

# Heritage Impact Assessment for the complex known as Umbilo Flour Mills, Sarnia Road, Durban



Prepared for:

Bakhresa SA (Pty) Ltd  
c/o Mike O'Brien  
Ascon Africa Group: Durban  
Aloe Building  
Fairway Green  
3 Abrey Road  
Kloof  
3610  
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa



**archaic consulting**

architecture: research: conservation: anthropology: impacts consulting

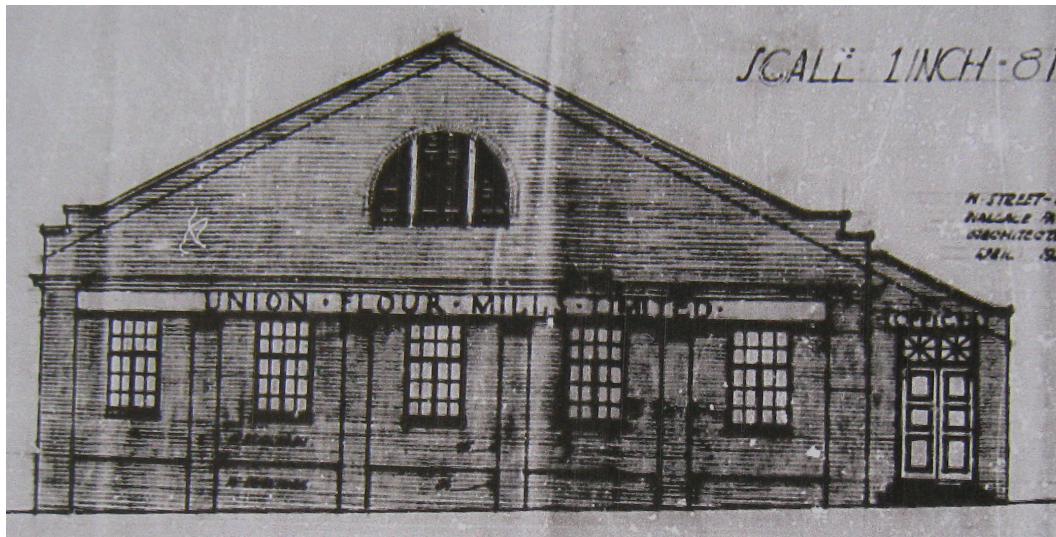
debbie whelan  
po box 21834  
mayors walk  
3208

tel: 033 3442522  
fax: 033 3443122  
cell: 083236 0410  
email: [debbie@archaic.co.za](mailto:debbie@archaic.co.za)

# Heritage Impact Assessment for the complex known as Umbilo Flour Mills, Sarnia Road, Durban

## Contents of report:

|    |  |    |
|----|--|----|
| 1. | Introduction                                 | 3  |
| 2. | Methodology and statement of expertise       | 4  |
| 3. | History of the site                          | 5  |
| 4. | Assessment of structures                     | 9  |
|    | 4.1 Individual structures - silo block       | 9  |
|    | 4.2 Individual structures – corner warehouse | 11 |
|    | 4.3 Buildings as a group and streetscape     | 12 |
|    | 4.4 Junction between buildings               | 13 |
|    | 4.5 Building as corners                      | 13 |
|    | 4.6 Building as foil                         | 14 |
| 5. | Conclusion                                   | 14 |
| 6. | References                                   | 15 |



