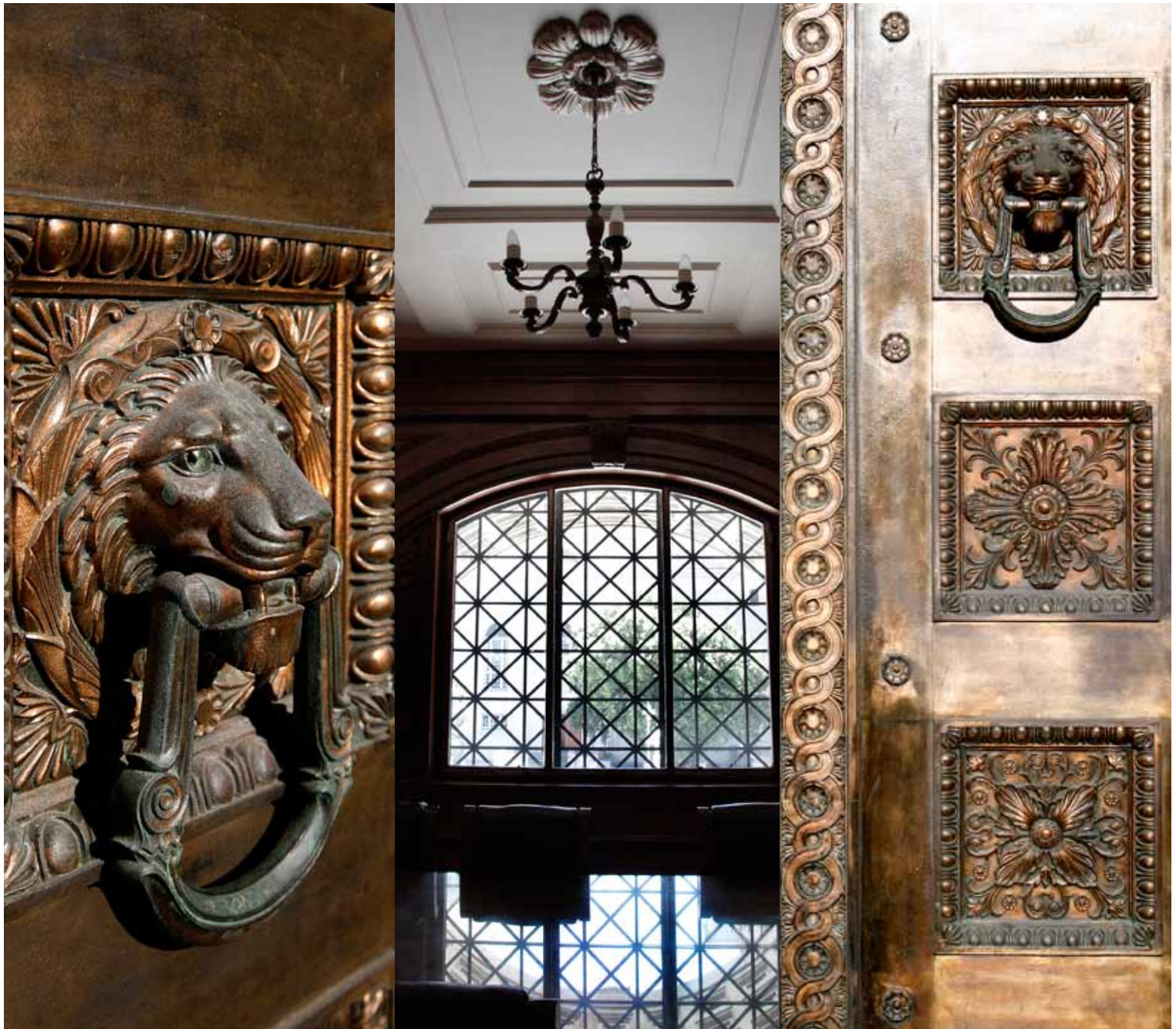


# Iziko Social History Centre





Façade of the Iziko Social History Centre.

