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PARLIAMENT PRECINCT: OLD ASSEMBLY BUILDING

**PERMIT APPLICATION : ENTRANCE HALL / NCOP LINK CORRIDOR – GROUND AND
FIRST FLOORS – STRIPPING OF EXISTING COLUMNS**

BUILT ENVIRONMENT UNIT

DATE: 29 – 11 – 2022



Old Assembly building : Entrance Hall / NCOP Link Corridor. Courtyard on the left, Old Assembly Chamber to the right.



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The aim of this submission is to apply for and obtain a Permit from SAHRA for the stripping of the existing columns on the Ground and First floors, situated within the Entrance Hall / NCOP Link Corridor of the Old Assembly building.
- 1.2 The columns were damaged by water ingress travelling down from the second floor. The latter was left exposed after suffering substantial damages by a fire that occurred on the 02nd January 2022. The floor was gutted with only the perimeter brick walls remaining. The damages to the columns can be seen as a direct result of the fire and what occurred afterwards.
- 1.3 The columns are made out of circular concrete columns, wrap in a plaster/gypsum coating. It is currently the latter that has been damaged by water ingress, causing the coating to crack open, bulged and pop-off.
- 1.4 It should be noted that the water ingress not only causes damages to the columns, but also to other architectural features and components within the Entrance Hall, surrounding Passages, Art Gallery etc that are situated directly below the fire damaged second floor.
- 1.5 The stripping of the columns are prioritized and recommended for the following reasons:
 - a) The damages to the columns (more specifically the plastered / gypsum coating) are of such a nature that it cannot be saved.
 - b) Further investigations are required to ensure that the integrity of the actual concrete columns are not compromised.
 - c) To ensure the safety of the occupants for when they are scheduled to remove their belongings from the building.
- 1.6 Assistance and support is required from SAHRA to assess this report, and assist with the issuing of a permit to allow for the stripping of the columns.

2. The Site description

Old Assembly Address : Located between Parliament Street and Government Avenue on the Parliamentary Precinct, Cape Town.

The Old Assembly occupies an important position in the architectural progression along Government Avenue and Parliament street going towards Tuynhuys. It is situated between the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) buildings.



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The January 2022 fire caused damages to the second floor on the South East as indicated below on the site plan.