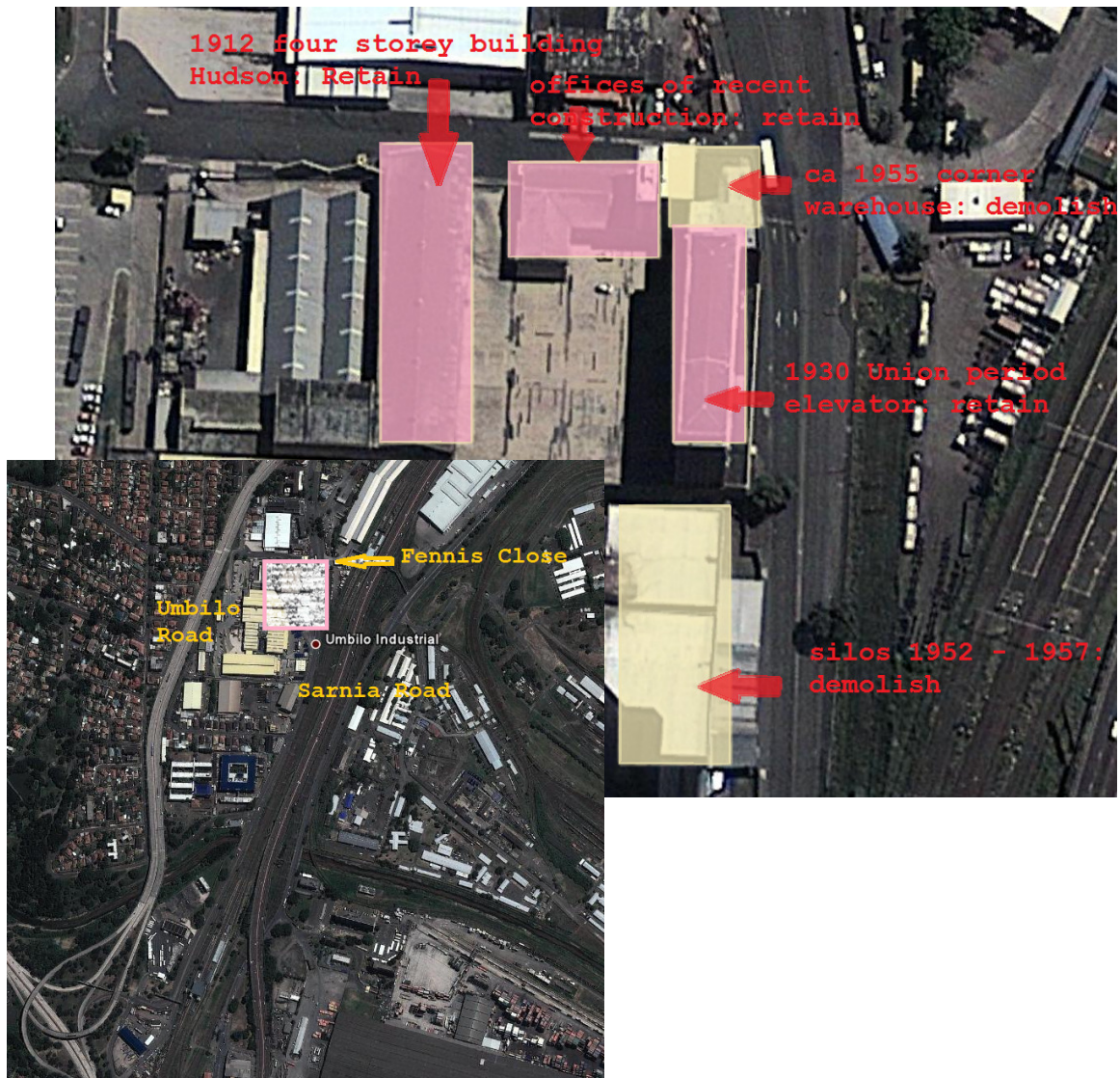
All buildings over the age of 60 years are automatically protected by legislation. In terms of the National Heritage Act no 25 of 1999, provision for the automatic protection of buildings over the age of 60 years is made in clause 34.1 which stipulates that '*No person may alter or demolish any structure or part of a structure which is older than 60 years without a permit issued by the relevant provincial heritage resources authority.*' This is reiterated in the KwaZulu – Natal Provincial Heritage Resources Act no 4 of 2008.

Application for demolition or alteration of these structures would thus have to be directed to the Provincial Heritage Resources Agency for the KwaZulu – Natal, *Amafa aKwaZulu – Natali*.

Please note also that whilst this heritage report has certain recommendations, they may or may not be upheld by the adjudicators in the appropriate Heritage Authority, when it comes to assessment. This is part of the process, and once that first level of adjudication has been completed, then the appropriate steps for a second phase can be assessed. Much can be achieved / mitigated in the design process, given correct briefing by the client and sufficient dexterity by the architects involved

## 1. Introduction

Debbie Whelan of Archaic Consulting was approached by Mr. Mike O'Brien representing Bakhresa SA (Pty) Ltd in order to carry out a Heritage Impact Assessment on the buildings comprising the complex situated at Erf 9527 Durban, known alternatively as the Union Flour Mills and the Umbilo Mills. This assessment is with a view towards the complete demolition of two of the structures to make way for new buildings to house contemporary machinery and processes (a requirement that is impossible to achieve through reuse of the old buildings). The owners want to revitalize the site and return it to an active and productive mill.



