

PROJECTS



MUTUAL HEIGHTS

Darling Street, Cape Town

Client

Old Mutual Properties

Architect

Louis Karol Architectural

Bridge Architect

Gabriël Fagan Architects

Quantity Surveyor

Mcintosh Latilla Carrier & Laing

Interior Designer

Louis Karol Interiors

Consulting Engineers:

Mechanical

Elshove & Pryce

Electrical

Solutionstation

Steelwork Engineer

Louis Karol Structural

Concrete Engineer

KFD Wilkinson

Bridge Engineer

Henry Fagan & Partners

Fire Consultant

Neville Bramley & Associates

Plumbing Consultant

Gemi Consulting

Lift Consultant

WAC Projects

Acoustic Consultant

Mckenzie-Hoy

Disability Consultant

Access Consultants

Heritage Impact Assessor

CS Design

Main Contractor

Murray & Roberts Construction

Photography

Ronnie Levitan

Mike Wesson

Text

Robert Silke of

Louis Karol Architectural

Mutual Heights

R100m Residential conversion of Old Mutual's former Headquarters in central Cape Town by Louis Karol Architectural

As *Architect & Builder* goes to print, an estimated 350 affluent, upwardly mobile new inner city residents are moving into the Mutual Heights residential conversion just across from the Grand Parade, on Darling Street in central Cape Town.

New Developments

Mutual Heights is the first of a new wave of mid-market residential redevelopments in the Cape Town city centre, widely regarded as the spark that ignited the current inner city residential boom. After Mutual Heights came Cartwrights Corner, Adderley Terrace, The Decks, Mandela Rhodes Place, and

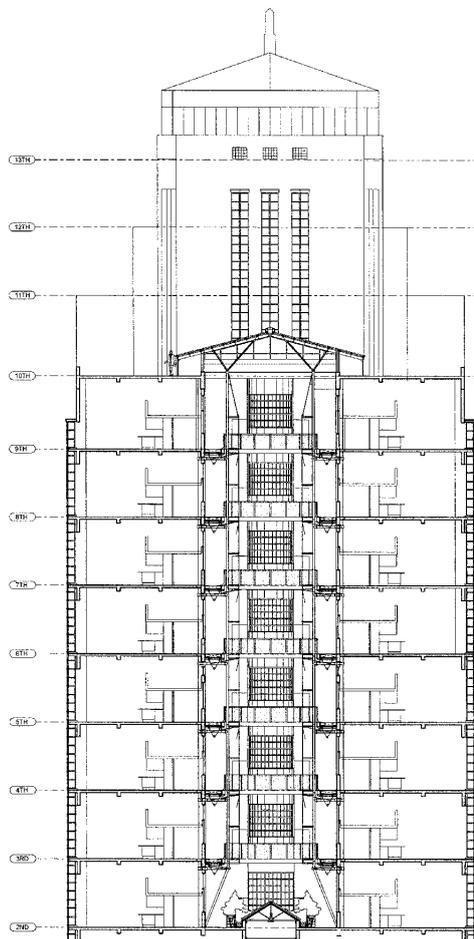
innumerable others due for completion over the next two years – expected to bring in no less than two thousand affluent new inner city residents to Cape Town. After at least two decades of neglect and disinterest, Cape Town city centre is booming, with new and established retailers lining up for limited CBD retail space, hoping to service this affluent, embryonic new market.

When the Mutual Heights units first came onto the market in May 2003, they were eminently affordable, starting from R300,000 per unit – which (difficult as it is to believe) was seen at the time as risky. Today those same flats are reselling for around R600,000 – which is now regarded as very reasonable.

The Mutual Heights project was financed to the incredible tune of R100m by the Old Mutual Life Assurance Company of South Africa – an incredibly brave and magnanimous show of confidence in the city's future. But Cape Town's inner city renaissance has not been a charity exercise and Old Mutual – however benevolent – are not the Sisters of Mercy. Behind Mutual Heights lies some very sound reasoning.

The Rationale

After seventy years of reductive modernist planning, forty years of apartheid and ten years of post-apartheid, white suburban flight had taken a devastating toll on the Cape Town inner city, before Old Mutual finally took the decision to moth-ball its landmark, art deco, inner-city headquarters in late 2002. 'Moth-balling' has been familiar terminology in the Johannesburg inner-city where mass-capital flight had rendered some of its crystal symbols of wealth, like the five star Carlton Hotel, bizarrely and instantly worthless. Like the Carlton, the Mutual Building's windows would be boarded up, the A/C plant shut down and the lights put out until some theoretical point somewhere in the city's uncertain future when a prince might come to give her the kiss of life. 'Moth-balling',



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for obvious reasons, represents an all time low in the life / death cycle of the city, and, like a malignant cancer, has a tendency to spread extremely fast. Cartwrights Corner, plain-Jane stepsister to the Mutual Building, though situated upstream in a better part of town, was next on the cards for being put to sleep.