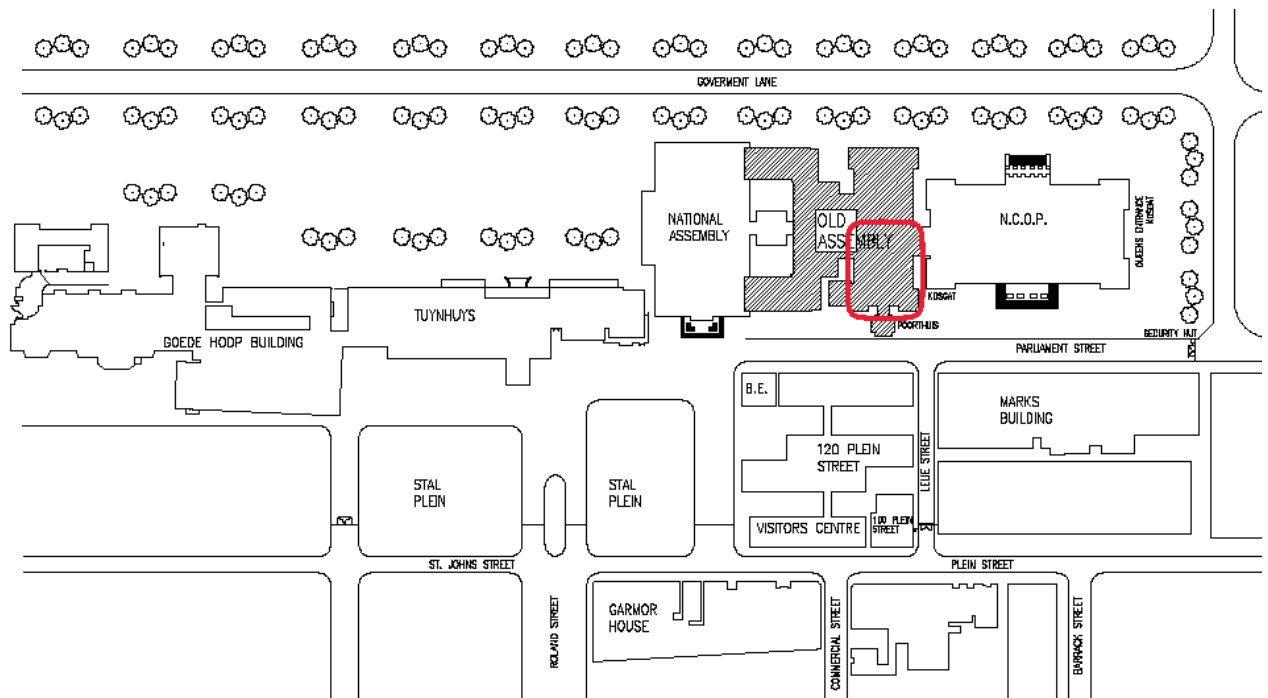


Fig 1 : Site plan – Parliament Precinct

The building is subject to Section 34(1) of the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA), Act 25 of 1999 which controls alterations and demolitions to any buildings older than 60 years. The Houses of Parliament of which the Old Assembly forms part of, received Grade 1 National Heritage Status from the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). In turn, these buildings forms part of the greater Grade 1 National Heritage Site, eg. the entire Parliamentary Precinct, and of which the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) is the custodian of.



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3. Statement of Significance

The Old Assembly is where the House of Assembly met until 1988. The sittings was then moved over to the National Assembly building. Consequently the large Old Assembly Chamber occupies a focal and significant place in the Old Assembly building.

Overall, the Old Assembly has high historical significance. The following are extracts from the Cape Town : Parliamentary Precinct Conservation and Integrated Management Plan – April 2007 WCS 042965, a project that was implemented by DPWI.

“The Old Assembly is an important part of a group of significant buildings in the precinct between the NCOP and New National Assembly building.”

To elaborate further on the historical significance of the Old Assembly building :

- 3.1 The Old Assembly building was constructed as an extension to the Old Parliament building and completed in 1910 to accommodate the Union Government. It was designed by the Public Works Department with active assistance from Herbert Baker and constructed by AB Reid and Company. The building therefor is of historic significance in terms of great architectural, national historical/political and social significance, and to some degree linguistics, scientific and spiritual significance.
- 3.2 The building is described as being “a manifestation of a more robust neo-classicism”, an architectural theme which was popular in the 20th Century.
- 3.3 Neoclassical architecture is an architectural style described in the following manner :
“Neoclassical architecture is characterized by grandeur of scale, simplicity of geometry, Greek – especially Doric) or Roman detail, dramatic use of columns and a preference for blank walls.”
- 3.4 The building underwent two extensions since 1910. The largest was completed in 1960 and resulted in the South West wing which was brought about due to the demand for more office space. A much smaller extension, the Security Lobby was added in 1988.
- 3.5 The Old Assembly’s well-proportioned facades, in particular the façade facing Parliament street and to a lesser extent the façade facing Government avenue, are regarded as fine architectural period pieces to be conserved as well as the building’s profile and roof-



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scape, boundary railings and piers. All these elements forms an integral part of the architectural composition of the building. These features follows the theme and continuation of the NCOP building. The walls are red facebrick, broken up with white plastered columns with elaborate detailed plaster work, plaster cornices/corbelles and moulded balconies, plastered window and door surrounds/mouldings, plastered string courses, cornices etc.

3.6 The interior depicts strong influences of Baker and Masey (Architects), and is organized around two structural spaces :

3.6.1 The Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor

3.6.2 The Assembly Chamber.

These spaces are regarded as architecturally, aesthetically and historically significant and should be retained at all cost, including their architectural detailing/features.

The Entrance Hall forms the focal part of the discussion within this report.

3.7 The Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor :

Note : the following are Architectural and Heritage recommendations : Page 59 of the Coega May 2022 report; Page 33 CMP document April 2007).