*Fig 1: Showing intention of structures on site. The old elevator is the long thin building parallel to Sarnia Road (inset: General location)*

## 2. Methodology

Given that the intention of this report is to compile information available in the public domain regarding the architectural and heritage value of the variant structures making up the complex on Erf 9527, a number of different research methodologies had to be employed.

Remember also that the information gleaned in this report has reference to the KwaZulu – Natal Provincial Heritage Resources Act no 4 of 2008, which intends to protect structures over the age of 60 years as public heritage, in addition to those structures of outstanding architectural or technical merit, or those designed by an architect who contributed significantly to the provincial built environment.

This means that as accurate a picture of all the affected buildings has to be drawn as possible in order to assess them with regards to recommending their retention or destruction. This means that focus will be placed on the old facebrick warehouse corner building, and the tall silo block.

Debbie Whelan visited the site on 13 February 2014 together with Mr. O'Brien who offered a brief orientation as to which buildings were to be retained, and which were intended for demolition.

The site is situated on a portion of what was historically Umbilo Road, which after re – routing was renamed as an extension of Sarnia Road. Fenniscowles Road, which formed the northern boundary to the site prior to the road re – routing, was renamed Fennis Close.

This information is of importance, as this change of address impacted negatively on the collection of empirical data, such as plans from the Municipality. However, this was remedied in part by scrutiny of the Natal Almanacs and Directories, which, in 1949, gave the street address as 1054 – 1104 Umbilo Road.

The Provincial Archives Repository in Pietermaritzburg was visited, and a number of files inspected. Little information was forthcoming from this source, thus the scope of research was broadened to the Archives Repository in Durban, as well as the National Archives in Pretoria.

The Natal Almanac and Directories for a number of years were consulted, in the hope that there would be some photographs of the buildings in the form of advertisements, but this too came to naught.

The drawing collections at the Barrie Biermann library at the University of KwaZulu – Natal as well as the Killie Campbell Collections at the same institution revealed no information. Some information was found in old references at the Cecil Renaud Library in Pietermaritzburg.

Importantly, the references to volumes of the *South African Builder* of 1926 showing the proposed new office building, and that of 1930 showing the new elevators, were not available in the Natal Society Library / Bessie Head collection. The only copies of these issues were found to be at the Legal Deposit Library in Cape Town.

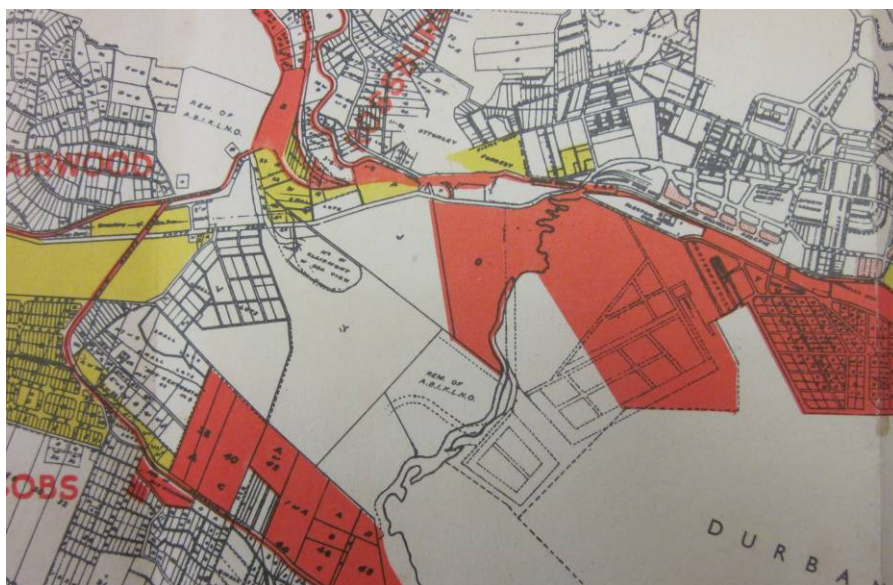
Importantly, the series of aerial photographs relevant to the site were also scrutinized, namely those from 1937, 1953 and 1967. However, the evidence in these was found to be largely inconclusive.

Dr. Debbie Whelan is a trained researcher in the heritage and anthropological fields. A full *Curriculum Vitae* is available on request, as is a company profile of Archaic Consulting.