## Extract from a draft heritage impact assessment report addressed to Heritage Western Cape

Regarding a Proposed Development requiring the Consolidation of Seven Erven, the Demolition of a Building More than Sixty Years Old and Alterations and Additions to a Provincial Heritage Site, the Old National Mutual Building (now the Iziko Social History Centre), at Erven 4723, 4726, 4727, 4728, 4729, 4730 and 4748, Church Square, Cape Town for the NATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

**13 May 2005**

Stephen S Townsend (B.Arch., Cape Town; Diploma in the Study and Restoration of Monuments, Rome; Ph.D., Cape Town). Architect, Planner, Conservationist in association with, Ashley Lillie (B.Journ., Rhodes). Heritage Consultant

# The History of the Buildings and the ownership

## The Old Mutual Building of 1905 and 1933

The National Mutual Life Association of Australasia first opened a branch in the then Cape Colony in 1897 in Cape Town. After renting various premises, a suitable location for the Cape Town head office was found, and in 1903 the company took transfer of a property on Church Square<sup>1</sup>. At the time the property consisted of an old Cape house (with many typical 18th century characteristics, although altered by this time) and the adjoining former warehouse<sup>2</sup>. As soon as transfer was taken, instructions were received from the company's head office that Mr Francis Masey be requested to prepare plans as soon as possible<sup>3</sup>. By August, 1904 the old building had been demolished and it was decided that tenders be called for erection of the new building in accordance with plans prepared by Messrs Baker & Masey<sup>4</sup>. Alternative tenders were to be called for the options of Paarl Granite and face-brick for the front façade<sup>5</sup>. Agreement was reached with the Civil Service Club for the National Mutual to build on the adjoining right of way and to leave extra space for light at the rear. Finally, in November it was agreed to accept the tender submitted by a contractor, a Mr M Adams<sup>6</sup>.

It should be noted that Herbert Baker had moved to Johannesburg in 1902 and, although he was evidently closely involved in the design of the building, it was Masey who was primarily responsible and who supervised the construction. It is apparent that the National Mutual did not require all of the space provided, as is evidenced by the leasing of offices to the Education Department on the 3rd floor of the building in 1906<sup>7</sup>.

By the late 1920s the National Mutual's growth had necessitated larger premises and they were fortunate in being able to obtain an adjoining state-owned property. The period was one in which numerous large companies in Cape Town were investing in buildings that, besides providing for their own requirements, allowed for accommodation for tenants.

1. Transfer 19177, dated 31 December 1903, from EB Fuller.

2. Cape Archives E191 1 & E4382, ci 904 and the earlier E2172.

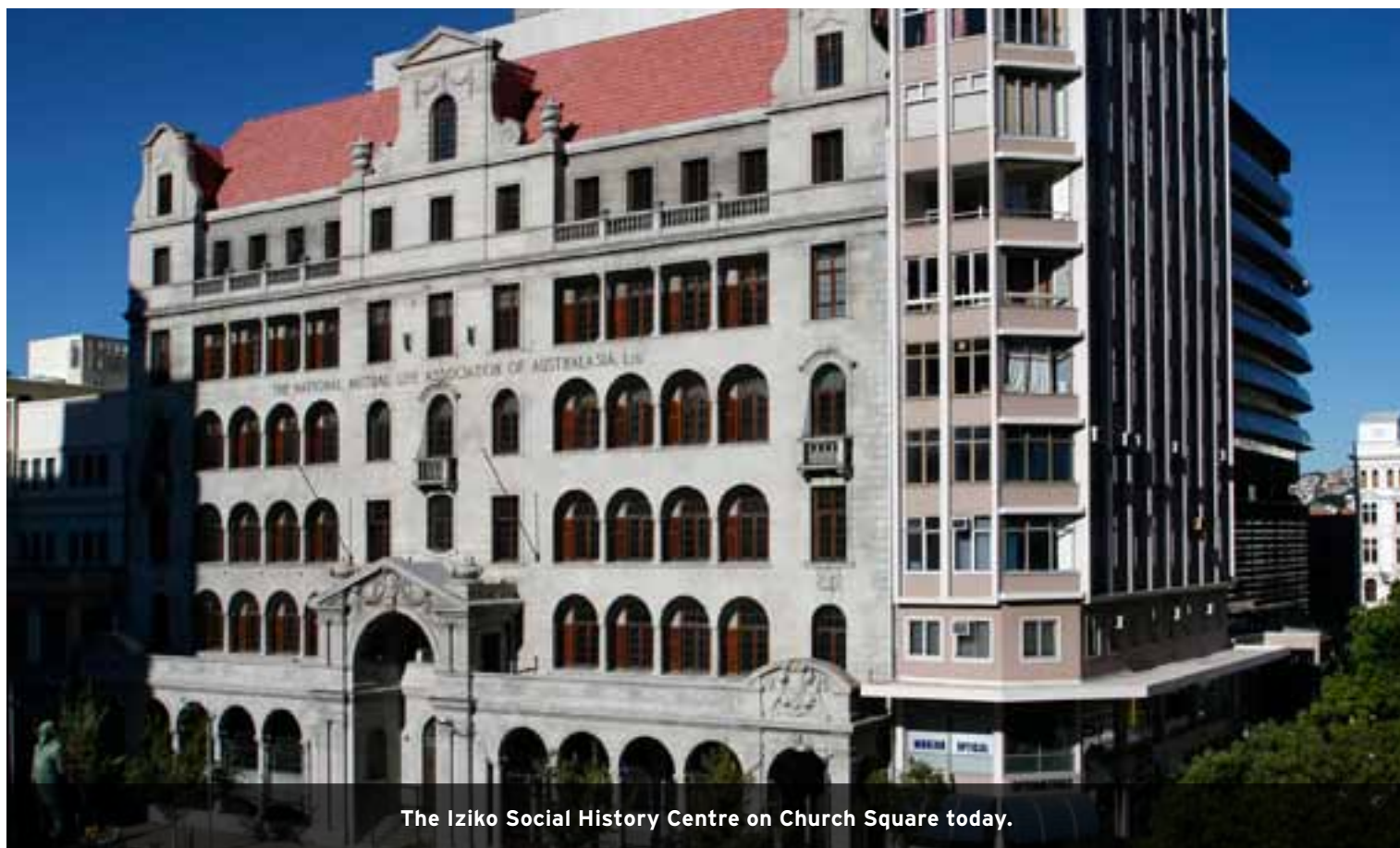
3. National Library of SA, MSC 82 15(4) Minutes of meeting held on 19 January 1904.

