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SPURC

**HERITAGE STATEMENT:  
PROPOSED REDEVELOPMENT OF  
ERF 172912, THE DA GAMA TAVERN SITE,  
GREEN POINT**

(to accompany the NID submission)

Prepared for

**StyleProps 120 cc**

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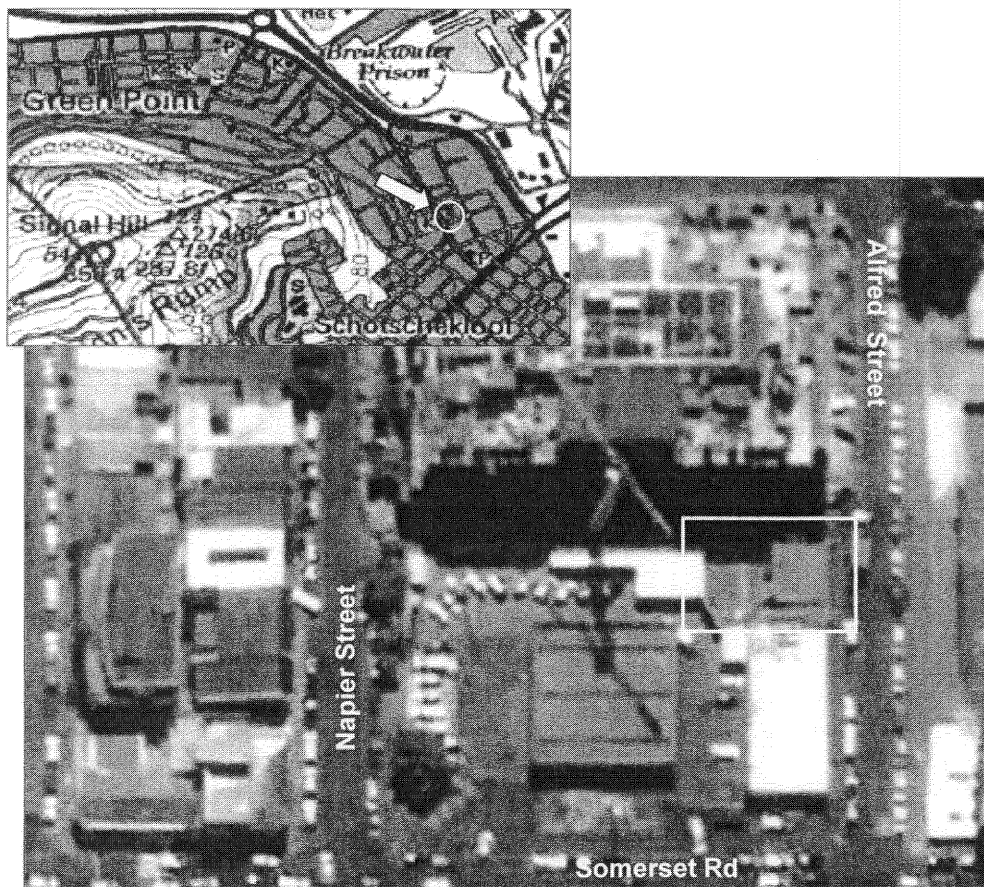
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Contracts Office was asked by StyleProps 120 cc to conduct a baseline heritage assessment of the newly consolidated erf 172912 (formerly erven 526, 527 and 528) Green Point, Cape Town, the current site of the Vasco Da Gama Tavern, as part of a Notice of Intent to Develop (NID). The site is located one block east of Somerset Road at the intersection of Schiebe and Alfred Streets, adjacent to the BP petrol station. It is directly opposite the new residential high-rise 'The Rockwell', and the same proponent wishes to incorporate the Da Gama Tavern building into a related development. The proposed project envisions a four-storey building to be used as offices, commercial space and restaurants. The existing building will be retained and integrated into the new design.



Figures 1 & 2: Locality map and aerial photograph (Google Earth). Site indicated in yellow.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT OF GREEN POINT: BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An early (undated) French map makes reference to the flanks of Signal Hill as the location of a Khoekhoen village. It is certain that Khoekhoen groups used these dunes for living places as well as for the disposal of their dead. This has been substantiated by archaeological excavations at Cobern Street, where *in situ* Khoekhoen burials were found, as well at Prestwich Street where scattered Later Stone Age material was recovered from a disturbed context.

