

FORM FOLLOWS FAÇADE

The architecture of W H Grant, 1920-1932

Federico Freschi

The Scottish-born architect William Hood Grant (1879-1957) designed a significant number of buildings in and around Cape Town. This article considers the façades of some of Grant's (and his contemporaries') commercial buildings in the Central Business District (CBD) during the inter-War period, tracing the genealogy of stylistic changes from the highly derivative classicism of the teens and 1920s to the 'modernistic' Art Deco style of the 1930s. It considers the iconographic meanings of the façades in terms of the construction of, firstly, the notion of an appropriate response to the South African (and more specifically Capetonian) urban context, and, secondly, the concept of 'modernity' as the *sine qua non* of corporate expansion and identity in colonial South Africa.



1. William Hood Grant

Photo: SA Advertising Contractors Ltd 1938. The Colosseum Theatre Cape Town: Souvenir Programme, Cape Town: Cape Times Ltd. 7

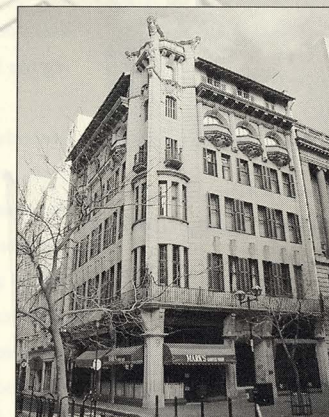
William Hood Grant (figure 1) was born in Dundee, Scotland in 1879. In 1898 (1900¹), after serving an apprenticeship with a local architect, he immigrated to Cape Town. He rapidly established himself in the thriving architectural scene in Cape Town, taking up a position as a draughtsman in the office of the well-known English architect Ransome.² In 1903 he went into partnership with his compatriot and colleague, McGillivray³ and became a Fellow of the Cape Institute of Architects in 1910. The partnership with McGillivray proved to be a very fruitful one. They collaborated on a number of buildings, establishing the meticulous attention to detail, judicious interpretations of contemporary styling and standard of craftsmanship which were to become characteristic of Grant's work during the 1920s and 1930s.

McGillivray and Grant were successful in various competitions, *inter alia* for several buildings in Natal, as well as for the Norwich Union Buildings and the Long Street Baths in Cape Town. They were also responsible for the design of several suburban schools – including those at Mowbray and Woodstock – which Picton-Seymour (1977:108) attributes to their

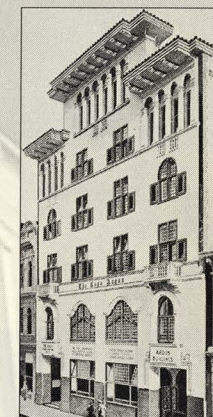
having gained for themselves a name for making the very best use of a particular site, paying special regard to its economic and convenient use.

Amongst their important works in Durban were the Southern Life Buildings and the African Banking Corporation Buildings, the elaborate façades of which combined fashionable Art Nouveau decoration with Edwardian Renaissance classicism. Although this conflation of Art Nouveau and classical styling has important implications for the later development of Grant's mature style, in its original context it provided an interesting counterpoint to the pre-eminence of Herbert Baker's contemporary Arts and Crafts inspired experiments with the Cape Dutch vernacular.

The McGillivray and Grant partnership dissolved in 1923, after the completion of the Argus Printing and Publishing Company Building in St. George's Street (the first of whose buildings, incidentally, had been designed by their former employer Ransome in 1895). Grant set up an independent practice, continuing to operate from the offices at 132 St. George's Street, which he had occupied since 1914. During the 1930s and 1940s he occupied offices in buildings designed by himself, first in the General Assurance Building from 1926 to 1933, and then across the road in the Commercial Union Buildings, from which he continued to work until his semi-retirement in 1950. During this period he was responsible for the design of a significant number of commercial buildings in the Cape Town city centre, numerous suburban residences, hotels, blocks of



2 McGillivray & Grant, Norwich Union Building



3 McGillivray & Grant, Argus Printing and Publishing Co. 1922

flats and factories, and, through his association with the Johannesburg entrepreneur I W Schlesinger, several cinemas in and around Cape Town. He died at Hermanus in 1957.