4. Copies of the Baker & Masey plans are held in the Manuscripts Collection in the Jagger Library, University of Cape Town.

5. *ibid.*, Minutes of meeting held on 16 August 1904.

6. *ibid.*, Minutes of meeting held on 15 November 1904.

7. *ibid.*, Minutes of meeting held on 24 September 1906.



The Iziko Social History Centre on Church Square today.

The minutes at the time record that (t)he property known as the Trades Hall<sup>8</sup> with frontage of 44 feet in Church Street and Plein Street, and depth of 112 feet was purchased by the Association on the 27th March 1929 for the sum of £33,000. The Directors consider the site a very valuable one, especially to the Association, and are satisfied that an excellent purchase has been made at a reasonable figure<sup>9</sup>; and a second adjacent property occupied by a small double-storeyed building with the wavy parapet, known as Brittain's, was acquired at the same time<sup>10</sup>.

John Perry and WJ Delbridge, two leading Cape Town architects working in association, were awarded the work of designing a building to occupy the entire site now owned by the National Mutual. Plans for a building estimated at £120,000 were submitted to the City Council on 17 February 1930 and approved on 11 March<sup>11</sup>.

Work commenced soon after approval, with an initial contract being awarded for the sub-structure. The new foundations were carried down to solid rock, some six metres below ground level. By February 1931 work had reached a point where the main contract for the superstructure could be awarded, the lowest of 20 tenders, that for £126,450 being accepted<sup>12</sup>. The completion of the building was arranged so as to permit continuous occupation of the tenants, the new structure being completed floor by floor and then connected by temporary bridges to the old premises to allow for transfer of tenants to the new premises. After three years, the work was completed around August 1933.

It should be noted that this new building, like that designed by Baker & Masey, provided more space than was required by the National Mutual; and it has three separate entrances: one, on the extreme left to the managers office (probably never used, a relic of the 1905 building); two, the central entrance to the banking hall and to the public spaces of the National Mutual; and three, on the extreme right giving access to the lift and to the offices on the upper floors occupied by private businesses.

The entire property owned by the National Mutual was bought by the State in 1989 and utilised for housing the (then) SA Cultural History Museum. Minor alterations were undertaken (by the architects, Stauch Vorster) to meet the requirements of the Museum.

### The Three-Storeyed Building Facing onto Plein Street of c. 1927

The three-storeyed building located at 38-42 Plein Street was, we believe, built c. 1927, replacing an early Cape five-bay building which had been modernised<sup>13</sup>. We have not been able to find any reference to approved plans, but the lift in the building is dated 1927, and its ownership had changed in 1926, even if only within the Zweigenhaft family. In its original condition the building, built for Michael Zweigenhaft, was a modest and plain example of the early modernist buildings being constructed in Cape Town at that time<sup>14</sup>. In 1982 this property was acquired by the National Mutual and, consequently, formed part of the group of properties bought by the State in 1989. We note that the process of consolidating the seven erven was initiated in 1982, and the surveyors diagram was approved by the Surveyor General in March 1983, but it was not ever registered by the Registrar of Deeds<sup>15</sup>.

8. This was built as the Magistrates court in 1894. See Howard, 1908, p. 166.

9. *ibid.*, Minutes of meeting held on 3 April 1929.

