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## Introduction: Looking Back, Moving Forward

### Published by

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*A century. One hundred not out. A significant milestone for Wits University. Add to that the fact that Wits was founded and has grown and thrived in a city not much given to looking back. Johannesburg, the City of Gold, has an edgy urban history befitting a place that began life as a mining town, and its development, like that of Wits, is inextricably linked to mining and political and civic activism.*

This book presents a narrative of Wits as a living and dynamic institution, celebrating its existence through its people, many of whom, in one way or another, have positively impacted on the world. Their stories – some of them told in their own words – map the University’s current and future vision, and show how Wits has transitioned from colonial, racialised and historical inequality to a global symbol of a flourishing and inclusive society.

There are many stories to tell, too many for one publication, and this book holds but a sample from the broad array on offer. Three major themes run through the text – origins, space and place, and the imagined future – accompanied by appropriate stories, photographs and illustrations. These stories have been chosen to reflect the diversity of the protagonists, the subject matter, and historical periods, and their contribution to the public good.



## ORIGINS

These are stories that explore Wits' beginnings and early years, but they are not here for nostalgia's sake. Institutional memory gives life to a place and provides a compelling way of understanding how far we as a people, a city, a country and an institution have come. Memories provide perspective on current concerns. Invariably, they also provide hope for an imagined future. In this section, we look to people who have memories of Wits' early years to explore what life was like back then; to understand the role that Wits played in shaping South Africa through its teaching, research and scientific endeavours; to uncover how Wits shaped society through the arts; and to appreciate how the University is embedded in Africa's cultural fabric.

*Present-day aerial drone image of Wits University and greater Johannesburg shows how the University has expanded over time and across the City. Photo: Shivan Parusnath*

*In May 1957, a march was organised by Wits students and academics against the Separate Universities Bill. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*



## SPACE AND PLACE

Wits occupies a central place in Johannesburg and its history is inextricably intertwined with that of the City in fundamental ways. The University is edgy, urban(e) and entrenched in the economic heartland of the continent. Wits both ‘makes’ history – it has produced many of Johannesburg’s social, economic, academic and political leaders – and recreates history, through its study of the history and archaeology of the region. We have captured these stories of place through narratives of space, politics, urban geography and inclusivity/exclusivity.

## INNOVATION AND AN IMAGINED FUTURE

These are stories of the imagination, which have not yet been realised or which are in the process of being realised. They include inspiring narratives around digital transformation and culture, society, and technology like artificial intelligence, online and machine learning, and big data, which have immense potential for changing and improving lives.



## VISION AND VALUES

The trajectory that marks the achievement of Wits to this point, in the year 2022, where it is a globally ranked, powerful African university, is not just a tale of triumph and achievement. Human frailty, unforeseen setbacks, obstacles and failure need to be factored into any journey of progression over a hundred years. The constantly changing context of the time – political, social and economic – has presented Wits with many challenges along the way. These have been internal and external, and have demanded ongoing self-reflection, re-evaluation and an honest scrutiny of value systems in a changing world.

Wits’ values have remained relevant and steadfast throughout its history. They are reflected in the manner in which Wits conducts its business, but they are also embedded in the three themes chosen for this celebratory book. Integrally linked to the themes, and expressed below as statements of intent, is Wits’ vision, as espoused in the past and just as relevant for the future of the University.

*We lead change.* Wits is renowned for its world-class research and academic excellence. Prominent in these efforts have been its commitment to social justice and the advancement of the public good. Tied to its anti-racism and non-discrimination position is the University’s insistence on institutional autonomy. The ability to lead change extends to the many innovations and world-firsts achieved by Wits staff, students and alumni over the years. Wits remains a premier university on the continent and continues to lead from the front. From the ways in which Wits responded with resistance to state crackdowns and legislation during the apartheid era to how

it has shaped contemporary thinking about decolonising education, from investing in the first IBM mainframe to hosting the first IBM quantum computing initiative, from developing radar to developing digital mines, Wits always leads change.

*We harness the power of place.* Wits is intimately embedded in Johannesburg, eGoli, the City of Gold. Much of the history of the institution is tied to the parallel development of the City, which grew out of a gold-mining camp. Wits started as a college to cater for the hugely influential mining industry that cropped up on the Witwatersrand. Witsies have been instrumental in changing the face of Johannesburg and, indeed, the region and the country. Stories in this thread include how Wits' research has contributed to the architecture of Johannesburg and the Gauteng City-Region, and has positively impacted on society through its food security, climate change and sustainability endeavours, for example.

*We create and apply knowledge.* Through a focus on Wits alumni and academics in a wider national purview, this section focuses on stories that demonstrate how Wits has shaped the country's psyche. These stories include Wits' groundbreaking work in law, anthropology and palaeoanthropology, and its pioneering work in digital transformation, electrical engineering and the Internet of Things.

*We are global.* Wits has an international sphere of influence. Wits Vice-Chancellor and Principal Zebulon Vilakazi affirms that Wits has the ability to compete and lead from the Global South. Stories in this section range from

Wits' role in helping to shape post-colonial thinking about Africa to the global impact of Wits' vaccine research in the fight against the coronavirus.

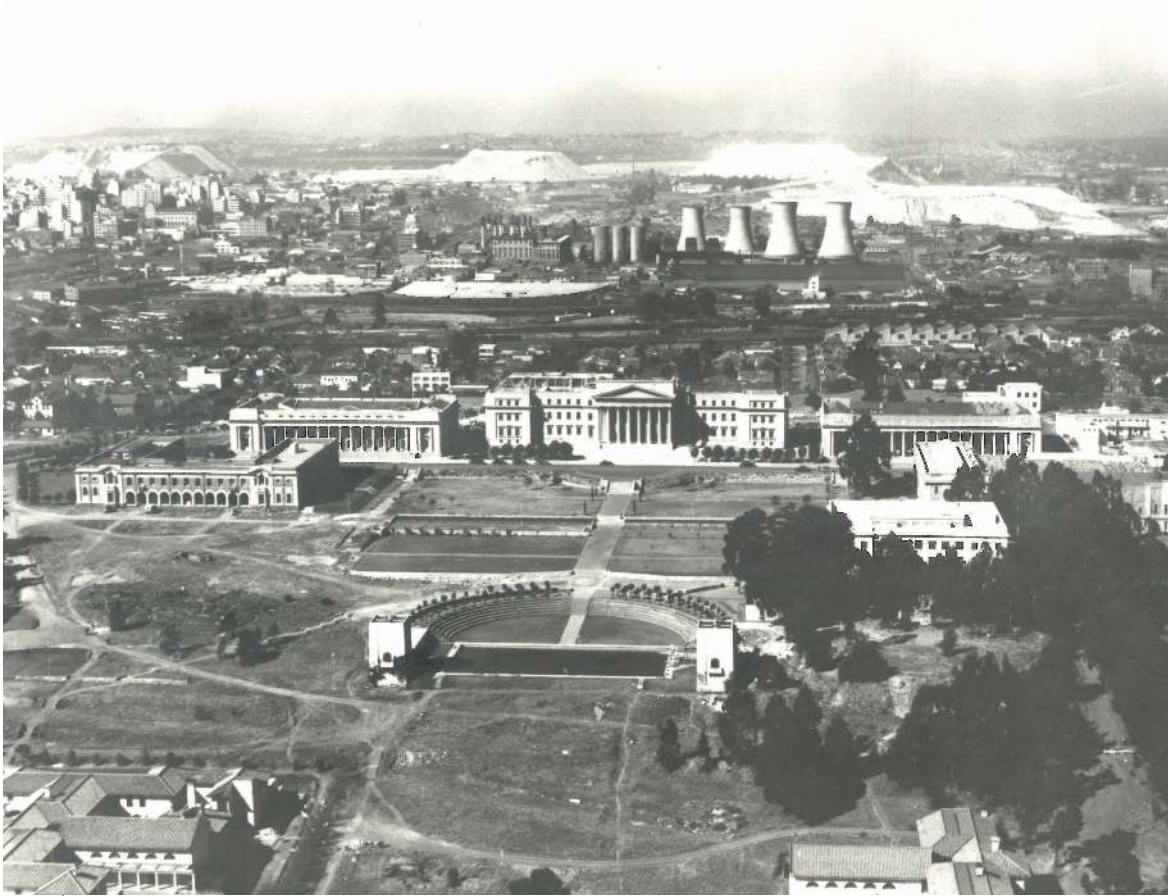
#### HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

*Wits University at 100: From Excavation to Innovation* is not simply a history or an archive of the first hundred years of Wits, but rather a series of snapshots – of people, events, places and ideas – that demonstrate how the University came to be a cutting-edge institution and how it plans to continue this tradition for the next century.

