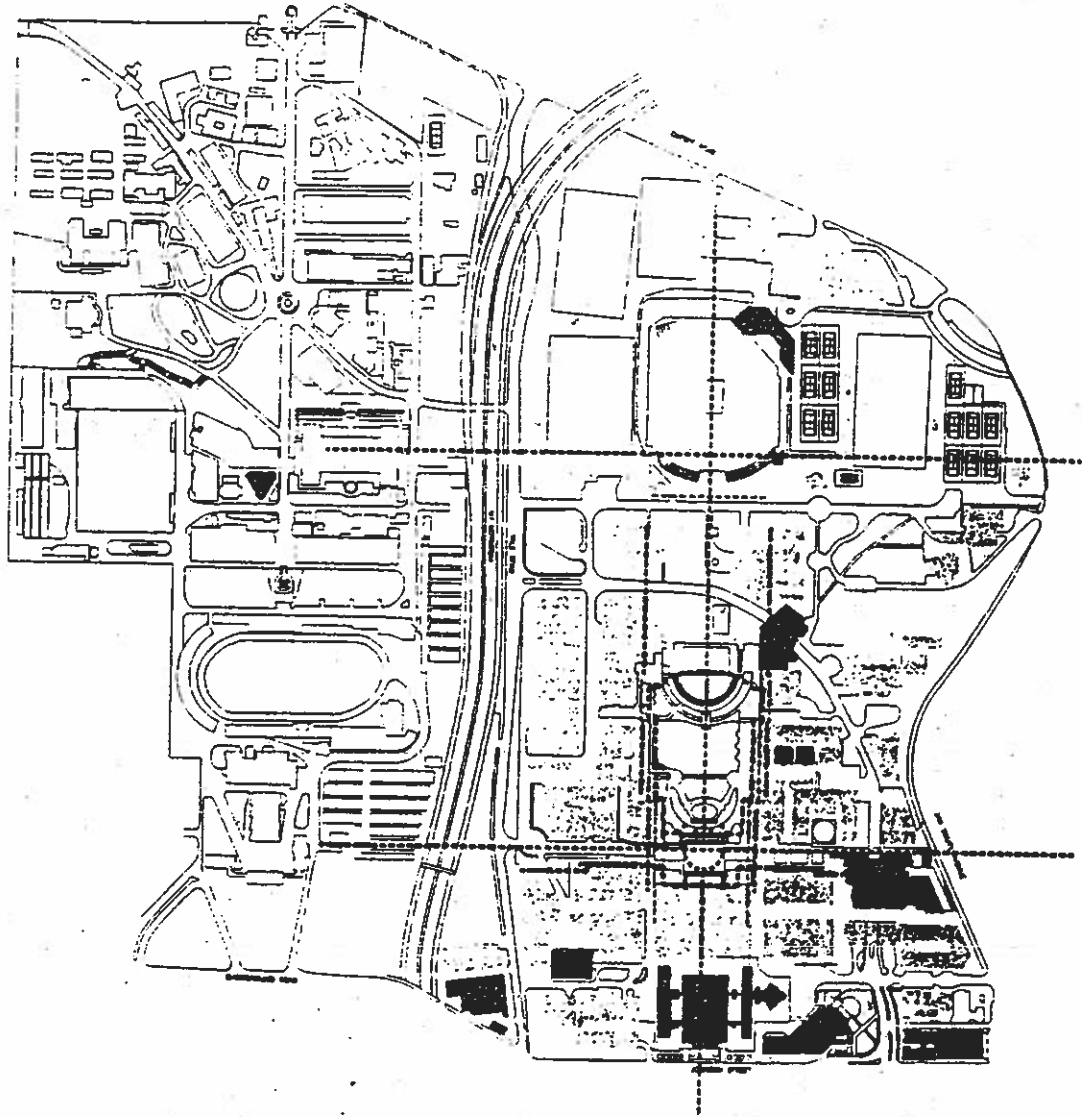


PLANNING HISTORY STUDY GROUP



SYMPOSIUM PROCEEDINGS

**TOWN AND GOWN: THE PLANNING HISTORY OF
UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES AND UNIVERSITY
TOWNS**

APRIL 6TH AND 7TH 1998
UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

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ESSELENPARK - THE RAILWAYS UNIVERSITY IN THE VELD

BASIL BRINK

INTRODUCTION

" When the solid foundation on which this proud " University in the Field " (sic) has been built, is understood and appreciated ; when the vision and mission of its people have been shared ; and when its magnificent architecture, superb facilities, picturesque setting and peaceful atmosphere have been experienced, even the most discerning people stand in admiration." ¹