3.7.1 The Entrance Hall forms the link between various circulation routes within the Old Assembly building, as well as internal links to both the NCOP and National Assembly buildings.

3.7.2 The interior design features, finishes and materials are of particular heritage importance and will need to be preserved or restored to the best quality.

3.7.3 The Hall is a double volume space, flooded with natural lighting, giving a sense of airiness and arrival within the building. The Hall is also characterized by beautifully crafted and crisply modelled colonnades, plain groin vaulted ceilings with a grand and elegant staircase, heavy teak timber joinery (windows, balustrades, walkways, doors etc) and slate/marble floor tiles.

3.7.4 Further information obtained from the Heritage report compiled by Rennie Scurr Adendorff, Phase 2 detailed assessment, 24th May 2022, stated the following :

a) The Old Assembly has a much higher intrinsic significance. The richness, rareness, detailing and age of the built fabric is an indication that great care should be taken with conservation work, especially relating to detailing and specifications. Some suggested conservation recommendations :

- The use of lime waters and renders,
- Breathable paint systems of high quality,
- High quality finishes and materials and,



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- Reconstructed detailing where appropriate.

Areas where these recommendations should be applied : Foyers/Hall, Old Assembly Chamber, Art Gallery etc which would require a detailed and scientific like approach for reconstruction to the highest conservation standards.

- b) The application of a temporary protective roof covering was strongly encouraged to be applied before the 2022 winter rains as a means to stabilize the built fabric and further protect it from water ingress and damage.
- c) Any reconstruction work would require a heritage permit.
- d) The involvement of a Heritage Architect was encouraged to oversee all reconstruction work.
- e) It is also important to add that DPWI should consider appointing a Heritage Architect to record and detail the existing surviving detail fabric for when reconstruction /restoration commences before further deterioration occurs.

3.8 As a result of the heritage significance of the Old Assembly building, any restoration measures will have to be guided by heritage considerations.

4. Background : The reason for the submission

4.1 On the morning of the 02nd January 2022, a major fire devastated South Africa's Parliament. The fire caused substantial damage to the National Assembly, completely gutting the main and central core of the building and affecting the adjoining areas as well. Fire damage to the Old Assembly is centered on the second floor of the South East wing only, causing substantial damage (the floor has been completely gutted) with only the perimeter brickwalls remaining. The lower floors were affected by debris, smoke and extensive water damage. The Old Assembly have also been rendered unusable.

4.2 Various investigations have been conducted by both internal Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) Professional Services officials as well as a team of independent built environment consultants specialist, which included a highly skilled Heritage Architect. The appointed Consultant team were briefed to conduct high level, but sufficiently detailed assessments of the damaged and residual structural strength of the two buildings :

- a) Declaring the building safe in order for investigations to be conducted,



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- b) Provide short term recommendations to preserve areas to prevent further damages,
 - c) Provide long term methodologies on high level restorative and rehabilitation proposals with the intent of compiling cost estimates to aid decision making.
- 4.3 Two of the short term proposals stemming from the above investigations :
- 4.3.1 The removal of the debris and cleaning up of the fire damaged areas.
 - 4.3.2 Provide a temporary roof cover over the fire damaged second floor South East wing (supported by the perimeter brickwalls) to protect the lower floors from further damage.
 - 4.3.3 SAHRA has issued permits for both the above in April 2022.
- 4.4 DPWI intended to have the above proposals implemented before the start of the Cape winter rains. Unfortunately that intention could not be implemented due to various reasons. As a result, further deterioration and damages occurred over the past few months, mostly caused by water ingress.
- 4.5 As indicated in section 3, the Old Assembly have areas of significant historical values, one of which is the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor. Unfortunately this areas is directly located below the second floor where the fire damage occurred. The area not having been protected after the fire, have now resulted in further damages/deterioration to existing heritage features. Damages caused by water ingress travelling down from the second floor are evidenced by damaged plaster works, cracks, brown stains etc. These unique heritage features have now been compromised, which could possibly have been prevented by installing a temporary roof over before the onset of the winter rains.
- 4.6 The type of damages as clarified by the structural engineer and confirmed on site are as follows (see attached Annexure A for more information) :
- 4.6.1 Flaking and peeling of paint. There is not much concern about the loss to the paintwork, since it appears that the wrong type of paint (eggshell) was used on walls, columns etc. This paint traps any moisture between the plaster surface and the paint layer, causing the peeling and bubbling effect.
 - 4.6.2 Cracking, popping open of and delamination of plaster caused by water ingress. The smooth plaster works has high relevance and contributes to the heritage significance in this building. Damages to the plaster works is of concern.
 - 4.6.3 Dank musty smells in poorly ventilated areas. This was experienced in areas like the Art Gallery (even though this area has good natural light and ventilation since all the windows were open), Passages and Offices. Presence of mould and fungus are noticeably present in the Art Gallery and noticed in a few Offices on the second floor.



