Gregg Cocking

Batho Pele House, the new residence of the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), stands proudly in downtown Pretoria on Proes Street. Hard to miss, the large 13-storey building finished in cream and brick red (ivory tusk and papyrus to be exact) was recently renovated by Eugene Barnard of Eugene Barnard and Associates. Started in April 2005, Barnard weathered four design changes to effectively finish the building at the end of February this year.

Barnard was approached in May 2004 to give the privately owned building, but one that is leased to the government, a façade change. The building had been occupied by another government department beforehand, but with an initiative by the government to improve its image, the structure needed an overhaul before the DPSA moved in. "The revamp was motivated by the government's desire to improve its image, which I believe is a wonderful thing," says Barnard.

"I studied Michael Graves' style of architecture which inspired the first couple of designs," explains Barnard when asked of his influences for the building. The one thing that is noticeable is that such an eye-catching building seems to uplift the area. In a sense it is a bold statement for inner city Pretoria. Previously the Zanza Building was a reflection of the surrounding buildings, but, with this renovation, the existing structures pale into comparison.

The third design that Barnard came up with for the building was chosen, but had to be altered once more due to budget constraints. "Because of the restrictions in the budget, we had to reduce the amount of glass used in the façade to bring down the cost, as glass costs three times as much as brick," Barnard explains. Numerous windows did survive and these were designed so that they were recessed into the walls and pulled back into 'boxes'. Before the renovations, the windows were flush with the façade and the amount of sunlight allowed to enter was adjusted through the use of louvres. This new design concept serves to make the building more energy efficient, as the south-facing side no longer receives virtually full sun and the air conditioning costs have been reduced.

The entrance to the building has been totally revamped – originally a palisade fence and a gate were the main entry into office block, whereas now, the front façade has been brought forward to allow for a lobby which is lit

◀ The north-facing side of Batho Pele House, the new residence for the Department of Public Service and Administration in Pretoria.

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Above: The original building that was renovated.

Left: The design process included a number of conceptual designs for the building.

naturally through large skylights. Part of the palisade fence remains as a security barrier, but the new entrance area has been formalised to bring it up to a standard worthy of the business conducted inside the building. The large façade is dominant at the front of the building, but it is more impressive than it is daunting. Textured and striking Marmoran coating is applied to the entrance façade, and the rest of the building will be coated with Marmoran shortly.

Creating a relaxed atmosphere

The brief called for a restaurant area for the staff which Barnard included by redesigning a stand-alone two-storey building behind the main structure, which includes a full gym, a rest area, the desired restaurant and an outside eating area. The two buildings are now joined with a bridge link on the first floor as well as through a walkway on the ground floor. This addition to the Batho Pele House serves as a rest and relaxation area away from the bustle of the office block. Smoking rooms were proposed in the main building but it was decided that an open air area would be a better option.

The east- and west-facing sides of the building were untouched during the renovation and feature the original patterned brickwork from the initial building. "We wanted to match the colour of the paint with the brickwork, but after a colour match we decided that it would be too dull," Barnard explains. "Anyway, it would have been a

■ batho pele house

pity to plaster over the bricks as you don't find that craftsmanship anymore."

Batho Pele House also consists of two levels of basement parking, although there is an arrangement with the school behind the building to utilise some vacant space on their premises for extra parking if needed. The offices themselves can accommodate up to 750 workers, although through initiatives by the government and interior designers, the Design Core, space has been set up to be best utilised by the employees. Barnard proposed that the interiors did not have clinical, long corridors, but rather winding spaces that don't give you the sense that you are in a regular office environment. The doors used in the building were also chosen carefully to add to the sense of space. At around 2,6m, the larger than normal doors were specified to further enhance the feeling of spacious working surroundings.



Above: Batho Pele House consists of two levels of basement parking and the offices can accommodate up to 750 workers.
Right: The original brickwork sidings of the building remain and are still one of the most noticeable features.



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The revamped entrance façade of Batho Pele House now incorporates a lobby which is roofed by skylights.



The windows of the building are recessed to limit the amount of sunlight and warmth that enters the offices.

Foundation challenges

A challenge faced by the construction team was that the existing building was 40-years-old, and, at the time that it was designed, a hollow block concrete system was used. This jeopardised the weight-carrying capabilities of the slab. What Barnard used to overcome this problem was Spaceframes, a lightweight rigid structure constructed from interlocking struts in a geometric pattern. Barnard believes in trying new and innovative materials in his projects. "It's my nature," he says, "I like to investigate new products and investigate the viability of using them in my buildings."

Through a hands-on approach and a real interest in the effect of his building on the environment and the surrounding area, Barnard managed to brave multiple design changes to complete a revamp of a building that he is really proud of. **LAD**

Batho Pele House – Project team

- **Client:** ApexHi Properties
- **Architects:** Eugene Barnard & Associates
- **Structural Engineer:** Tony Smith Associates
- **Electrical Engineer:** KKA Consulting Electrical Engineers
- **Mechanical Engineer:** WSP Consulting Engineers
- **Quantity Surveyor:** JWF Consultants
- **Tenant Liason:** Awanda Property Group

Photographs by Loren Shirley-Carr