You can read the book in conventional fashion, from beginning to end, or you can choose to dip in and out, using the thematic colour code and chapter titles as a guide, depending on your interest.

The 100-year timeline of key events, historical moments and defining issues is intended to be a helpful reference marker to bookend each of the ten decades making up the centenary. It should provide an understanding of the sweep of time both on the world stage and from the perspective of the Global South.

Some of the information in the chapters will, of necessity, overlap as the three themes of origins, space and place, and the imagined future pertain to a particular discipline, time period or the individuals who shared their stories. If you are intrigued by the historical aspects of how the University came to be in Johannesburg in the early 1920s, and by the economic imperatives that gave the institution its early identity and funding, then read chapter 1, 'Origins'.



*The main campus of Wits University in the 1950s consisted of a few buildings centred around the Great Hall. Note the mine dumps and cooling towers in close vicinity. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

*The Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) is a human rights organisation based in the Wits School of Law. The organisation combines research, advocacy and litigation in order to connect academia and social justice. Photo: Shivan Parusnath*



If you wish to trace the voice of Wits as an open university, evidenced by its independent intellectual thought, academic excellence and opposition to all forms of state repression, read chapter 2, 'Space and Place'. This section also demonstrates the reach of the University and its influence in Johannesburg and further afield, both geographically and intellectually.

Chapter 3, 'The Future', explores Wits' leadership in a world that is constantly evolving. It creates and enables an environment that fosters and celebrates creativity on every possible and improbable level, and leaves you with no doubt that this world-class institution will continue to make its mark for the next 100 years.

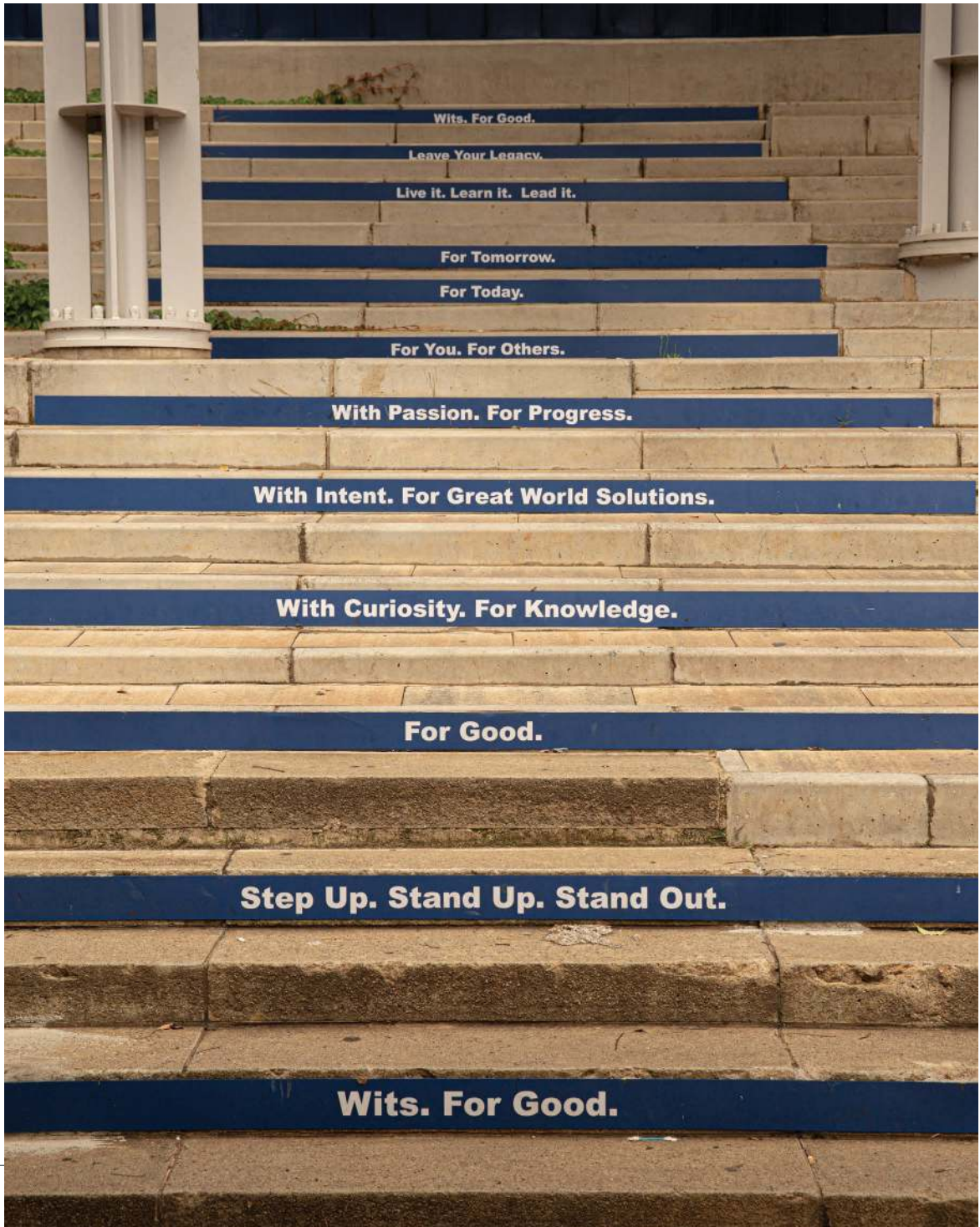
The final chapter, 'The Next Century Begins Now', reaffirms Wits' commitment to its values and its responsibilities, confirmed through the words of Wits' Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Zeblon Vilakazi: 'Our centennial year offers us an opportunity to build on the successes of our past, to value our current work, and to shape tomorrow. There are three core areas that we will maintain as Wits transitions into its next century: developing excellent graduates who leave their mark on society; conducting world-class research and fostering innovation; and using our location in the economic heartland of Africa to lead from the Global South.'<sup>1</sup>



*Robert F Kennedy's historic speech at Wits as part of his 'A Ripple of Hope' visit to the country in 1966 was inspirational. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

*The steps at the entrance of the Oppenheimer Life Sciences Building display Wits' 'For Good' manifesto. Photo: Daniel Born*