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- 4.6.4 Columns in the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor :
- 4.6.4.1 The existing circular columns on square bases are found on both the first and second floors. On the date of the inspection, several columns have already been damaged by water ingress, some of them severely so.
- 4.6.4.2 The existing columns are approximately 2160mm in height (including the bases etc) and 300mm in diameter from the bottom to mid-way, than tapering off as it moves upwards.
- 4.6.4.3 The columns are constructed out of reinforced concrete encased in a thick layer of plaster/gypsum material used for decorative effect. The plaster ranges in thickness from approximately 15 – 70mm. It appears that the plaster is cracking up (bursting open) as a result of moisture ingress. The columns are positioned away from any external walls, making the logical assumption that the water is travelling down from the top floors. (See the Structural Engineer's report for more information).
- 4.6.4.4 Currently nineteen (19) columns are affected, twelve (12) on the ground floor and seven (7) on the first floor.
- 4.6.4.5 The cracking of the columns (albeit the plaster) have raised safety concerns. The intention is to strip all the plaster from all the affected columns in order for the structural engineer to conduct proper investigations and tests to ensure that the integrity of the reinforced part of the concrete column have not been compromised. Saving and repairing the plasterwork would not serve a purpose in any event since the material has grotesquely swelled beyond repair.
- 4.6.4.6 Proposed reconstruction method for the :
- Apply lime plaster / rendering process in the reconstruction of the columns.
 - The lime plaster / rendering will assist in absorbing water readily. This breathable plaster will expel water as the weather dries up, conserving the substance below it and reducing damages. The lime plaster has room for contraction and expansion.
 - Apply a good quality breathable paint.
- 4.6.4.7 The existing column has been measured and drawn up for record purposes.