GRANT'S 1920s STYLE

By the 1920s Grant had formulated a characteristic style, at once entirely derivative of the prevailing Edwardian classicism espoused by Baker and Edwin Lutyens, and yet showing a number of vigorous stylistic refinements, developed during his years with McGillivray, which were increasingly synthesised into the elaborate 'modernism' of his 1930s style. Grant's claims to modernity – like those of many of his contemporaries – rested entirely on the stylistic refinements of his façades. Thus, if the contemporary European Modern movement was (at least partly) predicated on Louis Sullivan's notion of 'form following function', then it seems to follow that Grant's brand of modernity is more accurately characterised by 'form following façade'!

Photo: Architect, Builder & Engineer Sept. 1922:6



4 Baker & Masey, Rhodes Building, 1902



5 Baker & Masey, National Mutual Life Building, 1905.

Photo: Picton-Seymour (1977)



6 Grant, Argus Building, detail of holbol volutes, 1922



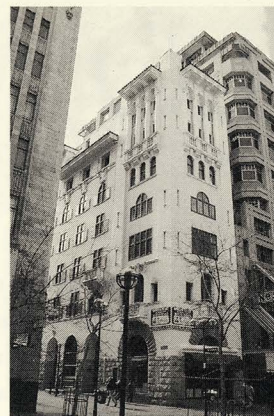
7 Grant, Argus Building, detail of balustraded balconettes and pilasters

The effect of rampant commercialisation and expansion in Cape Town during the 1920s and 1930s was remarkable, transforming the scale and appearance of the CBD. Zoning regulations for the most part inhibited the proliferation of 'skyscrapers' which characterised contemporary Johannesburg, but changing perceptions about the nature and function of ornament substantially altered the appearance of the CBD, which by the 1930s was concentrated around the relatively small area surrounding the length of St. George's Street.

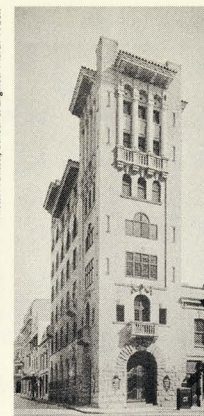
Nonetheless, the most significant shift was in terms of scale, with the average height of commercial buildings increasing from a maximum of six storeys to ten, while the pseudo-classical façades of the 1920s were challenged and eventually ousted by the robust influence of American skyscraper culture. The CBD was the terrain on which architectural novelty vied with traditionalism to proclaim the corporate identities of banks, insurance companies and large corporations.⁴ As Willis (1995: 145) notes in her discussion of commercial architecture in New York and Chicago (and the same may well be said of the burgeoning South African cities of the 1920s and 1930s),

[c]entral business districts ... must be understood as complex, competitive commercial markets where space is a commodity, and location and image count.

In these terms, Grant's contribution to the architecture of this area may be seen as indicative of his status. Apart from the Norwich Union Building and the Argus Printing and Publishing Company Buildings which were designed in partnership with McGillivray,⁵ he was responsible for (*inter alia*) the General Assurance and the Commercial Union Buildings, both with frontages on St. George's Street, and Shell House on Greenmarket Square. Boston House on Strand Street, Jackson's Showrooms in Long Street, and the OK Bazaars Building in Plein Street made significant statements at the outer



8 Grant, General Assurance Building, 1928



9 Grant, General Assurance Building 1928.



10 Grant, General Assurance Building, detail of façade, 1928

boundaries of this important commercial thoroughfare. (By the end of the 1930s this list would include the Del Monico restaurant as well as the Colosseum cinema).

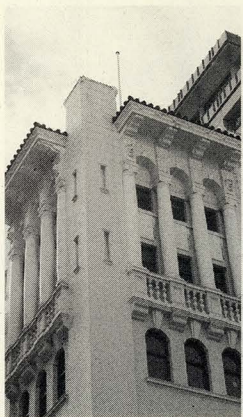
The earliest of these buildings, the Norwich Union Building of 1907 (figure 2) combines classical forms with Art Nouveau details and elements of Mackintosh's somewhat more restrained Glaswegian style. This refinement of the classical vocabulary is interesting in terms of establishing a reference point of cosmopolitan modernity outside of the ubiquitous influence of Herbert Baker's Cape Dutch revival style, which at this time had a firm grasp on the South African architectural establishment. The Argus Printing and Publishing Company Building of 1922 (figure 3), on the other hand, conforms more consistently to the prototypes for commercial buildings developed by Baker and Masey in Cape Town at the turn of the century (the Rhodes Building of 1902 (figure 4) and the National Mutual Life Building of 1905 (figure 5) implicitly emulating the empirical response to climate and context generated by Baker's Arts and Crafts inspired experiments with the Cape Dutch vernacular. The references to the latter in the Argus Building are obvious: the shuttered windows, plaster scrolls and *holbol* volutes around the doorways and at the ends

of the architrave above the first floor level are typical of the style, but above this the references are more consistently Italianate (the arched windows, pilasters, and balustraded balconettes) (figures 6, 7).

