



public works  
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## PARLIAMENT PRECINCT : AFRICA HOUSE

Subject : PERMIT APPLICATION FOR ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS TO AFRICA HOUSE TO MAKE THE BUILDING COMPLIANT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

From : DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS AND INFRASTRUCTURE – PROFESSIONAL SERVICES UNIT

To : SAHRA : BUILT ENVIRONMENT UNIT

Date : 22nd September 2023



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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Parliament forwarded a request to the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) to assess whether Africa House is equipped with the relevant facilities for persons with disabilities. Reports were received of officials having difficulty accessing the building due to certain constraints.
- 1.2 After the building and relevant facilities were assessed, it was discovered that provision was made for persons with disabilities, but that those facilities lacked compliancy to Part S2 of the National Building regulations.
- 1.3 The aim of this submission is to obtain approval/a permit from the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) for the following :
  - a) Implementation of new minor construction works to assist with the access for persons with disabilities.
  - b) Ensuring that the existing facilities for persons with disabilities is made compliant.

## 2. Location

- 2.1 Africa House was built in 1937. It was previously known as The British High Commission office. Not only does the building have high heritage significance, it is also located in the Parliamentary precinct which was classified as a Grade 1 heritage site.
- 2.2 Africa House is located on the corner of Stal Plein and Parliament street. The North West façade (front) faces onto the National and Old Assembly buildings. The South West façade (side) faces onto Stal Plein.
- 2.3 Africa House was extensively restored and refurbished in 2008-2009 and have been well maintained since. The building has great-charm and character with well-proportioned facades that gives off a stately and serious appearance.