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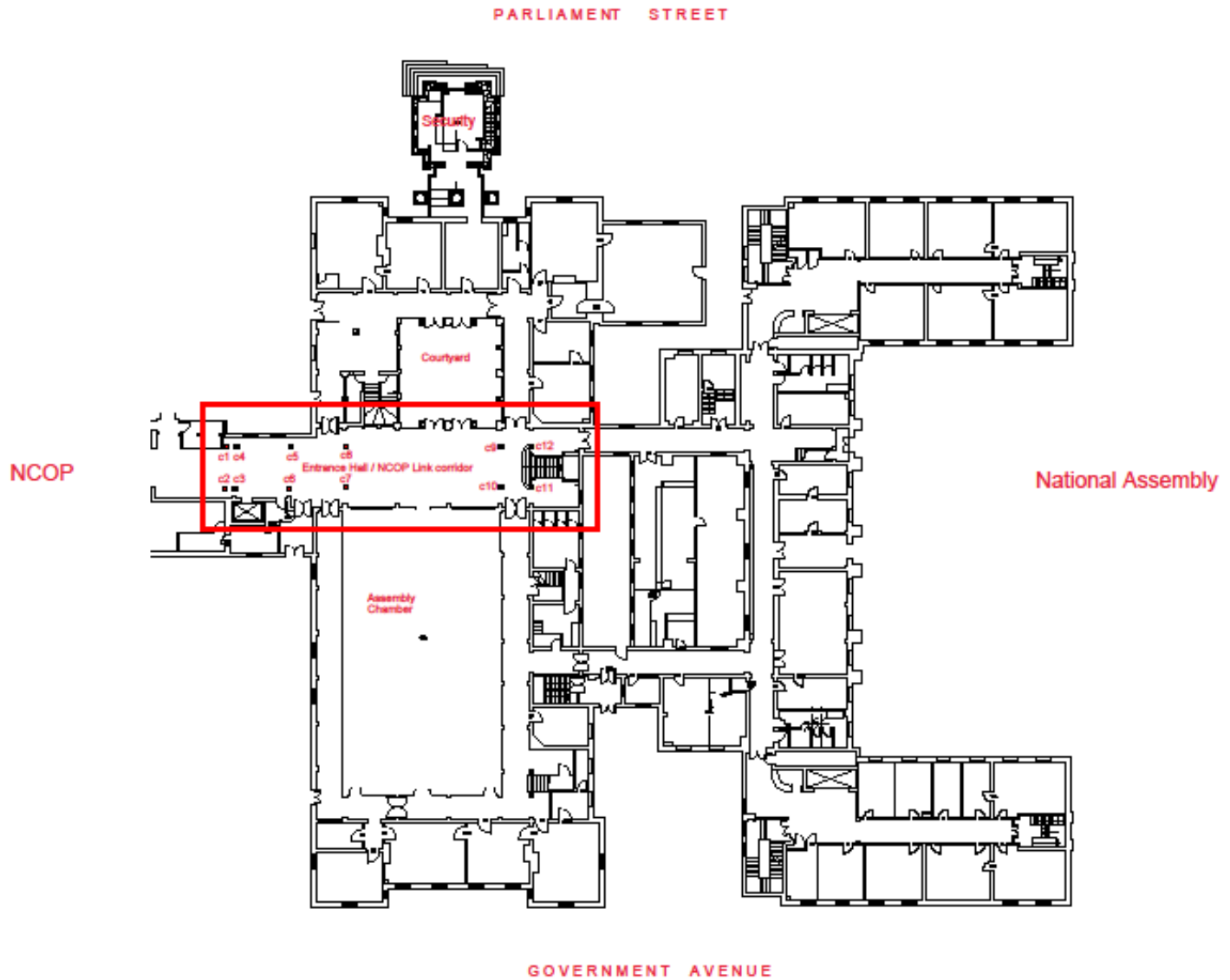