This conflation of the two styles provides interesting parallel readings in terms of the appropriateness of form to context. The references to Cape Dutch architecture obviously evoke what is considered 'an essentially South African spirit' (*South African Builder* 3/1920:15), since [Cape Dutch architecture] posses[es] types which are naturally suited to our South African climate and to our special South African needs. They seem to fit in naturally with their surrounding. They are elegant and pleasing, yet simple.

It is clearly these references to a quintessentially 'South African' tradition that the architects intended to exploit. The massive palazzo architecture, however, allows the building a certain cosmopolitan, European sensibility. The latter is, ironically, also considered by some commentators to be particularly suited to the South African context, in so far as

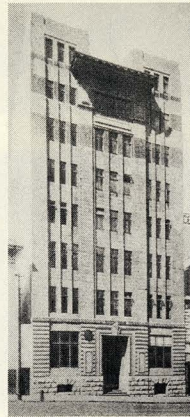
in arriving at a happy solution to the problem of developing a South African style we could not do



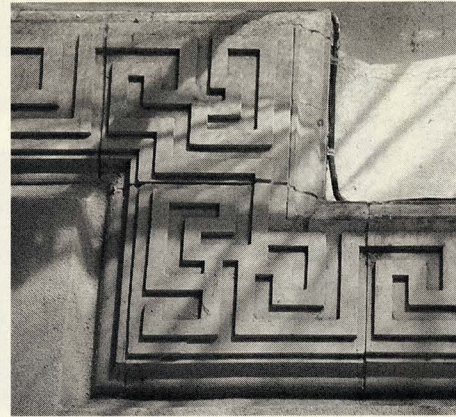
11 Grant, General Assurance Building, 1928



13 Grant, Shell House, 1940



14 Grant, Boston House, 1929



15 Grant, Boston House, detail of fret ornament on façade, 1929



16 Grant, Boston House, detail of acanthus moulding on cornice, 1929

12 Grant, Shell House, 1929



better than to turn to Italy and the Renaissance movement [sic] for inspiration. The open cortile, the heavy cornices and the piazzas and belvederes were all the type of thing, which naturally developed in a

land where there were blue skies, and an abundance of sunshine (*South African Builder* November 1923:25).

Thus the building may be seen in contemporary terms as clearly historicist and conservative in its intentions, embodying the spirit of colonial domestic architecture on a scale commensurate with corporate identity in the urban context.

ITALIAN REVIVALISM:

THE GENERAL ASSURANCE BUILDING

The General Assurance Building (figure 8) completed to Grant's design in 1925 is more consistent with the Italian Renaissance influence than with the Dutch, designed in

the style described by Rennie as 'Cape Revival Italianate' (Rennie 1978a:109). The constraints of the long and narrow site leant itself to a greater vertical emphasis, and thus, possibly, away from the implied horizontality of the Dutch vernacular. The verticality is expressed chiefly in terms of the campanile-like tower on the corner of St. George's and Longmarket Streets which disrupts the implied symmetry of the Longmarket Street elevation, and originally allowed the structure to project well above the surrounding buildings (figure 9). The vertical conceit is further reinforced not only by the attached giant order columns between the fifth and sixth floors, but also by the columnar chimneys which project above the cornice of the St. George's Street façade, terminating in Ionic scrolls. With the exception of this tower, the treatment of the Longmarket Street façade does not depart substantially from the Argus model. In this instance, however, the reference to Cape Dutch styling is vestigial, being evident only in the solid shuttered teak leaded casements, while the general character of the building is a more consistent – if somewhat mannered – evocation of the Venetian Renaissance. The compact and rectilinear plan, medallions, masks, balustraded balconies, spandrels and grand

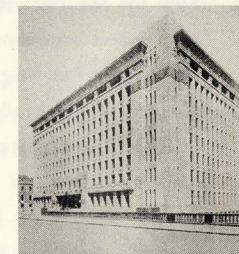
order Tuscan columns clearly evoke a sense of a Venetian palazzo (figure 10), while the projecting cornice with its decorated brackets and tiled roof is generally common to Italian High Renaissance architecture (figure 11).