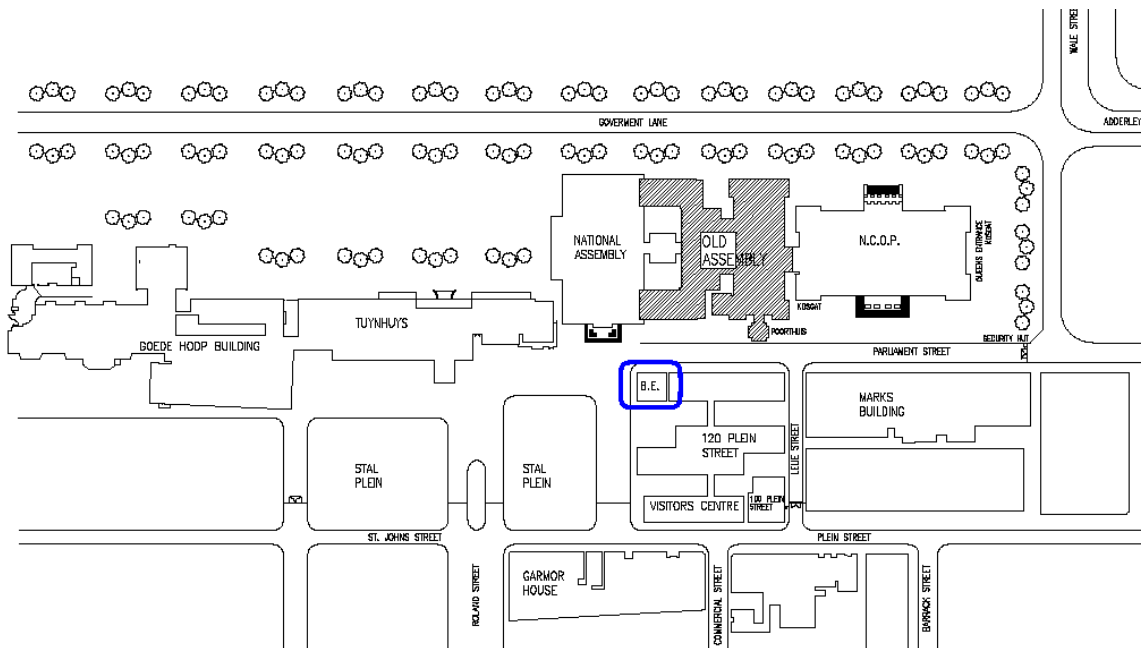


Fig 1 : Parliament Precinct - Africa House building position indicated in blue



### **3. Description of the building**

- 3.1 Africa House is well constructed, helped along by the use of high quality and durable materials, eg. dressed sandstone, teak casement windows with louvered shutters and wrought iron grilles etc. It still has its original roof covering.
- 3.2 The external design of the building reflects Italian palazzo influences and relates well to Marks building in terms of external design and aesthetics. The building's prominent position on the precinct (located opposite the Houses of Parliament and at the entrance to Stal Plein), contributes to its importance.
- 3.3 The building has seven floors including a basement and an attic. The spatial occupation consist of offices, boardrooms and service areas.
- 3.4 It is a relatively small building, measuring approximately 245square meters on the Ground floor and less (approximately 225sqm per floor) on all the other floors.
- 3.5 The materials and finishes used in the interior relates to the good and durable quality of the exterior. The building's design and finishes are well proportioned, giving the building a stately and aesthetic appearance. The prominent interior spaces are the ground floor Main Entrance, Lobbies, Foyers and Staircase.
- 3.6 Due to the importance, nature of work performed and the mandate given to officials occupying this building, security measures had to be installed in the building which are strictly controlled. A new security access control system was incorporated in the Foyer during the 2008/2009 restoration which was designed around, and fitted into the existing interior framework of the Lobby (Main Entrance). A Secondary Entrance with access controlled measures was also created.

### **4. Statement of Significance**

- 4.1 Cape Town had a significant role to play in the global trade history in Africa and the political landscape of South Africa. Cape Town was the gateway in which the British and the Dutch entered, established themselves and ruled before the democracy era. The Cape Town Parliament Precinct hosted many political events which altered the trajectory of the Republic from colonialism to democracy.
- 4.2 The Cape Town Parliament Precinct is deemed a Grade 1 Heritage Resource. It was declared a National Heritage Site by the South African Heritage Resources Agency. Such heritage sites are protected under the terms of Section 27 of the National Heritage Resources Act, which means that no changes may be done on such sites without a permit. The building is also subject to Section 34(1) of the National Heritage Resources Act which controls any alterations and/or demolitions to buildings older than 60 years.
- 4.3 The significance of Africa House centres around the following :
  - a) It is situated in a significant location, facing Northwest onto the National and Old Assembly buildings and South West onto Stal Plein.
  - b) It was constructed around 1936 to accommodate the British High Commissioner.
  - c) It was designed by British Architects, John Perry and Lightfoot.
  - d) Design influences centred around well-proportioned Italianate Palazzo design influences, consisting of tiered buff coloured dressed sandstone, teak casement windows and louvered shutters, wrought iron grilles, original Brosely clay roof tiles etc. All these materials are of high quality.



- e) According to the Conservation and Integrated Management Plan that was drafted in 2007, the following was identified that made Africa House historically significant :
- *“Great regional aesthetic and architectural significance, with particular regard to its exterior in terms of craftsmanship, award-winning architecture, and being part of a larger architectural group of recognised significance within the parliamentary precinct. It is significant that although the architects were British, careful recognition and re-interpretation was given to Cape Revival stylistic elements.....The building also makes a considerable contextual aesthetic contribution to Stale Plein and serves as a focal point and defining visual reference point within the square.*
  - *Considerable national historical significance relating to its past as the old British Embassy in South Africa and its historical role in relation to the Union Parliament. ...It is also noteworthy that the building, constructed of durable and high quality materials, has survived substantially intact and unaltered despite considerable changes in Stal Plein.”*

## **5. Project Description**

- 5.1 The Department of Public Works & Infrastructure (DPWI), being the custodian of national immovable assets which includes the Parliamentary Precinct, is tasked with the safety of its assets and ensure compliancy with the National Building Regulations etc where possible.
- 5.2 A request was received on the 12<sup>th</sup> July 2022 from Directorate: Prestige via the office of Director: Projects Cape Town to Professional Services, to compile a report which was intended to verify the appropriateness of the existing facilities for persons with disabilities, and whether these facilities were sufficient to meet the requirements.
- 5.3 An extract from the NATIONAL REGULATIONS PART S2: FACILITIES TO BE PROVIDED stipulates that :
- “(1) In any building contemplated in regulation S1 requiring facilities for persons with disabilities:*
- (a) persons with disabilities shall be able to safely enter the building, use all the facilities subject to the provisions of sub-regulation (3) within it and leave it;*
  - (b) there shall be a means of access suitable for use by persons with disabilities, from the main and ancillary approaches of the building to the ground storey; via the main entrance, and any secondary entrance;*
  - (c) there shall be a means of egress suitable for use by persons with disabilities from any point in a building to a place of safety in the event of an emergency;”*
- 5.4 A site visit took place on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022 by a DPWI Architect- and Quantity Surveyor from the Cape Town Regional office to verify whether the on-site conditions were compliant with the national regulations that prescribe that persons with disabilities are catered for in the building.
- 5.5 The site visit revealed that there are two access points into the building :
- a) Main Entrance (North West off Parliament street). This entrance is access controlled, both physically (SAPS presence) as well as electronically.