Fig 1 : Ground floor layout



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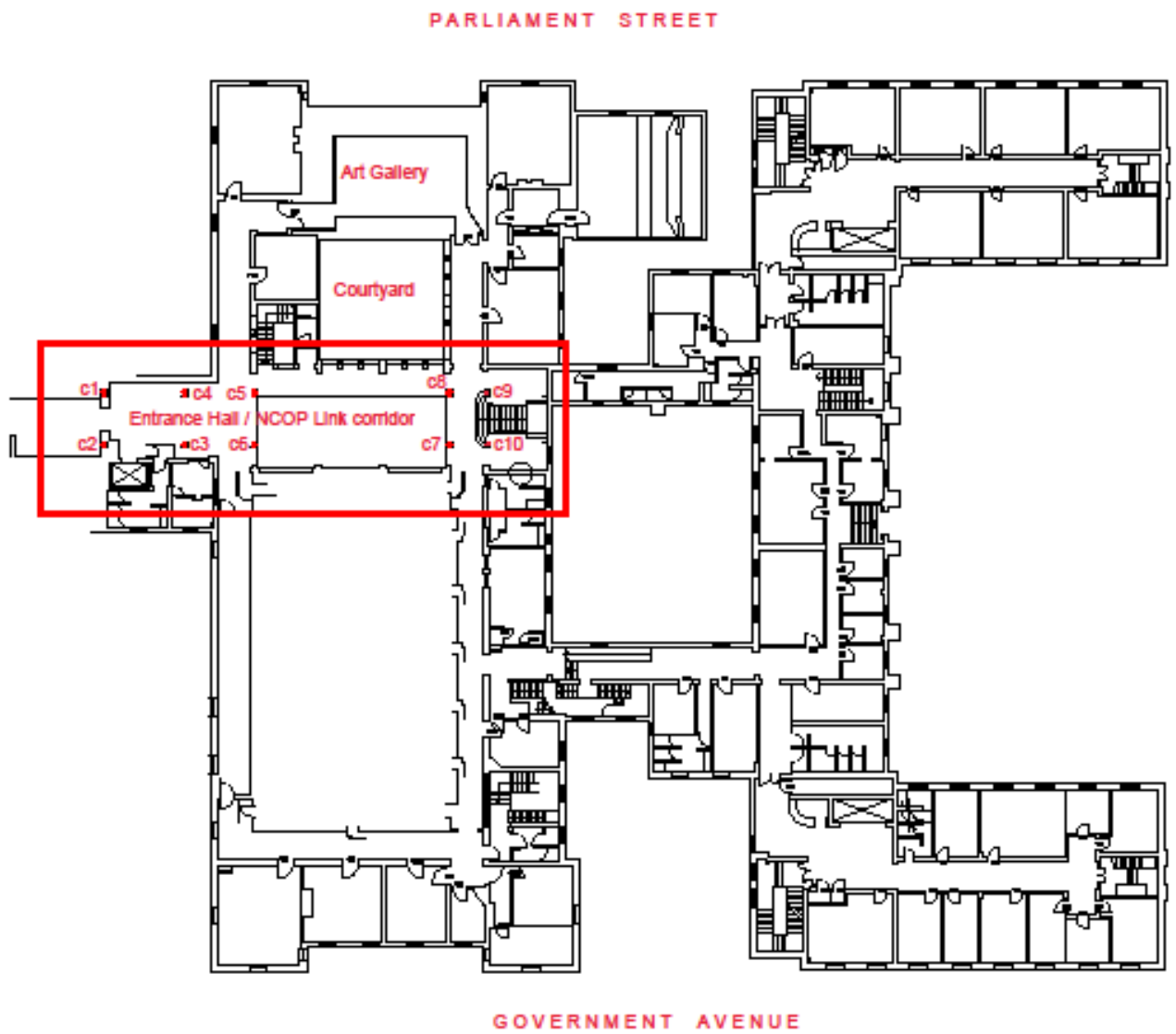


Fig 2 : First floor layout



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Fig 3 : Ground floor – damaged column



Fig 4 : Close-up of damaged column



Fig 5 : Typical column base with marble
tile cladding



Fig 6 : Top of column



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Fig 7 : Ground floor columns around the stairs



Fig 8 : Exposed concrete column



Fig 9 : First floor - Damaged base of column



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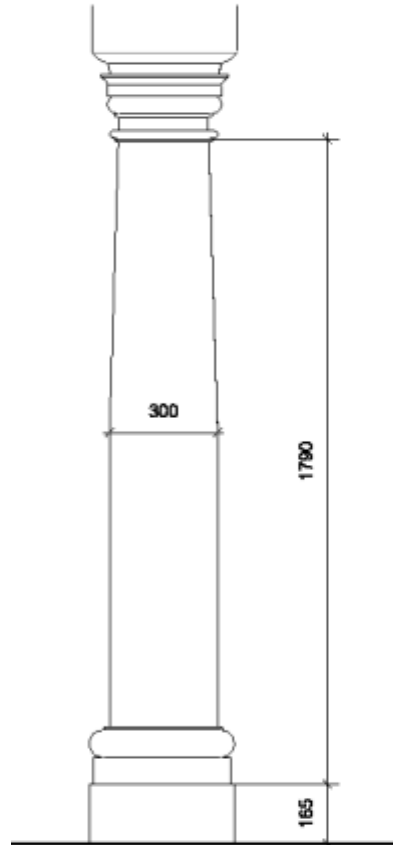


Fig 10 : Typical column in the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor

5. Additional information : Other areas of concern

5.1 In addition to the columns which is priority at the moment, the following areas are also of concern and should be noted. SAHRA's input is required on how to progress from here :

5.1.1 The groin vaulted ceilings and open archways in the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor :

5.1.1.1 Water damage is evident on various areas of the ceilings and archways. The amount of damage is cause for concern. Trying to save these elements at a later stage might prove futile if they are allowed to deteriorate further.