The reference to the Venetian Renaissance is explored more self-consciously in Shell House (figure 12), extensively remodelled by Grant, first in 1929 and again in 1940 (figure 13). The *South African Builder* (August 1929:27), in fact, describes the first of these renovations as resulting in a structure

distinctly reminiscent of the Venetian Palaces of the late Renaissance ... [with] features that are suitable and harmonise with others in the locality.

The existing three-storey structure was converted into a six-storied building with an attic storey. Although the exterior walls facing Longmarket Street and Greenmarket Square were retained, the façade was entirely remodelled. Apart from the first two storeys, where the plaster was coloured and heavily grooved in order to give the appearance of rusticated stone, the building was faced with brilliant white stucco. The whiteness of the façade was relieved by the insertion of courses

17 Burnet, Adelaide House, London, 1929



of red brickwork separated from one another by broader courses of white stucco, while the entrance was flanked with stone columns and pilasters with bronze caps. Continuing the impression of palatial luxury was the main hall, panelled throughout with white marble. The use of

Italianate forms, apart from affording a treatment that was considered suitable to the South African climate, also carry the historic associations of having housed a commercial aristocracy in the Renaissance. In both instances, this lends a vicarious historical weight to the public face of contemporary corporate culture.

INTO THE THIRTIES: BOSTON HOUSE

Boston House, completed in 1929 (figure 14) departs from this model, effectively presenting a burgeoning sense of modernity. The L-shaped site has frontages on both Strand and Waterkant Streets, the former faced with stone-coloured terracotta and the latter with white



18 Grant, the Waterkant Street elevation of Boston House as it appeared in 1929



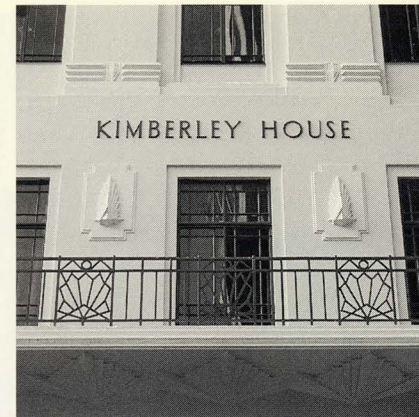
19 Grant, Jackson's Warehouse & Showrooms (now the SA Perm), 1930



22 Roberts & Small, Kimberley House, 1930



Top: 23 Roberts & Small, Kimberley House, façade detail, 1930. Bottom: 24 Roberts & Small, Kimberley House, detail of balconettes, 1930



25 Roberts & Small, Kimberley House, detail of lower balcony, 1930



26 Grant, Commercial Union Building (now Market House), 1932



20 Black & Fagg, Standard Bank 'ABC' Branch, 1930



21 Morris, South African Reserve Bank (now the Board of Executors), 1929

stucco, with courses of red brickwork at the uppermost storeys on both façades. Apart from the *faux*-rusticated base and entrances, running fret ornament on the architrave and the acanthus mouldings on the cornice (figures 15 and 16), the façades are relatively uncluttered and thus expressive of the underlying reinforced concrete structure. Symmetrical towers terminating in step parapets surmounted by flagstaffs replace the Roman tiled rooves of the 1920s, while the cornice is cantilevered shelf-like between the towers. In short, Boston House seems to abandon the formal and iconographic concerns of the Cape Italian Revival style in favour of a more up-to-date and cosmopolitan aesthetic. As a superficial comparison with John Burnet's Adelaide House (figure 17) in London, completed in the same year, reveals, the overall appearance of the building is consistent with contemporary trends abroad.

The ostensible 'modernity' of Boston House may be partly accounted for in view of the fact that it was built as a speculative investment by the Garlicks Company, and was therefore not designed to communicate the specific identity of an anchor tenant. This in turn affected the plan, since before the introduction of fluorescent lighting in the 1940s the quality and rentability of office space depended largely upon sufficiently large windows and high ceilings which allowed daylight to penetrate as far into the interior as possible. Windows are thus a design imperative, and this is communicated in the façade. Paired, with corner pane and criss-cross details at the top floors, windows establish a rhythm across the bays, while the grouping of offices to large light areas and side lanes results in one side of the length of the 'L' having what are virtually ribbon windows (figure 18). Thus, while the careful consideration of design elements in both corporate and speculative office blocks is generally expressive of the cultural conceits of the buildings' owners, in the example of Boston House they are primarily a com-

mercial strategy to promote highly profitable rental space in the increasingly congested CBD.