Meanwhile, back in the suburbs, the stultifying sterility of the new developments at Parklands, up the west coast, were giving young professionals a terrifying first

glimpse of what life might be like in the townships, with tiny, repetitive, badly built houses on dusty, wind-swept streets - situated many kilometres away from places of work, education and opportunity. This, in contrast to Cape Town's unique doughnut of prosperity surrounding its city centre, with booming businesses and rocketing property prices due to considerable foreign investment - which had become prohibitively expensive.

In December 2002, Louis Karol Architectural persuaded Old Mutual Properties (as part of an unsolicited proposal to convert their disused, art deco masterwork on Darling Street into residential units) that the Cape Town inner city - though at an all time commercial low - was ready for residential re-development, and that, although building apartments were not necessarily profitable, the influx of talented, young individuals back into the inner city would inevitably result in the recovery of their (and indeed Louis Karol's) traditional market - commercial property.

The Design Intent

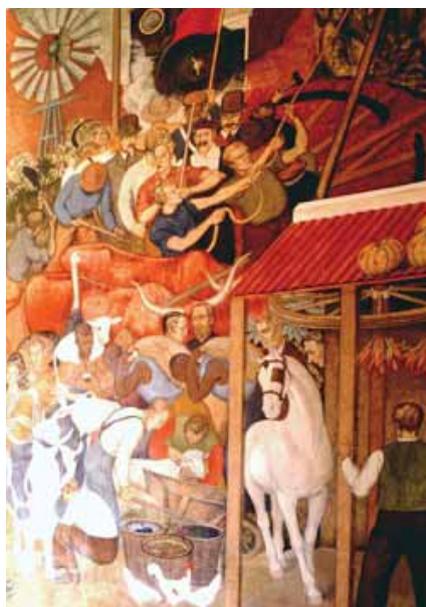
The conceptual basis of the project was to create 172 mid-market residential units without detracting, in any way, from what is arguably the finest Art Deco edifice in the southern hemisphere. To complicate matters further, not only the façade of the Old Mutual Building was worthy of



preservation, with the building sporting some of the most lavish and well-preserved public spaces of any 20th century building outside New York. To this end, all of the special spaces; such as the main entrance – decked in gold-veined black marble; the travertine Banking Hall with rich-as-foie-gras, pink marble fluted colonnades ; the stinkwood-panelled executive boardroom from which the Old Mutual was destined to ‘take over the world’ ; and the outrageous fresco hall, sporting

Le Roux Smith Le Roux’s Afrikaner nationalist Sistine Chapel, have remained untouched by the redevelopment.

The re-animation of this ‘comatose goddess’ has been one of the overarching pleasures and primary motivations behind Old Mutual and Louis Karol Architectural’s instigation of this project. Both Council and Province required a heritage impact assessment to be carried out in terms of Section 108 of Cape Town’s town planning scheme. The heritage impact assessor



Above: The travertine Banking Hall with rich-as-foie-gras, pink marble fluted colonnades and other original spaces have remained untouched.