19<sup>th</sup> century Cape Town experienced a population boom and the edge of the town spilled beyond the '*buiten*' street boundaries as development pressure intensified. The Burgher Senate initiated formal development of new areas with a land survey, and the urban design plan for new roads and building lots at the base of Signal Hill was laid out by 1818. Plots were sold off during the 1820s, amidst much land speculation and a few suspect dealings. Alfred Street and Schiebe Street would have been just outside of the walls of the *Soldaten Kerkhoven*, the old military cemetery. Formal complaints were lodged regarding the state of the burial grounds in the Green Point area at the start of the urban expansion period, and in response to the public outcry, the Burgher Senate declared a ban on informal burials in this section of town in 1819.<sup>1</sup>

In 1827, Erf 521 consolidated 44 building lots bounded by Somerset Rd, Alfred, Prestwich and Napier Street (Figure 3). The erven under study here were previously Lots 9, 10 and 11 prior to the consolidation. The lots were sold off and changed hands often in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A notation on the 1848 Deed of Transfer surveyor's diagram for Lot 9 mentions that a 'certain house' is already present on the property.<sup>2</sup>

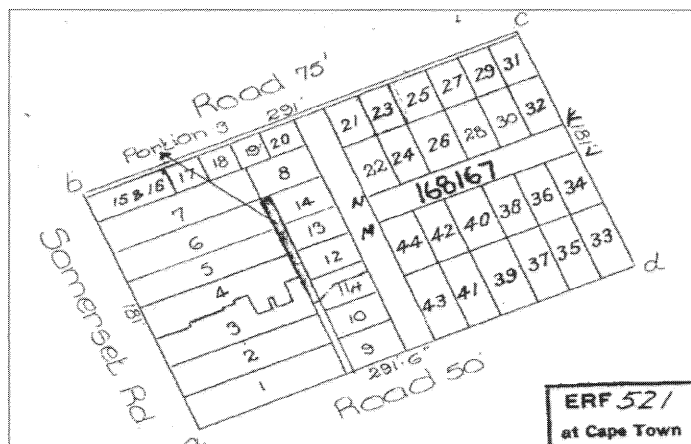


Figure 3: Erf 521 (366 square roods, 12.5 sq. ft) Transferred 23 February 1827 to James Molton (S.G. Diag. NO. 19/1827)

<sup>1</sup> A Malan *Site History of Cobern Street* (Unpublished report), Bickford-Smith 1995, Murray 1964, in Finnegan, Erin 2006: 'Buried Beyond Buitengracht: Interrogating Cultural Variability in the Informal Historic Burial Ground of Prestwich Street, Cape Town', Unpublished Masters Thesis, Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town.

<sup>2</sup> DO Erf 528 (Lot 9) purchased by B. Norton, formerly owned by Francis Collison (Trans. Deed No. 211 24.1.1848, S.G. Diag. 44/1848)

The intensification of the shipping industry and upgrading of wharf services added to the pressures of development. The north wharf, at the bottom of Bree Street, opened in 1840, and parliamentary authorization for the construction of a breakwater and new harbour was passed in 1857. As a result, residential and commercial development boomed between Somerset Road and the dock area. However, it still took several decades for the area to be completely capped by buildings. The development on Erven 526, 527 and 528 and environs is illustrated by the following sequence of 19<sup>th</sup> century town surveys.

**Comment:** When did these become erven

By 1862, the Vasco Da Gama Tavern site was already entirely developed as shown on Snow's survey map (Figure 4), with no major changes occurring by the 1890s (Thom's survey, Figure 5).



**Figure 4:** Snow's Municipal Plan of the City of Cape Town, 1862. Erven under study highlighted in yellow.<sup>3</sup>

Archival research indicates that the study site was the premises of 'The New Dock' Hotel from approximately the turn of the century until the mid-1930s, although the exact period remains unclear. Further archival research would be required to determine if the building was the original or if a new building had been built for the hotel.

