



25

building

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## TRANSPORT TERMINALS



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# Park Station — an early Johannesburg landmark returns to the city

## TRANSPORT TERMINALS

The elegant 19<sup>th</sup> Century steel structure which stood as a landmark at Johannesburg's Park Station for more than 50 years, is scheduled to return to Newtown, west of the city centre.

The station canopy, designed by Dutch architect Jacob Klinkhamer and manufactured in Holland in the 1890s, is to house the new Transnet Railway Museum.

Building spoke to Transnet senior architect Basil Brink, about this project.



Johannesburg Station occupies a central city site bordered by Rissik, De Villiers, Wanderers and Wolmarans Streets, with its major entrance on axis with Eloff Street. The present station complex which replaced Park Station, was erected in the 1950s, a larger facility designed in response to the increasing demands on the rail service. The railway tracks were lowered and the extended station premises necessitated the move of the Wanderers Club from its location north east of the original Park Halt to its present property north of the city. Wanderers Park today recalls the Club's former territory.

When the new station was to be built the sequence of steel structures that had sheltered the platforms until then, were threatened with demolition. The main station building, the Canopy which sheltered platforms three, four, five and six, was recognised as a building of historic and architectural merit and in 1951 the chief civil engineer of the then SAR sought permission from the corporation's general manager for its re-use at Kaalfontein. The structure was dismantled and transferred to Esselen Park, where it was re-erected on the property of the SAR Central Training Institute.

***The Station Canopy***

The building was designed originally as an exhibition space — a temporary function. It was shipped from Amsterdam to South Africa in the 1890s and transported to Johannesburg in 1896/97 to cover the newer platforms serving additional lines at Park Station.

The Canopy is an elegant steel structure, more lightly

framed than others of similar period and finely detailed. It extends a length of 155 m and a width of 22 m and is open on all sides. As such it provided an appropriate platform shelter. The vaulted spaces are almost cathedral-like — the high central nave with colonnaded aisles to either side and clerestory lighting continuous through the length of the building. The outer wings of the roof, which are suspended from the core structure to a level below the clerestory lighting, provided a verandah-like shelter to the edge of each platform.

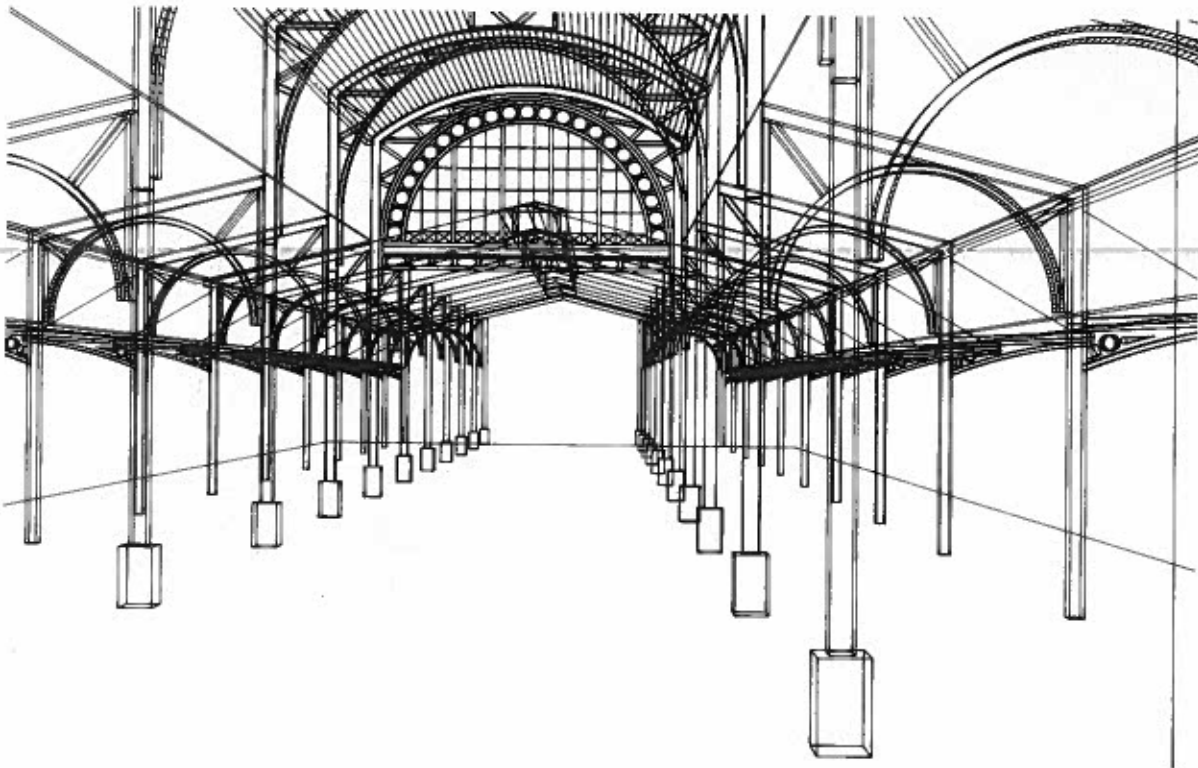
Old photographs indicate changes in the use of interior spaces. At the turn of the century kiosks of timber panelling and glass were ordered along the central space. These provided enclosed waiting rooms as well as housing newsagents and similar. At a later date, from the 1930s, vehicular access was provided to the platforms from Rissik Street with an exit on Wanderers Street. This one way thoroughfare, which required that the centrally placed kiosks had been removed, allowed for cars to be driven onto the platforms and parked under the shelter of the Canopy.

