

## The history of Newtown's Turbine Hall

The Turbine Hall started its life as Johannesburg's Jeppe Street Power Station, the last and largest of three steam-driven power stations built in Newtown to supply electricity to the city. Constructed between 1927 and 1934 it consisted originally of a shorter Turbine Hall and a single "North Boiler House". The station could not keep up with the city's growing demand for electricity and so in 1934 the "South Boiler House" was built, extending the Turbine Hall. However demand outstripped supply and in 1942 Orlando Power Station took over the supply of electricity to Johannesburg.

By 1958 the Jeppe Street Power Station was no longer able to function economically even as a backup supply. The plant was shut down in 1961 but because of expansion in Johannesburg's Central Business District during the mid-60s the Turbine Hall was re-equipped to be used as a standby and for peak loading periods. It continued to function through the 70s. From that time Newtown was experiencing its own decline as a result of the then City Council's indecision about the area. The flight of businesses from the city to Sandton had begun and the degradation of the inner city was becoming a reality. During this time the Electrical Precinct served as a workshop and storage depot. The property became the subject of a wrangle about ownership between the City Council and Turbine Square Pty Ltd after the company purchased it for R22,1 million but transfer was never effected.

By 2000 more than 300 squatters had occupied the then derelict building. The ownership issue was resolved in 2003.

Today the Turbine Hall houses the offices of AngloGold Ashanti and other businesses, and is home to **the forum company's** conference and wedding venue.

## Preserving the heritage of Turbine Hall

Preserving the building while transforming it into a first-class conference facility had to be treated with the utmost respect and sensitivity. Glynis Hyslop, the forum company's managing director was adamant that throughout the refurbishment process the founding principles of the entire project would be to ensure it remained a pristine heritage site. Together with acclaimed architects TPS, **the forum company** has created a venue that continues to speak volumes in terms of its powerful heritage.

The new building pays homage to the existing structures in material selection, scale and spatial experience. The result is an intentionally 'modest' external expression with celebrated internal volumes.

"The building has an enormous energy," says Glynis, "and its uniqueness meant that the spaces dictated their own usage. The soaring basement with the enormous turbine concrete plinths makes an extraordinary event space,

## the forum company | turbine hall

while the girder room has evolved into a perfect evening bar and the huge boiler house inspired the lightness of the furnishings.

“The major difficulty,” says Glynis, “was to decide what to leave intact and what to smooth over and modernize. As the first coal-fired power station in Johannesburg, much of the existing finish came from its usage – aged copper, aged steel, rust and grey. The integrity of the surfaces remains and we’ve used yellow – the colour of light – as an accent. We’ve gone so far as to make sure that all of the furniture is historically compatible – but it has been modernised and specifically designed for the space.

“Ironically, although it was the home of electricity, we have tried to minimize its usage by bringing as much light into the building as possible. Additional windows, skylights and glass means that most areas require very little artificial lighting. Heating and cooking is done by gas and the only area that requires lighting at all times is the champagne bar in the cellar.”

The history of building is rich and colourful and during its lifetime the Turbine Hall has seen aspects of the city come and go, and stood witness to the changing face of Africa’s wealthiest city.

The Turbine Hall has been hailed for its representation of a truly iconic South African architectural style. The site retains its industrial heritage but also displays a contemporary personality. The building has an enormous energy and atmosphere – every brick speaks of its colourful history while lofty volumes of light offer opportunities to showcase significant South African art and bold architectural spaces.

### **Newtown today**

Newtown originally started out as a racially mixed working class district, where bricks were manufactured. Through the years the area has seen forced removals take place, has been an agricultural trade hub and also the producer of much of Johannesburg’s power. Today creativity flows through Newtown whether it be in music, theatre, art or dance. The area is home to museums, theatres, restaurants, art galleries, dance studios, craft markets, live performances and night spots. It is also a managed precinct with 24-hour security patrols and lots of safe parking so visitors can enjoy all that it has to offer with peace of mind.

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