This introduction to the 50 year commemorative album of the Esselenpark training centre self-consciously markets this centre as being on a par with tertiary academic institutions. Often universities take pride in their " magnificent architecture, superb facilities, picturesque setting and peaceful atmosphere ", features which are purported to be conducive to learning and the acquisition of knowledge. Even though the most basic technical skills were taught at Esselenpark, its design and architecture implied that all acquisition of learning and knowledge, albeit technical or academic, should also be valued and respected by those people who enter through its portals.

The Railways in all its forms had a profound effect on the lives of all the people of South Africa. Many workers spend their entire working lives in its employ and scores of passengers and commuters make use of its services. Railway buildings, whether rural or urban, large or small, played an important role both in the socio-economic development of South Africa and as the backdrop to historical events.

The Central Training Institute, or Esselenpark Centre of Excellence, which is the relatively unknown railways university in the veld at Kaalfontein in Kempton Park, is one such an example. It celebrated 50 years of existence in 1993 and has an anachronistic and politicised planning history.

The purpose of this paper is to :

- ❖ outline the planning and construction history of Esselenpark ;
- ❖ shatter some of the myths surrounding its construction ;
- ❖ examine why such an anachronistic, labour intensive and expensive complex was built in the classical tradition when modernism held sway in South Africa and
- ❖ describe present uses and possible future developments.

Views, where expressed, are my own and do not reflect those of Transnet.

¹ du Plooy, M. " A new look at 50 years ", p.7.

• (pps 234-264 in)
Proceedings •

THE ESSELENPARK CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Transnet's main training centre since 1947, called the Esselenpark Centre of Excellence, is located between Kempton Park and Tembisa 25km north-east of Johannesburg at Kaalfontein station. It has become one of the largest public sector human resources development facilities in the country. (Illustration 1 : Bird's eye view of Esselenpark)

Training and development activities focus on :

- Functional, technical and tertiary training,
- Management development, and
- adult basic education and training.

Organisation development interventions are aimed at :

- transformative culture changes
- an integrated human resources service and
- implementing innovative business design processes. ²

Since 1996 Esselenpark has entered into a strategic alliance with Wits Technikon aimed at enabling Transnet employees to pursue technikon accredited diplomas and degrees.

Since 1990, the disused Railway Police dormitory building, and the underutilised north dormitory block were converted to a " Port Captain's Lodge " (46 bedrooms), and a " Railwaymen's Inn " (160 bedrooms) respectively. Each complex has conference rooms, refreshment lounges and restaurants. The refurbishments were done without affecting the external aesthetics of the buildings. These modern " hotels " have given Esselenpark its new lease on life. (Illustration 2 : Internal views). During 1997 Esselenpark provided 117 000 bed nights accommodation and served 237 000 meals for Transnet employees. ³

² Transnet Annual Report, 1997 p.60.

³ Ibid.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since the 1930s rail passenger and freight traffic increased rapidly in South Africa and properly trained railway staff were required to ensure an efficient and safe service. Mr Henry Lyell, the principal from 1945 to 1970 of what was referred to as " the largest railway training college in the world " said on his retirement :

" The increasing complexity of railway operations cannot be mastered by mere rule - of - thumb methods and day-to-day experience. " ⁴

On 26 January 1940 the General Manager of the S.A. Railways and Harbours wrote to the Chief Civil Engineer to request that "...the erection of a training institute" should be proceeded with as a matter of urgency. ⁵ The minutes of the meeting of System Engineers, held on 13 and 15 March, recorded the preferred location and set out the purpose of the proposed Central Training Institute, as Esselenpark was known at the time :

"The establishment of a training school at Kaalfontein had now been agreed to. This site was the nearest suitable one to the Reef and approximately 250 acres were being acquired. This area would be properly laid out and all classes of men trained. The men would be selected men and there would be efficient instructors. In this way it was hoped to achieve something really worthwhile. Opportunities would be taken to ask Senior Officers to lecture. In addition to training new men, refresher courses would be arranged..." ⁶

A total of 106,8 morgen of the farm Witfontein at Kaalfontein was to be expropriated. This farmland though distant from any built up area, was on the railway line between Pretoria and Johannesburg, and relatively close to Germiston, the largest railway shunting yard in South Africa. The Resident Engineer arranged for a survey of the property on 29 February 1940. ⁷

⁴ " Anniversary of Railway College ", Pretoria News, August 1, 1970.