Since the early 1950s the building has stood at Esselen Park where it is still in use as a signals training centre. The decline in use of manually operated railway signals — in favour of centralised and computerised operation — has reduced the requirement for signals training but the centre has been retained and the signal equipment is well kept. The building itself is in need of maintenance externally.

***Left: Park Station in the 1930s — vehicular access was provided to the platforms from Rissik Street, with an exit on Wanderers Street  
Below: Earlier, timber panelled kiosks (c 1910) and enclosed waiting rooms were ordered along the central space***



## TRANSPORT TERMINALS



*Above: Also in the 1930s  
Left: A computer generated image of the canopy structure*

### **A railway museum**

The Canopy, because of its history and particularly its historical significance in Johannesburg, has long been recognised as a building that might house a railway museum. Relatively recently a Transnet site in Newtown was identified as appropriate for such a development — its suitability accentuated by a proximity to the cultural node of Newtown, the theatre precinct and the Africana Museum. The Canopy is to be transferred to this site.

The Newtown property lies to the north of the former city abattoir site on land that slopes upward from this level. It is crossed by railway lines — many of which are scarcely used and some of which will continue to be used.

Discussion with the urban designers involved in the upgrading of Newtown has led to plans which allow for

the inclusion of the railway museum site within the area defined by major bordering roadways (rather than its exclusion according to former conceptual drawings) with an adjustment in the route of the proposed Yale Road extension. Modifications to the extensions of Carr and Wolhuter Streets contribute to the possibility of creating a crossroad — vehicular/pedestrian/rail — beneath a bridging piazza which would stand as a forecourt to the museum and establish a visual focus on axis with Wolhuter Street. There is a possibility that a 'head' building, a hotel or similar, would be erected adjacent to the museum on the Transnet site.

### **Development considerations**

Although the Canopy was used as an exhibition building in

Amsterdam, because it is an open structure it is not ideal as a museum in which internal environmental controls are critical. A number of options present themselves to resolve this problem.

