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Don't Look Away

An apartment inside one of the most iconic Art Deco buildings in South Africa embodies the country's fraught history, beauty and years of oppression.

By Nancy Hass Photographs by Greg Cox

ART DECO CAME late to South Africa, as did other revolutions. The architectural style, with its futuristic, Asian-influenced geometry, had already transformed most major cities in the mid-1920s and early 1930s, from the gilded facade of Paris's Folies Bergère to the spiked arches of New York City's Chrysler Building.

But it wasn't until 1940 that the movement came to the coastal nation, then a British colony. The Old Mutual building, erected in Cape Town's central business district as the headquarters for a then nearly 100-year-old insurance company, remains among the period's most striking creations. Founded in 1845 by a Scottish-born newspaper publisher with abolitionist leanings named John Fairbairn, what was long known as the South African Mutual Life Assurance Society grew over the decades into a Pan-African enterprise with

The former reception chamber of the South African Mutual Life Assurance Society building has been converted into a living room with original frescoes by Le Roux Smith Le Roux, ottomans in fabric woven by local makers from Coral & Hive and a bench by the artisan Adam Birch.

offices throughout the continent. Its directors wanted their new head office to convey stability as well as innovation, and so they sent the local architects Louw & Louw on an extensive trip to the United States to study other Art Deco treasures. The skyscraper they dreamed up would briefly be the tallest building in Africa aside from Egypt's great pyramids.

Nearly three hundred feet in height, the structure is still only about a third of the size of the Chrysler Building. Yet the tale of the magnificently intact edifice is arguably more significant than that American touchstone, and certainly more fraught. It was conceived in an era when Cape Town, relatively liberal and bohemian compared to the country's rural north, seemed to be moving, if glacially, toward a degree of enfranchised multiculturalism after centuries of bitter conflict between Boer and British colonial forces, and the subjugation of Indigenous people, including the Xhosa and Zulu. Any such impulse was, of course, crushed in 1948 by the victory of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party and the passage of apartheid laws. But in the years between the wars, prosperity gave reformers a glimmer of hope.

With a dramatic ziggurat form made from granite-clad reinforced concrete and brick, and tall, slim, prism-shaped windows, the building seems to cascade to the ground. Wrapped around the base just above street level is a 386-foot frieze of colonial life by the South African heraldic sculptor Ivan Mitford-Barberton; at the time, it was said to be one of the world's longest such carvings. The nearly 50-foot-high lobby, reached by a set of 17 stairs, is bedecked in black and gold-veined onyx with gold leafing.

But perhaps the most spectacular — and troubling — space is the Assembly Room, a giant oval-shaped eighth-floor chamber designed for policyholders' receptions. Around the perimeter, the Afrikaner artist Le Roux Smith Le Roux painted five 18.7-foot-tall murals glorifying more than 100 years of brutal colonial history, including the discovery of gold deposits near what is now Johannesburg and the Great Trek of the late 1830s, during which white Afrikaners left the British-dominated Cape Colony to annex Indigenous land for the creation of more conservative territories, including the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In

pre-apartheid Cape Town, segregation was less formally enforced than it would later become, which meant that Le Roux was able to depict Black men alongside white people in the paintings. But those men were almost always shirtless, often seen from the back or with their faces obscured by a shovel or an arm in motion. The fate of the building over the decades that followed can be seen as a reflection of the history of 20th-century Cape Town itself. Just 16 years after unveiling it, the South African Mutual Life Assurance Society abandoned it for a wealthy suburb, marking the beginning of a larger and devastating exodus from downtown. An array of commercial tenants leased the space as the years passed, but no one knew what to do with the striking, now empty building. By the early 1990s, as apartheid was at last eliminated, most of Cape Town's businesses had left the city, leaving hollowed out, grandiose structures as a reminder of the wages of the Empire, institutional racism and urban flight.

