Figure 1
William Hood Grant
Photo: SA Advertising Contractors Ltd, *The Colosseum Theatre Cape Town: Souvenir Programme* (Cape Town: Cape Times Ltd., 1938), 7.

Form Follows Façade: The Architecture of W. H. Grant, 1920–1932 [1]

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 first, the notion of an appropriate response to the South African (and more specifically Capetonian) urban context, and, second, the concept of "modernity" as the sine qua non of corporate expansion and identity in colonial South Africa.

William Hood Grant (figure 1) was born in Dundee, Scotland in 1879. In 1898 (1900[2]), 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.[3] In 1903, he went into partnership with his compatriot and colleague, McGillivray,[4] 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 that were to become characteristic of Grant's work during the 1920s and 1930s.

McGillivray and Grant were successful in various competitions, among other things, for several buildings in the province of Natal, as well as for the Norwich Union Buildings and the Long Street Baths in Cape Town. They also were responsible for the design of several suburban schools—including those at Mowbray and Woodstock—which Picton-Seymour 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." [5]

Among their important works in Durban were the Southern Life 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

1 A shorter version of this article was delivered at the 13th Annual Conference of the South African Association of Art Historians, September 1997. I am grateful to William Bell of the Glasgow University Archives for making available biographical material on W. H. Grant, and to John Egan for sharing his reminiscences of the 1930s in Grant's offices.

2 Grant's obituary in the *Dundee Courier* lists the date of emigration as 1900, while that in the February 1957 *Architect and Builder* 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.

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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 was 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 center, numerous suburban residences, hotels, blocks of flats and factories, and, through his association with Johannesburg entrepreneur I. W. Schlesinger, several cinemas in and around Cape Town. He died at Hermanus, near Cape Town, 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 Herbert Baker and Edwin Lutyens, and yet showing a number of vigorous stylistic refinements, developed during his years with McGillivray, which were increasingly synthesized 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 characterized by "form following façade!"

The effect of rampant commercialization 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 the "skyscrapers" that characterized contemporary Johannesburg,[6] but changing perceptions about the nature and function of ornamentation 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 stories 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

4 McGilivray; according to D. Picton-Seymour, *Victorian Buildings in South Africa Including Edwardian and Transvaal Republican Styles 1850-1910* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1977), 107, came to South Africa from Scotland "on account of ill health." After serving his articles, that is he served his apprenticeship, (i.e., he was an "articled clerk") 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 D. Picton-Seymour, 108.

6 For a critical discussion of the development of the 1930s "skyscraper style" in Johannesburg, see F. Freschi, "Art Deco, Modernism and Modernity in Johannesburg: The Case for Obel and Obel's 'Astor Mansions' (1932)," *De Arte* 55 (1997): 21-35.

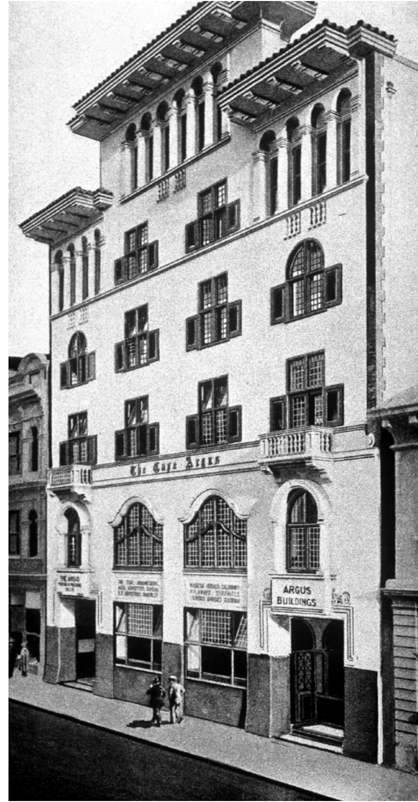

Figure 2 (above)
McGillivray & Grant, Norwich Union Building
Unless specified otherwise, all photographs were taken by the author

Figure 3 (above right)
McGillivray & Grant, Argus Printing and Publishing Co., 1922

which architectural novelty vied with traditionalism to proclaim the corporate identities of banks, insurance companies, and large corporations.[7] As Willis 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."[8]

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 and the Argus Printing and Publishing Company buildings, which were designed in partnership with McGillivray,[9] he designed the General Assurance and the Commercial Union buildings, both with frontages on St. George's Street, and Shell House in Greenmarket Square. Boston House on Strand Street, Jackson's Showrooms on Long Street, and the OK Bazaars Building on Plein Street made significant statements at the outer 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 in-

7 As early as 1923, the *South African Builder*, (August 1923, page 19) 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."

8 C. Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 145.

9 Grant designed substantial additions and modifications to the Norwich Union Building in 1926, and the Argus Building throughout the 1930s.

Figure 4
Grant, Argus Building,
detail of *holbol* volutes, 1922

teresting 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 that 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 nearby Rhodes Building of 1902 and the National Mutual Life Building of 1905, for example, implicitly emulated 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* (concavo-convex) 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 (figure 4).