- The gradient and the geotechnics of the site facilitate the creation of a lower ground floor, and allow for the Canopy to be re-erected on higher land — the upper ground level. Thus an enclosed and environmentally controlled building could be created at the lower level. The principle design concern in this possibility would be the resolution of the south facade — the integration of upper and lower levels, the old and the new.
- A further option is to recreate the timber panelled kiosks that once were ordered along the central interior space of the Canopy. Such cubicles would serve to house relatively small and independent exhibits.
- The possibility of introducing a mezzanine level, taking advantage of the vaulted space in providing either continuous galleries to either side of the central space or enclosed exhibition areas, also is being considered. A concern here is to create the mezzanine independently of the Canopy structure so that the original building remains integral.
- Additional exhibition space could be provided in railway carriages, historic and contemporary, which would stand alongside the building on the lines to the north. This possibility would afford the museum the opportunity of creating wholly authentic contextual displays.

Overriding influences in the conceptualisation of the museum complex relate to : the Canopy building and its history; and to the objective of creating what the architect terms 'active' space.

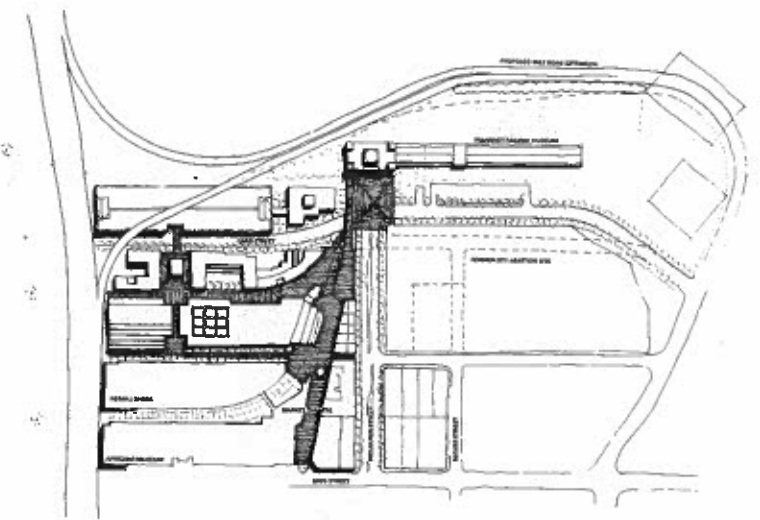
The historic Canopy is central to the complex and the intention is that it should not be compromised by arbitrary intervention. Any development within or in direct relation to it is to be consistent with the design of the building and its functional history.

In terms of creating 'active' space, which will motivate museum attendance by inviting public participation, the possibility of introducing commercial opportunities is being considered. This also would offset the cost of running the museum.

The recreated station kiosks could be used as before to house newsagents and other small commercial outlets. The mezzanine galleries could provide retail facilities such as antique and collectors' shops.

The idea of reintroducing vintage cars, stationed within an area beneath the Canopy and providing a city taxi or Newtown transport service, presents another commercial possibility, as would 'steam safaris'. Old steam-powered locomotives offering excursions to places of interest on the Witwatersrand, such as the Transnet railway preservation centre at Millsite, could be operated from the railway museum.

All these possibilities would contribute to the vitality of an upgraded Newtown and although the resolution of the project remains to be distilled from the conceptual thinking, the return of the Canopy to central Johannesburg is scheduled to take place within a year. The process of dismantling and reassembling the building is intended to be handled in phases, systematically, with a corresponding construction of a new building to replace it at Esselen Park.



**Top right: A sketch plan illustrating the location of the railway museum in Newtown — adjacent to the northern railway lines. The possible adjustment of the proposed Yale Road extension and modifications to the routes of Wolhuter and Carr Streets are shown. By courtesy of Gallagher Aspoas Poplak Senior, urban designers**  
**Right: The sequence of photographs illustrates the station building in a changing urban context — in the 1920s, additional lines are being constructed; in the 1930s, the south station building, designed by Leith & Moerdyk, is complete; and in the 1940s the SAR regional offices (in the foreground) are complete**