The earliest mention of the New Dock Hotel found during the preliminary archival search was in a request for approval of alterations filed with the City Council in 1905. The request letter originated from the desk of Ohlssons' Cape Breweries<sup>4</sup>. Ohlsson's Cape Breweries Ltd. bought erf 526 (Lot 11), erf 527 (Lot 10), and erf 528 (Lot 9) in 1898 from the Trustees for Mary Smithers Robertson & Others. Ohlsson's Cape Breweries bought up many taverns and hotels in the city from the 1890s. A biographical study of Anders Ohlsson explains his motivation for the intensified acquisition of commercial properties as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Jordan, Elliott. 2003. Digital Atlas of Historic Cape Town. Cape Town: University of Cape Town. CD-ROM.

<sup>4</sup> CA 3/CT 4/1/4/81 C57.4

"In 1884 he [Ohlsson] had one brewery and a few public houses and canteens, but after 1888 and the absorption of Letterstedt's brewery and hotels, and the discontinuation of brewing at the Canon Brewery at the end of 1888, Ohlsson had a larger vested interest in the increased number of properties and hotels which he owned and which served as outlets for his brew."<sup>5</sup>

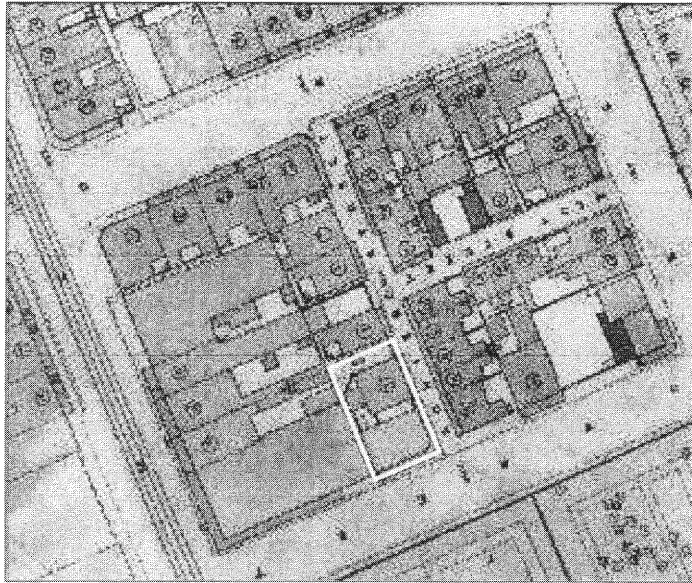


Figure 5: Walter Thom's Survey circa 1900 (surveyed in the 1890s).<sup>6</sup>

Erven 526, 527 and 528 were owned for nearly 60 years by Cape Breweries, until sold to Morris Saacks in 1959.

### 3. FINDINGS

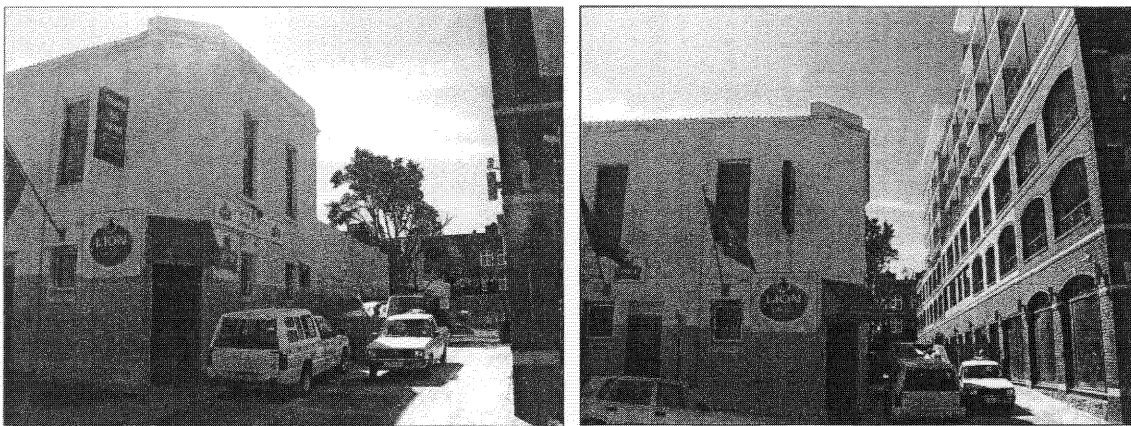
The Vasco Da Gama Tavern is a popular watering hole and restaurant in the lower Green Point area that bustles with business lunch clientele and after-hours regulars. Only a few years back, the lower Green Point area was an unexciting and often overlooked part of the city, where nondescript mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century municipal, commercial and harbour-related buildings were interspersed among late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century buildings. In recent years, however, the area has experienced a major redevelopment boom. The Da Gama Tavern now finds itself embedded within the trendy and upmarket 'Somerset Precinct' of restaurants, clubs, 'boutique hotels' and shops stretching from De Waterkant to the V & A Waterfront (Figure 6). Schiebe Street once separated the site from a dreary 1960s-style warehouse immediately opposite. At present, the street has been reconstituted as a pedestrian thoroughfare and component of the new 'Rockwell' development (Figures 7 & 8). It is envisioned that the Da Gama Tavern building will be integrated into the development 'theme' and play a dynamic role within the streetscape (Figure 9). The existing building will form the