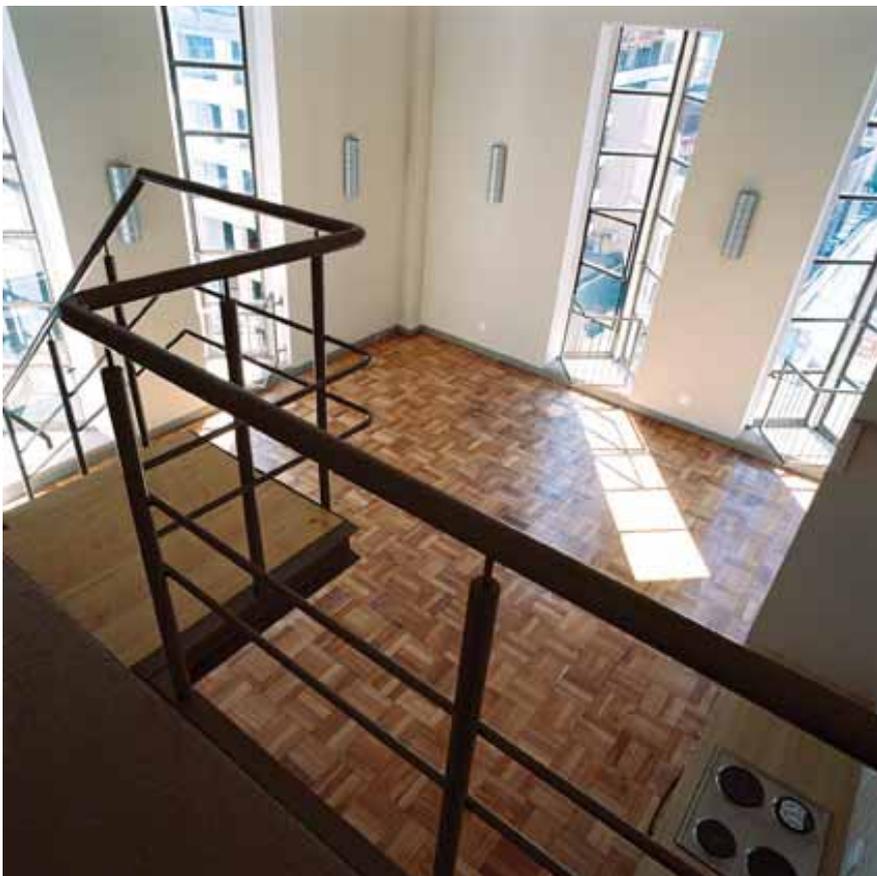
The luxuriously high ceilings were employed to create mezzanine bedrooms that overlook woodblock-floored, double volume lounges with floor-to-ceiling bay-window views of the cityscape.



identified the abovementioned areas as 'no-go' zones, and a vast number of priceless period fixtures and fittings have been recycled for use within the redevelopment. The clients, Old Mutual Properties, together with 'Mother Mutual', the parent company, have a strong sentimental attachment to the building and, therefore, not only the authorities, but the developer and the professional team were really all on the same side in this respect.

With the principle areas excluded, the remainder of the building's interior spaces could be regarded as high quality, but generic. Exceptional characteristics of the generic office space included the 4.8m high ceilings, maple woodblock flooring and floor-to-ceiling triangular bay-windows, all of which were preserved and utilised as enhancements to the layouts of the new apartments. The architects opted for dry-wall construction over brickwork, in an effort to minimise the disturbance caused by wet trades to fragile existing finishes. While dry-wall construction is de rigueur today in most first world markets, Mutual Heights probably qualifies as one of the first ever applications of dry-walling for separating walls in a South African apartment development.

The least spectacular original architectural feature was the central 'atrium' – a gloomy, glorified light well, which has now been converted into the central circulation system of the new residential component, allowing contact between residents on a vertical as well as