- b) Secondary Entrance (South West off Stal Plein). The secondary access was established during the 2008/2009 restoration project. This entrance is also electronically secured and serves as an escape route as well as an access point for persons with disabilities.

## 6 Findings on site

### 6.1 Main Entrance:

The only provision made for persons with disabilities is the existing external ramp in front of the building. The main entrance is through a system of double doors and a sequence of lobbies. In between these lobby spaces is a change in level (2 steps leading downwards) which approximates 450mm in height. There are both physical and electronic security controlled access in the Entrance Foyer.

#### Findings:

- No provision was made for access for persons with disabilities in the Main Entrance lobby.
- The Lobbies within the Main Entrance area are small and restricted, making it difficult to implement disabled facilities of any kind. Placing a temporary metal ramp over part of the steps will not work – the gradient will be too steep to navigate.
- As indicated earlier, the Ground floor Foyer is a prominent part of the circulation space in the interior and cannot be adjusted.

#### Recommendation:

- The existing Main Entrance Lobby to remain as is in terms of its configuration. It cannot be adjusted because of space and heritage constraints.
- The secondary entrance on the South West side of Africa House was recognized for further development to make it fully compliant for persons with disabilities.



Fig 2 : Existing ramp-up area at the Main Entrance

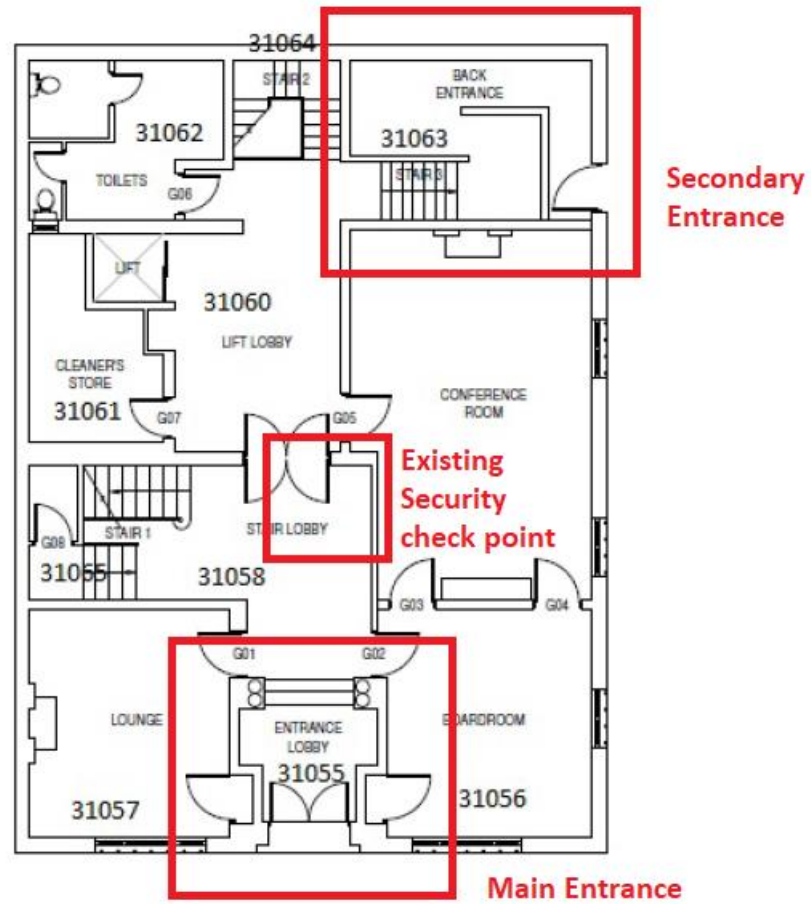


Fig 3 : Existing Ground floor layout



Fig 4 : Main Entrance Lobby : View from entrance doors towards the security access control/checkpoint



Fig 5 : Main Entrance Lobby : Steps dividing the two lobbies

## 6.2 Secondary Entrance:

The secondary access is situated on the South Western side of the building. This is a secure Lobby with access through a single solid timber door access controlled via a biometric system connected to the front desk.

