



A new residential complex for the University of the Witwatersrand to keep up with expanded student numbers was planned from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The completion of this project, Wits Junction, on the Parktown campus in 2012 highlights the challenges of finance, heritage, economics, design and construction.

*By Kathy Munro and Brendan Hart*

# Wits Junction

Adapting student housing and heritage

*View along Sediba Lane at night with Kum Saan and Parna Janda on the left*

All photos in this feature: [www.studio88.co.za](http://www.studio88.co.za)



Opened in phases from mid-2011, Wits Junction is a self-catering student residential complex, providing accommodation for over 1 200 students in a secure, gated urban community in new three- and four-storey buildings. The original objective was to accommodate upper-income senior or postgraduate students and a few visiting academics. The appointed architectural firm was Boogertman, with substantial and important input from Ludwig Hansen.

There is a mix of bachelor, two-, three- and four-bedroom units in brick-faced blocks set in a green garden site in the historic Parktown suburb. Each apartment is equipped with a telephone, Internet connectivity with unlimited access, a television aerial point and a wall mounted heater. The close proximity of a retail outlet, a gym, a TV lounge, computer rooms, social spaces and meeting places makes for secure and comfortable residence living in a green environment.

The layout of the site was determined by the original four Parktown streets – Boundary Road, Ridge Road, Junction Avenue and Park Lane – where suburban housing roots go back to the 1890s. There are 28 buildings (of which 24 are residences, including 13 new residential blocks, eight older existing student residences from the 1980s and five heritage houses with mixed usage).

#### Location and neighbours

A hospital (Park Lane Clinic) is its nearest neighbour and a number of other office developments have emerged on the land of old residential gardens. A few remaining once-grand old homes of Parktown have been converted into company headquarters. The Sunnyside Park hotel is close by and the Houghton Isle office development lies on the north side of Boundary Road. The University's Education Campus (built in brutalist style in the 1960s) is within walking distance in St Andrew's Road.

#### Geography and history

The geography of the complex and its location reflect Johannesburg's layered, if short, history. The site, a consolidation of nine separate residential erven, is effectively a buffer site at the edge of old Parktown, abutting Hillbrow and nudging into Houghton. The original geology of the quartzite Witwatersrand ridge necessitated geological and drainage assessments. Later came the eight well-proportioned homes of professional Johannesburg people (the architect Frank Emley's home Emleigh was sited close to the 1911 fire station on Louis Botha Avenue but was demolished many years ago). A near neighbour at the corner of Park Lane and Junction Avenue is the Park Lane Clinic (or as it now is, a Netcare hospital) which was built in the 1960s. In the 1970s the State expropriated this portion of Parktown for future educational developments for the then Johannesburg Teachers' College and in 1992 the property was transferred from the Republic of South Africa to the University of the Witwatersrand as a donation. Some of the old homes remained and were adapted to new residential and University business purposes. Some new residences were built in the late 1980s.

#### Origins and early residential thinking and planning

By the early 21st century the University had enough space to grow its student residential capacity to match the rapid growth in student numbers (now 30 000). Residences at other campus locations were either newly built or expanded but what was unique about the Parktown site was the potential for a sizeable investment and the provision of many units, with a view to a 20% increase in residential capacity. It was a moment for vision, imagination and a bold approach to financing. What was required was a coming together of a team from diverse disciplines, a strong campus planning drive, new thoughts about finding finance and a design that spoke to a layered

history, a sylvan atmosphere, challenging geology and an imagined future student community. Serious planning began in 2008.

#### Challenges in planning – team work

The Director of Wits Campus Planning, Emmanuel Prinsloo, has commented on the many challenges of the Wits Junction project extending over the period 2007 to 2011. There were four or five design iterations and shifting schemes before the final complex emerged. It was important not to set the designs into place too soon. The architecture needed to be simple, plain and straightforward with an ease of access and a homely feel in the communal spaces. Spencer Hodgson, the chief project manager for all Wits' infrastructural developments, describes the process as a "rollercoaster". Plans evolved as budgets were revisited and specialist inputs were sought. Achieving a balance between commercial viability and University needs meant that finding the right developers, consultants and contractors was all-important. The requirements and advice that emerged from the Heritage Impact Assessment were unique. The team work of project managers, an urban designer, architects, developers, a landscape designer, legal advisors, financiers and bankers, procurement officers and ultimately the residence officials was forged successfully over several years.