Although the change in stylistic values exemplified by this and other examples (the Jackson's Warehouse and Showrooms Building of 1930 (figure 19)) seem to indicate a shift in contemporary tastes, classical revivalism remained the officially sanctioned style in Cape Town in the early 1930s. Black and Fagg's Standard Bank of 1930 (figure 20) and James Morris' South African Reserve Bank Building of 1929 (figure 21), for example, were awarded the Institute's Bronze Medals in 1931 and 1932 respectively. Both buildings clearly evoke the iconography of Renaissance classicism as appropriate to financial institutions in the CBD. The bronze gates, window grilles and internal shutters (and not least the inclusion of the Medici coat of arms!) of the latter carries overt connotations of permanence, authority and power.

THE ART DECO STYLE IN CAPE TOWN

The officially sanctioned conservatism of these buildings notwithstanding, architectural taste in the 1930s was, as is demonstrated by the examples of Boston House and Jackson's Showrooms, showing signs of imminent change. One of the earliest buildings to show a definitive break with historical revivalism is Kimberley House (figure 22), by Roberts and Small, completed in 1930. The building clearly pays lip service to classical conventions in terms of its rusticated base, projecting cornice with incipient egg-and-dart mouldings and fret ornament. Its general character, however, is more expressive of the so-called 'modernistic' or eclectic commercial style, emerging from the fringes of *beaux-arts* and Modern Movement architecture, which has retrospectively been labelled 'Art Deco'. The *South African Builder* (June 1930:3) articulating this conflation of the contemporary and the historical, described the building as

show[ing] in its detail traces of the present-day tendency in design. There is no



27 Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of terrazzo colonnade, 1932



28 Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of stepped parapets, 1932



29 Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of façade mouldings, 1932



30 Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of stylised bas-relief eagles, 1932



31 J A Wetmore, Main Post Office, Kansas City, detail of façade, 1933-1935



32 Louw & Louw, SANLAM & SANTAM Building, 1932

imitation of the details of any past period and yet each component part is architecturally treated in such a manner as has been done at some time in the past [my emphasis]. All the details blend harmoniously and with very decidedly individualistic treatment.

Implicit in this discussion seems to be the idea that this 'present-day tendency' is communicated as much in terms of the decorative details, as in the implied structural 'honesty' of the treatment of the concrete structure – or, more simply put, a clear case of form following façade.

The brilliant white façade is delicately framed with a fine line of black tiles, zig-zagging as it approaches the cornice (figure 23). The undersides of the balconies are treated with a diamond-like geometrical pattern, at once reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance convention of articulated balcony struts, while at the same time suggesting the reinforcement of slab construction (thus implicitly acknowledging a certain degree of structural 'truth'). This 'diamond' motif – appropriate to the éponymous home of the South African diamond industry – is repeated symmetrically on the mouldings on

either side of the topmost balconette, here resembling stylised classical medallions, as well as in the wrought iron railings of the balcony, the vestibule flooring and the fanlights (figures 24, 25). The use of these obviously 'modernistic' elements clearly serves to identify the tenant as progressive, cosmopolitan and urbane.

Grant's Commercial Union Building of 1932 (figure 26) marks a decisive break with historical revivalism in his commercial work. Nowhere on the elaborate façades of the building, uniformly and lavishly decorated on the Greenmarket Square, Shortmarket and St. George's Streets elevations, is there any appeal to the classical. The *South African Builder* (September 1932:3) gave a lengthy description of its appearance and enumerated its stylistic virtues, proclaiming that in this building 'modernism in design almost "in excelsis" [had] come to Cape Town'. It commented further that [s]ome other buildings recently erected in the Mother City in the modern manner show less restraint than that under notice, which has the distinction of being fresh and non-imitative.

A later issue praised its 'stately appearance' and 'very modern character' (*South African Builder* February 1933: 21). Cumming-George (1933:95) reiterates this sentiment, describing the building as 'imposingly modern' with 'fine decorative modern stonework' on the façades.