### Findings: Internal

6.2.1 The following is accommodated in the Lobby:

- a) An L-shaped 1050mm high low wall in the center of the space
- b) Existing access control security equipment in the form of 'Mantrap' and a scanner
- c) A seating area
- d) Allowance was made for persons with disabilities in the form of a platform chair lift attached to the wall at the steps.

6.2.2 The challenges in this area:

#### Internal

- a) The small size of the Lobby with the low L-shape wall as well as the existing electronic security equipment, restricts the movement of wheelchairs, eg. making maneuvering around corners very difficult.
- b) The position of the existing access control biometrics is too high for persons in wheelchairs.
- c) The security personnel currently utilizes a small area of the space to rest during breaks. There is no other areas available for this purpose.

#### External

- d) The existing intercom and biometric panel is too high for persons in wheelchairs.
- e) Wheelchair bound persons has to access this entrance by travelling along the side of the building (distance = +- 24 meters from the front entrance door). There are existing steps opposite the door, not good for wheelchairs.
- f) See fig 6 below for existing layout



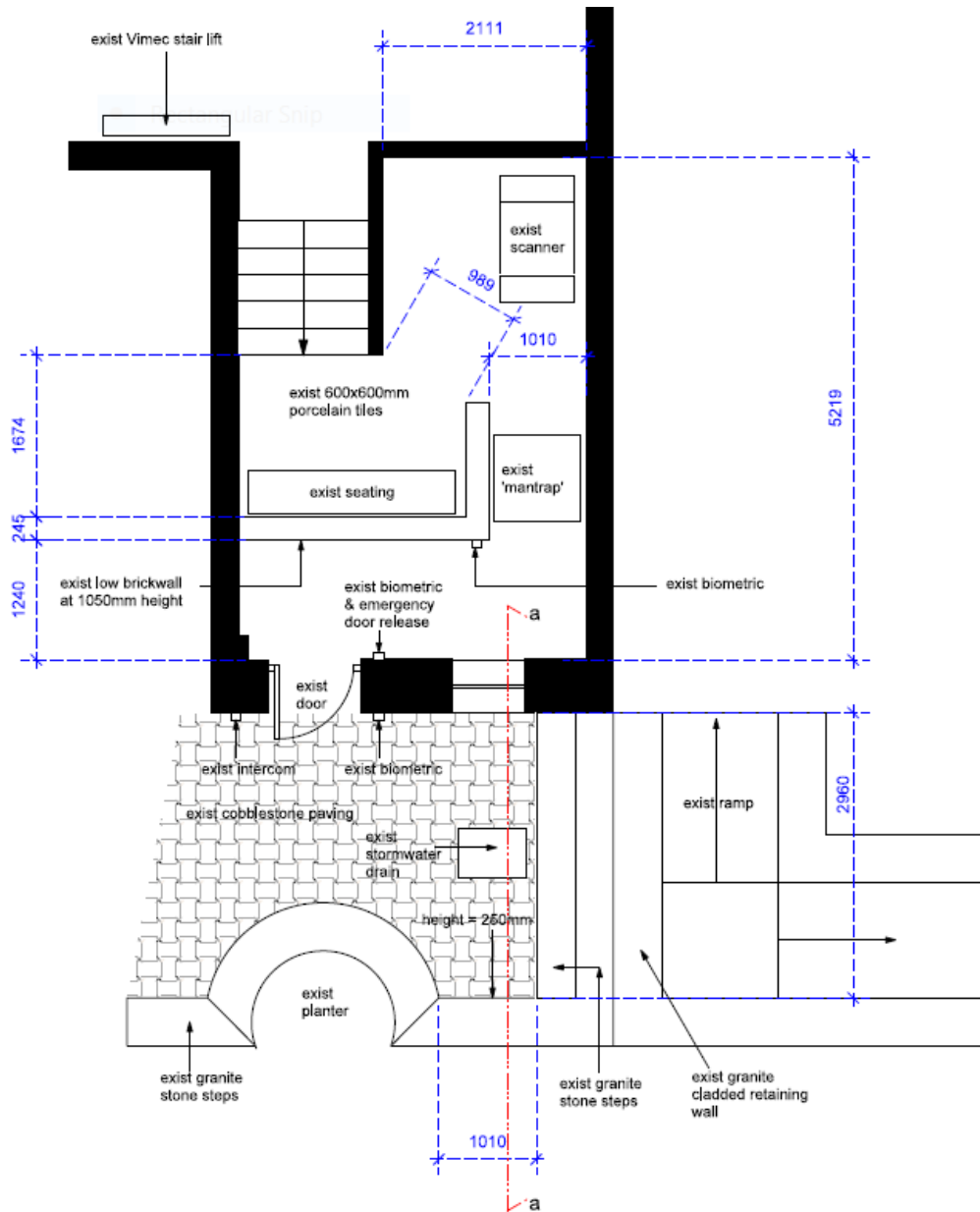


Fig 6 : Existing Secondary Entrance layout



Fig 7 : Secondary Entrance Lobby with low wall and security equipment. Area to be reconfigured as indicated on the layout proposal