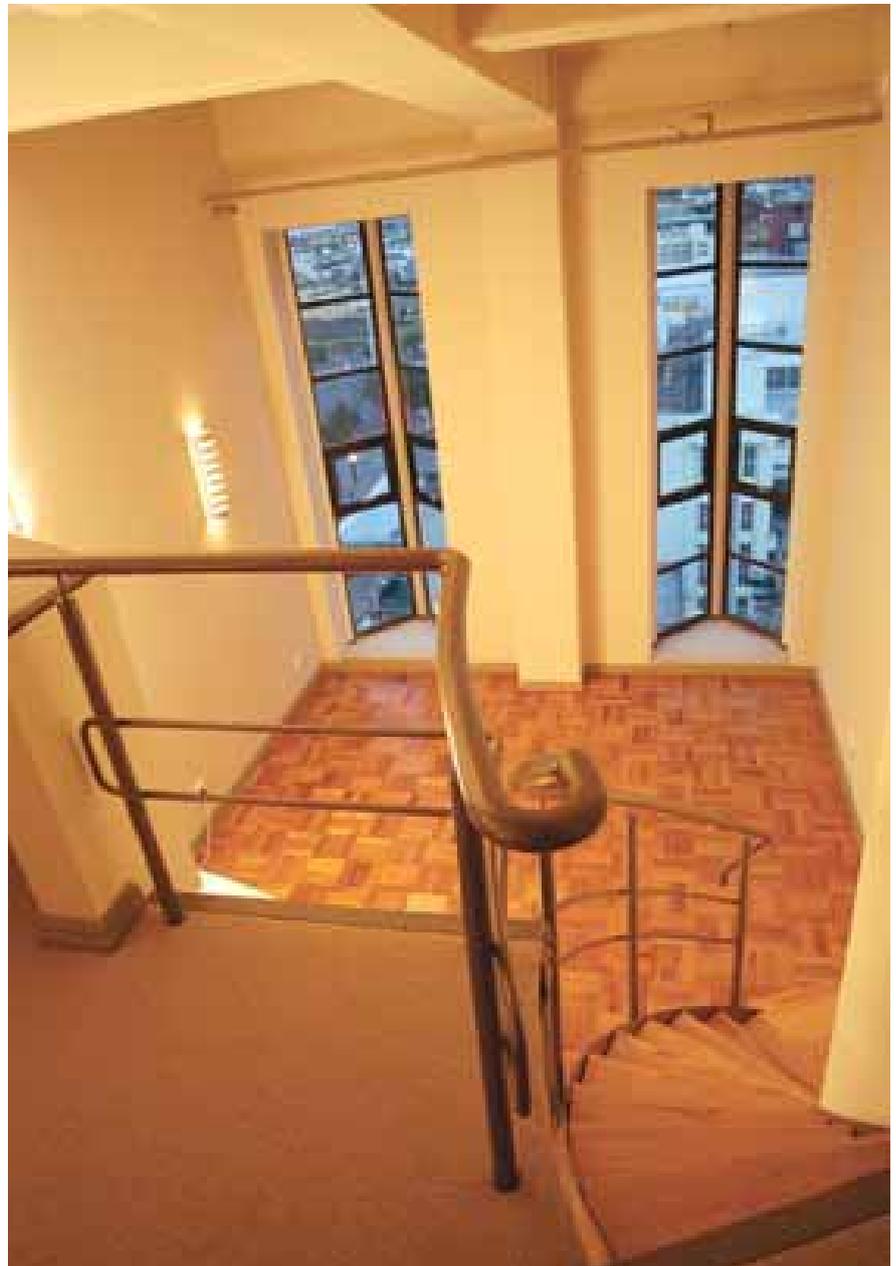


Stainless steel kitchens with duco'ed cupboard doors – together with hotel-style bathrooms – came as standard features to all units.

horizontal plane – attempting to construct a vertical residential street.

The apartments range in size from 35m² to 600m², with the vast majority of units in the 50m², 1 bedroom range. Finishes were pegged at quite a few notches higher than your run-of-the mill developers' specification of white melamine and cheese-lights. Stainless steel kitchens with duco'ed cupboard doors – together with hotel-style bathrooms – came as standard features to all units. The luxuriously high ceilings were employed to create mezzanine bedrooms that overlook woodblock-floored, double volume lounges with floor-to-ceiling bay-window views of the cityscape.

Stylistically, Louis Karol Architectural regard the overriding nature of deco as comprising technology and innovation, and it is to these ends that they took the decision not to crudely emulate with historicist fibre-glass bronze swans and faux art deco interventions. The architects felt that dilution by mimicry tends to detract from an historic context, and therefore opted for clean, modern contemporary





construction of The Adderley parking garage, diagonally across Parliament Street from the Mutual Building – and which had, to date, experienced difficulty finding takers for its numerous parking bays. The Adderley had hundreds of secure, undercover bays available – of which Old Mutual bought two floors.

But this wasn't the end of the story, as agents Pam Golding Properties were adamant that there was no way that the market would tolerate having to cross an unsheltered, insecure public street at night in order to access their cars – in short, Cape Town was not yet ready for it.

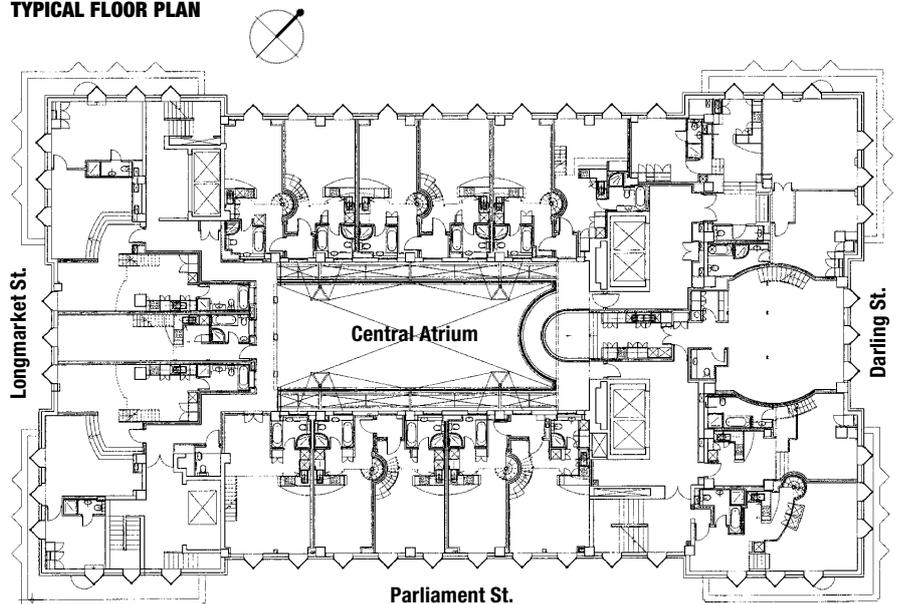
At a cost of around R1m, a high-level pedestrian Skywalk over the intersection of Parliament and Longmarket Streets was constructed out of steel and glass, to connect the existing parking garage to the proposed apartments. Acutely aware of the impact such a bold intervention may have on a listed building in a delicate existing urban fabric, Louis Karol Architectural called on Gabriël Fagan Architects, arguably South Africa's most eminent conservation architects, to design a formal