Certainly no expense was spared in terms of realising the approximately £30,000 building. The concrete framed structure has a black marble plinth facing, with bush hammered pink Transvaal granite and cream coloured pre-cast stone facings. The lofty groined entrance hall (reminiscent of Boston House) is walled with travertine marble, the floor originally being finished in golden tone mosaic, while the shops on the square are sheltered by a concrete veranda supported on a green terrazzo colonnade (figure 27). Furthermore, an elaborate ten storeys from ground to topmost parapet, the building was then the tallest building in the CBD.

The extensive decorations of the façade, consisting of both low and high relief mouldings in pre-cast stone are eclectic in origin, and effectively one of the finest examples of the Art Deco style in Cape Town. In its

attempt to concoct a 'modernist' vocabulary, devoid of classical or conventional references, this style emerged as a true hybrid, borrowing extensively from various sources. This tendency had been most clearly and dramatically expressed in the New York skyscraper architecture of the middle 1920s, where the development of novel forms had arisen partly from the zoning ordinances of 1916, which required certain setbacks from pre-determined levels above the street. The nature and appearance of ornamentation, consequently, also underwent a dramatic change: although the *beaux-arts* disposition towards symmetry and ornamentation as being fundamental to architectural aesthetics *per se* still dictated the general appearance of contemporary structures, the vocabulary of ornamentation was no longer confined to the classical. As a primarily commercial style, the new skyscraper aesthetic embraced a variety of stylistic sources in its attempts to fulfil the requirements of good advertising. In her discussion of the skyscraper style in New York and Chicago, Willis (1995: 146) points out that

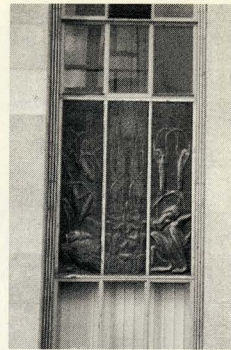
[m]ost corporate headquarters also lease a major portion of their buildings to outside tenants ... [therefore, she argues] ... all skyscrapers ... can be



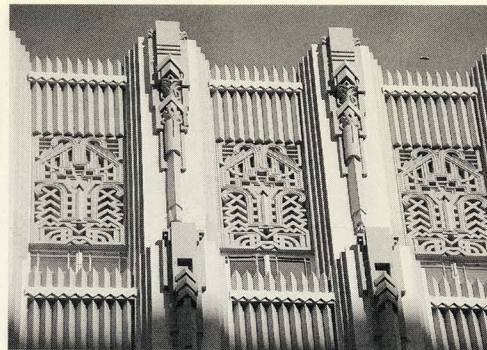
33 Quail, Versorging, pre-cast concrete panel, 1932



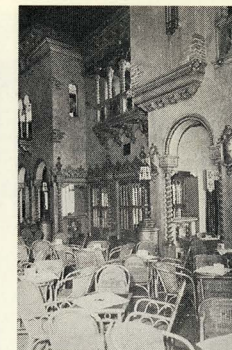
34 Quail, Sport, pre-cast concrete panel, 1932



35 Quail, African motifs, bronze, 1932



36 F M Glennie and Louw & Louw, The Old Mutual Building, 1940



37 Grant, OK Bazaars Building, 1934



38 Grant, Del Monico Restaurant, detail of interior, 1936

Photo: Architect, Builder & Engineer August 1936:9

viewed as real estate ventures, either as income-generating properties or as long-term investments in high-value urban.

It seems as if the appearance of the building, by extension, was (and is) as important as the arrangement of its internal space in terms of attracting clientele – the equation may seem simplistic, but obviously obtains: the more attractive the building, the better the class of rental.

In these terms it is easy to understand why the decorative details on the façades of the Commercial Union Building have no direct bearing upon the commercial activities conducted within. It is impossible, therefore, to trace any direct iconographic link between the decorative programme as a whole and the ostensible function of the building as corporate headquarters with space to let, although the use of elaborately 'modern' forms clearly identified the corporation as progressive, cosmopolitan and urbane. The details are, nonetheless, interesting in themselves: the elaborate play of geometric forms along the stepped parapets are reminiscent of Aztec decorative motifs (figure 28), while the elaborate medallions, corner mouldings, spandrels and zig-zags (figure 29) evoke the contemporary interest in quasi-Expressionist geometric forms. The stylised *bas-relief*

eagles flanking the entrances (figure 30) are more obviously reminiscent of American public works architecture (figure 31), while at the same time dramatically celebrating the user-oriented aspects of the building. The eagles are linked by a continuous band of low-relief mouldings representing stylised proteas, which are, once again, iconographically ambiguous. On the one hand they may serve to anchor the building in its South African context, while on the other the geometric nature of the flower lends itself well to stylisation in this manner.