10. Transfer 9597, dated 24 September 1929, from Estate Late J Brittain.

11. City of Cape Town. Register of Building Plans No. 31. #29339. We note, however, that the plans are not in the envelope and we have not been able to find these plans.

12. National Library of SA, *op. cit.*, Minutes of Meeting held on 19 March 1931.

13. See Cape Archives photograph J6639.

14. See Cape Archives photograph E3071.

15. See the Surveyors Diagram for Erf I 15873, compiled in February 1983 by the Land Surveyor, Rupert Honey.



Paarl granite façade from the earlier 1905 Baker & Masey design.

# The Statement of Significance

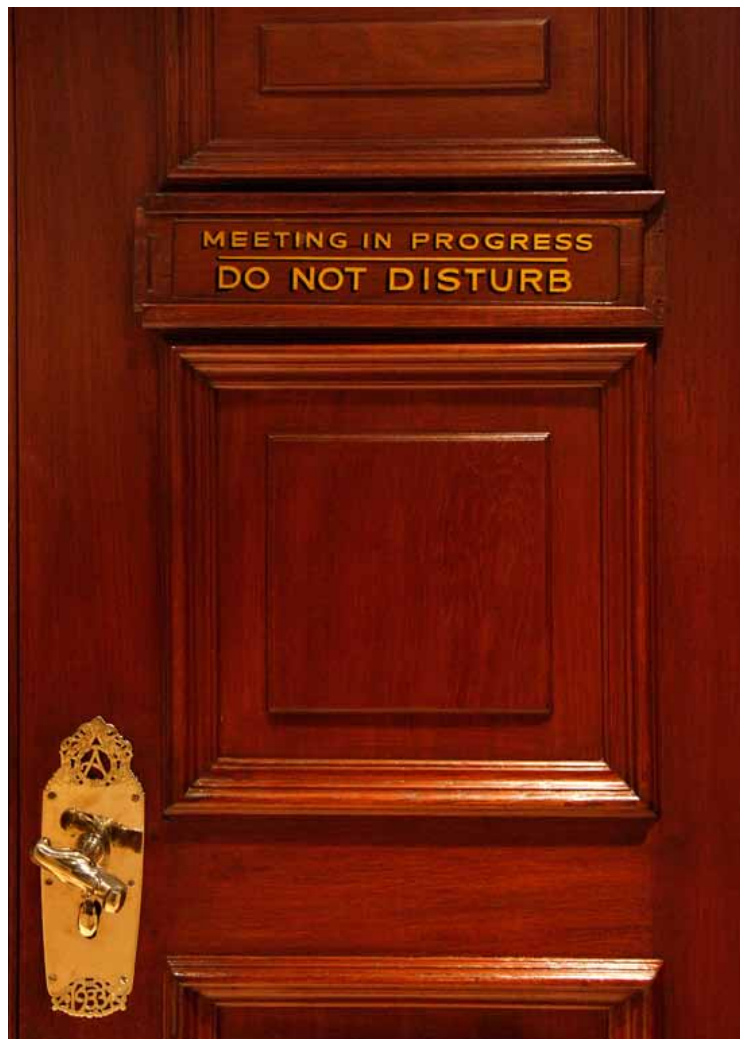
## The Old Mutual Building of 1905 and 1933

The former National Mutual Association of Australasia building is the strongest and dominant building on Church Square. Centred on the longest of the square's sides, this building sets the tone of this historic square, acting as a counterpoint to the architecturally less distinguished, if much older and socially and politically more significant, Dutch Reformed Church opposite.

Despite the somewhat overpowering nature of the building, the colonnade at ground level and its three separate entrances strive to integrate the building with the square, giving a sense of the public realm entering and sheltering under this palatial edifice. The main façade of Paarl granite derives most of its detail from the earlier 1905 Baker & Masey design and this component of the building (façade and the abutting spaces) spans most of the period of the influence of Arts & Crafts in South Africa. This influence is most clearly demonstrated in elements of the interior with its Cape-revival doors and ironmongery. Limited elements of the 1905 construction survive in the interior. The most recognisable internal elements of the original work are the surviving light-well, reminiscent of much of their early work, and the early Cape-revival doors, which served to inform the later detailing, and which also survive in a few instances.



The light-well, a feature reminiscent of the 1905 Baker & Masey design.