Fig 8 : Secondary Entrance

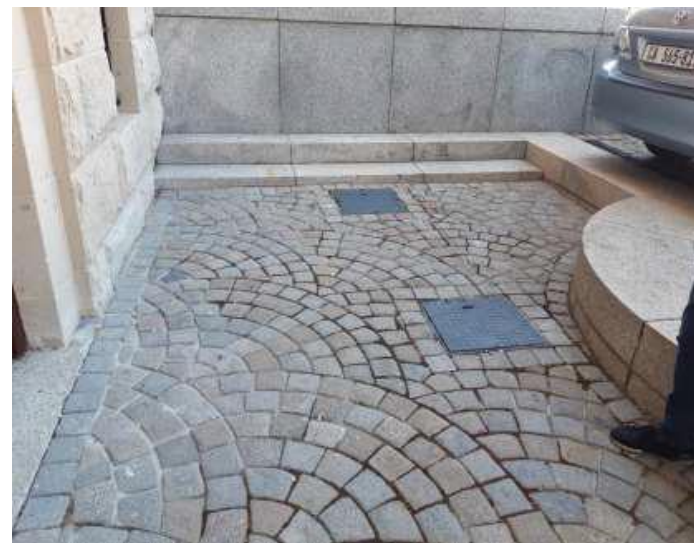


Fig 9 : Location of Proposed Ramp along the retaining door wall at the back. Secondary Entrance door to the left – step on the right to be dropped down by 50mm. Furthest stormwater drain to be raised.

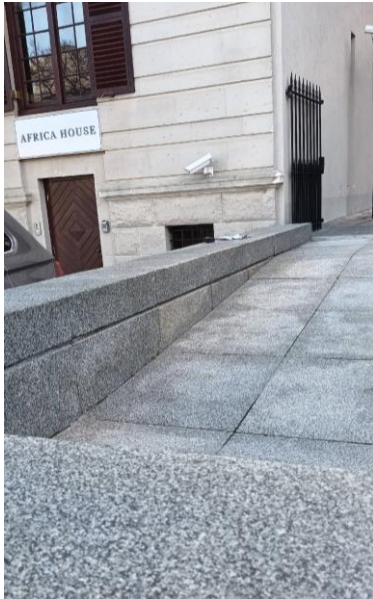


Fig 10 : Existing ramp – providing access from 120 Plein to Stalplein.  
New ramp proposed on the other side of the retaining wall (on the left)



Fig 11 : Looking down from the existing ramp onto the area where the new ramp is proposed

- 6.3 The following proposal was presented to Parliament regarding changes to the Secondary Entrance Lobby : Demolition of the existing low-wall and re-configuration of the security equipment.
- Remove existing seating
  - Demolish the bulk of the low L-shape wall, but allow for +- 450mm length of wall to remain and made good.
  - The Existing 'Mantrap' and scanner to remain. The scanner can be positioned next to the 'Mantrap' to utilize the space more efficiently.
  - Allowance to be made for the inspection and servicing of the chair lift to a functional and proper operational state.
  - Fit a new 1318mm L x 1100mm H stainless steel paraplegic gate with glass insert panel, operable at 90 degrees in both directions.
  - Gate to be connected to the existing access control in the building.
  - Allowance to be made for power supply to the gate.



