

'Ora Joubert

---

## A new Student Centre and the pedestrianization of the University of the Free State campus

Regrettably, academic buildings in South Africa often suffer from a stigma of ideological nepotism – a social phenomenon that is seldom conducive to architectural excellence. The University of the Free State in Bloemfontein is no exception, and consequently any new design commission is followed with both interest and envy.

### The University of the Free State

Unlike the 'instantaneous' campuses synonymous with apartheid education, the University of the Free State has a long-standing academic tradition. It was founded in 1904 and is the third oldest in the country. Accordingly, the architecture reflects the design priorities of different eras. Coinciding with the prosperity of the golden years of the Afrikaner Nationalist Government, the majority of the buildings dates from the mid-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and provides thus a relatively cohesive interpretation of the modern design idiom. With the exception of the Sasol Library – completed in 1983 and emulating the somewhat later brutalist aesthetics – building activity ceased for close on three decades. Although this inactivity can be interpreted as a sign of academic decline, it has, from an architectural point of view, been advantageous since its distinct modernist ambience has remained pretty much intact.

### A democratic South Africa

The democratic elections of 1994 necessitated that this university – as all tertiary institutions countrywide – address the pedagogic demands at hand. The university administration adopted a pro-active strategic vision (the so-called *draai-strategie*) for social, linguistic and financial transformation, whilst remaining committed to standards of academic excellence. Concurring with this process of academic introspection, both the resources and the ad hoc 'campus sprawl' came under scrutiny. In 1999 a team of urban designers was appointed to develop a master plan for

---

Professor 'Ora Joubert is head of the Department of Architecture, University of the Free State.  
Student Centre architects: The Roodt Partnership.  
Campus pedestrianization architect: Bannie Britz.



Figure 1: A north-easterly perspective of the new Student Centre (architects: The Roodt Partnership)

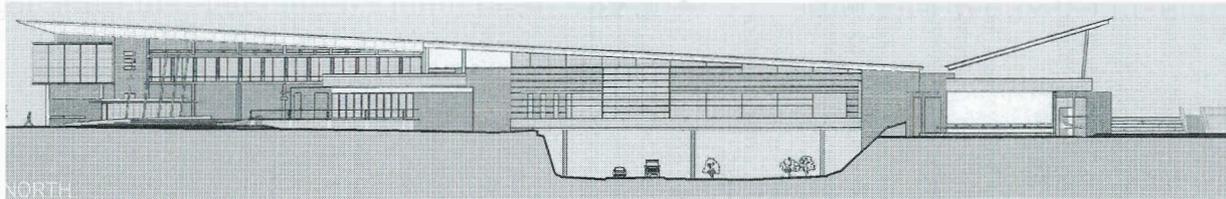


Figure 2: North elevation of the bridge building straddling DF Malherbe Avenue, five meters below (architects: The Roodt Partnership)



the campus. The ensuing structure plan identified certain shortcomings and provided a series of guidelines for future developments.

In particular, the vehicular bias of the campus was criticised and a plea was made for a substantially improved, and user-friendly, pedestrian network. The urban designers also called for the development of "a new student service, support and administrative centre"<sup>1</sup>. It was suggested that this new facility should bridge the highway in the attempt of linking the western and eastern parts of the campus, and act as its 'new heart'. It was argued that a state of the art student centre would also assist in "the much needed marketing boost for the university"<sup>2</sup>, in keeping with similar facilities on various other university campuses.

### **The concept of the new Student Centre**

As the centre has to cater for various student requirements, it resulted in a mixed-use building, which, by definition, is a complex – if not an elusive – architectural prototype. Moreover, as financial viability plays a crucial role in developments of this nature, the priorities of the commercial tenants also had to be considered. Only after wide consultation with the various parties involved, could the findings be translated architecturally.

The architects interpreted the urban design brief in a literal manner and developed a bridge building straddling DF Malherbe Avenue, five meters below. The new Student Centre thus establishes the necessary link between the eastern and western sections of the campus, with the position of the Sasol Library and the newly developed pedestrianised routes also taken into account. The bridge itself serves as the main circulation route, with fast food outlets on ground floor, and student offices and support services upstairs. The two flanks on the eastern and western sides house respectively a media centre, cafeteria and a host of other commercial facilities.

### **In conclusion**

Due to the complex nature of the project, and taking into account that it is the first building to be constructed on campus in many years, its viability and success will be closely followed. It is too early to speculate whether this building will fully meet the expectations of either the financiers or its student clientele. Yet, it would undoubtedly invigorate the campus and make a positive contribution to the architectural fabric as a whole.

---

<sup>1</sup> & <sup>2</sup> Extract from the "Structure Plan, University of the Free State", prepared by Markewicz & English, Urban Designers, Architects & Planners, October 1999.