### 3. History of the site

The first mention of a proposed mill on this site was in 1905, when WF Leeson approached the Department of Railways and Harbours with a view towards leasing the land of not much more than an acre on which the site stands. The original agreements stipulated a period of some 25 years, and Leeson was, at the time, committing himself to spending £ 50 000.00 on setting up the mill (NHD II/1/92 HDE 1533/ 1905). The position was desirable, being close to the wharf and also contingent on having rail access. The position of the Castle Brewery / South African Breweries was also significant. Initial development proceeded swiftly, although reaching operational status took some time. William Street Wilson contributed designs to the new mill in 1906, as well as Stanley Hudson, who designed the Durban City Hall. Hudson designed the four story block on site which will not be affected by demolition.

It is important to note that this area was virtually undeveloped at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that the Union Mill was one of the first industrial complexes to situate itself here.



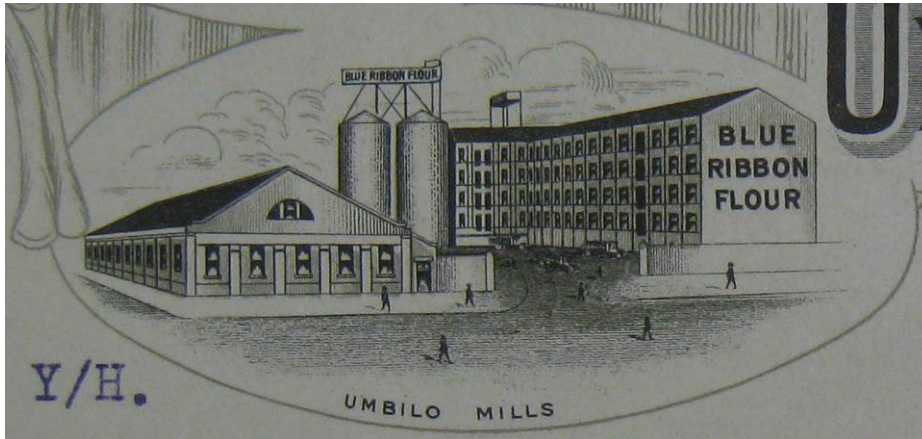
**Fig 2: Plan from 1939 Natal Almanac and Directory showing the development at the time: red is railways and harbours land, yellow is privately owned. Note the square in the centre which is the Union Flour Mill property**

Despite negotiations around leases commencing in 1905, as an operating site there was little of any note until the mid – 1920s. The first mention of Union Flour Mills in the Natal Almanac and Directories was in 1924. This is corroborated by a mention that ‘..the largest, Union Flour Mills. (1906), combines wheat milling with maize milling’ (McWhirter 1959:11).

Structures on site in the first few years appear temporary: William Street - Wilson and Paton are known to have designed offices on the site in 1920 and 1926<sup>1</sup> and the new Mill in 1930, which is the Union period structure still present on site.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/bldgframes.php?bldgid=2681&archid=1652>

<sup>2</sup> Artefacts notes that ‘The partnership in Durban between W Street-Wilson and J Wallace Paton from about 1898 (Hillebrand 1975:193); according to Street-Wilson’s FRIBA nomination papers (1906), Street-Wilson admitted Paton to partnership in about 1904/1905. After Street-Wilson’s death in 1928, Wallace Paton continued the business under the same style, later bringing Charles Silver Milne TAYLOR into the practice, the style of the firm becoming PATON & TAYLOR. Among the firm’s early jobs was the design of Emmanuel Cathedral for Bishop Jolivet, Durban, during which a case of bad management was brought against them by the clients (Street-Wilson & Paton v Roman Catholic Mission, Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court 15 Oct 1906) which Street-Wilson & Paton won (Spiller 1985). Several buildings which



**Fig 3: Letterhead of Union Flour Mills, Ca 1929 (3/PMB 4/3/38 579 /1929). Note a completely different configuration of the site.**



**Fig 4. Photograph Ca 1930 / 1931 showing newly completed elevator (Acknowledgements: Mr Arthur Gammage, eThekweni Metropolitan Council Architects)**

have been put into Street-Wilson & Paton's oeuvre because they fit the partnership dates have been found only under Street-Wilson's FRIBA nom papers (1906) and so might not belong to both should a definite partnership date be established. Nevertheless it possible that Paton worked on several since he was in the office at the time. The firm exhibited photographs and drawings in the South African Academy Exhibition (1926) of St John's School Chapel, Pietermaritzburg; a drawing, perhaps that exhibited, currently hangs in the school chapel..' <http://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/archframes.php?archid=1652>

By 1952, the complex as extant above remained, as evidenced in photographs appearing in Pictorial Geography of Natal (Emmanuelson & Wells 1952: 169).