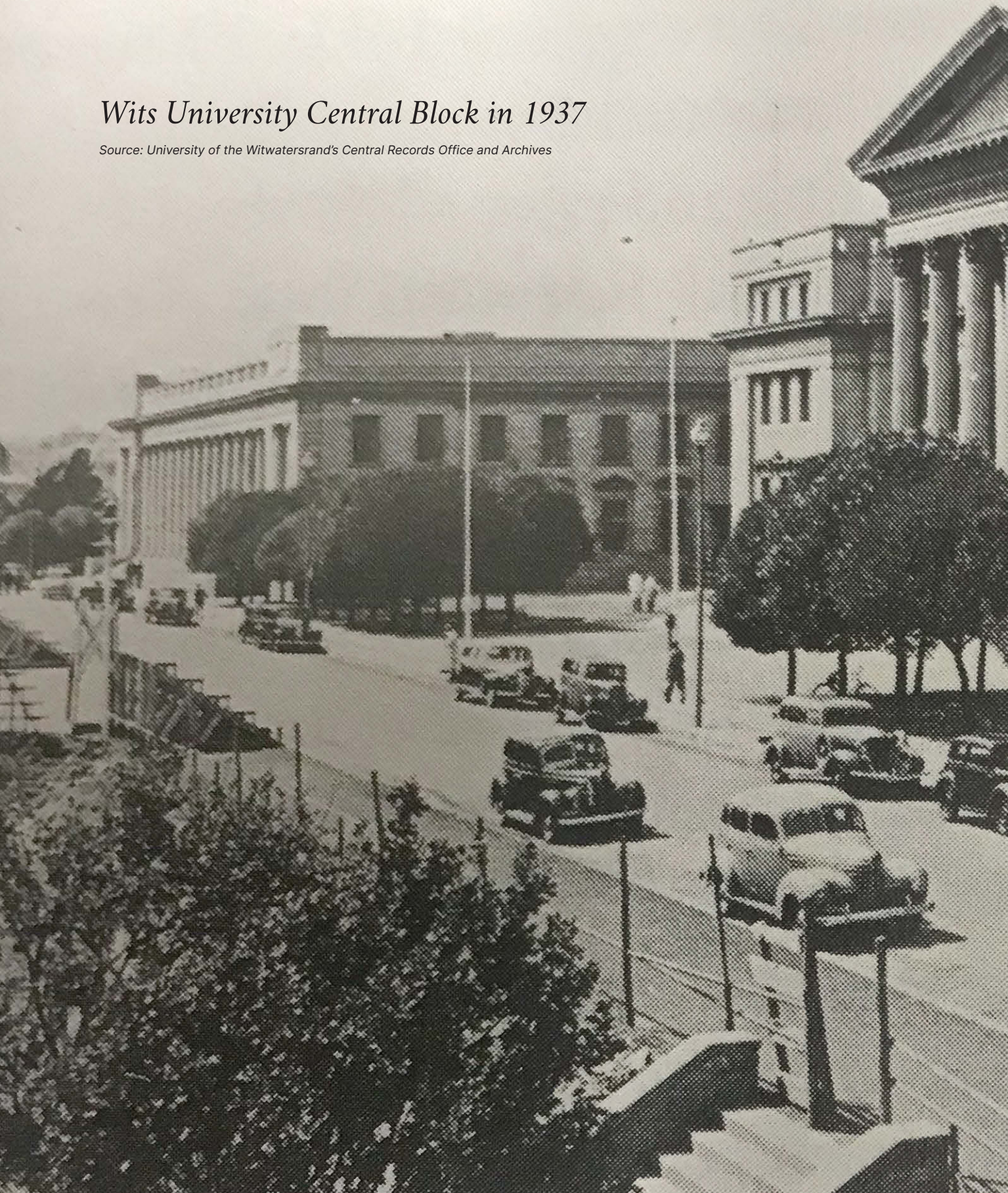






# *Wits University Central Block in 1937*

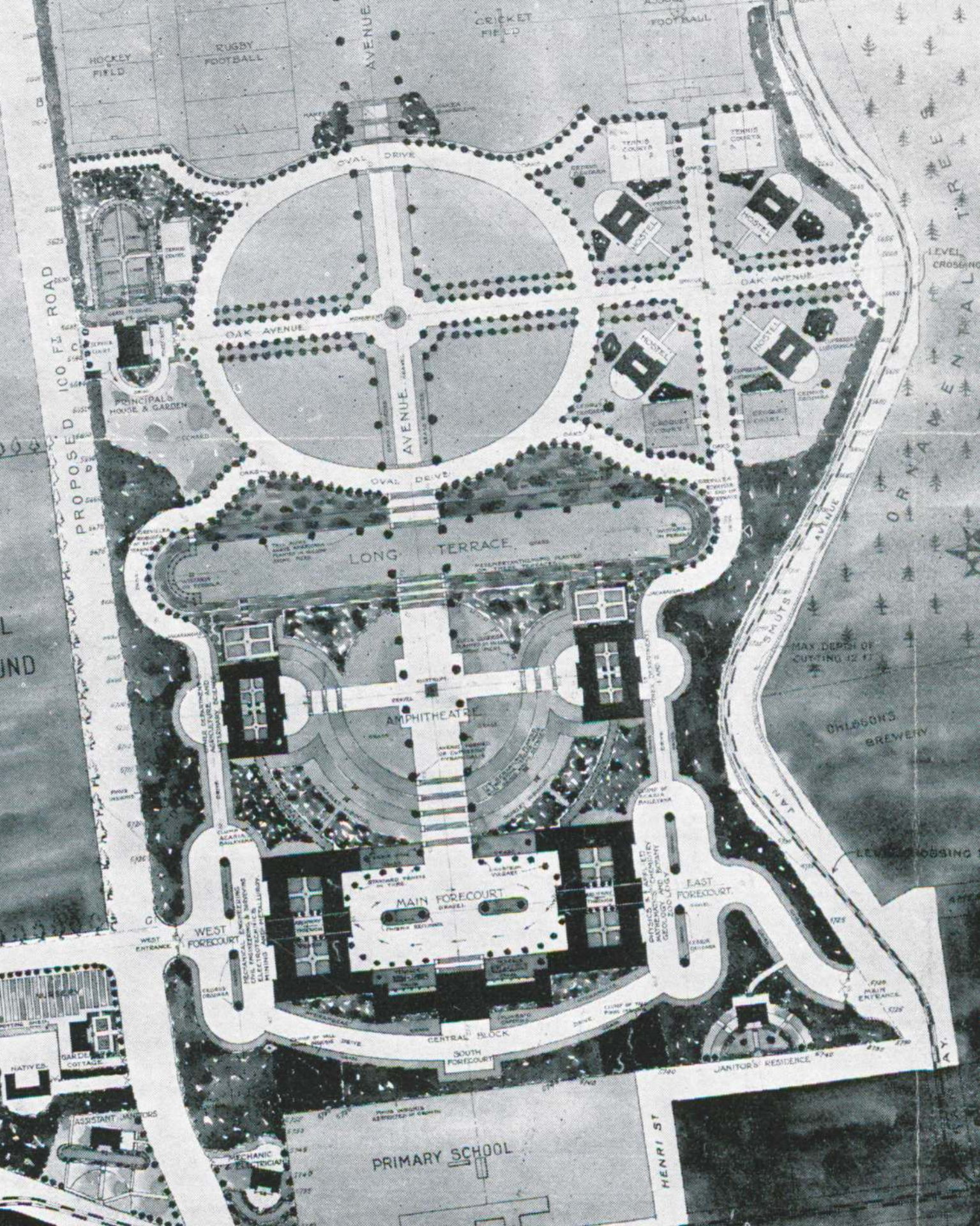
Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives















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## Chapter 1: Origins

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OR

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Origins

*The origins and subsequent growth of Wits University are inseparable from the development of the mining industry through the twentieth century and the expansion of Johannesburg through the same period. Their intertwined histories are evident in how the University and City grew spatially and architecturally.*

The links between the birth of Wits and the development of the City are shown in Wits' character as an institution of higher learning; the nature of the people who were influential in its development; the diverse academic disciplines, thoughts and ideologies; and the effect on multiple levels of society. The University's development as a crucial place in Johannesburg, part of its fabric, has been an organic one, allowing the people of Wits – its staff, students and communities – to develop, breathe and negotiate their way creatively.

Wits has always thrived on the energy and innovation of the industrial heartland of South Africa. From the very beginning, the site of the University campus was rooted in the spatial identity of the City of Johannesburg, with emerging skyscrapers in the old central business district and nascent mine dumps serving as backdrops.

A hundred years after its inauguration on 4 October 1922, an aerial view of Wits as it stands in the City today will testify to the institution's integration and urban reach. The University is spread across five academic campuses in Braamfontein and Parktown, Sturrock Park, and the Wits Rural Campus in Mpumalanga. The Braamfontein Campus East is the traditional home of the humanities and some science faculties, and houses the administrative seat of the University. Across the M1 highway lies Braamfontein Campus West, the former home of the old Rand Show. The Braamfontein campuses are bordered by Empire Road on the north, Jan Smuts Avenue on the east, Jorissen Street and Enoch Sontonga Avenue on the south and Annet Road on the west.