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," since "[Cape Dutch architecture] possess[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." [10]

It is clearly these references to a quintessentially "South African" tradition that Grant intended to exploit. The massive palazzo architecture, however, allows the building a certain cosmopolitan, European sensibility. The latter is, ironically, also considered by some contemporary 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 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." [11]

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 5), 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." [12] The constraints of the long and narrow site lent itself to a greater vertical emphasis, and thus, possibly, away

10 *South African Builder* (March1920): 15.
11 *South African Builder* (November 1923): 25.
12 J. Rennie. *The Buildings of Central Cape Town: Volume Two: Catalogue.* (Cape Town: Cape Provincial Institute of Architects, 1978), 109.

Figure 5 (above)
Grant, General Assurance Building, 1928

Figure 6 (above right)
Grant, Shell House, 1940

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

The reference to the Venetian Renaissance is explored more self-consciously in Shell House, extensively remodeled by Grant, first in 1929 and again in 1940 (figure 6). The *South African Builder,* 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 harmonize with others in the locality." [13]

The existing three-story structure was converted into a six-storied building with an attic story. Although the exterior walls facing Longmarket Street and Greenmarket Square were retained, the façade was entirely remodeled. Apart from the first two stories, where the plaster was colored and heavily grooved in order to give

13 *South African Builder* (August 1929): 27.

Figure 7 (above)
Grant, the Waterkant Street elevation of Boston House as it appeared in 1929

Figure 8 (above right)
Burnet, Adelaide House, London, 1929

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 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, paneled 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. (The 1940 remodeling incorporated the clock tower, bring the building's corporate identity in line with that of the company's head office building on the Embankment in London.)

Into the Thirties: Boston House

Boston House, completed in 1929 (figure 7) 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-colored terra-cotta, and the latter with white stucco, with courses of red brickwork at the uppermost stories on both façades. Apart from the *faux*-rusticated base and entrances, running fret ornament on the architrave and the acanthus mouldings on the cornice, 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 roofs 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 favor of a more up-to-date and cosmopolitan aesthetic. As a superficial comparison with John Burnet's Adelaide House (figure 8) in London, completed in the same year, reveals, the overall appearances 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 therefore was 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 largely depended upon sufficiently large windows and high ceilings, which allowed daylight to penetrate as far into the interior as possible. Windows thus are 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. Thus, while the careful consideration of design elements in both corporate and speculative office blocks generally is expressive of the cultural conceits of the buildings' owners, in the example of Boston House, they primarily are a commercial strategy to promote highly profitable rental space in the increasingly congested CBD.[14]

Although the change in stylistic values exemplified by this and other examples, including the Jackson's Warehouse and Showrooms Building of 1930, 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 and James Morris's South African Reserve Bank Building of 1929, 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 9) by Roberts and Small, completed in 1930. The building clearly pays lip service to classical conventions in terms of its

14 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 in turn could be sub-divided into suites as required. The building also was unique in that it incorporated a tenants' garage in the basement.

Figure 9
Roberts & Small, Kimberley House, 1930

Figure 10
Grant, Commercial Union Building (now Market House), 1932

rusticated base and projecting cornice, with incipient egg-and-dart moldings and fret ornamentation. 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 labeled "art deco." The *South African Builder,* 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 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." [15]

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, zigzagging as it approaches the cornice. 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 eponymous home of the South African diamond industry—is repeated symmetrically on the moldings on either side of the topmost balconette, here resembling stylized classical medallions, as well as in the wrought iron railings of the balcony, the vestibule flooring, and the fanlights. 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 10) marks a decisive break with historical revivalism in his commercial work. Nowhere on the elaborate façades of the building, uniformly and lavishly decorated in the Greenmarket Square, and on the Shortmarket and St. George's Streets elevations, is there any appeal to the classical. The *South African Builder* 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." [16] 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 nonimitative." [17]

A later issue praised its "stately appearance" and "very modern character." [18] Cumming-George reiterates this sentiment, describing the building as "imposingly modern" with "fine decorative modern stonework" on the façades.[19]

15 *South African Builder* (June 1930): 3.
16 *South African Builder* (September 1932): 3.
17 Ibid.
18 *South African Builder* (February 1933): 21.
19 L. Cumming-George, *Architecture in South Africa: Illustrated with Photographs, Drawings, and Plans, Volume 1.* (Cape Town: Specialty Press of South Africa, 1933), 95.

Certainly no expense was spared in terms of realizing the approximately £30,000 building. The concrete framed structure has a black marble plinth facing, with bush-hammered pink Transferal granite and cream-colored, pre-cast stone facings. The lofty groined entrance hall (reminiscent of Boston House) is walled with travertine marble, the floor originally was finished in golden tone mosaic, while the shops in the square are sheltered by a concrete veranda supported by a green terrazzo colonnade.[20] Furthermore, an elaborate ten stories from ground to topmost parapet, the building was at the time then the tallest building in the CBD.