**Fig 5: Photograph of grain elevator and corner building (Emmanuelson & Wells: 1952)**

In 1959 and 1960, letters written to the Pietermaritzburg Town Council appeared on letterheads showing this extant situation as is Figure 5 above



**Fig 6: Letterhead ca 1960 (3 / PMB 4/5/434 TC 164/219)**

By 1961 this had changed: a new letterhead proudly shows the new corporate image of the Umbilo Mills, together with the new silos, the warehouse on the north, and the old elevator and old grain bins completing the façade.



**Fig 7: Extant building as per Fig 6 above on Fennis Close, designed by Stanley Hudson, 1912. Not for demolition.**



**Fig 8: Letterhead ca 1961 (3 / PMB 4/5/434 TC 164/219)**

In the absence of ready access to the plans of the buildings, these corporate letterheads can provide a measure of evidence as to the age of the buildings that are under threat of demolition.



## 4. Assessment of structures

The buildings earmarked for demolition in order that the site can be practicably developed, are the silo block, and the old face - brick corner warehouse (See Fig 1 of this report). Please note that the comments drawn out of the discussions in items 4.3 through 4.5 are for the purposes of identifying greater design issues than merely those of the structures involved in the demolition, in order to be able to address the scale, massing, design and construction of any new replacement buildings should demolition be carried out.

### 4.1 Individual structures - silo block

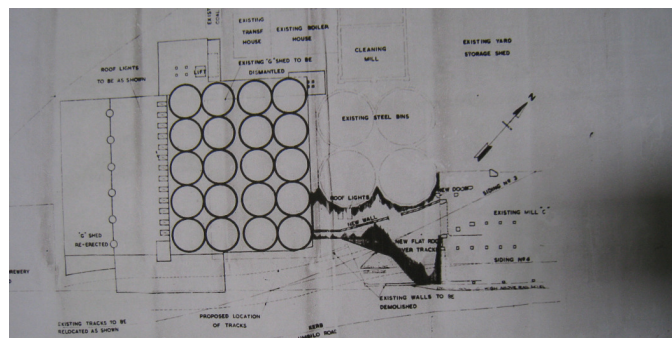
The silo blocks consist of two towers, one larger than the other. They are likely early examples of concrete slide structures, topped with an elegant orthogonal capping with a centralized ribbon window and painted signage for Blue Ribbon Flour. This reflects the heavy neo – classical cornice of the old Union period elevator, making the buildings act in tandem.

It appears as though demand on the site for storage space increased rapidly after the construction of the 1930 block. In the mid – 1940s FE Kanthack and Partners had surveyed the site in order to submit a number of proposals to establish the next batch of silos, consisting of 20 in total. In August 1951 the proposal for these silos was submitted for approval. It would appear that, by the time of the submission of the additional silo block to the south, consisting of an extra 23 silos in October 1954 that these initial silos were complete, or indeed, construction well underway.

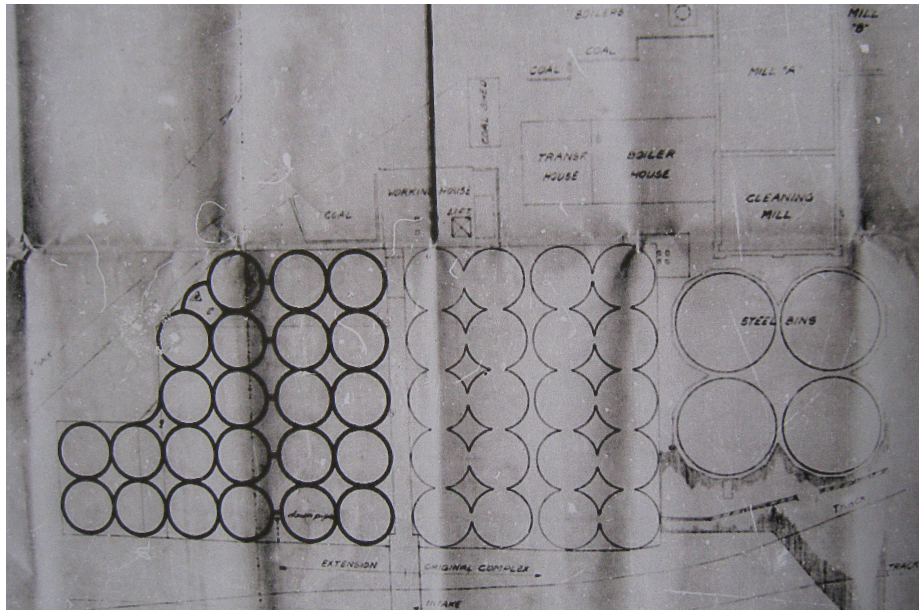
Architecturally, they are well crafted, and, as such form a significant contribution to the streetscape. Their massing contributes to the identity of the mill and its position as a landmark in the area.