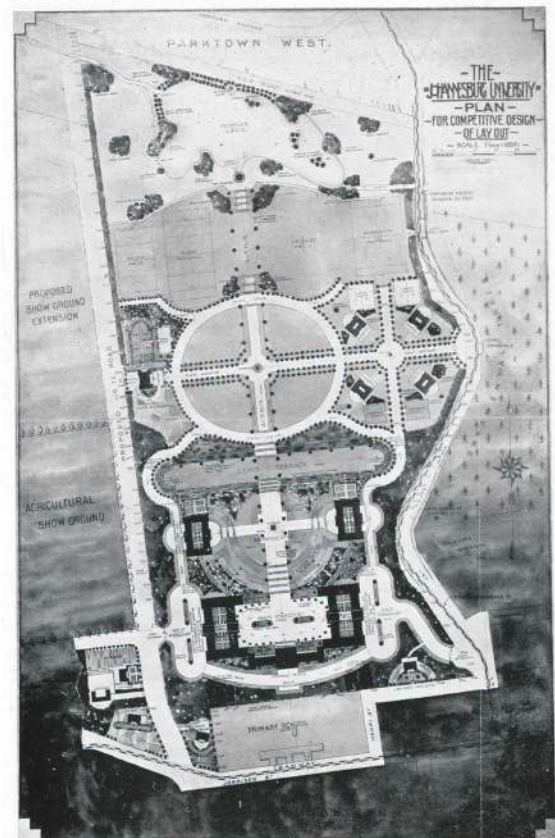
The Braamfontein Campus West was originally the Milner Park showgrounds, acquired by the University in 1984 from the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society. It features the architecturally significant Tower of Light, built for the Empire Exhibition in 1936. The tower has been retained and serves as a landmark of the redeveloped Braamfontein Campus West, which houses the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, and the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, amongst other entities.



Wits has three academic campuses in the suburb of Parktown. The Wits Education Campus (WEC) houses the School of Education, within the Faculty of Humanities. East of the WEC (across York Road) lies the Wits Faculty of Health Sciences, which adjoins the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital, built in 1979. The Phillip V Tobias Building on the Princess of Wales Terrace was opened in 2014. To the west of the WEC (across Victoria Avenue) lies the Wits Management Campus, which houses two postgraduate schools – the iconic Wits Business School and the Wits School of Governance.

#### GOLD RUNS THROUGH IT

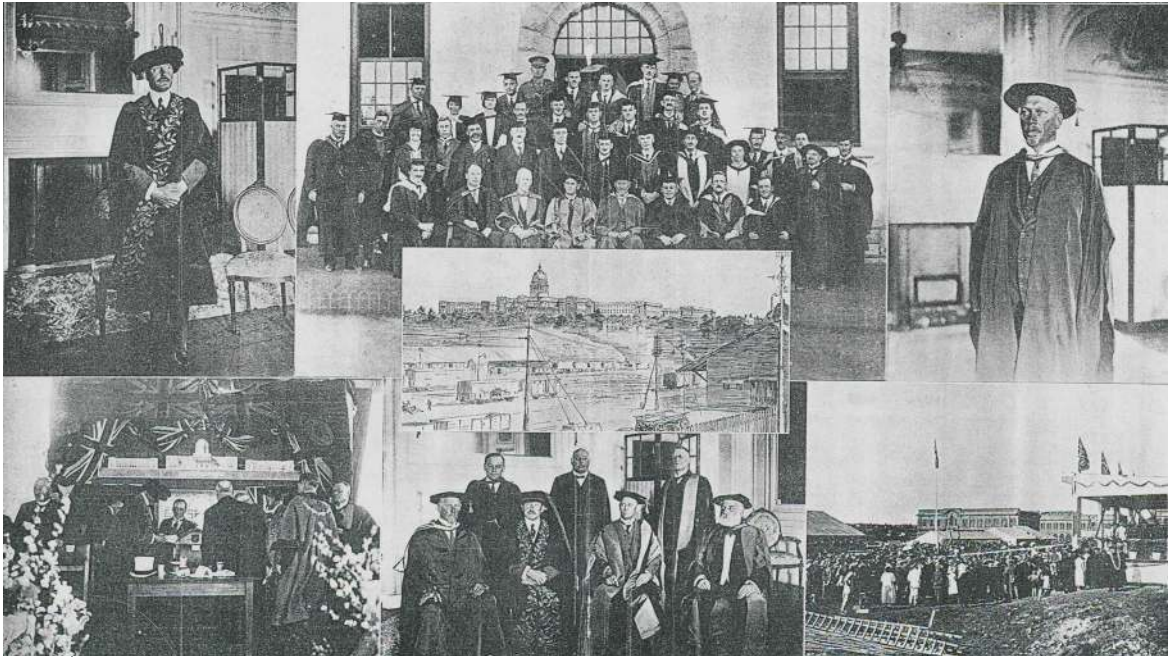
As much as Wits seems part of the cityscape today, the University had its genesis in 1896 in the diamond-mining town of Kimberley, in the Northern Cape. Johannesburg was for a long time readily identifiable by the gold-coloured mine dumps on the City's margins, but in its infancy the City was by no means the African city that it is today. It started its economic life as a rough tented mining camp, filled with fortune-hunting prospectors from all over the world lured to the Reef by the promise of gold-bearing rock beneath the ground. Some struck it rich, while others fell by the wayside.



*A proposal for the East Campus extension by architect Harold Porter, 1919. The design of J. Lyon & War Fallon won the 'lay-out competition'; Porter's design came second. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

Early collaboration between higher education and industry. On 10 August 1896, the first five students enrolled for the third year of the mining course at the School of Mines in Kimberley. All five students passed and moved to Johannesburg, where, through the Chamber of Mines, they were committed to the care of various mine managers on the Rand. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives





*In 1920, the South African School of Mines and Technology became, by an Act of Parliament, the University College, Johannesburg. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

*The inauguration of Wits staff and students of 1907. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

It was not long before the mining companies took hold. The influence of the mining magnates, known collectively as the Randlords, on the public life of Johannesburg at the beginning of the twentieth century is undeniable. Many Johannesburg institutions and the shaping of the City itself were influenced by the economic decisions taken by the mining companies.

It was through the agency of the mining company owners that the School of Mines, originally established in 1896 in Kimberley, was transferred to the new fields on the Reef in 1904, a move that unknowingly gave birth to what would become the University of the Witwatersrand. You could therefore say that, technically, Wits is 118 years old!

By 1904 Johannesburg was already the economic hub of the country. The school was



renamed the Transvaal Technical Institute, with premises on Eloff Street. Other departments in broader arts and science disciplines were added, and in 1906 it was renamed the Transvaal University College. In 1910 the Transvaal government created a separate campus for the college in Pretoria – providing, in part, the groundwork for what would in time become the University of Pretoria. The institution in Johannesburg was renamed the South African School of Mines and Technology, using the former Trade Union Congress Building on Plein Square as its headquarters.

#### THE INAUGURATION (AND PROTESTS)

In 1917 the school began to provide teaching space for broader arts and science courses, making it a university college in all but name. In 1920, it was named the University College, Johannesburg, and full university status was granted in 1922.

The official inauguration was set for 1 March of that year, but the Rand Rebellion and other events saw the ceremony moved to 4 October. The inauguration, and also the first graduation, took place in the City Hall in Rissik Street. Presiding over the inauguration was Prince Arthur of Connaught, governor-general of the Union of South Africa. He became the University's first chancellor and Professor Jan H Hofmeyr its first principal.

Achieving official university status was not plain sailing but was met with protests. There were many influential figures at the time who opposed the idea of a university in the city, including Cecil John Rhodes. It was widely considered, among the wealthy capitalist classes, that Johannesburg in the early twentieth century was

no place for an institution of higher learning, considering its genesis as a freewheeling mining town. Many deemed it to be too 'rough and ready' to offer a conducive environment for serious study. In 1926, Hofmeyr described the City in these words: 'We have this twentieth century City of Johannesburg with the ethic of the mining camp still sometimes revealing itself – all too painfully.'<sup>2</sup>

#### THE 1922 MINERS' STRIKE

In the same year that the University was inaugurated, miners' strikes were emerging, and the traditions of social leadership and protest have since been associated with Wits. The so-called Red Revolt across Johannesburg and the Reef was inspired by the entrenched racist labour practices on the mines that guaranteed semi-skilled white workers certain jobs. Mine owners, concerned about a fall in the gold price, proposed to employ Black workers in these positions to cut labour costs, causing a racially inflected 'Bolshevik' uprising of whites-only workers and communist political parties. What began as a general labour strike quickly became an armed insurrection.