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5.1.1.2 The curvature of the vaulted ceilings allows for the water to transverse across the ceilings and then settle at a lower point. In this case, evidence of water damage were noted mostly in areas between the edge of the vaulted ceilings and top of the columns, as well as around the arch areas.



Fig 11 : First floor ceiling



Fig 12 : Looking over part of the ceiling in the Hall



Fig 13 : Ground floor - Damages to ceiling and arches



Fig 14 : First floor – Damages to the arches



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5.1.2 The existing walls in the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor including the link Passages :

5.1.2.1 Shows signs of water stains, cracks in some areas and water ingress (peeling, flaking and bubbling of paint etc).

5. 1.2.2 Water ingresses into the walls from above, find their way downwards, settling in the columns and walls, resulting in the damages now experienced.



Fig 15 : Hall – ‘Blank’ Wall



Fig 16 : First floor – Damages to the walls

5.1.3 The timber handrails in the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor :

5.1.3.1 The beautifully carved solid teak timber features forms part of the heritage significance of the Old Assembly. They appear on the main staircase (handrail), walkway balustrade, the actual walkway construction, windows and cills.

5.1.3.2 Carpeting covering the timber walkway floor surface was badly damaged by water. Any damages to the timber walkway itself could be concealed by the carpet, which can only be established once the carpet is removed.

5.1.3.3 The timber handrail on the stairs shows signs of damage. No swelling could be detected.



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Fig 17 : Stairs – damages to handrail



Fig 18 : First floor – Damages to handrail



Fig 19 : First floor timber walkway – water damaged carpet –
timber flooring below

5.1.4 Severe damages to the Art Gallery (ceilings, walls, floors etc)

5.1.4.1 Damages to the Art Gallery (room) are very severe. Damp ingress has damaged the ceiling, walls and floor.



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- 5.1.4.2 This room is situated on the first floor facing onto Parliament street, in the wing directly below where the fire occurred.
- 5.1.4.3 Every surface in this room might need to be assessed, possibly stripped and carefully restored / reconstructed. The warp timber flooring might need to be replaced entirely.
- 5.1.4.4 Black mould (fungus) on ceilings could pose respiratory responses in humans when exposed (coughing, sneezing, chronic fatigue, persistent headaches, irritation of the eyes etc).



Fig 20 : First floor – Damages in Art Gallery



Fig 21 : First floor – Art Gallery – another view



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6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Based on the above, DPWI is submitting this application to SAHRA for a permit to allow for the stripping of the plaster from the existing damaged columns in order for tests to be conducted to assess the structural integrity of the columns which is a priority. The severely cracked plaster on the columns are beyond repair.
- 6.2 With this application, SAHRA's input is required on how to mitigate further damages to the Old Assembly building. It is highly recommended that the columns not be looked at in isolation, but attention is given to the Entrance Hall/NCOP link corridor, the Art Gallery and Old Assembly Chamber as a whole. Quick action is required to try and save the rest of the areas before further and irreparable damages are experienced. Due to DPWI's processes etc, it might take some time before approval is granted for the complete restoration/reconstruction of the Old Assembly building. Based on this, SAHRA can give its input and share its view on the following two items :
- 6.2.1 DPWI to appoint a Heritage Architect to record and detail the existing heritage features before further deterioration occurs, for in the event a reconstruction is required.
- 6.2.2 DPWI to install a temporary roof covering over the second floor wing / fire damaged area to avoid further water ingress and deterioration on the lower floors.

7. Sources

1. <https://www.britannica.com>, Neoclassical Architecture – Definition, Characteristics, Examples and Facts
2. Bam Zollner Architects, Phase 1 Report No 1, CMP, April 2007.
3. Rennie Scurr Adendorff, Phase 2 Detailed Assessment : Heritage and Architectural report, 24th May 2022.
4. Mary McMahan, 'What is lime render' – <https://www.aboutmechanics.com>, 08th November 2022.

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