**Fig 9: Silo block from elevated parking on the north. Fig 10: Silos from Sarnia Road**



**Fig 11: 1950 revised plan for initial silo block adjacent to grain bins**



**Fig 12: 1954 submission drawing showing bins and first batch of silos as complete, and application for a further group of 23 silos (Arthur Gammage: eThekweni Metropolitan Council)**

### **Significance:**

They appear to have been constructed in two parts, the first, and closer to the old elevator sometime between 1952 and 1954, and the second, after 1954. This means that the first section, closest to the old elevator, is most likely over the age of 60 years and thus subject to protection under the KwaZulu – Natal Provincial Heritage Resources Act.

The significance of the silo complex is limited to its position as a group of buildings forming part of a landmark.

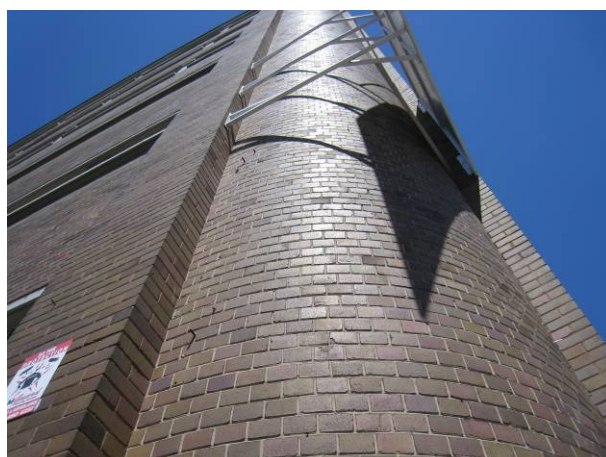
They have medium architectural significance, in their presentation of industrial building as 'architecture' relating to the rhythm and the streetscape created by the old 1930 elevator.

| <b>Silos</b>  | <b>local</b> | <b>regional</b> | <b>national</b> | <b>international</b> |
|---------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Architectural | medium       | low             | low             | low                  |
| Historical    | low          | low             | low             | low                  |
| Technical     | medium       | low             | low             | low                  |
| Scientific    | low          | low             | low             | low                  |
| Social        | medium       | low             | low             | low                  |

## 4.2 Individual structures – corner warehouse



**Fig 13: Northern façade of warehouse**



**Fig 14: Corner of warehouse**



**Fig 15: Sarnia road frontage of warehouse**

The facebrick warehouse that forms the ‘bookend’ to the Sarnia road façade balancing the mass of the silo block is a carefully considered modernist derived building that carefully picks up clues from its predecessor, the old elevator, projects itself beyond the line on the street frontage, yet simultaneously in its systematic façade treatment and lower height, defers to the older structure. The elevation in Fig 15 above illustrates this relationship.

The plans for this building were submitted for approval in May 1954, designed by Paton Taylor Architects. This means that the building is less than 60 years of age, and thus not subject to protection in terms of age in the KwaZulu – Natal Provincial Heritage Resources Act no 4 of 2008.

It is a well - crafted building of stretcher - bond brickwork<sup>3</sup> with bands of ribbon windows delineated by projecting cills. The corner is simply recessed, yet well proportioned. The north façade follows that of the east, with slight variations in fenestration.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the careful attention to the design, the pointing in the brickwork is not particularly well executed.

## Significance:

This building is a well - crafted example of industrial modernism which responds and contributes to the streetscape of the block. It has medium significance from an architectural point of view given its design by Paton Taylor, a long – lived and prominent firm in Durban.

