

Urban investment



The site of a former 1970s bank has been transformed by Daffonchio & Associates Architects for Blend Property Group into a super-efficient and historically sensitive contemporary addition to the Rosebank CBD in Johannesburg, revitalising the pedestrian-friendly cosmopolitan culture of the area.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JUANE VENTER

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Below: A glamorous undulating light installation invites visitors towards the building's main entrance and lobby.



Above: Proud Mary, a new restaurant on the ground floor, spills out to the wide pedestrian-friendly sidewalk.

Left: Beautifully patterned brickwork, using custom-made rough-faced black bricks, imparts a sense of warmth and charm to the façade.

The Bank, a new 13-storey mixed-use building in the heart of Rosebank's CBD, Johannesburg, rose from the foundations of an existing four-storey building on the site. The name of the new development alludes to the history of the original building, a First National Bank dating back to the 1970s. Architect Enrico Daffonchio says, "The site was to all intents and purposes dead, so much so that the landlord across the piazza had built a wall to hide it from view."

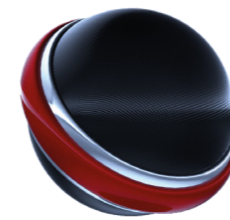
His new design sought to reactivate this important node and its surrounds, reviving its connection with the vibrant pedestrian and café culture that the area is known for, which includes art galleries, tree-lined avenues and a thriving commercial life, while introducing a sustainable contemporary dimension.

Stylistically, The Bank takes its cue from Rosebank's historical Art Deco charm, aesthetically reviving the language in a 'contemporary key', as Daffonchio puts it. "A lot of the heritage of Rosebank has been lost [as] Art Deco buildings in Rosebank and Oxford Road had been bought and demolished over time," he notes.

Rather than mimicking the style, however, he reinterpreted it, carefully considering the use of colour, volume, landscaping, and texture to integrate it sensitively into its context. Locally manufactured rough-faced black bricks were custom made for The Bank, and impart a sense of strength and stoicism to the façade. Their texture introduces warmth and charm, softened with the greenery of water-wise landscaping. Subtle brass elements on the façade, as well as Art Deco-inspired steel detailing and balustrades, add a sense of metropolitan glamour. At the top of the building, the form dissolves into a sleek, modernist-inflected fragmented crown with deep landscaped roof terraces and balconies that offer sweeping views of the Johannesburg skyline.

The ground floor of the building includes high-end shops and a restaurant and café that spills out to the street. A bar and eatery open onto the first-floor terrace. A wide pedestrian-friendly pavement has been provided along the western street-facing façade. "We elected to resurface the road with a cobblestone-styled paving brick instead of the usual asphalt and tar, which softens the roadway significantly and prioritises the pedestrian," says Daffonchio. Significant resources were invested in upgrading the road around the building, rehabilitating the trees and creating an Uber lane.

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Clockwise from top left: A new staircase was inserted into the existing building atrium in the Art-Deco inflected lobby; local artist Cameron Platter was commissioned to create a mural in the dramatic four-storey light well cut into the south-east corner to make a voluminous internal courtyard; the detailing in the lobby creates a sophisticated metropolitan atmosphere; the interior of the ground-floor restaurant.

"It is unusual in Johannesburg that a developer would give generously to the concourse surrounding a project," says Daffonchio. The rest of the building includes four floors of co-working space, a hotel and, at the top, two floors of premium-grade office space (occupied by a banking institution, in a poetic nod to the building's origins). Local artists have been commissioned by Art Gazette to create hundreds of unique art pieces for the building and notable pieces include two sculptures by the legendary local sculptor Eduardo Villa, donated to the public space.

"Technically, this was an incredibly difficult project because we retained the structure and built around and on top of it rather than demolishing it, so the engineering of this project was extremely complex," says Daffonchio.

The existing basement foundations and the top structure were reinforced to support the load of the additional floors. A wide range of weight-saving measures, particularly in the choice of materials, kept the new build as lightweight and efficient as possible. Aerated concrete blockwork was used for the top three floor façades, lightweight steel trusses and roof sheeting, instead of a flat concrete roof slab, were used for the roof, and the six hotel floors were constructed with acoustic drywalling rather than conventional brickwork.

The limitations and structural idiosyncrasies of the existing grid were integrated into the internal floor planning and celebrated rather than viewed as a hindrance. "The retail solution is innovative because we insisted that the functions of retail would not be separated internally but rather flow one into the other – so, although there are four different activities on the ground floor, they are all seamlessly connected," says Daffonchio.

The existing building atrium was used to accommodate a new staircase and elevator circulation core. Major demolitions of the existing structures were kept to a minimum, although a dramatic four-storey light well was cut into the south-east corner to draw in natural light and create a voluminous internal courtyard. The existing slab edge beams, however, were retained and transformed into 'shelves' to support the cascading landscaping, and a local artist was commissioned to cover the internal walls of the

courtyard with a stunning mural.

It was not possible to extend the existing basement, so extra parking was created by making clever use of redundant spaces. Innovative car lifts were introduced where the soffit void was high enough, which allows one car to be stacked on top of another, co-ordination by a valet service and an app. This method will make an interesting case study for high-density urban regeneration challenges elsewhere in the city, says Daffonchio.

Rather than upgrade to the existing municipal power supply, costs were channelled into sustainable solutions. Innovative solutions such as trigeneration, photovoltaic panels, energy-efficient smart HVAC and insulation made it possible to move a major portion of the power supply off the grid. A large gas generator uses the existing Egoli gas supply, and the heat it produces is captured through a heat-exchange system and is stored in large water tanks that provide free hot water to the entire building without any geysers or additional utility costs.

While The Bank adds a significant architectural landmark to the Rosebank CBD, it does much of its most significant work at street level. "We've used The Bank as a hinge pin to pedestrianise the Rosebank CBD area even more," says Daffonchio. Its vibrant public interface and carefully considered influence on pedestrian traffic flow does much to contribute to the public-centric cosmopolitan culture the area has always been known for, reinvigorating this business district with its interconnection to a series of offices, malls and residential dwellings that surround it.

The Bank leads the way for new developments in the Rosebank CDB and surrounds to build a healthier urban environment.

Professional Team

Client: Blend Property Group Structural Engineer: JRMA Consulting Architect: Daffonchio & Associates Architects Mechanical Engineer: VMG Consulting Electrical Engineer: SOLelec Wet Services Engineer: MG Building Services Fire Engineer: Building Code Consultants Main Contractor: Gothic Construction Quantity Surveyor: DMS QS Landscaping: Grace's Glory Interiors: Imbewu Design Project Managers: Davidoff Project Managers Wall Tiles & Reception Desk Tiles (Lobby): Wolkberg Pv Panels & Co-Generation System: Blackdot Energy

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