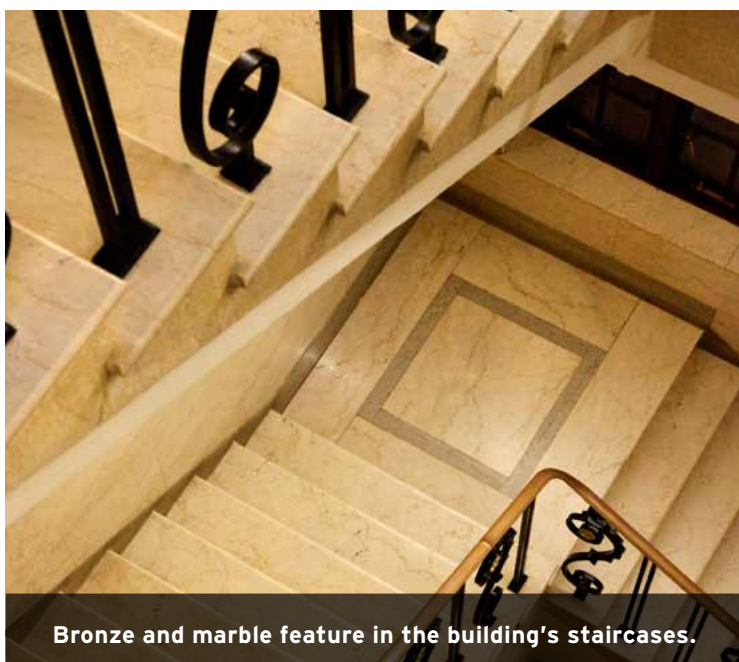


Early Cape-revival doors.

The most significant feature of the interior created by Perry & Delbridge is the main reception space or banking hall immediately behind the main central entrance. Now, deprived of its original furnishings, the space is even more impressive than initially; and a domed skylight serves as the deep focus of the space. Other significant components include the managers office with its Australian cedar panelling to the left of the main central entrance in the 1905 section of the building; the centrally located boardroom on the first floor which is also richly panelled and decorated; and the materials and detailing of the right-hand entrance and its related corridors are costly and carefully designed. The use of bronze and marble in the staircases and lifts is consistent with the best finishes in the areas provided for the original owner's activities. The art deco façade of the wing facing onto Plein Street, also by Perry and Delbridge and built as part of the same campaign as the grand and derivative Church Square façade and also of granite, is understated but is also carefully proportioned and well detailed - even if careless ad hoc alterations in inappropriate materials have spoiled the ground floor.



**The main reception space or banking hall, with the domed skylight visible, is now occupied by the Iziko Social History Centre library.**



**Bronze and marble feature in the building's staircases.**



**The boardroom, located on the first floor.**

The building was declared to be a national monument in 1994 (CT315) and is now a provincial heritage site. The 1978 CPIA Catalogue classifies the Church Square wing of the building as 'a building which forms a fine grouping of architectural merit, which contributes to or enhances the quality of a square or other space of significance on which it abuts, and which represents the work of a pioneer or recognised master'. The Cape Town City Council's 1993 grading system proposed it as a Grade 1 site.

In our view this building, an interesting hybrid completed in 1933, is the best example and probably the most intact of its type surviving in Cape Town, comparable only with the Old Reserve Bank (c. 1931) and the First National Bank in Adderley Street (c. 1937). It is a singularly important part of Cape Town's architectural development; and we regard its current status as a provincial heritage site (and a Grade II building on the national scale) to be appropriate. However, we do also believe that, if the building is properly treated in this and future campaigns, it will, in time, warrant a higher status, a Grade 11\* or even Grade I. Accordingly, we regard this building to have extremely high architectural significance and to warrant particular care to any alterations both to its interior and to its façades and roofscape.

### **The Three-Storey Building Facing onto Plein Street of c. 1927**

The 1978 CPIA Catalogue classified this building as one that forms a fine grouping of architectural merit. We find this surprising as nothing is known about the building (other than its approximate age) or its designer and nor is it an obviously significant design. This is a very ordinary modern building, even if, for Cape Town, precocious stylistically. Although we have not been able to date the building definitively, we are confident that it is of c. 1927, but we find no merit in either the façade or the body of the building other than, as we said, its precociousness. Accordingly, we regard the building not to merit a grading.



**Detail of the Groote Kerk, opposite Church Square.**

# The Townscape

As we have said, in our assessment, as many as 70% of the buildings in this quarter are of considerable architectural merit and contribute to making the quarter an extremely important one, even though the architectural character is heterogeneous and the buildings range considerably in scale and visual import. At the centre of the quarter is Church Square with its collection of nationally significant buildings, the Old Slave Lodge/ Old Supreme Court, the Grootte Kerk and, we believe, the Old National Mutual Building. Accordingly, we regard the townscape to merit a high significance and to require great sensitivity with any intervention. This will apply in this particular case in particular to any alterations to the Church Square façade of the Old Colonial Mutual and to the design of the new façade facing onto Plein Street.



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