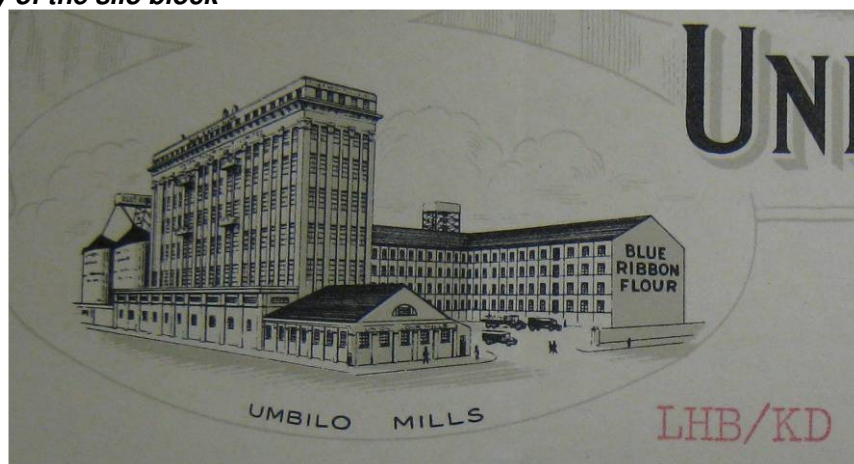
| Warehouse     | local  | regional | national | international |
|---------------|--------|----------|----------|---------------|
| Architectural | medium | low      | low      | low           |
| Historical    | low    | low      | low      | low           |
| Technical     | low    | low      | low      | low           |
| Scientific    | low    | low      | low      | low           |
| Social        | low    | low      | low      | low           |

### 4.3 Buildings as a group and streetscape

From the individual assessments, it is important to note the value of the buildings from the point of view of streetscape and as a group.



*Fig 16: Corner warehouse on approach, and massing of site culminating in the verticality of the silo block*



*Fig 17: Elevation circa 1960, showing the downscaled massing in the foreground with the old offices*

The streetscape on the corner of Fennis Close and Sarnia Road is dominated by the facebrick corner warehouse building. On the Fennis Close side, this verticality is emphasized by the entrance portal to the building. The streetscape then collapses to a series of smaller, less coherent structures: the more recent extension, then the old four storey structure of the complex as originally constructed (see Fig 17). In all, this is an elevation dominated by the scale of the corner, rather than one which is balanced in its massing and proportion.

The eastern elevation is more homogenous, with the old elevators being propped up by the more recent structures on either side.

#### 4.4 Junction between buildings

Interrogating the junctions between buildings is also important in being able to draw recommendations as to hierarchy in the design process.



**Fig 18: Junction between old and new, Sarnia Road** **Fig 19: Junction on west**

The facebrick warehouse, as previously mentioned, has been carefully crafted in order to not diminish the elegance of the old 1930 elevator, despite its being positioned more in the foreground. Its reverse junction, to the west, is recessed, also casting the old elevator into the foreground. The reverse of the entrance portal block on the warehouse balances the massing and height of the elevator, casting the brickwork of the warehouse into the background.

In both instances, a large part of the 'junction' is the deployment of unlike materials, so that the eye reads 'like' (portal block of the entrance and the elevator) and darker, less prominent materials recede.

#### 4.5 Building as corners



**Fig 18: Building as corner**

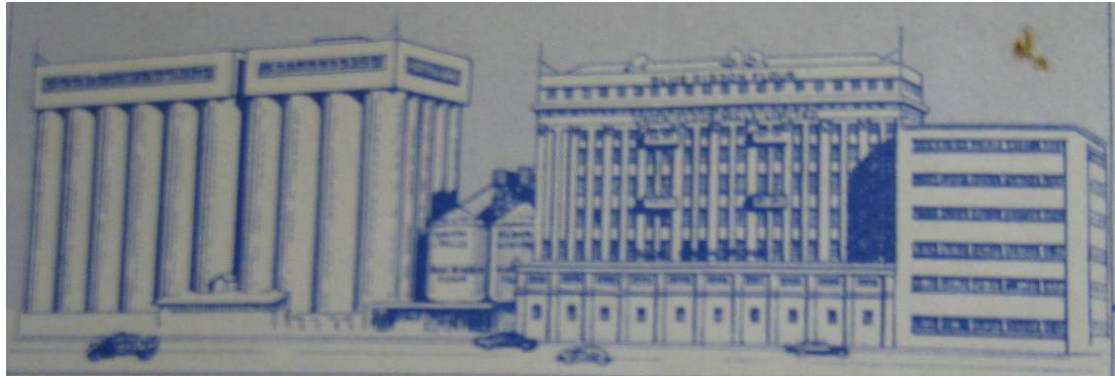
The warehouse is possibly most significant in the manner that it addresses the corner of Fennis Close and Sarnia Road. This is carried out architecturally by recessing the brickwork on the corner, thus projecting the flanking bands of brick and fenestration on the northern and eastern elevations.