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, Michael Granger, *Anders Ohlsson, Brewer and Politician 1881-1894*, Honours Thesis (unpublished), History Department, University of Cape Town 1976. p. 75

<sup>6</sup> Jordan, Elliott. 2003. *Digital Atlas of Historic Cape Town*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town. CD-ROM.



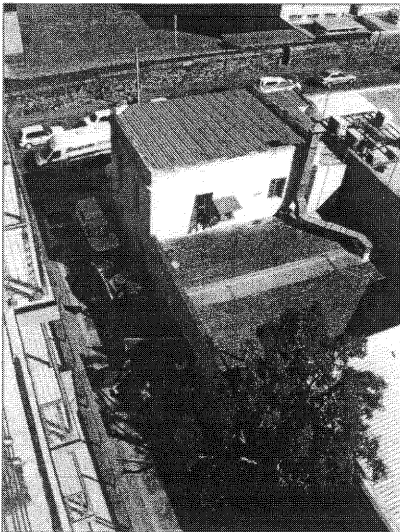
**Figure 6:** Vasco Da Gama Tavern, facing west along Alfred Street towards Somerset Rd.



**Figures 7 and 8:** View north up Schiebe Street, newly pedestrianised. 'The Rockwell' residential building on right hand side (east) of Schiebe Street.



cornerstone of a larger commercial-use high-rise, which will be similar in architectural style to the Rockwell.

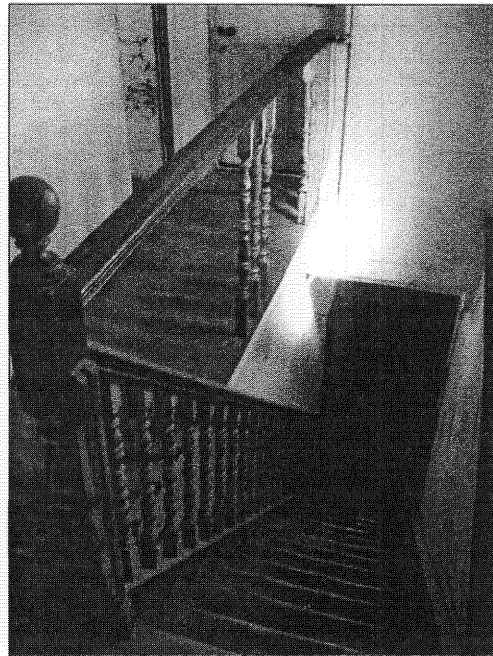


**Figure 9:** View of site (Vasco Da Gama Building) and pedestrianised Shiebe Street, from Rockwell penthouse level.

Although the exact date of the extant construction is presently unknown, it is likely that it dates from the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An architect or built environment heritage specialist would be able to narrow the age range and comment more fully on the significance (if any) of the building, particularly the few remaining original features and fabric (Figures 10 & 11).