The extensive decorations of the façade, consisting of both low and high relief moldings in precast 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 mid-1920s, where the development of novel forms had arisen partly from the zoning ordinances of 1916, which required certain setbacks from predetermined 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 no longer was confined to the classical. As a primarily commercial style, the new skyscraper aesthetic embraced a variety of stylistic sources in its attempts to fulfill the requirements of good advertising. In her discussion of the skyscraper style in New York and Chicago, Willis 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 viewed as real estate ventures, either as income-generating properties or as long-term investments in high-value urban." [21]

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 commercial tenants.

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 program 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

20 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.

21 C. Willis, 146.

Figure 11 (above)
Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of stepped parapets, 1932

Figure12 (above right)
Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of stylized *bas-relief* eagles,

of geometric forms along the stepped parapets are reminiscent of Aztec decorative motifs (figure 11), while the elaborate medallions, corner moldings, spandrels, and zigzags evoke the contemporary interest in quasi-expressionist geometric forms. The styled *bas-relief* eagles flanking the entrances (figure 12) are more obviously reminiscent of American public works architecture 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 moldings representing stylized protea flowers (figure 13) 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 hand, the geometric nature of the flower lends itself well to stylization in this manner.

John Egan,[22] 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."

As for the actual origin of the decorative details themselves, Egan describes how "Mr. Grant took bits and pieces from various things that appealed to him." [23] 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 harbor. Once the designs were completed, the Salt River Cement Works cast the moldings. Egan 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." [24]

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. First, in terms of establishing the rhetoric of "modernity" as

22 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, which lasted until his retirement in the late 1970s. Egan (personal communication, July 29, 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."

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

Figure 13
Grant, Commercial Union Building, detail of façade moldings, 1932

Figure 14
Louw & Louw, SANLAM & SANTAM Building, 1932

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 redefined. 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 14, 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 stories, the impres-

Figure 15 (above)
Quail, *Versorging* (literally translated this means "to take care of"), precast concrete panel, 1932

Figure 16 (above right)
Quail, *Sport*, precast concrete panel, 1932

sion 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 precast concrete decorative panels which repeat across both the Wale and Burg Street elevations, succeeding, according to *Die Huisgenoot*, in counteracting the potential for "monotony" latent in the "simplicity that distinguishes a building like this one." [25]

Designed by the sculptor M. Quail, these panels serve to symbolize the nature and functions of the companies that occupy the building,[26] with symbolic representations of "Trust," "Care," and "Fruit[fullness]," [27] as well as sport, industry and agriculture in a quasi-expressionistic, figurative style (figures 15 to 16). Of particular interest are the bronze panels below these, which *Die Huisgenoot* described as "[p]ure African motifs which express the Afrikaans character of the firms. Bushmen with knobkieries and charging Kaffirs with rawhide shields and assegais, cactus plants, bunches of grapes, proteas, ostriches, etc., are stunningly represented thereon." [28] (figure 17)

The equation of "modernity" with ideology and the construction of national (and, more specifically, Afrikaner) identity thus is expressed in a very self-conscious way. The lavish use of color in the interior of the building also can, according to *Die Huisgenoot* be equated with construction of a South African identity, since, in contrast to the "greyness of the northern countries under whose influence our architecture stands," [29] The brightly colored decorations in the ceiling coffers of the vestibule "agrees with the character of the building, with the wealth of luxuriantly colored flowers and clear blue skies of our sunny South Africa." [30] These same ideas informed

25 *Die Huisgenoot* (September 1932): 47. My translation of: "Dit is begryplik dat'n eenvoud soos die wat hierdie gebou kenmerk, maklik tot eentonigheid kan lei. Daar is derhalwe gepaste versierings aangebring."
26 SANTAM and SANLAM are South African financial institutions.
27 *Die Huisgenoot* (September 1932): 47.
28 Ibid. My translation of: "...suiwer Afrikaanse motiewe wat uitdrukking gee aan die Afrikaanse karakter van die firmas. Boesmans met knopkieries en aanstormende Kaffers met skildvel en asgaai, kaktusplante, trosse druiwe, proteas, volstruise, ens., is treffend daarop uitgebeeld."
29 Ibid. My translation of: "...grouheid van die noordelike lande onder wie se invloed ons boukuns staan."

Figure 17
Quail, African motifs, bronze, 1932

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.[31]

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 those of Afrikaans companies).

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-publicized. 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 the desire to articulate capitalist cosmopolitanism in the vocabulary of modernism. Despite the implicit appeal to functional aesthetics, however, form inevitably still followed façade.

30 Ibid. My translation of: "...strook met die karakter van die gebou, met ons sonnige Suid-Afrika se weelde van blomkleure en sy helderblou hemel." See F. Freschi, "Big Business Beautility: the Old Mutual Building, Cape Town." *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994).

31 For a more detailed account of the nationalistic iconography underpinning the decorative program of the Old Mutual Building, see F. Freschi "Big Business Beautility: The Old Mutual Building, Cape Town, South Africa," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994): 38-57

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