A BROTHER AND sister in their 30s who were raised in the wine business and now live mostly on a vineyard estate nearly two hours from Cape Town grew up with the Art Deco masterpiece and knew of its historical importance long before they imagined that they would one day be part of its story. "I remember feeling a sense of awe over the building's complexity of history," says the sister. A few years ago, the brother was on the hunt for a pied-à-terre downtown, with its bustling arts and restaurant scene. His main requirement was that the space be architecturally unique; after touring the Assembly Room, which had been on the market for years, there was little need to continue searching. It had been residentially zoned but heavily proscribed by historical provisions; understandably, no one had had the imagination — or the money — to figure out how to turn it into a home while preserving its original structure and ornamentation. The sister, who was then pregnant, decided together with her brother to combine resources and convert the 4,887-square-foot space — incorporating the Assembly Room and two additional continuous apartments — into a single grand residence, which they would share.

The design challenge was significant: The Assembly Room alone is 59 feet long with a 25-foot ceiling, a raised proscenium stage at one end and a free-standing mezzanine — hardly built for intimacy and family life. "You had to have both a real imagination for the future and a willingness to go very far into the past, wherever it takes you," says the Cape Town-based architect Alexander McGee, 39, who, with his partner, Reanne Urbain, also 39, was hired by the siblings in 2016 to undertake the nearly three-year project, working with Atelier Interiors, a local firm run by 36-year-old Adri van Zyl and Vincent Clery, 33. They were dedicated to restoring as much of the original detailing and fixtures as possible while turning the space into a contemporary home.

In the former elevator lobby that led into the Assembly Room, Urbain McGee designed a floor with a bold marble motif inlay that's simultaneously modern and evocative of the building's origins. At each end, within newly installed polished Verde Guatemala marble architraves, towering decorative metal gates now lead to private areas made from the two additional apartments. In the bedroom wing (his, on the west side, is moody, in shades of midnight and slate; hers, on the north side, is airy and pale, with a custom metal four-poster bed and a colorful woven wall hanging from Morocco), the en suite bathrooms are cleverly stacked atop each other; the sister's is reached from her room by a half-flight staircase.

The Assembly Room itself needed little structural change, but the architects and designers had to figure out how to use furnishings to make it feel more human-size. One bit of luck was that the original six-foot-tall columnar hanging light fixtures — Art Deco in its purest expression



Above: a room-size cabinet of curiosities is decorated with objects from the family's travels around the world, including animal skulls, whale's teeth and precious stones. Below: in the brother's bedroom, an antique brass parrot lamp on an 1840s Cape yellowwood-and-stinkwood paneled chest, a Ureag rug and a bamboo bed-throw by African Jacquard.

— were made on pulleys so the bulbs could be changed; lowering them permanently several feet instantly made the room less formal and foreboding.

Van Zyl created a music area at one end of the room, outfitted with a pair of armchairs by the Brazilian Modernist Percival Lafer (the sister's partner is a classical flutist) and turned the platform at the other end into a raised kitchen. He also decorated the space largely with works by local artisans, including a huge bench of eucalyptus cladocalyx by Adam Birch, a steel dining table with a seawater patina by Xandre Kriel and a lamp by the ceramist Nebnikro, whose biomorphic forms explore issues of queerness in South Africa's contemporary culture. The wall of the new entry hall is spanned by a wall-mounted installation shaped like an inverted fan; it was made from wine-bottle foil by Morné Visagie, an artist who spent his childhood on Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned.

But the most vivid acknowledgment that Cape Town, for all its natural beauty and current energy, was built on inhumanity and inequity can be seen in "The Tale of Two," the sculpture commissioned from the South African artist Rodan Kane Hart — a subtle rebuke of Le Roux's depictions of Black South Africans in the original frescoes. A colossal polished-steel convex that hangs from the ceiling, the work is in the spirit of Anish Kapoor, but with a prominent seam down its center. The fissure fractures the paintings' reflections into jarringly radical angles, throwing the country's past into a headlong collision with its present and future. "Our history is freighted, and I wanted to challenge it with a mirror," says the sister. "We deal with these things every day. It's important not to hide." ■