On 10 March 1922, the then prime minister General Jan Smuts, proclaimed martial law. Seeking to quell the revolt, he came to Johannesburg to personally direct operations against the white mine workers. The strikers fought across the East Rand of the Reef, briefly occupying Benoni, Springs and Brakpan. In Johannesburg, they entrenched themselves in Fordsburg and along the Brixton Ridge to the west of Milner Park. Smuts, who cracked down on the insurrection with the full force of the army, used the Wits Biology Block, which

*Black miners were hired to cut labour costs, as mine owners were concerned about a fall in the gold price. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

*A view of the crowd that gathered for the Wits inauguration ceremony on 4 October 1922, when HRH Prince Arthur of Connaught laid the foundation stones for Central Block. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*



was nearing completion, to survey and plan an attack on Cottesloe School and the Ridge. A contemporary map noted that on 12 March 1922, 'Brixton Ridge was captured, aeroplanes and guns cooperating with infantry, and the first severe blow dealt against revolutionaries in Johannesburg'.<sup>3</sup> The fighting along the Rand lasted four days, with 153 people killed and many more injured before the strike was finally subdued. As many as 2 200 strikers were taken prisoner and four were executed.

Wits' close ties with the mining industry were a factor in drawing the battle lines for the University and where the University's sympathies lay in this conflict was never in question. The strikers were perceived as hated 'Bolsheviks'. Staff and students alike, many of them veterans of the First World War and loyal to Smuts, rallied to his defence, with a good number enlisting in the army or volunteering as special constables to patrol Johannesburg's streets in the aftermath.

#### THE RANDLORDS

While neither Wits nor Johannesburg itself would have come into being were it not for gold and the industry it spawned, it was not always a harmonious relationship. Given their importance in the mining companies, it is somewhat surprising that the Randlords didn't exert a more direct influence over the origins and development of Wits, given that many of their fortunes were intertwined with the City. The major growth of the University happened a little later in the twentieth century.

In 1925, the Prince of Wales officially opened the Central Block (now the Robert Sobukwe Block) in its current location. The building's grand neo-classical façade was for many years



*Jan H Hofmeyr (right) was appointed principal of the South African School of Mines and Technology at the age of 24, in 1919. He and General Jan Smuts (left) attended the inauguration ceremony in 1922. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

*The Randlord-era mansion Saverlake was built in 1904 and later bequeathed to the University as the estate of the late Dr Bernard Price, former resident director of the Victoria Falls and Transvaal Power Company (now the state-owned entity Eskom). Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*



just that – a façade. Financial shortfalls meant that the temporary wood and iron buildings that were there since its inception were only finally replaced in 1940, but not before a huge fire in 1931 destroyed much of the building. The blaze, tragically, destroyed the irreplaceable Gubbins collection of Africana. John Gubbins (1877–1935), a Cambridge-educated historian and minor mining magnate, had placed his extensive collection with the University for safekeeping. The 1931 fire also consumed the Philip Papers, the collection of the letters of eighteenth-century missionary and activist John Philip. A more permanent – and safer – library building, what is today the William Cullen Library, was erected the following year.

Sir Lionel Phillips, who was briefly exiled for his role in Cecil John Rhodes' Jameson

Raid, was the president of the Chamber of Mines and lived in Johannesburg for 12 years. Phillips revived the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society that played a vital role in Wits' spatial development in the 1980s. He was also a founding trustee of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. He contributed seven significant paintings and a Rodin sculpture to the gallery. His wife, Lady Florence, was responsible for the renowned Foundation Collection. She brought in Sir Hugh Lane, a noted Irish gentleman curator, to put this collection together in order to give the City some 'European sophistication'. Lane did the same for the City Gallery in Dublin, which today bears his name.

One of the Randlord-era mansions to retain a contemporary Wits connection is Savernake in Parktown. Built in 1904, Savernake was purchased by a pioneering engineer,







Dr Bernard Price, in 1913. The house was bequeathed to the University in Price's will and has served as the official residence of the vice-chancellor and principal since 1948. A long-time benefactor of the University, Price established the Bernard Price Institute for Geophysical Research and the Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research at Wits. A building on the Braamfontein Campus East, which is home to the Evolutionary Studies Institute, now bears his name. The South African Institute of Electrical Engineers founded the annual Bernard Price Memorial Lecture in his honour, which is co-hosted by Wits and delivered by eminent scientists or engineers from around the world.

*Jubilant graduates pose in front of the iconic Great Hall in 2020. Graduation ceremonies are dignified occasions that begin with the academic procession (chancellor, president of Wits Convocation, chairperson of Wits Council, vice-chancellor and principal, deputy vice-chancellors, guest speaker, honorary graduands, SRC president and academic staff) led by the bearer of the University mace and accompanied by the processional song, 'Ihele'. Photo: Shivan Parusnath*

## AN INDEPENDENT INSTITUTION

Wits was founded as an open university with a policy of non-discrimination. Hofmeyr set the tone of the University's subsequent opposition to apartheid when, during his inaugural address on 4 October 1922, while discussing the nature of a university and its desired function in a democracy, he declared that universities 'should know no distinctions of class, wealth, race or creed'.<sup>4</sup>

At this point, Hofmeyr was regarded as one of the country's foremost intellectuals and university administrators. A young, Oxford-educated prodigy, he was a long-term ally and confidant of Jan Smuts, for whom he would fill in as South Africa's wartime prime minister during the Second World War, while Smuts was on active duty. Hofmeyr was conciliatory and liberal in his disposition and politics, especially concerning race relations, as his stint in Smuts' cabinet during the war would prove. He explicitly opposed nascent apartheid currents within Smuts' wartime government from politicians such as JBM Hertzog and DF Malan, figures who would go on to be influential members of the National Party. Hofmeyr's liberal convictions at that point were the same as those that he had established early in his leadership of the University, providing the young institution with its abiding system of beliefs and values, many of which are continued by its current leadership and academics.

The 'colour bar', as it came to be known, reserving certain better-paid and more skilled jobs for whites in the mining industry, remained in place long after the 1922 insurrection. Although the first Black

person enrolled at Wits in 1935, the advent of apartheid from 1948 curbed the intake of people of colour at the institution. The first Black mining engineer, Yusuf Sikander Joosub, registered at Wits in 1978, and graduated in 1981. It was only in 1988 that the colour bar was officially lifted for both the mining industry and universities in South Africa. With regard to mining engineering, Wits' first female mining engineer, Dale Pearson, graduated in 1994, and Wits' first Black female mining engineer, Celiwe Mosoane, in 2002.

## BRICK BY BRICK

It was the South African High Commissioner, Lord Alfred Milner (who also gave his name to Milner Park, where Wits' Braamfontein Campus West stands today), who had prioritised the recommissioning of the deep-level gold mines on the Reef after the South African War (1899–1902). His efforts to establish a centre for technical mining training for artisans focused on white engineers and artisans, which was common practice for educational and professional institutions at the time, signalling the extent to which, from the beginning, Wits would be embroiled in contestation around racial discrimination and oppression.

Of course, the sprawling Wits campus of today was born from humble beginnings, and built brick by brick. From 1923, the University gradually began vacating its premises in Eloff Street to move to the first completed teaching buildings in Milner Park, on a site donated by the Johannesburg municipality. At this stage, the University had six faculties (Arts, Science, Medicine, Engineering, Law, and Commerce),

37 departments, 73 members of academic staff and around 1 000 students.

During the period between the two world wars, severe financial restrictions were imposed upon the University. Nevertheless, student numbers remained impressive – in 1939 student enrolment totalled 2 544, a number that grew to 3 100 by 1945. A sudden increase in student enrolment after the Second World War led to accommodation challenges, which were temporarily resolved by the construction of wood and galvanised-iron hutments in the centre of the campus. These huts remained in use, surprisingly, until 1972.

Between 1947 and the 1980s, the University experienced considerable growth and student numbers increased steadily. In 1963 there were

6 275 students, in 1975 admissions reached 10 600 and ten years later enrolments totalled 16 400. By 1999, Wits was home to about 20 000 students. Today, Wits has close to 40 000 registered students. The University's identity has been richly enhanced by its many students and staff from other provinces, the rest of Africa and the world, who bring with them diverse views and ideologies.

#### EXPANSION

As Wits grew, the acquisition of additional property became urgent. The medical library and the administrative offices of the Faculty of Health Sciences moved to a new building in Esselen Street, Hillbrow, in 1964. The Graduate School of Business Administration was established in 1968 and the Ernest





Oppenheimer Hall of Residence was formally opened in 1969 in Parktown. In the same year, the clinical departments in the new Medical School were opened. The Medical School has since moved premises and is now based in the Faculty of Health Sciences, situated in York Road, Parktown. The campus was opened on 30 August 1982. The Health Sciences administration was relocated to the Phillip V Tobias Building in 2014.

