

Seat of government is the symbol of our nation

100 years on,
Union Buildings
are pride of SA

LAU VAN ZUYDAM

THE CAPITAL city's most iconic buildings are 100 years old this week. Famous as the seat of government from the days of the Union of South Africa, the 1906 Women's March and Nelson Mandela's inauguration in 1994, the Union Buildings have been the political hub of the country since the first cornerstone was laid in November 1910.

It is now 100 years after their completion and the buildings are still the seat of government in the nation's capital and house the president's offices. The buildings are situated at the highest point in the city, Meintjieskop.

Even though they are not situated in the centre of town, they are less than 2km from the central city and are a national heritage site.

The buildings and their rolling gardens have become a symbol of democracy and national unity and are among the most popular tourist sites in the city. With the introduction of a statue of Nelson Mandela, they are likely to become even more visited.

The buildings are situated on Government Avenue with a view over the city bowl.

In 1909, Sir Herbert Baker was commissioned to design the buildings as a symbol of national unity after the Union of South Africa was formed on May 31, 1910.

The British high commissioner at the time, Lord Selborne, and HC Hull chose the site for the new building after considering several sites in the city, including the site where the City Hall now stands.

Baker preferred Meintjieskop because it reminded him of the Acropolis in Greece and his idea was for the Union Buildings to be a modern acropolis. The site at that time was a disused quarry and existing excavations were used to build the 9 000-seat amphitheatre – which was renamed the Nelson Mandela Amphitheatre by President Jacob Zuma on Tuesday last week.

The sandstone buildings took 1 263 workers and artisans more than three years to complete and were finished in 1913. At that time, the Union Buildings were the largest in the country and were designed to house the entire public service.

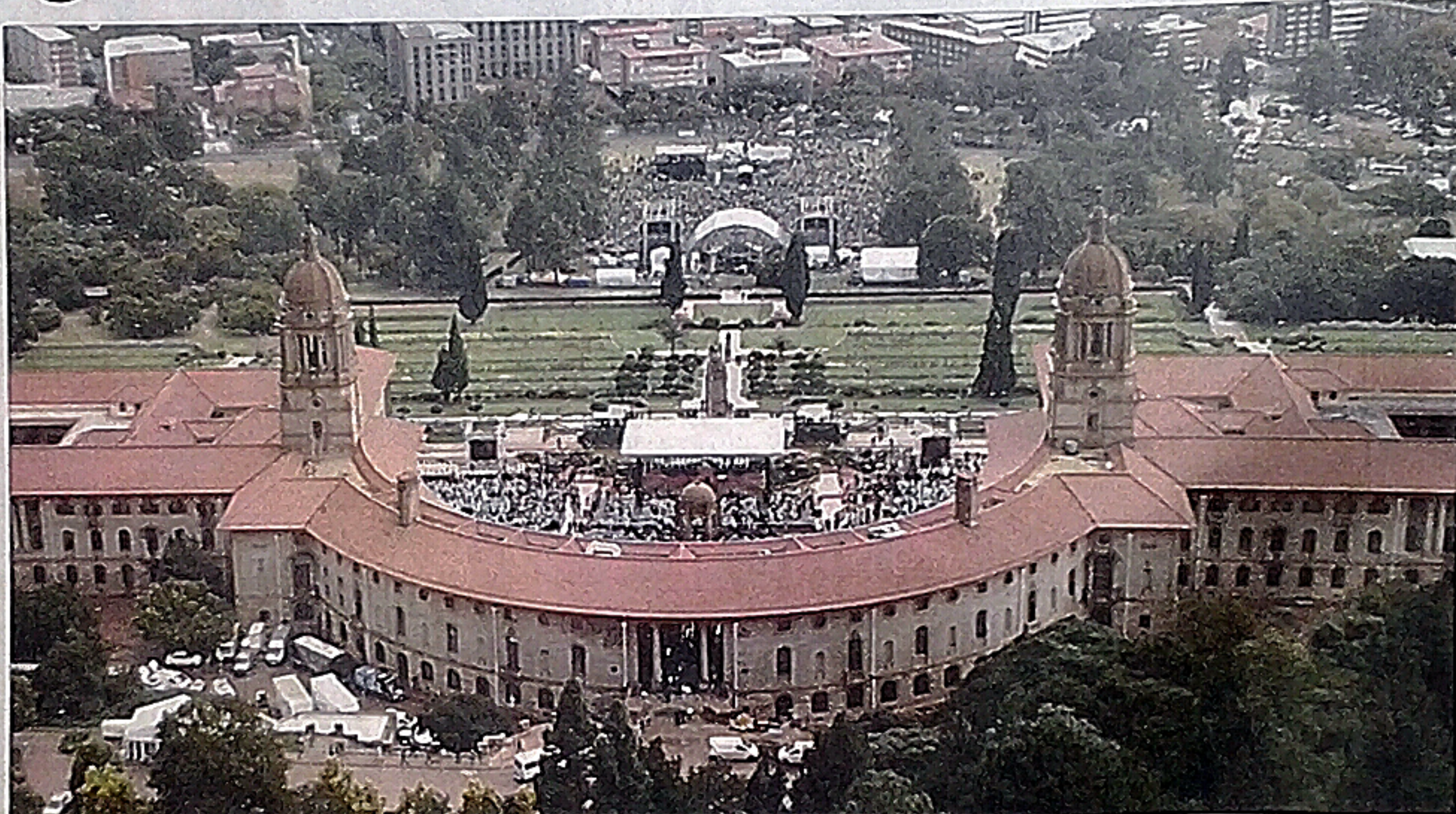
Baker designed two identical wings representing the two official languages at the time – English and Afrikaans.

