
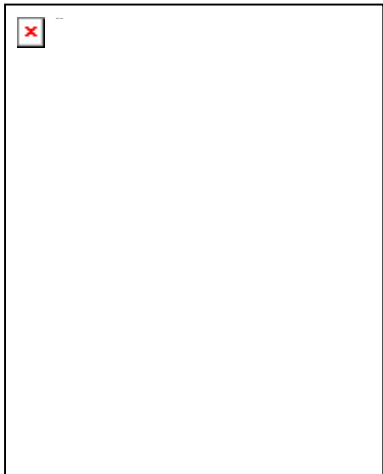


Tall tales with Neil Fraser 

Written by Neil Fraser

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Plans are afoot for two of Joburg's towers, while one landmark already has a fresh face and a new use - the Orlando cooling towers in Soweto.



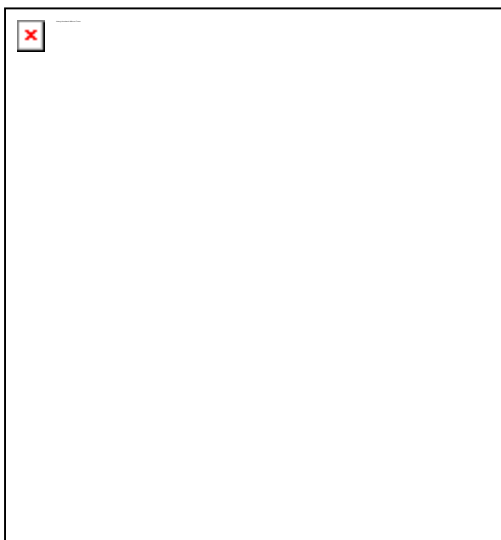
Neil Fraser

CONSTRUCTION of the Hillbrow Tower began in 1968 and the tower was completed in 1971. It has a height of 269 metres and the contract price was R2-million! At the top of the tower there were six public floors, one of which housed a revolving restaurant - Heinrich's Restaurant. There was also the Grill Room on a non-revolving floor.

It was open to the public until 1981, when it was closed "for security reasons".

Telkom's sosatie

I'm sure that many of you will know that there have been numerous attempts to get Telkom to allow the tower to be used in the way for which it was originally designed, as are most such towers throughout the world - for the sheer experience of being whisked hundreds of metres in the air, getting out nervously on cantilevered observation floors and having a mind-blowing 360o view of the city and, maybe, a meal or snacks in the air.



Joburg's landmark Hillbrow Tower

It is a completely different feel from going up 50 floors of the Carlton Centre to its Skyfloor, where one has the appreciation of 49 equally sized floors supporting you underneath. I remember going up both the Hillbrow and Auckland Park towers aeons ago and being so awed by the panorama they offered.

I have subsequently been up towers in many cities in various parts of the world. In fact, in Auckland, New Zealand, a couple of years back, I was startled by a body hurtling down past the outside of the observation floor where I was standing - but it was just a bungee jumper. Only, those people are quite nuts!

Equally nuts are the people who take vertical rides above the observation floors in Las Vegas; the tower there has all the usual - soaring central core and observation floors mushrooming out high in the sky with restaurants, et cetera, but also the ability to get on to the roof above the observation pod and to be strapped into seats that are then catapulted up the main antenna. I believe, like most things in Vegas, the whole thing is false; it is just a full-size mock up that doesn't actually act as a telecommunications tower. But let me tell you, the screams from the folk rocketing up the spire hundreds of metres above terra firma are not false. So, I chickened out, so!

There have also been attempts to get the Hillbrow Tower painted in some African style; some years ago a great zebra pattern was proposed. Telkom, with the unimaginative, ponderous attitude of a typical parastatal of the previous regime, has been unmoved and come up with the traditional lame excuses - "it would be a security risk"; "there is no way that people could be evacuated in an emergency", and so on and so forth. All a load of rubbish! The tower was open to the public for a decade, operating quite safely and was designed to include emergency evacuation. Such towers are a major tourist drawcard in cities all over the world, many much higher - Toronto's is three times the height of Hillbrow's.

Well, the reason for this tale is that there has been a public meeting (which I only heard about but I gather there was a notice in *The Star*) for the citizens of the city to see and comment on Telkom's proposals to utilise the tower for the company's "visual support of 2010". Now that 2010 is looming large, the organisation has decided that the tower could be well used in marketing the World Cup by adorning it with a giant soccer ball structure.

I actually don't think that it is such a bad idea in principle. We are spending billions of rand in preparing for the event and a soccer ball high in the sky to catch the attention of hundreds of millions of watchers throughout the world during TV transmissions seems okay to me. It is the sort of brash, in your face marketing that seems to be what today's world loves.