The 1970s saw the construction of the Jubilee Hall of Residence and the Wartenweiler Library on the Braamfontein Campus East, as well as the opening of the Tandem Accelerator (the first, and to date only, nuclear facility at a South African university).

Expansion into Braamfontein also took place. In 1976, Lawson's Corner (since renamed University Corner) was acquired. Senate House, the University's main administrative building, was completed in 1976 and opened in 1977. It has since been renamed Solomon Mahlangu House on request from #FeesMustFall activists in 2015/16. The Wedge, a building formerly owned by the National Institute of Metallurgy, was acquired by the University in 1979. Initially, it became the studios of the University's Department of Fine Arts but it is today the site of the renowned Origins Centre, an African anthropological and rock

art museum. In 1989, the Chamber of Mines Building for the Faculty of Engineering was opened, and the brick-paved AMIC deck was built across the M1 motorway to link the East and West campuses. The renaming of the AMIC deck to the Sibanye-Stillwater Infinity Bridge was approved in 2021.

#### EXPANSION OUTSIDE JOHANNESBURG

The University's interests were not confined to the development and expansion of Milner Park and adjacent areas. In the 1960s, Wits acquired Sterkfontein farm, with its world-famous limestone caves rich in archaeological material, from the Stegmann family. In 1968, the neighbouring farm, Swartkrans, also a source of archaeological material, was purchased. In the same year, the University acquired excavation rights in caves of archaeological and palaeontological importance at Makapansgat in Limpopo province. Both sites are rich in the fossil remains of early hominids. In 1999, the area was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO as the Cradle of Humankind. As a World Heritage Site, responsibility for the site shifted from the University to the Gauteng provincial government, which has developed the site into a world-class tourist attraction and is responsible for its protection.

The University's world-famous Archaeology and Palaeontology departments, which drew on the work of renowned scientists Raymond Dart and Phillip Tobias, among others, continue to play a leading part in excavations of the site, and Wits retains ownership of Sterkfontein's intellectual rights. In recent years, Professor Lee Berger made two significant discoveries in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site

*Panoramic view of Wits' East and West Campuses, linked by the AMIC deck bridging the M1 highway. Photo: Shivan Parusnath*



– *Australopithecus sediba* in 2010 and *Homo naledi* in 2015. Six years later, in 2021, Berger and his team announced the discovery of ‘Leti’, the skull of a *Homo naledi* child found in a remote passage of the Rising Star cave system. Almost 2 000 individual fragments of more than two dozen individuals at all life stages of *Homo naledi* have been recovered since the Rising Star cave system was discovered in 2013, making this the richest site for fossil hominins in Africa.

#### ‘OPEN UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA’

After gaining power in 1948, the National Party government began to extend measures to segregate educational institutions and curricula – including the segregation of universities. In response, in 1957, Wits, the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University and the University of Natal issued a joint statement titled ‘The Open Universities in South Africa’, committing the institutions to the principles of university autonomy and academic freedom.

Throughout the years of the apartheid regime (1948–1993), the Wits community protested strongly and continued to maintain a firm, consistent and vigorous stand against apartheid. As time went by, more civil liberties were withdrawn in the country and peaceful opposition to apartheid was suppressed. The consequences for the University’s continual protests and opposition to apartheid constraints were severe. Banning, the deportation and detention of students and staff, as well as frequent invasions of the campus by riot police to disrupt peaceful protest meetings were commonplace.

In 1959, the apartheid government’s Extension of University Education Act forcibly restricted

the registration of Black students for most of the apartheid era. Wits protested strongly and continued to maintain its firm, consistent opposition to apartheid. This marked the beginning of a period of conflict with the apartheid regime, which coincided with a period of massive growth for the University.

The University was not wholly united in its opposition to apartheid at this point. This stemmed from the Wits Council being dominated by conservative mining and financial interests, compounded by the fact that the former provided major financial support to the University (as it had done from the very beginning). This internal tension would characterise the University until the 1990s.

The 1980s was a period of heightened opposition to apartheid, as Wits struggled to maintain its autonomy in the face of attacks from the apartheid state. As the apartheid government attempted, through the threat of financial sanctions, to bring Wits under firmer control, protests escalated, culminating in the General Assembly of 28 October 1987, at which Wits reiterated its commitment to the values underlying the ‘Open Universities’ statement, and to which the University of the Western Cape now added its voice.

University management also came under increasing pressure to implement change within Wits. Many disadvantaged communities and political organisations such as the then banned African National Congress (ANC) perceived Wits as an elitist institution dominated by white interests. It was necessary to further transform Wits, and this evolution continues today through curriculum reform,



*Prior to the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959, Wits and the University of Cape Town operated as open universities. Their criteria for admission were purely academic and did not consider race, colour or creed. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*



diversifying the academy and the student body, and renaming Wits' places and spaces, amongst other transformation initiatives.

#### AN INTELLECTUAL HOTBED

Wits has been fortunate to attract some of the most influential academics, intellectuals, scientists and researchers in the country. As a centre of academic and research excellence, the University has a long and distinguished record. From developing and constructing vital radar equipment in the Second World War to being the first African university to own a computer, from producing a systematic climatological atlas of southern Africa to achieving a successful graft of plastic cornea, there can be no dispute that Wits has always been at the forefront of technological advancement. The country's first dental hospital and school were established at Wits, as were the departments of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy. Wits was the first South African institution to open a clinic for the treatment of speech defects, the first blood transfusion service in the country was started by its medical students, and the University's scholars have greatly advanced the theory of human origins and evolution.

The stories of many of these achievements – from original patents to medical breakthroughs, from significant historical and anthropological discoveries to Nobel Prize awards – are reflected in the pages of this book, and hundreds more can be found on the Wits website.

#### WITS AS AN OPEN UNIVERSITY

Benedict Vilakazi is often celebrated as the first Black academic to be employed in a teaching capacity at a university in South Africa. He arrived at Wits in 1935 with a BA from Unisa, completed his honours and master's degrees by 1938, and earned his doctorate in 1946. Despite already being an acclaimed Zulu novelist and poet, he was only offered the lowly position of a language assistant to Professor CM Doke, the then head of the Department of Bantu Studies. It was Doke who had strongly urged his appointment because he felt that 'for the proper teaching of Bantu languages at the University, an African Native Assistant is needed'.<sup>5</sup> His appointment stirred considerable public criticism and opposition from the University's hierarchy, many of whom supported the then widely held ideology of racial segregation. Vilakazi, undeterred, went on to publish widely in a new, syncretic form of poetry he had developed, combining praise poetry and blank verse, as well as academic articles. He died prematurely, aged only 41.

The extraordinary Mary Susan Malahlela-Xakana was the first Black woman to register as a medical doctor in South Africa after qualifying from Wits in 1947. She was also the first recipient of the Native Trust Fund to study medicine, which had been open to Black students at Wits from 1941. Malahlela-Xakana was a founding member of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), a member of the Women's Peace Movement and a member of the Fort Hare University Council. She participated in community work for 34 years of her life.

A far more recent medical first for Wits was when Dr Nolubabalo Unati Nqebelele became, in 2018, the first Black woman in South Africa to earn a PhD in internal medicine, becoming a specialist in chronic kidney disease. She is one of a very select group of such specialists in the country. One of South Africa's youngest inspirational medical graduates, Dr Thakgalo Thibela, who hails from the rural village of Violetbank in Mpumalanga, turned 21 in 2021, and serves at the Helen Joseph Hospital, one of Wits' teaching platforms.

Today, Wits is proud to have a string of Black leaders at its helm. At present, Dr Judy Dlamini serves as the chancellor of the University. She is a medical doctor by training and is also a leading businesswoman, entrepreneur, author and philanthropist. She succeeded the Honourable Justice Dikgang Moseneke and the Honourable Justice Richard Goldstone, both former Constitutional Court luminaries.

Professor Zebulon Zenzele Vilakazi is the current vice-chancellor and principal of the University. He succeeded Professor Adam Habib (2013–2020) and Professor Loyiso Nongxa (2002–2012), who served in this role for seven and ten years respectively.