lines - which juxtapose nicely and serve to heighten the existing art deco melodrama.

The Sky Bridge

Although a residential redevelopment is far less demanding of parking than commercial use, the Mutual building (with around sixty parking bays) fell far short of the 172 bays (one bay per flat) required to make any apartment saleable. But, in a fortunate turn of events, the previous year had seen the

TYPICAL FLOOR PLAN



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solution befitting the status of the area and of the Mutual Building itself.

Conclusion

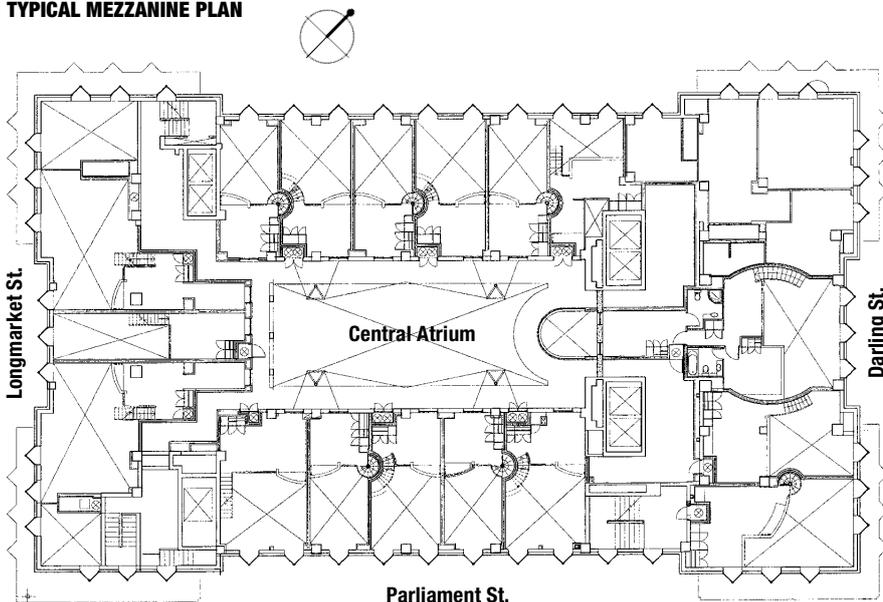
Mutual Heights reached practical completion on February 28th 2005 and the investment paid off for Old Mutual. While Mutual Heights can be considered to be a gift to the city by Old Mutual, we can rest assured that they have made good money selling off neighbouring Cartwrights Corner at a much better profit margin – not to mention the knock-on effect the development has had on Old Mutual's innumerable other inner city assets.

While sceptics may argue that the kind of residential development now going on in the Cape Town city centre is elitist and that many purchasers are investors who don't intend living in the city themselves, it should be pointed out that this is the first time, since the introduction of rent control thirty years ago, that significant quantities of relatively affordable rental housing are being constructed en masse in central Cape Town. And the fact that so many sensible, well-resourced prospective landlords are



lining up to bet their life-savings on this great post-apartheid social experiment, bears testament to a very positive new force sweeping through the city. The success of Mutual Heights is evidence of a more sophisticated, inclusive and diverse kind of market economy emerging in Cape Town, as well as proof that architects and their commercial clients can indeed act on behalf of the public good – without bankrupting themselves in the process.

TYPICAL MEZZANINE PLAN



MUTUAL HEIGHTS

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Consulting Engineers

McIntosh Latilla Carrier & Laing
Quantity Surveyors

Metal Windows
Window and door specialists

Murray & Roberts Construction
Main Contractor

Peri Wiehahn
Formwork

Service First South Africa
Suppliers of fan coil units

Skye Demolition and Earthworks
Specialists in demolition, earthworks and clearance

The apartments range in size from 35m² to 600m², with the vast majority of units in the 50m², 1 bedroom range.