**Figure 10.** Detail of old mosaic flooring in rear.



**Figure 11.** Staircase in rear of building. Original?



## 5. HISTORIC BURIAL ZONE IN GREEN POINT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DA GAMA TAVERN SITE

The Green Point historical burial grounds that have been uncovered in recent years were once situated within the 'wasteland' often described in early 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> journals and letters. The area was used for VOC and Dutch Reformed Church cemeteries as well as for the burial of the lower social strata of Cape Town, that is, anyone who on religious or social grounds, would not have been permitted to be buried within the official cemeteries.<sup>7</sup> Green Point was largely undeveloped during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and "the ground consisted of windblown sands about 1.5 m thick that lie on an ancient hard gravel and clay layer resulting from the decomposition of the underlying Malmesbury rocks. The deep dune sand was precisely the reason for the numerous burial grounds in the area<sup>8</sup>. After the prohibition on burial, development proceeded at pace and before long buildings and roads were constructed over the old cemeteries.

In the current phase of urban renewal in the area, the presence of human remains has necessitated the hiring of heritage specialists to assess the impacts of development on the remains. There have been numerous Archaeological and Heritage Impact Assessments in the Green Point area to date, many resulting in mitigation activities (exhumation) taking place. Exhumations have taken place at the Cobern Street, Victoria Junction, Prestwich Street, Marina Residential and BP Head Office sites.

In late 2004 SAHRA demarcated core and peripheral historic burial zones in the Green Point, Bo-Kaap, De Waterkant and Waterfront areas as a response to the situation that developed out of the Prestwich Street exhumations. They promulgated an 'Interim Archaeological Protocol For Developers' and an area to which that protocol would apply was provisionally declared by the heritage authorities (6 months).. This declaration has since lapsed although the protocol for burials is still largely applied by the authorities.

The parameters of the historical burial horizon remain officially undetermined, but it is assumed (in the absence of information to the contrary) that burials will extend beneath all city blocks and roads immediately adjacent to the Prestwich site (current site of 'The Rockwell'), including the Vasco Da Gama Tavern site.

## 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

While there will no doubt be a few nostalgic toasts raised to the demise of the Tavern by some of the regular patrons; the Vasco Da Gama pub as an entity does not have deep historical roots. What remains of the original building, however, is clearly older than 60 years and thus provisionally protected under the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA No. 25 of 1999). The retention of the shell, of the building, is desirable to the proponent.

It seems as though a precedent is being set in the immediate environs; one which emphasises the integration of architectural and period styles and the melange of old and new

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<sup>7</sup> Finnegan 2006

<sup>8</sup> Hart, Tim, 'Appendix 2, Technical Report on Archaeological Excavations at Prestwich Place, Green Point, Cape Town', Archaeology Contracts Office, UCT, Unpublished report. 11 August 2003.

fabric. There are several examples of the retention and redevelopment of the older 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings, or their shells/facades: the streetscape façade along Somerset Road is one example; the renovated buildings along Napier Street (between Somerset Road and Prestwich Street), another. This is presumably a result of professional heritage practitioners outlining a way forward for the precinct's redevelopment, and a growing awareness on the part of the developers/architects that Green Point's 'character' depends largely on these historic buildings.

It is felt that the retention of the Da Gama building, rather than its demolition, is the preferred development option in this case.

## **7. GRADING**

Although it remains for a built environment specialist to analyse the building properly, the city has rated it as Grade 3c.

(Grade 3c is defined as: Of medium to low intrinsic, associational or contextual heritage value within a national, provincial and local context.)

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations on the proposed redevelopment of Erf 172912 Green Point, are as follows:

The proposed redevelopment of Erf 172912 (Vasco Da Gama Tavern site) will require a heritage specialist with an architectural or historical built environment background to assess the heritage significance of the building itself (and grade).

As it is assumed that the historical burial horizon extends beneath Scheibe Street and the Alfred/Somerset city block, test pits must be undertaken in the areas where subsurface disturbance is likely to occur, in order to ascertain if human burials are present or not. A permit for excavation must be applied for from the South African Heritage Resources Agency (burials) and Heritage Western Cape (archaeological material).

## **9. INVESTIGATION TEAM**

Fieldwork: Erin Finnegan  
Report: Erin Finnegan & Dave Halkett