

# Business Day (Late Final), Home Front

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DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

## The gold standard

*Johannesburg's new R280m council chamber in Braamfontein packs symbolic punch, and is designed to catalyse urban regeneration and make the city more democratic*

WORDS: GRAHAM WOOD :: PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

Johannesburg's new R280m council chamber in Braamfontein is designed to be the kind of building that not only makes a statement, but also helps to stitch together the fragmented urban fabric around it. It adds something visually exciting to the cityscape, yet it has not missed the opportunity to create safe public space around it, and make people's passage easier and more secure.

### LIGHT

Designed by StudioMAS Architects and Urban Designers, the chamber is a bold and intriguing architectural intervention. It is set right outside the Metro Centre, to the south of the imposing neo-brutalist landmark. In contrast to the monolithic concrete slab, the new council chamber is light and circular: a golden drum with a scalloped and finned glass facade. It floats above a reflection pond on flag columns, and reaches up to make its mark on the skyline with a 10m-high golden spire.

It is everything its apartheid-era counterpart is not: curved, light, transparent and, more importantly than anything else, firmly in the public realm.

"The old Metro Complex ... was an award-winning design in its time," says Alan Dinnie, senior manager of property development at the City of Joburg Property Company (JPC), which manages the city's property assets. He says, however, that it is very much "inward focusing". It was built on 139 erven, clearly at odds with Braamfontein's "rather intricate" grain. "It really divorced itself from the urban fabric," he says. "It sits in the cityscape but somehow doesn't relate to it."

### SPACE

Buried deep inside, far from the public eye, was the old council chamber. "The project [the new chamber] started out as pure frustration with the lack of space," says JPC CEO Helen Botes. But it became so much more.

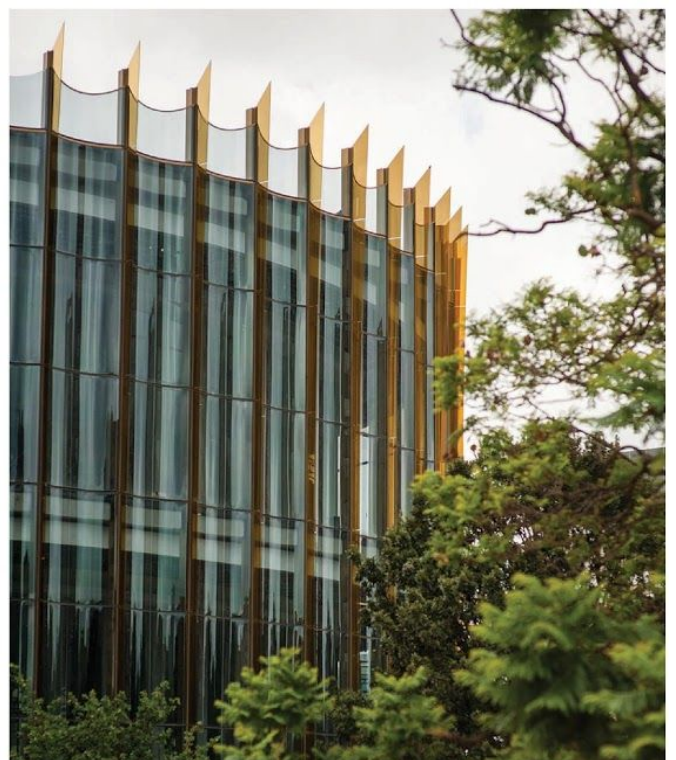
The chamber itself is the first phase of a comprehensive R2.5bn plan

not only to revamp the old Metro Centre, but also to add to it and transform it into a multi-use precinct. The old council chamber was too small to accommodate the city's growing number of councillors: 135 by 2014. Beyond that, the council had become scattered across 159 buildings without any comprehensive property strategy. "[We] could greatly improve not only costs, but service delivery and efficiency by consolidating its operations to a single centre," says Dinnie.

### STATEMENT

Of course, a project of this scale needed to make a statement. "We know what's happening in Sandton in terms of iconic buildings," says Dinnie. Braamfontein needed to make a statement to compete with those. If it was to be at all effective in catalysing urban regeneration, "I think if you're really going to make a statement — set the standard, and people will follow," he says. The council chamber presented that opportunity.

The JPC was also aware of the opportunity such a

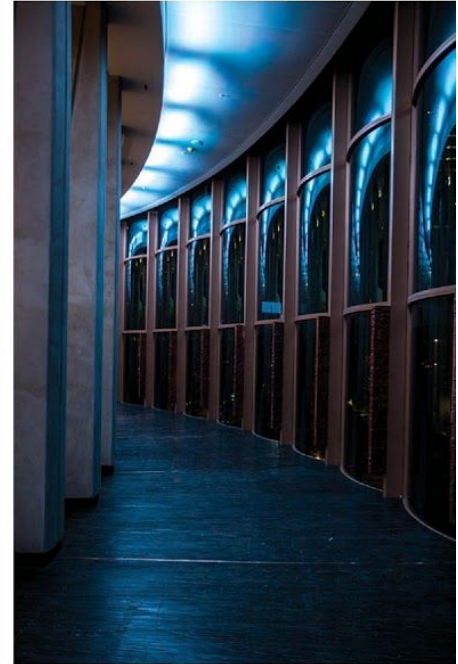




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precinct presented on an urban planning level. "The plans for the other buildings are about rebuilding fabric and connecting us back into Braamfontein and Hillbrow," says Dinnie, "so it doesn't seem like it's this cut-out place anymore."