#### ACTIVISM

In the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, political activism and mobilisation against apartheid defined a large part of the Wits identity. Many anti-apartheid activists of the period were associated with the University. Trade unionist and medical doctor Neil Aggett worked closely with the Wits student leadership of the 1970s. He was detained for 70 days, assaulted and tortured



*Dr Judy Dlamini was elected as the chancellor of Wits University on 31 July 2018. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*



by the apartheid state's Security Branch police, and then found dead – hanged in his prison cell – on 5 February 1982. He was 28 years old. His death was never properly resolved, and a reopened inquest into the case in 2020 brought many Wits alumni and staff to the stand. Included were Barbara Hogan, Auret van Heerden, Clive van Heerden, Keith Coleman, Ismail Momoniat, Maurice Smithers and Firoz Cachalia, an alumnus and now a law professor and director of the Mandela Institute at Wits.

Another long-time anti-apartheid activist, who was influential in the United Democratic Front (UDF) during the 1980s, was David Webster, a lecturer in the Anthropology Department. Webster was assassinated at his home in

Troyeville on 1 May 1989. Many other Witsies were questioned, incarcerated and sometimes paid the ultimate price. Ruth First was such an activist – she was killed by a parcel bomb in Mozambique in 1982. Today, the University hosts the annual Ruth First Lecture in her honour.

And yet, while Wits students and staff organised and resisted apartheid as part of the opposition in wider South African society, a struggle of a different kind was under way in the University. For many Black students at Wits in the 1980s – still in a minority because they required ministerial permission to be able to attend the institution – being at Wits was an opportunity to organise around Black political issues, as in the case of the racially exclusive Black Students'





Left to right: Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Yunus Ballim, Professor Phillip Tobias, and Vice-Chancellor and Principal Professor Loyiso Nongxa participate in an academic anti-xenophobia march at Wits, close to Jan Smuts Avenue, held on 21 May 2008. Source: Wits Communications

One of the many anti-apartheid student protests during the 1970s and 1980s. Source: Wits Communications





*Students and staff gather at the East Campus lawns to pay respects to the 'gentle hero' following David Webster's assassination on 1 May 1989. A student residence on the West Campus cluster was named the David Webster Hall of Residence in 1992. Source: University of the Witwatersrand's Central Records Office and Archives*

Society (BSS). Non-racialism under the banner of organisations like the UDF was the dominant oppositional discourse. The exclusively Black and radicalised BSS flew in the face of this ideal on campus, putting forward the viewpoint that non-racialism was only possible in a free society, and that the University was still part of apartheid South Africa. Black students on campus at the time, commuting from the surrounding townships, brought a militant style of protest compared to that to which most white students were accustomed. Protests on campus were common during the 1980s, as were police invasions – there were 52 police raids of the University between 1986 and 1988 alone.

On-campus tensions ran high as the white, government-funded, conservative Students' Moderate Alliance (SMA) began to deliberately provoke increasingly violent clashes with the BSS. All the while, the University's officials had to examine their commitments to independence and protest without facilitating potentially deadly clashes.

The year 1990 was a turning point for Wits, when a decision on a new way forward had to be made to help build a new South Africa. An era in the University's history came to an end when, in that year, the National Union of South

African Students (NUSAS), the major non-racial anti-apartheid student organisation, and BSS leaders were called to a late-night meeting at Wits, where they were addressed by former president Nelson Mandela. He instructed them to disband their existing structures and to form a non-racial, national student body. The BSS at Wits called a referendum in which 75 per cent of its members voted in support of the consolidated student body. This paved the way for the development of the contemporary identity that Wits has taken in the twenty-first century – more representative of the country's demographics and more responsive to historical imbalances and injustices.

#### HOW FAR WE'VE COME

Wits has its historical origins in the mining industry, and it is undeniably a defining part of the City it calls home, but in many significant ways it has never been constrained by either mining or Johannesburg. Its beginnings are steeped in the liberal tradition, academic excellence, civic activism, and a commitment to the political, social and intellectual independence of the institution. The stories that follow reflect this diversity and the pursuit of excellence.









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## The Last Word: Benedict Vilakazi

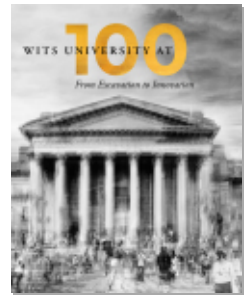
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WE LEAD CHANGE

# The Last Word: Benedict Vilakazi

*Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906–1947), affectionately celebrated as the father of Nguni literature and the founder of modern Zulu poetry, was the first Black person in South Africa to receive a doctorate in literature. He was also the first Black person in the then Union of South Africa to teach at a white university. He has a street named after him in Soweto. Yet, outside his body of literary and academic work, little is known about the man behind the words.*

## IN SEARCH OF VILAKAZI

Khulani Vilakazi, the poet's grandson, said in a 2006 interview with the *Mail & Guardian* that his family was still trying to understand more about his grandfather. "The family does not know him that much, he died when my father was about four years old [and] my father died when I was three. So, it is difficult for us as a family to produce personal anecdotes about what type of man he was. [He] never had enough time with his family."<sup>6</sup> What is clear is that Vilakazi was on a personal quest to preserve and develop the Zulu language. 'He saw himself as being sent by the ancestors [for this purpose]. His poem 'Ngizwa Ingoma' speaks to that notion, of a person anointed,' said Khulani.

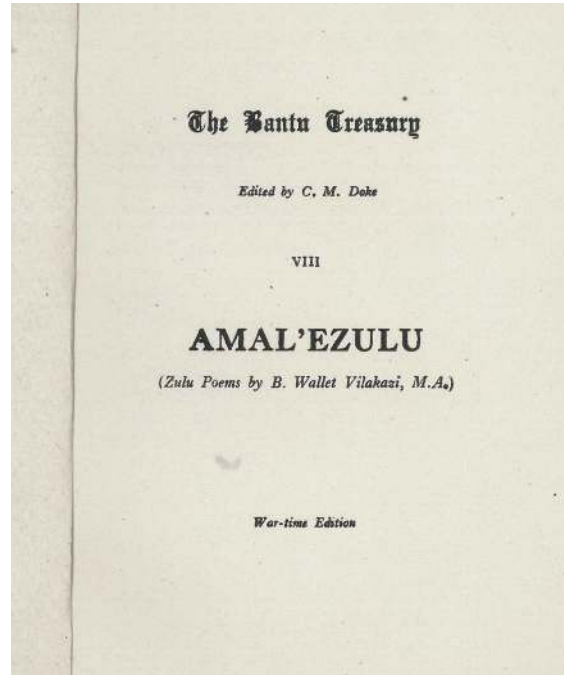
Portrait of Dr Benedict Wallet Vilakazi.  
Source: Museum Africa

Indeed, Vilakazi cut himself off from his birthplace, family and ancestors when he moved to Johannesburg at the age of 29 to pursue his academic career and he would lament this in much of his poetry. Part of his poem 'Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu' describes the move:

Ungiletheleni lapha?  
 (Why have you brought me here?)  
 Ngingen' amadol' angisinde  
 (I enter with heavy knees)  
 Ngicabang' ikhanda lizule  
 (I think and my head spins).

Vilakazi's childhood was spent herding cattle and, until the age of ten, attending the local mission school. He then transferred to a co-educational Roman Catholic secondary school. After completing his schooling, he trained as a teacher and then taught at the Ohlange Institute in Phoenix near Durban. Studying on his own, he earned a BA degree in African studies with distinction from Unisa in 1934, with special work on the Zulu language.

He was initiated as an *imbongi*, a traditional composer, in the Zondi clan. His birthplace of KwaDukuza, close to the main headquarters of the nineteenth-century Zulu king Shaka kaSenzangakhona, provided Vilakazi with imagery for his poetry. He was determined to cement the Zulu language as a mighty force – as King Shaka did with his people.



