

Historical and Architectural Impact Assessment for the Strachan Memorial Hall at uMzimkulu



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Contents of Report		
1.	Introduction	2
2.	Methodology	2
Section A: The structure		
3.	History of site and building	3
	3.1 History of uMzimkulu	3
	3.2 History of Erf 43 uMzimkulu	3
4.	Assessment of building and significance	4
	4.1 Description of building	4
	4.2 Significance of building	6
Section B: Management plan		
5.	Guidelines for additions and alterations to building	7
	5.1 General design principles	7
	5.2 Specific design comments	7
6.	Guidelines for repair and maintenance	8
	6.1 Synopsis of guidelines for repair and maintenance	12
7.	References	13

1. Introduction

Debbie Whelan of Archaic Consulting was approached by Mr Bunmi Ilori with a view to preparing a Heritage Assessment of the old Memorial Hall at uMzimkulu, in order to inform an extended design and maintenance process including the structure. The intention of the developers is to convert this structure into a museum, within a defined community precinct.

In order to prepare a statement of significance which will inform the recommendations, it is important to contextualise the building and assess it within its architectural, social and historical context. This forms Section A of this report.

The intention is that the site will be developed in order to provide amenity for the people of uMzimkulu, and that the hall will become a meaningful part of the intended space. However, since the building has suffered from ill-maintenance due to ignorance, as well as lack of maintenance in recent years, a rehabilitation plan has to be put into place, and a series of guidelines created in order to best address this issue. This forms Section B of this report.

Please note that, as a building over the age of 60 years and as a protected site in KwaZulu-Natal, the recommendations in this report have the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Heritage Act no 4 of 2008 as reference, as well as the principles contained in the Burra Charter.

2. Methodology

Debbie Whelan of Archaic Consulting visited the site on 15 November 2012 and took photographs. The addition to the rear of the building was not accessible, but this was not an issue since the intention is to remove it. From this point, research was carried out through the Provincial Deeds Office, by consulting known published sources and local Archive Repositories, as well as scrutinising the Strachan and Hulley Family papers at the Killie Campbell Collections. Furthermore, the drawings archives at the Barrie Biermann Library were also consulted with regard to the original drawings by the architects Ing & Jackson, but revealed that a plan for this building was not lodged in this particular repository.

SECTION A: The structure

3. History of site and building

3.1 History of uMzimkulu

The contemporary town of uMzimkulu is intimately connected with Strachan & Co. More significantly, it is associated with Donald Strachan in particular.

3.2 History of Erf 43 uMzimkulu

The building was designed by noted Durban firm, Ing & Jackson, and was built in 1920.¹ Historian Milner Snell notes that 'In 1919 the Stachan family contributed money towards the building of a town hall at Umzimkulu in memory of Donald, Jane, Wallace and Kate Strachan. The hall, with its Cape Dutch gable, was opened by Daniel Hulley. In 1949 a tree was planted in front of the hall to commemorate the centenary of the arrival of the first white settlers in Natal. In 1958 a set of gateposts were erected to mark the centenary of the arrival of the Strachan brothers at the drift' (Snell 2006:14). Indeed, on the wall opposite the entrance to the hall, is mounted a plaque which reads 'This hall was erected in loving memory of the Hon. Donald Strachan and Jane Strachan and of Thomas Wallace Strachan and Kate Strachan by members of their families.'

Donald Strachan died in 1915.² He had been married to Jane, nee Hulley, who had died in 1901. The reference to Thomas Wallace and Kate Strachan is most likely to his siblings with one of whom he arrived in Natal in 1850. His sister Catherine had died on the Mull of Kintyre aged 3 in 1840³ and his brother Thomas, a scarcely documented but important part of the early Strachan and Co. business, died in 1879 whilst working sawing logs.⁴ The title, 'Honourable' comes from Strachan's tenure on the Cape Legislative Council and as activist for Pondoland.

Donald and Thomas Strachan had arrived with the Byrne Settlers as boys. Their parents both died soon after arrival and for a time they worked with a transport rider. In 1864, opting to settle, they managed to get permission from the Griqua government to operate a pont across the Umzimkulu River. Although the town was most likely started by John James Jackson, it is really the Strachan Brothers that stimulated its rapid growth as a result of trade.

From operating the pont, they moved to other enterprises. In the mid 1860s, Snell notes that they constructed the first hotel, as accommodation for the many transport riders moving between Natal and the Cape.⁵ Donald Strachan was appointed as magistrate in 1865, and was delegated by the Griqua *Raad* to carry out improvements to the hamlet. By 1879, at the time of annexation of Umzimkulu to the Cape, the Strachan's had established a hotel, a store, and butchery and bakery. Donald Strachan, particularly, was a vital and crucial part of the founding of Umzimkulu.

Their memory is encapsulated in the Strachan Memorial Hall. Given that the Strachan Memorial Hall and Umzimkulu are both so inextricably tied to Donald Strachan and the Strachan family until the 1970s, it is appropriate to recycle this structure as a museum for uMzimkulu.

¹ Online architectural resource 'Artefacts' has the date of construction as 1923. (<http://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/bldgframes.php?bldgid=1421>)

² MOOC 6/9/785 1170 Strachan, Donald. Death Notice, also, Snell 2006:22.

³ Rainier 2002:3

⁴ Rainier 2002: 134

⁵ Snell 2006:9

4. Assessment of building and significance

4.1 Description of building

The Strachan Memorial Hall is a diminutive structure of a mere 177m². East facing, it sits roughly in the middle of the site, with a recent extension behind it, filling the rear of the site. It appears to be constructed of mud or stabilised earth brick, and plastered with a cementitious plaster, on top of which it has been painted. It is currently roofed in a clay tile over a saddle ridge, which replaced what was possibly corrugated sheeting. The windows are most likely teak, which have been painted, and unpainted door frames internally support this. It is a very competent and considered little structure. Pair of white painted hitching rails survive at the entrance to the building.

The building is a very good example of a Union period building. It is symmetrical, and the entrance portico is topped with a pediment noting the date of construction as 1920. This classical Revival element is then shadowed by a Cape Dutch Gable, which has a central timber louvered ventilator. The two gable ends are graced by matching gables, providing an aesthetic balance.



Fig 1: Front elevation of building

The entrance portico is supported by two Egyptian Revival Columns, which in turn adjoin pilasters which have detailed with medallions. The entablature above the columns has purely decorative and unreferenced *guttae* and two medallions marking out the line of the columns and the pilasters respectively.

Two, what were possibly coat check rooms, flank the entrance portico. They also have pilasters at the corners, balancing out those at the entrance. High level windows with a careful cill detail are found in each enclosed wall space. Symmetrical windows in Revived Cape Dutch fashion flank the main elevation to the hall.

Internally, the floor of the portico has original quarry tiles. It leads on to the two flanking rooms which may have originally served as coat check rooms, and the main hall itself. The flanking rooms are full of refuse and stored material at the moment, and locks and locksets have been changed in the past, meaning that any original ironmongery is long gone.



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