John Egan,⁸ who worked as a draughtsman in Grant's office during the 1930s, and who was responsible for the drawings from which these details were produced, describes Grant's working method as follows:

[w]e both seemed to have similar ideas of detail and [he] left a lot of his ideas to me. He did not do any drafting himself ... [i]f he sketched out something I would work it up for him (Egan 1997).⁹

As for the actual origin of the decorative details themselves, Egan (1997) describes how 'Mr. Grant took bits and pieces from various things that appealed to him'. The latter included details from the American journal *Architectural Forum* to which Grant subscribed, as well as

details from the interiors of the ships docked in the harbour. Once the designs were completed, the Salt River Cement Works cast the mouldings. Egan (1997) relates that

[b]oth [the Salt River and the Union Cement Works] had Italian fellows who [were] artistic and made plaster of Paris templates from our designs.

Although this account implies that – in contemporary terms at least – the iconography of the façade is nothing less than gratuitous, I would argue that it is nonetheless iconographically significant. Firstly, in terms of establishing the rhetoric of 'modernity' as the *sine qua non* of contemporary corporate culture, this radical shift away from historical revivalism marks a definitive break with the image of Cape Town as a minor (albeit strategically important) colonial outpost with an extended village-like character. In its place, the vision of Cape Town as a twentieth-century skyscraper city was born, a notion which was to have a profound impact on subsequent urban planning and the eventual, disastrous, removal of the CBD to the reclaimed area of the foreshore in the late 1950s.

Secondly, freeing the façade from the shackles of historical ornament paved the way for the construction of

an alternative and more contemporary iconography, within the broader rubric of which the notion of a South African design identity could be further explored and re-defined. While the case for the 'South Africanism' of the 'protea' motif on the Commercial Union building is, as I have shown, at best tenuous and at worst entirely gratuitous, the iconographic possibilities of the new stylistic language were beginning to be confidently explored elsewhere.

'SOUTH AFRICANISM'

The SANTAM and SANLAM Building (figure 32, now known as 'Waalburg'), completed to the designs of Louw and Louw in the same year as the Commercial Union Building, is a case in point. Rising sheer from the street to a height of seven storeys, the impression of a dominant verticality is reinforced by the treatment of the pilaster-like bays, which terminate in a step-pyramid configuration. The spandrels in the bays are decorated with a variety of low-relief bronze and pre-cast concrete decorative panels which repeat across both the Wale and Burg Street elevations, succeeding, according to *Die Huisgenoot* (September 1932:47), in counteracting the potential for 'monotony' latent in the 'simplicity that distinguishes a building like this one'.¹⁰



39 Grant, Commonwealth Building (incorporating the Colosseum cinema), 1938

Designed by the sculptor M Quail, these panels serve to symbolise the nature and functions of the companies that occupy the building, with symbolic representations of 'Trust', 'Care' and 'Fruit[fulness]' (*Die Huisgenoot* September 1932:47), as well as sport, industry and agriculture in a quasi-Expressionistic, figurative style (figures 33 to 35). Of particular interest are the bronze panels below these, which *Die Huisgenoot* (September 1932:47) described as

[p]ure African motifs which express the Afrikaans character of the firms. Bushmen with knobkerries and charging Kaffirs with rawhide shields and asegaais, cactus plants, bunches of grapes, proteas, ostriches etc., are stunningly represented thereon'.¹¹

The equation of 'modernity' with ideology and the construction of national (and, more specifically, Afrikaner) identity is thus expressed in a very self-conscious way. The lavish use of colour in the interior of the building can also, according to *Die Huisgenoot* (September 1932:47) be equated with the construction of a South African identity, since, in contrast to the 'greyneess of the northern countries under whose influence our architecture stands',¹² the brightly coloured decorations in the ceiling coffers of the vestibule 'agrees with the character of the building, with the wealth of luxuriantly coloured flowers and clear blue skies of our sunny South Africa'¹³ (*Die Huisgenoot* September 1932:47). These same ideas informed a great deal of Louw and Louw's work throughout the 1930s and 1940s, finding their greatest expression in Cape Town in the elaborate façade of the Old Mutual Building, completed in 1941 (figure 36).¹⁴

Grant's façades, however, were never concerned in as direct and self-conscious a way with the ideological posturing of Afrikaner (or, indeed, South African) nationalism *per se*. His was primarily and literally a commercial architecture: his buildings are flamboyant, fashionable, and oriented around visual impact – the most salient manifestation of novelty. This is not to suggest that Grant's work therefore stands outside of ideological constructs – far from it – but rather that he is operating from *within* the dominant discourse of English colonialist

capitalism. The appeal to modernity, therefore, was primarily in commercial terms, and its assumptions of cultural dominance were seemingly unchallenged (particularly in Cape Town, where the number of English-owned or -controlled companies far outweighed the Afrikaans).

