



Project: Newtown

The latest piece in the Newtown puzzle

By Craig McClenaghan, Mashabane Rose Associates

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Newtown has been a construction site for the last five years, during which time it was rumoured (among construction workers) to boast the largest hole in the ground since construction of the Carlton Centre!

Cranes, diggers, noise and dust are now (at last) starting to be replaced with a bunch of new buildings – and perhaps more importantly, the sights and sounds of downtown Jo'burgers shopping, eating, working and playing. With a City Lodge nearing completion, the latest piece to be added to the Newtown puzzle is the new Laager Theatre, recently reopened by Johannesburg's legendary Market Theatre.

Historically the smallest of the Market's three theatres, The Laager has always been affectionately known as the smaller, slightly tatty 'experimental' sibling of the larger, more formal Barney Simon and John Kani Theatres.

The brief for this new theatre aimed to celebrate this fact as an important design consideration. The scrappy 1980's structure, carelessly slapped onto Museum Africa's historic façades (hacking back the original roof line and smothering the old brickwork and windows) was torn down to make way for a newer, more flexible space, while still attempting to retain the 'unpolished charm' that theatre patrons came to love.

The Laager theatre complex comprises a theatre (seating up to 180 patrons), a public lobby, and two 'back of house' wings (accommodating dressing

rooms, green rooms, actor's bathrooms and offices) – one for the John Kani theatre and one for the Laager Theatre. The complex clips neatly onto the side of the existing Market Theatre/Museum Africa building, facing northwards towards the Newtown Junction development.

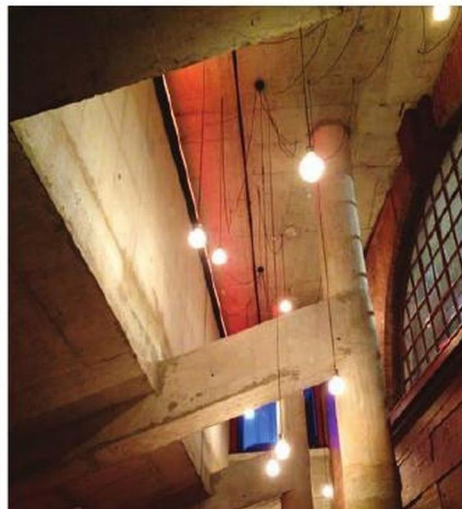
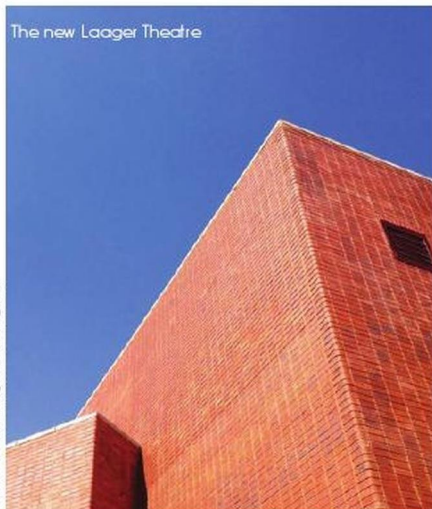
The new theatre structure is a raw off-shutter concrete 'box' which, depending on the design of the performance, permits multiple options for stage and seating configuration – from traditional end-on, to thrust and even catwalk formation.

With the theatre 'box' pulled away from the historic façades, the new lobby space formed in between is entered either through the main entrance of the Market Theatre, or from the newly-opened 'Potato Shed' eatery located under the fully-restored historic structure of the same name. Either way, the peculiar volumes created between old and new is a spatial surprise, further emphasised by the playfully-coloured interior red lighting.

The emphasis on 'shades of red' in an otherwise deliberately minimal palette of materials, sets up an architectural dialogue with the historic red floor, brick and roof aesthetic of the surrounding context. Crisp, deep-punched windows acknowledge the rhythm and proportion of their historic counterparts on the façade behind. This building is at once about subtlety and at the same time surprise, with moments of playfulness reminding the visitor that the world of theatre and

The new Laager Theatre

Photo credit: Craig McClenaghan



The Majestic

Photo credit: Amy Mania



fantasy is alive and well in Newtown! From behind the blank face-brick exterior, the dangling light bulbs with looping cables sparkle in the red foyer, the blue glass skylight casts curiously eerie shadows down the historic brick walls (deliberately left tatty and scarred), and the multi-coloured tiled floors of the actor's bathrooms take a swing at the seriousness of reality...

But through this whimsy, the building is also about a profound architectural respect, which is an idea that Mashabane Rose Associates (MRA) nurtures in almost everything we do... to breathe new life into an older structure, to step back and remind ourselves of its worth in Johannesburg's broader narrative.

The Laager Theatre is one of several Newtown building projects in which MRA has been involved. It is flanked by Newtown Junction, a large mixed-use development comprised of much-needed retail and commercial space; and The Majestic, a five-storey commercial building leased by Nedbank.

The common denominator of all these projects is a celebration of the fragments of architectural heritage structures scattered across the precinct, including the old 'Station Master's House' (located underneath the double decker highway) the 'Potato Shed' structure (which was carefully dismantled, restored and re-assembled during construction of the development's

four-level parking basement), the steel pedestrian bridge that links across to the upper floor of the Market Theatre, the historic single-storey façades of old Wolhuter Street (through which one now enters The Majestic's main lobby), and the jewel in Newtown's heritage crown, the 'Edwardian Bath-House', which is currently being converted into a sophisticated cocktail/cigar bar, cheekily named 'The Gentleman's Arthouse.'

The restored steel pedestrian bridge is once more open to the public and provides access from the vibey, newly-opened eatery, 'The Potato Shed', to the upper-level lobby of the Market Theatre. This means that patrons can park their cars securely in the basement of Newtown Junction, emerge into the large open square, have dinner, walk over the bridge and watch a show.

Atterbury Properties has been the pioneering developers in getting these large commercial projects off the ground, and Nedbank's interest in heritage proved to be an irresistible hook. Consequently, within the space of five years, the area has transformed from a derelict yard of partially destroyed sheds and warehouses into a vibrant urban precinct that attracts and celebrates the same urban demographic that Newtown always has – a completely diverse one. Just in far bigger numbers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Architects for Newtown Junction: DHK, LPA and MRA

Architects for The Majestic: MRA

Interior Designers for The Potato Shed Eatery and The Gentleman's Arthouse: Life Interiors

Architects for City Lodge: Boogertman + Partners