#### Budgets and financial models

Early proposals for finance looked to a PPP model (public/private partnership) and foresaw that a developer would find the finance, commission the architects, build and then operate with a lease agreement for 20 years, and only thereafter would the complex be transferred to the University for direct management (the build, operate and transfer model). The developer, Rowmoor 615 (the special project vehicle of Synfin and Crowie), had its own construction people and designer. Initially the bud-

get was set at R490-million with a projected 900 bed capacity. Gradually the budget crept upwards (to R511-million) and the housing capacity rose to over 1 200 beds.

By late 2009, the University adopted a more hands-on approach. Rand Merchant Bank advanced the capital to Wits. The finance was the bank's first-ever 20-year loan to any institution. The State's contribution of R60.5-million offset the loan's financing costs and ensured government approval and support for the project as part of the national plan for residential provision at universities.

It was decided that direct responsibility for operations should be taken over by the Office of Residence Life, under the director, Robert Sharman. It was felt that a university, with its experience of running residences, was the best management option. The scheme had become "build quickly, transfer early and operate efficiently", despite the very expensive nature of the project. Nonetheless, student rentals have been set at an affordable level and 700 students had taken up residence by the end of 2012.

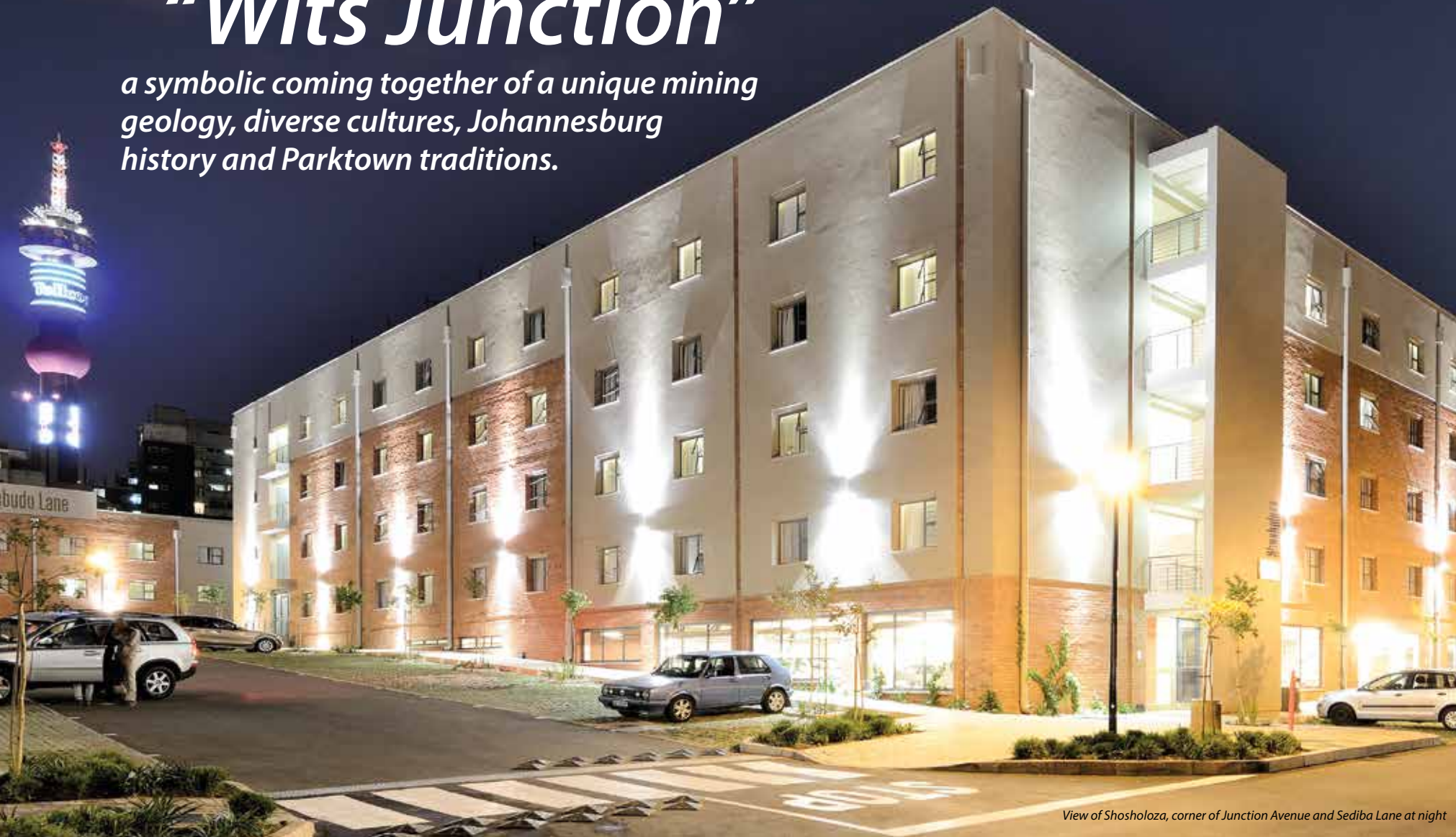
#### The importance of urban design

While the developer continued to be responsible for construction, the role of an urban designer, Ludwig Hansen, became more important and Hansen brought together the rare skills of architect and urban designer with linkages to an overall university urban design. Hansen understood that Wits is an urban university possessing the size, resources and influence to change the entire spine of the city ridge from Braamfontein to Parktown. The ultimate shape of Parktown Village II, or Wits Junction as it became, was guided by that vision. A critical aspect was to preserve and promote the quality of the environment and a great deal of effort was invested in bringing to life a student village and community. The Hansen vision sought to integrate heritage, landscape, to-