It is clear, however that the Commercial Union Building marks a decisive break with historicism in Grant's work. His buildings from 1933 onward are exclusively in the 'modernistic' style, and the strategic importance of the sites on which they were erected in the city ensured that their characteristically fashionable façades were well-known and well-publicised (figures 37, 39). Ultimately, it is clear that the technical and aesthetic processes initiated by Grant and his contemporaries in the 1930s are an unequivocal expression of urban self-consciousness and of the desire to articulate capitalist cosmopolitanism in the vocabulary of modernism. Despite the implicit appeal to functional aesthetics however, form inevitably still followed façade.

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The following journals were widely consulted. Where relevant, specific references have been given in the text:

Architect Builder and Engineer
Die Huisgenoot
The South African Architect
The South African Architectural Record
The South African Builder

PHOTOGRAPHY

Unless specified otherwise, all photographs were taken by the author.

Notes

- 1 A shorter version of this article was delivered at the 13th annual conference of the South African Association of Art Historians, September 1997.
- 2 Grant's obituary in the *Dundee Courier* lists the date of emigration as 1900, while that in the *Architect and Builder* of February 1957 lists the date as 1898.
- 3 Ransome immigrated to South Africa from England in 1880, after becoming an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He was responsible for the design of a number of commercial buildings in Cape Town.
- 4 McGillivray, according to Picton-Seymour (1977:107), came to South Africa from Scotland 'on account of ill health'. After serving his articles in Scotland, he worked under John Johnson in London. Upon his arrival in Cape Town he worked first with John Parker, before taking a position as managing assistant in Ransome's office.
- 5 As early as 1923 the *South African Builder* described St. George's Street as 'the finest street in Cape Town for handsome buildings' and continuing '[w]e do not think there are many cities in the world which can boast of so many fine looking edifices in a street so short as St. George's Street ... without taking into consideration some of the older buildings which have a dignity of their own' (*South African Builder* August 1923:19).
- 6 Grant designed substantial additions and modifications to the Norwich Union Building in 1926, and the Argus Building throughout the 1930s.
- 7 Indeed, actual rentable space within the building was considerable: the upper floors, ambitiously interpreting the standard formula developed during the 1920s, were divided into approximately forty offices, which could in turn be sub-divided into suites as required. The building was also unique in that it incorporated a tenants' garage in the basement.
- 8 This lavish architectural treatment of the ground floor shop fronts is partly attributable to the fact that shops generally yield much higher rents than offices.
- 9 John Edward Egan FRIBA (b. 1906) also worked in the offices of F M Glennie, and set up his own practice in Cape Town in the early 1950s until his retirement in the late 1970s.
- 10 Egan (1997) also relates how, since Grant was left-handed, they would sometimes work on the same drawing: 'on a very large, detailed drawing, he did the lettering on the left side and I on the right'.
- 11 'Dit is begryplik dat 'n eenvoud soos die wat hierdie gebou kenmerk, maklik tot eentonigheid kan lei. Daar is derhalwe gepaste versierings aangebring' (*Die Huisgenoot* September 1932:47) [my translation].
- 12 '... suiwer Afrikaanse motiewe wat uitdrukking gee aan die Afrikaanse karakter van die firmas. Boesmans met knobkerries en aanstormende Kaffers met skildvel en asgaai, kaktusplante, trosse druiwe, proteas, volstruise ens., is treffend daarop uitgebeeld' (*Die Huisgenoot* September 1932:47) [my translation].
- 13 '... grouheid van die noordelike lande onder wie se invloed ons boukuns staan' (*Die Huisgenoot* September 1932:47) [my translation].
- 14 '... strook met die karakter van die gebou, met ons sonnige Suid-Afrika se weelde van blomkleure en sy helderblou hemel' (*Die Huisgenoot* September 1932:47) [my translation]. See Freschi (1994).

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