This is emphasized in the projecting junction between the old Union Period elevator and the newer facebrick structure.

Architecturally addressing the corner is important in the creation of sophisticated and elegant urban streetscapes.

#### **4.6 Building as foil**

An important aspect of the decision process is the position of the old Union Period elevator, designed by Street Wilson and Paton, in 1930 in any new development. For the author, this is the most important building of the group, and should be respected at all costs.



**Fig 19: 1960s Sarnia Road elevation of the complex showing the old elevator building as an important part of the consolidated elevation**

This is really the keystone of the whole mill complex, and it is supported by the buildings of subsequent construction, namely the new silo block and the corner warehouse. These respect the older structure, which is an elegant and unique example of Union Period architecture, by respecting its scale and proportions, and allowing it to contribute significantly to the streetscape and the architectural identity of the complex.

Any new designs that occupy the places of the silos and the warehouse (should they be demolished) will ideally respect this building and provide a foil for it. This means that the new designs should be simple and receding, and, perhaps of similar massing to the extant buildings, in order to provide a memory of their existence.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Most of the buildings intended for demolition are less than 60 years of age, and thus are not subject to the age protection clause in the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Heritage Resources Act no 4 of 2008. This means that permission from *Amafa aKwaZulu - Natali* is not necessary in order to process their demolition. However, the responsibility for the built environment, and the historic built environment lies with property owners, and to this end, there lies an opportunity for best practise to be employed in both the retention of old buildings, and the careful crafting of new ones in order to best protect the built environment.

The concrete silo immediately adjacent to the old Union Period elevator is most likely just over the age of 60 years, or at least was still under construction in 1954, and thus should be considered as if it were an historic structure.

## **Recommendations:**

*Ideally, it is hoped that the old silos and the facebrick building could be reused through retrofitting, rather than demolition.*

*However, it is also important to recognize that it is the Union Period structure that is the most important part of this complex, and that reuse of the mill as a whole will only benefit the longevity of this structure. This means that sacrifices may have to be made in order to ensure its continued existence.*

*Whilst the corner warehouse is a good example of industrial modernism, and was designed by a prominent firm, it is not older than 60 years, and is not deemed significant enough to protect through other clauses. Demolition, should it be required, could be condoned.*

*The silo block consists of two parts: the earliest is older than 60 years and thus subject to protection by Amafa, and the second section is not. As a whole the silo block is well – crafted and a good example of an engineered building that has been carefully designed as a piece of architecture.*

*Whilst ideally, investigations into creative reconfiguration of the silo blocks to ensure their reuse would be desirable, focus must be on the valourisation of the Union Period elevator. Despite their strong architectural contribution, demolition, should it be required, could be condoned.*

*However, for any of the structures replacing the old silo blocks and the corner warehouse, it is strongly recommended that a heritage architect be employed to carry out the designs using design principles embedded in the Burra Charter, in order to maximize the attention on the Union Period structure. It is also recommended that such an architect be employed in order to fully assess, strategise and supervise repairs and renovations to the Union Period structure.*

## **6. References**

### **Published sources:**

Emanuelson, O & Wells, R. 1952. *Pictorial Geography of Natal*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter

McWhirter, D. *Industry in Greater Durban. Part II. Raw materials as a factor in industrial location*. Durban. University of Natal and Town and Regional Planning Commission

*Natal Almanac and Directories* for the years:

1923

1927

1931

1932

1939

1945

1949

### **Archival references:**

3 / PMB 4/3/38 579/1929

3 / PMB 4/5/434 TC164 / 219

NDD II / I / 92 HDE 1533 / 1905

### **Website addresses:**

<http://www.artefacts.co.za> – Street Wilson

**eThekweni Metropolitan Council / Mr. Arthur Gammage**

Plans repository for address 1054 – 1104 Umbilo Road, Durban