- h) Reposition the existing biometric access control panel to be closer to the gate (to be positioned on the 450mm wall).
- i) Lower the existing biometric access control panel and emergency door release at the entrance door from 1350mm height to 1000mm, center of the units.
- j) Allowance to be made for the fitting of new 600x600mm full-bodied non-slip best grade porcelain tiles for the whole Lobby area to match existing.
- k) Allowance to be made for stainless steel edging strips to the edges of each step/landing.
- l) Allowance to be made for the preparation and painting of the Lobby walls.

External

- m) Lower the existing biometric access control panel and intercom at the entrance door from 1450mm height to 1000mm, center of the units.

- 6.4 The following item was proposed as a further means of convenience for persons with disabilities.
- a) To benefit persons with disabilities further, it was proposed to convert a small unutilized area just outside the secondary entrance into a short ramp. As mentioned above under items 6.2.2 (e) the existing ramp in front of Africa House is. +- 24 meters away from the secondary entrance.

- 6.5 Benefits of the ramp :
- a) The ramp will not be an obstruction. Rather, it will benefit persons with disabilities coming from areas like Stalplein, the Goodhope, Tuynhuys, 120 Plein street buildings etc.
  - b) It will discourage officials from using the space in front of the entrance as parking space.
  - b) It will match and blend in with the existing surrounds :
    - There is an existing ramp next to Africa House to assist people coming from 120 Plein street onto Stal Plein.
    - The same surface materials will be used (either cobblestones or granite slabs to match the existing surrounding area.

- 6.6 The following method of construction is proposed for the construction of the ramp :
- a) Remove the existing cobblestone pavers to the right of the entrance door (when facing the door).
  - b) Construct a reinforced concrete ramp with up-stand, and new Mentis type or equally approved GMS hollow core tube handrails and stanchions fitted securely to the up-stands.
  - c) Surface finish on the ramp to be either granite slabs or re-using the existing cobblestone pavers.