# “Wits Junction”

*a symbolic coming together of a unique mining geology, diverse cultures, Johannesburg history and Parktown traditions.*



View of Shosholozha, corner of Junction Avenue and Sediba Lane at night

pography, an urban presence and existing buildings to arrive at a well-positioned sense of place and a modern urban metro village.

The foregrounding of urban design is a unique element. The development is one that brings urban renewal to Johannesburg and spearheads revitalisation at the edges of Hillbrow. The physical imprint of the University is firmly extended, connecting the activities of the Medical School, Health Sciences, Education and Management campuses to the original nodes of Milner Park in Braamfontein.

The Landscape Studio (Bernadette Vollmer) was awarded the landscape design contract in May 2009. Vollmer strove to incorporate heritage into the gardens, with the preservation of big old trees. The landscaping took account of kerb stones, low walls and the geological formations around the historic beacon marking an old boundary of Johannesburg.

## Heritage impact assessment

Heritage and the earlier suburban street layout clearly inform this development and the Heritage Impact Assessment report completed by Dr Johan Bruwer and Henry Paine became a critical design tool. It was a challenge to incorporate all that the HIA report advised, such as the remnants of walls or old street lights, but ultimately a better product emerged. All but one of the old trees were retained. The topography of the site was retained and shaped design, rather than the adoption of a proposed civil engineering solution to construct platforms for the buildings.



Amagumbi courtyard



Trendy living spaces with tasteful furnishings



One of the light and airy games rooms



View of Kum Saan



We want people to know that this project is something different, special, unique...



View of the main entrance to the residence complex

Five heritage houses were retained and R80-million was spent to retain and integrate the heritage buildings into the complex. The oldest of the heritage houses, Muzi Yami (later Eridge House), is now a student centre; there is an administrative centre, four flats for visiting academics and two wardens' cottages. The old stables building had to be rebuilt and is virtually a new building. It has been important to ensure sustainability for Johannesburg's heritage.