⁵ Kaalfontein : Central Training Institute : General and Estimates, Chief Engineer's works files parts 1 to 5 from 26 January 1940 to 27 October 1971.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

THE NEO-CLASSICAL DESIGN

The architects employed in the Chief Architect's office of the Chief Civil Engineer's department were instructed to proceed with the design, and the first " Layout Plan, Central Training Institute, Kaalfontein " was produced in February 1941. ⁸ It was amended in May 1941 and checked in July 1941. This layout encapsulated the design concept which was to be adhered to as the Institute was built during the subsequent 15 years. (Illustration 3 : Layout Plan, 1941)

The Modern Movement and International Style had been imported to South Africa in the 1930s, and was in vogue when the Institute had to be designed. However the planning of the site layout and design of the buildings was undertaken in the neo-classical tradition by railway architects messrs L.B. Preller, T.J. "Tiekie" Dry and Alan Wilson amongst others, assisted by several architectural draughtsmen. An aerial view of the Wits campus in 1930 shows a resemblance to Esselenpark in 1947. (Illustration 4 : The Wits campus in 1930 and Illustration 5 : Esselenpark, 1947). One is tempted to deduce that Emley and Williamson's forum Romanum at Wits ⁹ influenced the architects a decade later when they commenced with their layout plan for Esselenpark. The classical tradition makes use of symmetry and axis to organize accommodation and landscaping into a layout that is orderly and easily understood :

" The plan is usually symmetrical on either side of a line, or axis, starting at the main entrance and running straight through the building. The symmetry reflects the balance of nature and the human form.

... When circumstances, such as location or use, make a uniform arrangement possible the accommodation can be organised around linked symmetrical rooms and courts which give a clear order to the plan ... ". ¹⁰

The Railway architects used symmetry and major as well as secondary axes as ordering device for the general layout, landscaping and architecture. The 1941 Layout Plan resolved the site development concept in broad principle. However, the designs of individual buildings were to be amended extensively as more detailed planning progressed. For example, an isometric view of the Central Block in 1943 shows different buildings forms from those planned in the 1941 layout. (Illustration 6 : Isometric view of the Central Block, 1943).

⁸ Esselenpark files, Transnet Heritage Foundation.

⁹ Chipkin, C. p. 77.

¹⁰ Adam R. p. 284.

The north and south dormitory blocks were each shown as three separate buildings in the 1941 layout, but were subsequently re-designed as single buildings arranged around courtyards. Similarly, the Central Block was to include a gymnasium, museum and police school in a T-shaped building, none of which were provided in the rectangular building with courts which was eventually built. Changes to the accommodation schedule, where facilities such as the museum were initially planned for but never provided, suggest that the architects had a poorly defined, open-ended brief which was substantially modified while construction proceeded.

The wartime shortage of bricks was in some respects fortuitous, as the choice of the more expensive sandstone for the buildings could be motivated by the architects in this way.

ARCHITECTURE

The three principal orders of classical architecture, i.e. the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, are well represented in the completed buildings at Esselenpark. Ionic columns were used for the Memorial Ambulatory next to the Central Block ; Roman Doric columns for the covered walkways in the dormitory courtyards and Corinthian at the main entrance. (Illustration 7 : Working drawing). All buildings have slate roofs at a 30° pitch.

The tympanum in the pediment above the entrance to the dining hall contains a frieze rich in symbolism, according to Mr " Tiekie " Dry, the senior architect of the Chief Civil Engineer's office.¹¹ The rays of sunlight from the right hand corner symbolise the dawn of the S.A. Railways (Illustration 8 : Pediment to dining hall). Figures holding a microscope, test tube and hourglass, and positioned at a drawing board and typewriter, symbolise studiousness and progress.

The four figures on either side of the map of Southern Africa symbolise thought, learnedness, knowledge and training. The six figures on the left represent employees laying track, riveting, repairing wheels surveying, signalling and electro-technical work. The four provinces are connected by rail, road, air and sea on the map of Southern Africa in the centre of the pediment.

¹¹ du Plooy, M. p. 26.