The president's offices are in the west wing and the national flag flown on the left side indicates the president is in office.

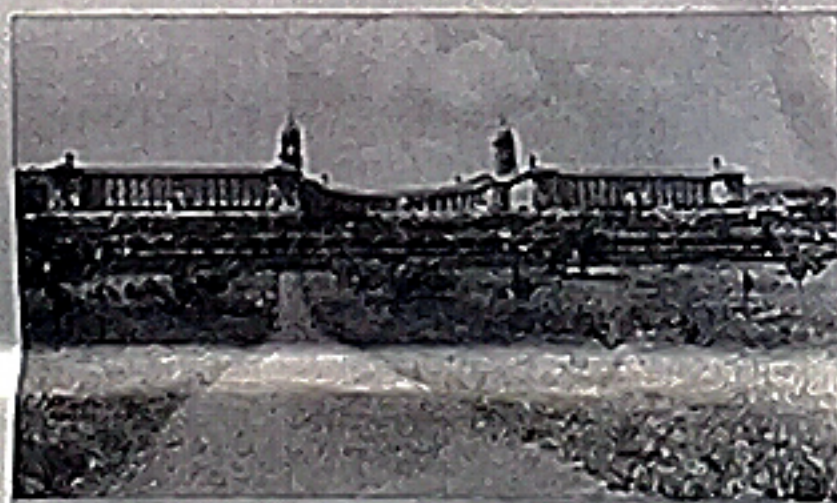
The wings are linked by a semi-circular arc with the space in between forming an amphitheatre for gatherings of national importance. This is where Nelson Mandela lay in state for three days last week.

The building is 265m long. It took 14 million bricks to build the interior office walls, half a million cubic feet of freestone, 74 000 cubic yards of concrete, 40 000 bags of cement and 20 000 cubic feet of granite to complete.

Initially, Baker wanted to use



An aerial view of the inauguration of President Jacob Zuma at the Union Buildings in 2009.



The Union Buildings soon after completion in 1910.

imported granite for the buildings, but the new state demanded South African stone be used. The terraces and retaining walls in the grounds were built using mountain stone from the site, the foundation was laid with granite and freestone was used for the exterior walls, amphitheatre and courtyards. It was the largest construction work undertaken in the southern hemisphere at the time.

At the time, Lord Selborne said: "People will come from all over the world to wonder at the beauty of the site and to admire the forethought and courage of the men who selected it."

On August 9, 1906, 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in protest against apartheid pass laws and its importance as a struggle site was born.

They were chanting "strike a woman, strike a rock". Today, August 9 is National Women's Day and those words are commemorated at the Union Buildings.

On May 10, 1994, Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first black president.

The millennium celebrations were held at the Union Buildings on December 31, 1999. The gardens, boasting several indigenous plant species, are full of memorials and statues honouring several South Africans, including the country's first president, General Louis Botha.

Until recently, a statue of former prime minister James Barry Mank Hertzog stood in the gardens, but it was removed to make way for a statue of Mandela – which is part of the buildings' centenary celebrations. The statue was unveiled at the

THE UNION BUILDINGS BRING UNITY

Former president FW de Klerk

On a personal level, the Union Buildings mean much to me. I spent many years there, attending numerous meetings during my years in the cabinet. Then it became my office during my presidency. For me it was the place, together with Tuynhuys in Cape Town, where the foundation for the transition of South Africa to a new, just and equitable dispensation was laid.

Singer Yvonne Chaka Chaka

Twenty-five years ago, the Union Buildings meant nothing to me. Today we call it home, our beautiful home with enchanting and spectacular gardens. It is a symbol of unity among South Africans, as the name itself suggests it is the union of all races.