#### Naming Wits Junction

The entire complex has been named "Wits Junction", a symbolic coming together of a unique mining geology, diverse cultures, Johannesburg history and Parktown traditions, which speaks to the hope that the lives of students will intersect at the centre. Junction Avenue remains the main access road and the subsidiary lanes are named for Wits' proud achievements in palaeontology research – such as Sediba, Africanus, Sibudu and Blombos Lanes. The road leading to the historic beacon (Randjeslaagte Corner) on the western boundary is Beacon Way. The theme adopted in the naming of the buildings has been Songs of Migration, commemorating the folklore, cultures and vibrancy of the many nationalities and people who made Johannesburg. The names, such as M'Gondini, Ulima, Languta, Sarie Marais, Stimela and Shosholozza, are redolent of memory, physical labour, longing and inclusivity in forging a common history. The laundry takes the name AmaWasha to com-

memorate the first Johannesburg laundry service. Meeting rooms have been named for Wits alumni who are Nobel Prize laureates – Nelson Mandela (Peace), Aaron Klug (Chemistry), Sydney Brenner (Medicine) and Nadine Gordimer (Literature). A book by Luli Callinicos, *Who Built Jozi? Discovering Memory at Wits Junction*, was commissioned and launched at the opening event in October 2012. See "*Who built Jozi*" on page 54.

#### Striking a balance

Prinsloo commented that an exciting lesson learnt was "to find the balance between being precious about heritage and a forward-looking design and use for the building". Heritage provides constraints and opportunities. There was a challenge in making a heritage building work in a significant way for both heritage and current use. Heritage should be seen as a challenge and a resource and not a stumbling block. "We needed to step back and not necessarily adopt the perfect design, but rather opt for what we could afford while working with heritage. We do want to do the right thing and it becomes important to do something rather than do nothing. The full restoration may not always be possible but you must make it functional and make decisions without being reckless." An example of a problem decision was the retention of a specific fine antique fireplace in Muzi Yami, which had the potential to destroy a multifunction application for the space.

scheme for Erf 815 went through to approval stage with the City Council. Flo Bird, the Chairman of the Trust, sees the new development as an expression of the University's founding principles: "Wits is a university not of patronage but of the people of Johannesburg; Wits was created in the crashing spirit of protest of Johannesburg people, rather like the clash of the tectonic plates in the formation of the Witwatersrand ridge." Blue heritage plaques will mark the significance of history for each of the retained and renovated buildings.

#### Quality residential life and its meaning

Wits Junction is a quality complex with its focus on green design and urban living. Paul Kotze comments on the importance of the quality of life in the spaces between the buildings: "This is where students meet, these are the spaces of chance encounter." Perhaps the closest comparison in approach is the somewhat smaller Graça Machel Residence at UCT (architect Martin Kruger). In providing quality residences the University promotes and ensures academic success for its students; a secure home during term time bridges the gap between school and the world of higher education. "The end product," commented Sharman, "is a service and not simply a building."

#### Setting a new standard

The design of Wits Junction sets a new standard in student accommodation by creating a diverse range of residential choices in a consciously urban environment. Cutting-edge design gives a sense of place and of confident purpose. Successful heritage adaptation has bridged past and present, contributing to the sense of a unique place. Over time, as Parktown is reborn as a community of students and scholars, it will develop its own history for the 21st century. The success of the project lies in its long-term projections, the complexity and care of urban planning and the linkages between the buildings. ■

#### Parking

There is a total parking capacity for 500 vehicles and garage parking offers security and removes the intrusive presence of cars. Parking capacity was a function of the topography, but basement parking provision was avoided as too expensive an option. A shuttle service of five buses is also available to ferry students to the Education and Braamfontein campuses.

#### Heritage stakeholders

Two heritage bodies were seen as stakeholders in the evolution of the project: the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust and the Parktown Association. Initial concerns revolved around the site development plans, the retention of heritage buildings, parking, the loss of views, the scale of the new buildings and building heights to match older buildings and old houses. Questions were raised about retail outlets, a projected restaurant and parking facilities. The number of beds planned for the complex represented an influx of new inhabitants into a traditional suburb, but over time and several meetings a better understanding of the challenges emerged and the fact that the University was contributing to new solutions for a decaying suburb converted objectors into supporters. The applications for the removal of restrictions and amendments to the town planning