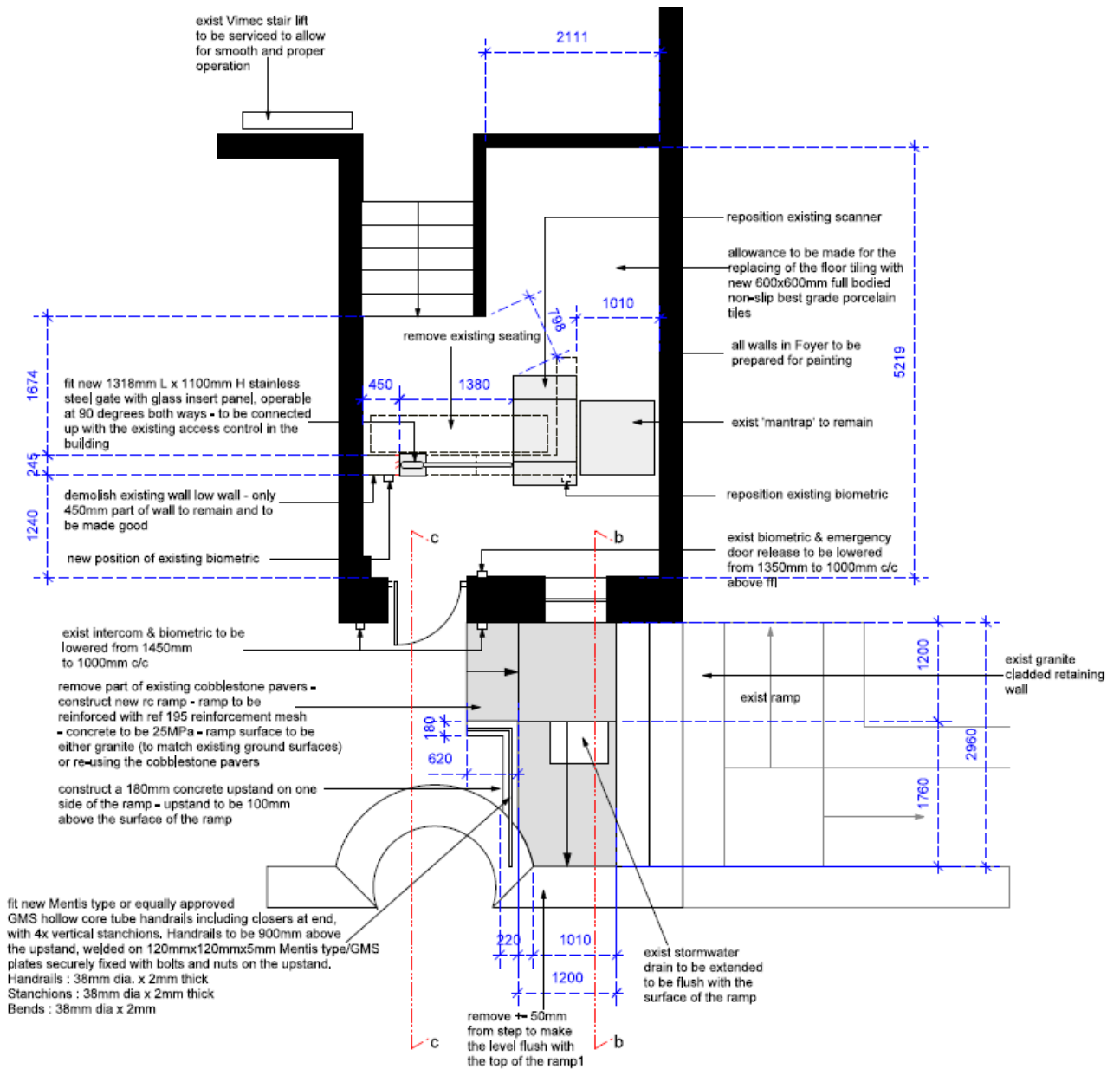


Fig 12 : Existing Secondary Entrance – Proposed new layout

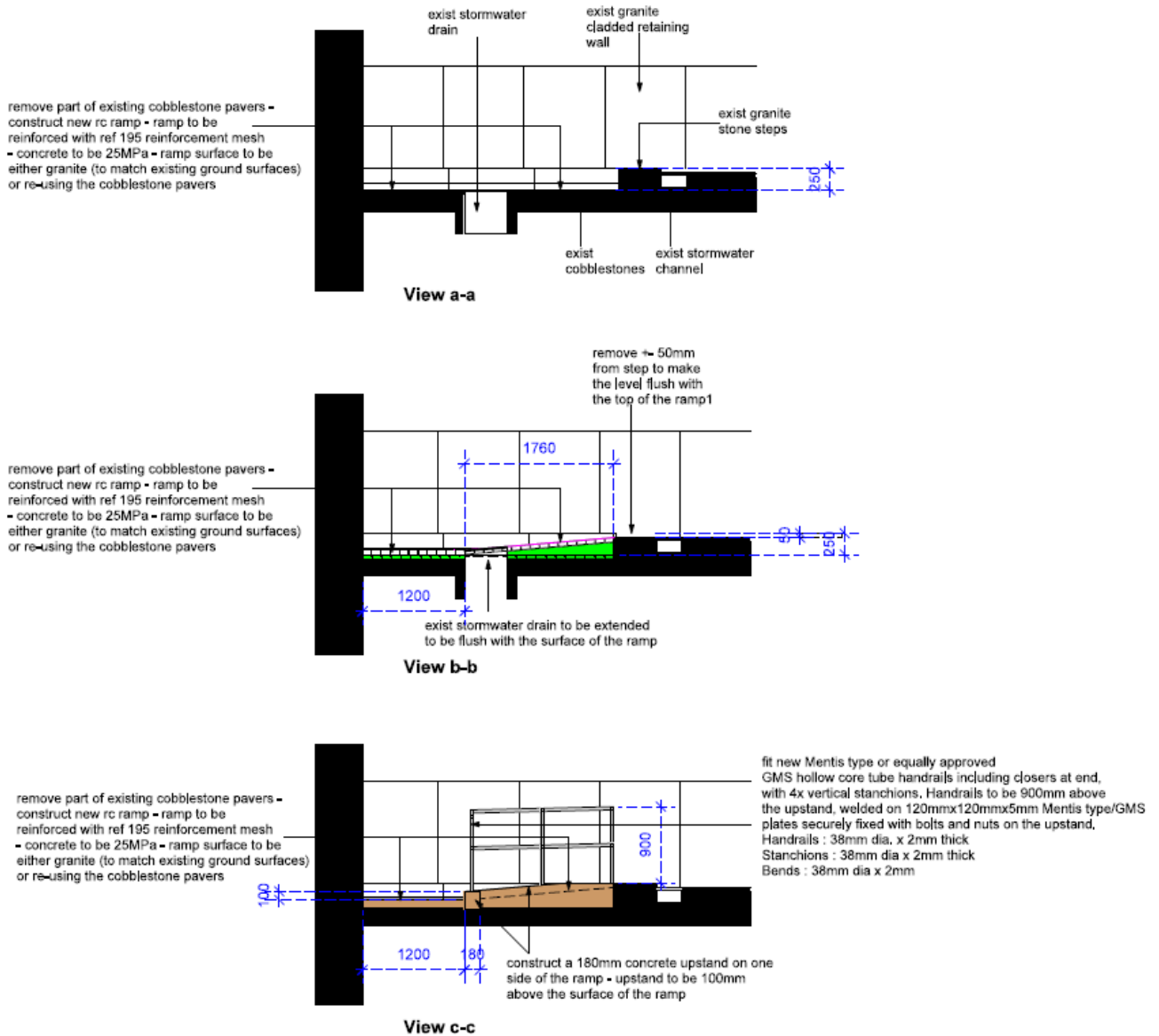


Fig 13 : Section through the ramp

6.7

Stalplein : Heritage significance :

6.7.1 Stalplein is supposed to be highly prominent in terms of :

- a) Visual spatial significance as an open forecourt to Parliament, being an important public interface between Parliament and the people.
- b) It's visual prominence of being the centre point and connecting the long visual axis down Roeland street with Tuynhuys and the National Assembly.
- c) Historic significance with the location being used as a stable in years gone by. However, it is believed that any historic artefacts that could have existed before the underground parking was build was destroyed.
- d) Significance for ceremonial events.



- 6.7.2 Unfortunately The significance of Stalplein has somewhat been subdued. This is as a result of :
- a) The public interface between Parliament and the people are restricted by the existing perimeter security barriers.
  - b) Parliament / Presidency is utilising Stalplein as an ad-hoc parking area and vehicular circulation space to access the underground parking areas.
  - c) There are already surface interferences within Stal Plein in the forms of ramps and steps.
- 6.7.3 After having laid out the above 3 items that somewhat detracts from the historic significance of Stal Plein, the conclusion is that having a ramp constructed (that will serve a practical purpose to make things more convenient for officials with physical disabilities to enter Africa House) will have less of a detrimental effect than items 6.7.2 (a), (b) and (c) as laid out above, based on the following :