But someone who went to the presentation (at which there were less attendees than the fingers on your hand) said that the "ball" was to be built around the central concrete core *below* the section of offices and viewing floors. One's imagination translates that into an image of a giant kebab or sosatie, the tower core skewering a giant football with a number of additional pieces above the football like slices of pineapple and dried apricot! Why don't the media carry pictures of the proposals so we can all see and get real comment on what we have to live with for the next however many years? Would be a change from the pictures we are daily subjected to of politicians and officials in disgrace!

Someone suggested that a great alternative would be an illuminated soccer ball with a greater diameter than that of Ponte, nestling on top of the signage at the top of the building. Now that would make a statement!

Wits's column

Turning to another, albeit much smaller tower, there is a story doing the rounds that the University of the Witwatersrand is planning to demolish the 72-year-old "Tower of Light" on its west campus. Towers of light were particularly popular in the 1930s at international exhibitions when "electrification remained the magical ingredient of modern society, equivalent in its expressive qualities to the fountains of Baroque Rome" (Clive Chipkin - *Johannesburg Style*). This was the case

with our own Tower of Light, built for the 1936 Empire Exhibition.

The west campus of Wits was previously Milner Park and the venue for the Rand Show from 1907 to 1984. It was organised by the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society, which was established in 1894. The first show was opened by Paul Kruger in that year, when the City was just eight years old, and the show was repeated in the two succeeding years.

However, the Anglo-Boer War brought an end to the show and it was only re-instated in 1907 and moved from its previous site "between the old Fort and Milner Park" to Milner Park itself, at that time described as "an old brickfield pockmarked by large holes left by excavations".

The "Rand Show" became quite an institution in Johannesburg's early life. In 1936, it was converted into the Empire Exhibition, which coincided with the city's 50th anniversary. Such exhibitions were typical initiatives that were intended to boost trade and bolster popular support - in this case for the British colonial empire.

HJ Crocker, in the *Almanac* of October 1936, provided his impressions of the exhibition grounds before they were opened to the public: "A picture offered itself of the tens of thousands of folk of all ages and diverse races who would soon throng this miniature city, peopling the roads and terraces and pavilions, crowding into hours and days a fuller realisation of British Africa and its Commonwealth relationships than could be obtained in a lifetime of office and workshop and field and home".

A miniature city of pavilions with an eclectic, and contentious, mix of architectural styles - the department of architecture at Wits, on the other side of Yale Road, greeted the "modernistic explosion of the Empire Exhibition" with "deafening silence" according to Chipkin, who goes on to say: "For at such close quarters the apostles of the Modern Movement were forced to confront the noise and energy, the impurities and the jumble of ideas exhibited on a hundred acres of show-ground dominated by the modernistic and retrospective architecture which they condemned."

He gives a broader idea of the era: "In 1936, much of Johannesburg's population was diverted by the Empire Exhibition. The city was 50 years old, and in its golden jubilee year the heart of Johannesburg was illuminated with floodlit buildings and decorated with triumphal arches studded with lights and draped with Empire flags. The main thoroughfares and the old Market Square were ablaze with golden light. But not the slumyards and remote black townships. There were no lights there, no electricity - only braziers in winter, candles and paraffin lamps. The surrounding veld was dark at night as it had been before gold discoveries."

Ironically, according to historian Sue Krige, the city couldn't supply sufficient power for the 1936 Empire Exhibition including its Tower of Light; additional supply had to be bought by the city from VFP, the Victoria Falls and Transvaal Power Company. The Victoria Falls company supplying power to the Empire Exhibition - Mad Bob would have *platzed!*

An additional irony of the 1936 Empire Exhibition, a truly tragic one, was that while the British Empire was celebrating its colonial prowess and demonstrating the extent of its colonial rule, 1936 was the year that generals Smuts and Hertzog, "laid out the site-works of the apartheid structures of the future ... the year of the infamous Native Land and Trust Act and Representation of Natives Act which destroyed the Cape franchise for blacks".

The centrepiece, or focal point, of the layout of gardens and buildings and pathways of the Empire Exhibition was the Tower of Light. Although only 60 metres tall, when illuminated, it could be "seen at night from anywhere on the Rand and [is] a wonderful landmark to airmen flying after dark". It was placed on the north-south axis of the exhibition's "Avenue of Prosperity", which was at right angles to Empire Road (Chipkin states that the latter was "fortuitously named 10 years earlier through love and regard for the British Empire").