He believes strongly that "the value of a place is not in how it looks, but in how people use it", and wanted a plan that would bring people into the precinct.

Dinnie notes, however, that the iconic and symbolic aspects of the design "became our lead decision makers". The JPC refused to compromise on those aspects of the brief.

The symbolism is multifaceted, working on many levels. Firstly, the building is circular to reflect an African drum (calling people together) and the circular lekgotla (meeting place). The glass façade represents transparency and accountability, and the gold

colour is a reference to the city's gold-mining history.

The way in which it is built also sets a precedent. The council chamber is what Dinnie calls a "bright green building", incorporating smart technologies and green building systems so that it embodies the city's vision of itself as a world-class African city. It has a five-star Green Star SA design certification in the public and education buildings category.

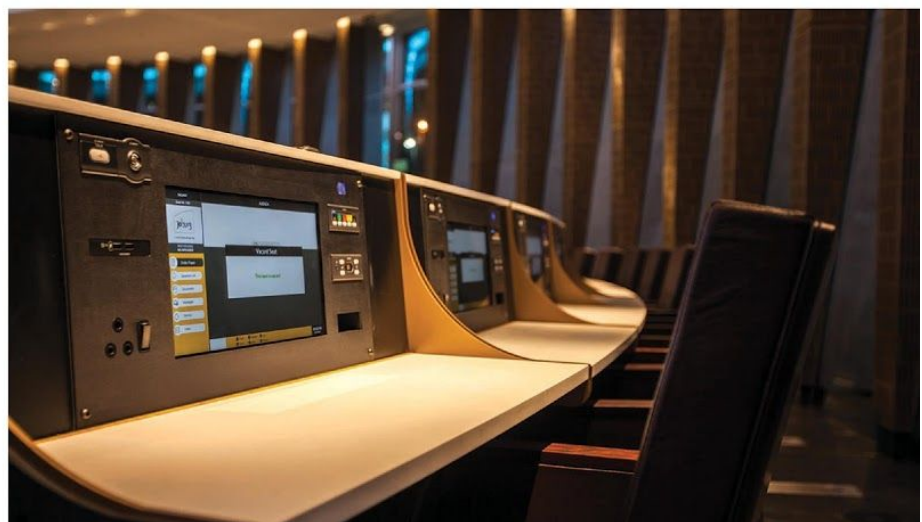
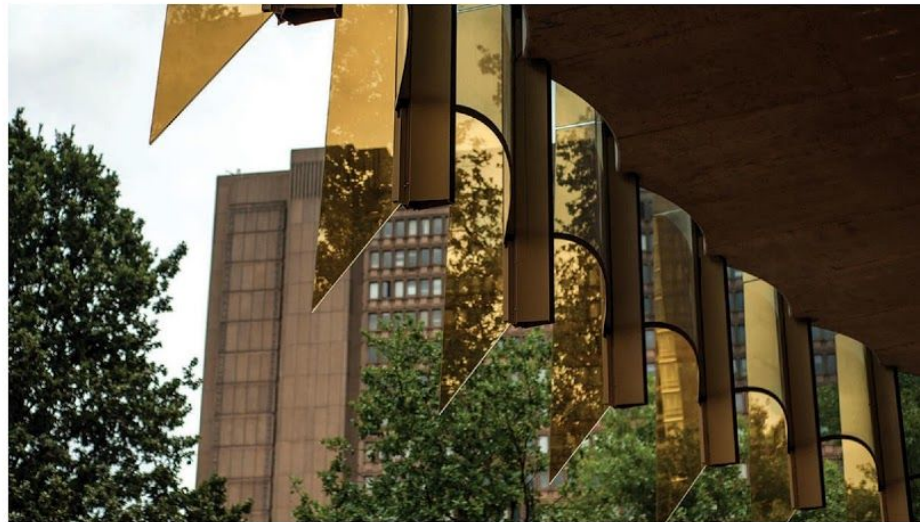
## ART

The interior might be a technological wonderland, but it includes human touches, too. The outer ring of the chamber features a series of carved wooden totems based on artworks collected during a public art competition to "gather resources from the people". Entrants submitted works that represented their community and their community's history.

Neither the chamber nor the rest of the precinct plan involves effacing or demolishing the original Metro Centre building. "I did not want to destroy history," says Botes.

Rather history is reframed, refracted and critically reinterpreted through the remarkable architectural lens of the council chamber.

"A city is a conversation of many different buildings, with many different voices coming through," says Dinnie. This one speaks clearly, without drowning out past and future voices.



**"The glass façade represents transparency and accountability, and the gold colour is a reference to the city's gold-mining history"**

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