- a) The ramp will not be highly noticeable since it is tucked away in a corner (and screened by a wall) and will blend in with it's surroundings. It is also a very short ramp : +- 3.5 meters in length.
  - b) It would help to convert this dead wasted space into a practical serviceable space for persons with disabilities.

## **7 Permit Request**

- 7.1 The Department of Public Works & Infrastructure, being the custodian of the Parliamentary precinct hereby presents :
- a) This submission to SAHRA for approval.
  - b) Requesting the issuing of a permit in order for the above-mentioned works be implemented so that Africa House can be made compliant with Section S of the National Building Regulations concerning Persons with Disabilities.
  - c) The proposal was compiled keeping in mind the consciousness of the Heritage status of the Precinct and Africa House by retaining the character and integrity of the historical elements and to keep intervention at a minimum.

## **8 Sources**

1. Ragmat Davids. 2022. *Internal Memorandum – Parliament Precinct: Africa House – Assessment report regarding facilities for persons with disabilities within the building.* October 2022. DPWI.
2. Arcus Facilities Management Solutions (Pty) Ltd. 2018. *2017 Annual Building Plan for Africa House.* October 2022. DPWI.
3. Culture Connect. 2019. *Parliament of South Africa – Architectural History.* October 2022. <http://cultureconnectsa.com>
4. *Cape Town Parliamentary Precinct : Conservation and Management Plan : Phase 1 Report, April 2007 – prepared by Bam Zollner Architects and the Parliamentary Heritage team*



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Report compiled by :  
Ragmat Davids : Chief Architect  
National Department of Public Works and Infrastructure  
Directorate : CPM

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ragmat Davids'.

Signed :

Dated : 22/09/2023