Scan of title page of one of the poetry collections of Dr Benedict Wallet Vilakazi – Amal'eZulu – a classic in African literature. Source: Wits University Press

Vilakazi Street in Soweto, named after the poet, is also famous as the street on which both former president and alumnus Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu lived. Photo: Daniel Born



## GROUNDBREAKING WORK

Wits University Press (WUP), which is the oldest university press in South Africa (established in 1922), published Vilakazi's first book of poems, *Inkondlo kaZulu*, in 1935. By then, he was already well known as a poet and a writer and his works had been published in various journals and newspapers such as *The Star*, *UmAfrika* and *The Bantu World*. Coincidentally, Wits was looking for an assistant in the Department of African Languages at the time, and Vilakazi was appointed as language assistant to Professor CM Doke, head of the department, that same year.

WUP published Vilakazi's second volume of poetry, *Amal'eZulu* (1945), as well as the first Zulu-English dictionary, which Vilakazi compiled in collaboration with Doke. In 1946, he received a doctorate in literature from Wits.

Vilakazi also published three novels in the 1930s: *Noma Nini!* (Mariannhill Mission

*'The time has now come to end any discrimination in my department on the grounds of race or colour.'* Professor Clement M Doke

Press), *Udingiswayo KaJobe* (Sheldon Press) and *Nje Nempela* (Mariannhill Mission Press). His volumes of poetry and novels are all on the list of required reading in Zulu literature courses.

Through his writing, Vilakazi became a spokesperson for his people, though he was never overtly political. He often articulated social issues that remain relevant today, including the safety of Black miners, the plight of the poor, and the impact of industrial advancement on human values. These are still societal challenges that



the University is tackling today – for example, through the Wits DigiMine, the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, and the use of new digital technologies to advance humanity.

#### CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE

Despite his success, Vilakazi faced discrimination and criticism. His appointment at Wits was opposed by conservative whites who could not come to terms with an African man lecturing white students. He was also scorned and ridiculed by Black people, who wrote letters of discontent to newspapers condemning Vilakazi for consenting to be used by whites through such a ‘collaborationist appointment’, as Dumisane Krushchev Ntshangase wrote in a 1995 paper for the Wits Institute for Advanced Social Research.

Professor Humphrey R Raikes, the then principal of Wits, personally wrote a letter to Vilakazi to explain his position at his new job. He would be a junior academic staff member, would look after the ‘Native library’ and would take care of African students only. He would not be allowed to teach, grade or supervise white students unless they asked for help in their Zulu courses.

In a letter in the Wits Archives, dated January 1947, Doke wrote to the Human Resources Department that ‘the time has now come to end any discrimination in my department on the grounds of race or colour’, requesting that Vilakazi’s status be changed to that of lecturer.

In October that same year, Vilakazi died suddenly of meningitis. He was survived by five children, who attended his funeral at Mariannhill along with thousands of people.

In their collaborative dictionary, published a year after Vilakazi’s death, Doke wrote: ‘[The] sudden death of Dr Vilakazi, cut off amid further research and literary activity, has deprived the African people of a brilliant son, one who not only achieved high academic standing but whose life and personality gained for him a lasting place in their affections. This dictionary of his mother-tongue – the language he loved – will stand as a monument to a great African.’<sup>7</sup>

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Vilakazi was born Bhambatha ka Mshini and changed his name to Benedict Wallet after converting to Roman Catholicism. At his mother’s insistence, he kept the family name Vilakazi.

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Vilakazi spent some time at Mariannhill training for the priesthood, but his fascination was an intellectual rather than a spiritual one – he soon changed his vocation to that of a writer.

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The Order of Ikhamanga (Gold) was conferred on Vilakazi posthumously in 2016 for ‘his exceptional contribution to the field of literature in indigenous languages and the preservation of isiZulu culture’.

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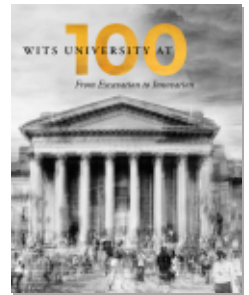
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WITS PIONEER: JOHNNY CLEGG

# Becoming the White Zulu

*It was October 1976, with the Soweto uprising fresh in the country's memory, and David Coplan, now emeritus professor in social anthropology at Wits, found himself in solitary confinement at The Old Fort prison after being arrested during a music performance in Tembisa, a township just outside Johannesburg.*

Authorities would visit his good friend Johnny Clegg, who himself saw the inside of several jail cells for defying cultural boundaries at the time. Clegg's insistence that Coplan was 'an American idiot' who simply didn't understand the laws would help gain Coplan his freedom several weeks later. 'Johnny was loyal to a fault,' says Coplan of the legendary musician.

*Immersed in the study of Zulu history and culture, Johnny Clegg left an unforgettable rhythmic expression of South African cultural fluidity and appreciation. Photo: David Redfern/Getty Images*

*'He was always part of the Wits family. There exists such a thing.'* Professor David Coplan

The two men had met a year earlier, when Coplan, a graduate student in ethnomusicology at Indiana University in the US, came to South Africa to research a documentary about township music. 'I heard of this white guy who speaks Zulu and has a Zulu band. I went to see him at Wits, where he was studying anthropology, and there was this immediate sense of kinship. We were both musicians looking for a way to cross cultural boundaries. Johnny was trying to beat the drum for

the value of all cultures in the country. He was so energetic, so enthusiastic, it just gobbled me up.'

Clegg was one half of the as-yet-unknown acoustic duo Juluka with Sipho Mchunu, and the two would search for any opportunity to perform – in contravention of apartheid laws.

Before the fame that followed Juluka's debut album in 1979, Clegg poured his love of South African cultures into anthropology, becoming a lecturer at Wits and writing several seminal papers. On weekends, he would take part in dance competitions as a certified member of a Zulu dance team.

'We were full of beans, just young men on the loose, wanting to go to vibrant townships even though we weren't allowed. Johnny's performances



were so athletic, persuasive, and African people went crazy for it – seeing someone take their culture seriously, in composition, singing, lecturing, Zulu guitar and dance. We stuck out like sore thumbs, but back then the only people you feared were the police,’ says Coplan.

Coplan was deported in 1977 and could not come back to South Africa for 14 years, but he and Clegg stayed in touch. ‘[Johnny] came to the States often on tour and I would always see his shows. We’d stay up talking until the wee hours. He needed an ear – in those days, he was arrested so often in his own country, but he wasn’t going to give up.’

Coplan became head of the Anthropology Department at Wits in 1996 and Clegg would often visit (in between averaging around 180 performances a year). Clegg also donated money in memory of his mentor in the department, Professor David Webster, who was assassinated by apartheid security forces in 1989. ‘[Johnny] was always part of the Wits family. There exists such a thing,’ Coplan adds.

Clegg never wavered in his goal to bring people and cultures together. On his final tour before succumbing to pancreatic cancer in 2019, he had no illusions that this would be the end, says Coplan. ‘He’d undergone terrifying treatments, and yet still put on this incredible, energetic tour. But he knew it was the last squeeze of the lemon. “So, I’ll kill myself saying goodbye to our people,” he said. He is, in a word, my hero.’

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Juluka performed their hits including ‘Impi’ and ‘Scatterlings of Africa’ in the US, Canada, the UK, France, Germany and Scandinavia. After the group had disbanded, Clegg formed the nine-piece band Savuka in 1987, which sold over one million copies of their debut album and produced hits like ‘Asimbonanga’ and ‘Great Heart’.

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Johnny Clegg received numerous awards for his contribution to music and society, notably the Knight of Arts and Letters from the French government in 1991, the Order of Ikhamanga (Silver) from the South African government in 2012 and the Order of the British Empire in 2015.

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Johnny had two sons – Jaron and Jesse Clegg. The latter is also a popular musician and Wits graduate. Wits gets multiple mentions in *Scatterling of Africa: My Early Years*, a book published in 2021 that tells the story of Johnny Clegg in his own voice.

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Another famous Wits graduate is songwriter and musician Claire Johnston, the lead singer of Mango Groove. Born out of a band formed by three Wits students, Mango Groove fuses pop and township music.

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*South African musician Johnny Clegg (1953–2019), a Wits alumnus, challenged South Africa’s apartheid regime through his music and promoted racial reconciliation. Photo: Peter Maher*







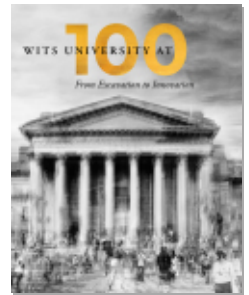
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