Designed by Professor GE Pearse, its positive impact on viewers is described by Gerhard-Mark van der Waal in *From Mining Camp to Metropolis*: "The dynamics of the high cylinder with its fins must

have grabbed the attention of the public at the time. Like most other buildings in the grounds, it was reminiscent of the constructions of the Chicago World Fair of 1933 where 'progress' was the leitmotif."

The Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust refer to its significance as:

- A landmark in the city, familiar to generations of South Africans who visited the Rand Easter Show.
- It meant to earlier generations what the Brixton and Hillbrow towers meant to later generations. It was the symbol of Johannesburg's and also of South Africa's achievement and vision.
- It was designed to be lit as a shining beacon and could be seen across the Reef.
- It was not acclaimed by the architects of the time as an important Modern Movement structure despite its simple lines and use of the most common of materials - concrete and steel. While the academics kept silent it was acclaimed by the people who associated it with a pleasurable outing and annual event they enjoyed. So it is a landmark in time as well as space.
- It was elected in 1986 as one of the 100 structures recording Johannesburg's history.
- The Empire Exhibition was held in Johannesburg in 1936 as part of the city's golden jubilee. The Tower of Light is the only significant structure of that important milestone in one of the world's youngest cities.

Wits will mess with this one at its peril - I don't think it should even think about it; it's not theirs, it's the city's.

Orlando's coolers

Maybe it was the lack of ability to supply the Empire Exhibition that drove the then city council to consider the construction of another power station, this one to be known as the Orlando Power Station. Krige records that construction actually began in 1939 but its completion was delayed by the outbreak of the Second World War. When completed it was regarded as an ultra-modern station with state of the art turbines, using high temperatures and pressures, with greater efficiencies than anything else we had.



The cooling towers in Orlando

By 1945, "the high thermal efficiency" of Orlando meant that it could supply a steady load and it became the main city power plant. It was eventually overtaken, however, by the building of Kelvin A and Kelvin B power stations between 1953 and 1970.

So what is the tall tale about Orlando? Well, as part of its giant conversion to shopping malls et al, to be known as Orlando Ekhaya, the two distinctively branded cooling towers have been turned into

the "world's first vertical adventure centre in a pair of cooling towers". The landmark cooling towers have been turned into a permanent adventure centre that offers a lift ride up the 100m tall west tower, a viewing platform ride, a swing inside the tower, abseiling and bungee jumping.

It opened on Saturday, 12 July at 10am; and will be open every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 5pm.

So, I'll see you at the end of a bungee; well, I think not, but you go for it!

Regards, Neil

PS

I received the following note from Eric Itzkin, the deputy director of immovable heritage in the City's directorate of arts, culture and heritage, which is in the department of community development:

"Just to clarify, the statue of Captain Von Brandis [Neil Fraser looks at city pride] was the first public sculpture of an historical figure to appear in Johannesburg. The artwork by David MacGregor was, in fact, unveiled in 1965, not 1894. The earlier date appeared in an otherwise excellent report in *The Star* [30 June 2008], presumably the source for this snippet of misinformation. [It was!]

"Interestingly, the Von Brandis statue was initially conceived as part of the Miner's Monument in Braamfontein, developed by the same artist for the Chamber of Mines. Fortunately, the two artworks were split into separate projects."

A tribute to Nelson Mandela

This day-long bus tour takes place on Saturday, 19 and 26 July, to celebrate Madiba's 90th birthday. Each tour is limited to 40 people.

The tour includes:

- A visit to the house in Alex where a young Mandela lived in the 1940s.
- A visit to Liliesleaf Farm, hidden away in Johannesburg's northern suburbs, which became the high command of UmKhonto we Sizwe. The tour will re-live the police raid on the farm, on 11 July 1963, which resulted in the Rivonia Trial in which Mandela was sentenced to life in prison.
- A visit to the Johannesburg Fort, where Mandela spent time as a prisoner. At the jail, A Prisoners Lunch will be served on tin plates, with coffee in tin mugs.
- There will be a quick look at the treason trial, in which 156 prisoners opposed to apartheid, including Mandela, tell their story.
- A visit to Vilakazi Street, Soweto, the only street in the world that boasts two Nobel Peace Prize winners as residents - Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.
- Time permitting, the bus will drive past the home Madiba occupied during his tenure as president.

The cost of the tour is R320 each and booking is at Computicket, on 083 915 8000 or 011 340 8000, or through the Computicket website.

Meet David Forrest at Sunnyside Park Hotel, 2 York Road, Parktown at 8.30am for departure at 9am. For more information, telephone Eira Bond on weekdays between 9am and 1pm on 011 482 3349.

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