Former minister without portfolio responsible for the RDP, Jay Naidoo

I remember the days walking in the amphitheatre when I needed a break – to refuel the batteries after long

days. The problems seemed insurmountable so often. But sitting on its many ledges, soaking in the energy of the midday sun, I would return to the hard slog of working on delivering the dreams of our people. The Union Buildings have always occupied an important place in our history. Now they occupy an important place in the hearts of our people. I treasure the precious memories of those days.

Son of Oliver Tambo, Dali Tambo

Because of its history, I see the buildings as a tremendous part of the national heritage. It is a symbol of the transformation from apartheid to democracy. It is now a symbol of social cohesion and a beautiful transformation to all South Africans.

Executive mayor Kgalema Ramogapa

We are privileged to have the Union Buildings in our metro. It is the most iconic of all landmarks in the capital city. Ask anyone about Pretoria and they know the Union Buildings.

buildings on Reconciliation Day a day after Mandela's funeral.

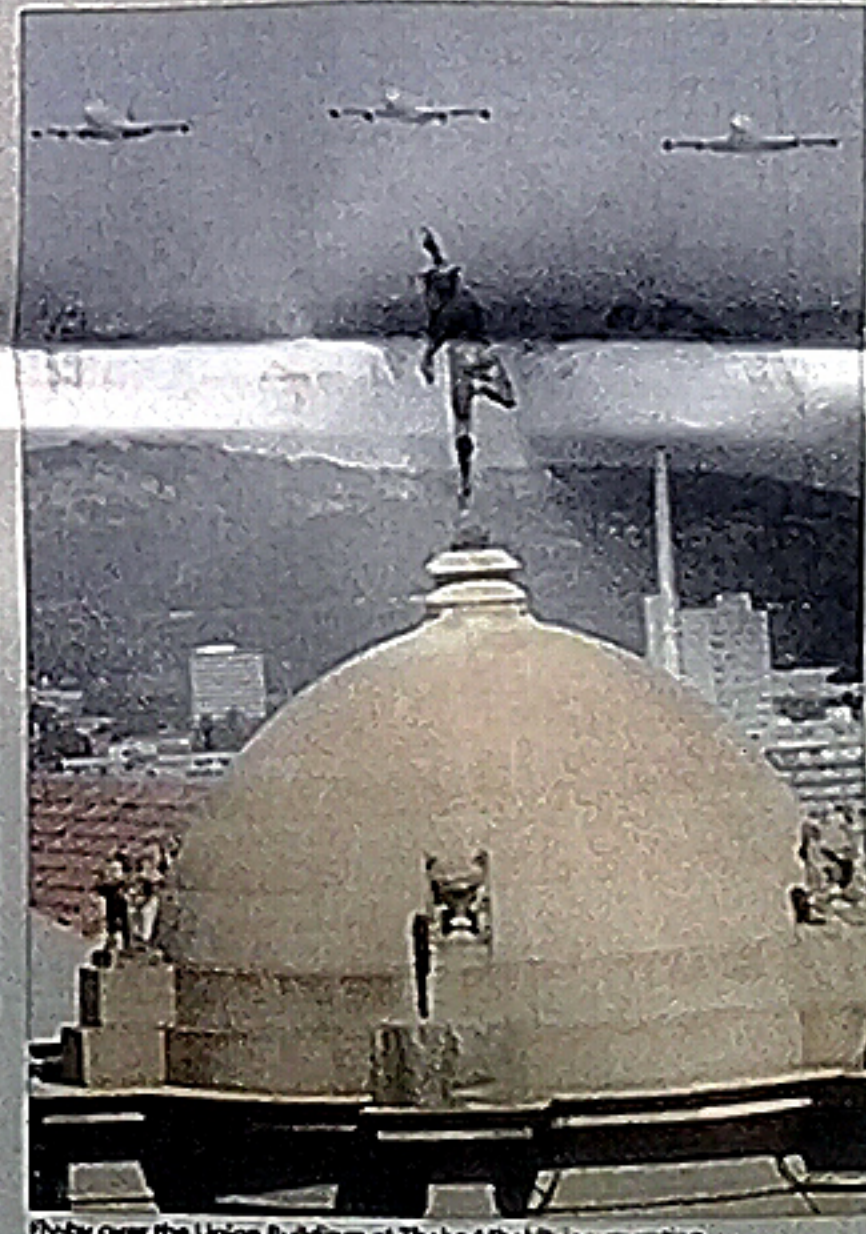
Hertzog's statue will be moved to a different location in the grounds.

There is a law in the city that no building between the Voortrekker Monument and the Union Build-

ings may obstruct the view of the monuments.

Members of the public are generally not allowed into the buildings for security reasons.

The Union Buildings are also part of the City of Tshwane's logo.



Fly-by over the Union Buildings at Thabo Mbeki's inauguration.