THE ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR

On 31 October 1940 it was decided to proceed with the design of the hostel block, which would house 250 students and an accompanying dining block. On 17 December 1941, after a presentation by the architects, the Hon Mr F. Claud Sturrock, Minister of Transport, approved the 1941 scheme with an estimated cost of 270 756 pounds.

On 6 November 1941 the Chief Civil Engineer indicated to the General Manager that construction work would commence in February 1942, and that it was decided to "...do the work departmentally with Italian prisoners of war labour." Walls and plinths were to be of dressed stone ostensibly because of the wartime shortage of bricks, and the Italians' skill as masons could therefore be put to good use.

However, on 23 July 1942 the General Manager informed the Chief Civil Engineer that :

"Vigorous representations have been made by the Trades and Labour Council and other industrial organisations in regard to the use by the Administration of Italian Prisoners of War on the erection of the buildings for the Central Training Institute at Kaalfontein. It has now been decided to discontinue forthwith the employment of Italian Prisoners of War on the work. Please arrange for the prisoners of war at present at Kaalfontein to be returned to the camp at Zonderwater at the earliest practicable date." ¹²

The Italians were stationed at Kaalfontein from 19 January 1942, when accommodation was arranged for them, until immediately after 23 July 1942, a period of approximately six months. The Institute was therefore not built by Italian Prisoners of War, as is still thought to be the case by some.

¹² Chief Engineer's works files.

CONSTRUCTION

In 1942, 25 local stone masons were employed as casual artisans and were joined by a further 32 in 1943 (Illustration 9 : Construction Area). An average of 50 local masons assisted by 140 black labourers were employed during the 15 year construction period of the Central Training Institute.¹³

The foundation stone was laid by the Minister of Transport, the Hon F. Claud Sturrock, on 10 December 1943, one and a half years after the Italians had left Kaalfontein (Illustration 10 : Foundation stone and Illustration 11 : Ceremony). The Resident Engineer, Rand New Works, Germiston was responsible for the construction of the Training Institute. His "Narrative Report" of 31 January 1944, typical of many other such monthly progress reports which were submitted to the Secretary of the Committee of Management, reveals the following :

Dormitory Blocks.

The old plan consisted of three blocks, nos. 1, 2 and 3 parallel to each other. In the new plan no. 2 block is resited to form a quadrangle with nos. 1 and 3. The old foundations for no. 2 block have been demolished where they projected above ground level. 40% of the new foundations have been completed.

Mess Block.

Except for the footings for certain columns in this building the foundations are complete and ready for the superstructure which is to be erected by contract. The making of the roof trusses for this building is complete.

Central Block.

The revised drawings have not yet been received.

Native Quarters.

No further progress.

¹³ Ibid.

Staff Quarters.	The Principal's House and outbuildings 90% complete. The vice principal's house and outbuildings 15% complete. Instructor's houses No. 1 and 2 virtually complete and No. 3 brickwork commenced.
Training Track.	Earthworks and culverts complete.
General.	The stone masons resumed work on 3.1.44. 29% of the stone cutting for all buildings completed to date. An officer visited Kaalfontein on 10. 1. 44 and selected three sites for boring for water. It is understood he will submit a report to the Management in this connection.
Staff.	54 stone masons (includes 2 toolsmiths and 1 leading hand). 28 other European Staff. Approx. 140 natives. (sic) ¹⁴

Training had to be undertaken both at temporary facilities in Kroonstad and at the Institute whilst the construction of incomplete buildings progressed. By 1948 the north and south dormitory blocks, the dining hall as well as the kitchen were taken into use (Illustration 5 : Esselenpark, 1947). The courses which were provided included catering, guard, shunter, platelayer and ticket examiner's duties ; driver training as well as the training of firemen and constables. ¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ General Manager, SAR : Annual Report, 1953.

MINISTER'S VISIT, 1947

Minister Sturrock visited the partially completed complex in 1947 was compelled to justify the choice of the neo-classical architecture, which contrasted markedly with Modernism already in vogue in South Africa at the time, by stating that :

" This school can, above all, give to the individual a tangible pride in membership of a great service – a service which will employ him for the rest of his working life and pension him in his old age, a service which is operated for the benefit of the State. These factors are likely to have a profound effect on the interest the trainee takes in his work and on his character as a railwayman. For this reason, the Institute itself should be built on good and solid lines, austere but dignified, because pride in a service will never be cultivated if the best the service can afford are army hutments and iron hangars ". ¹⁶

Clearly, neo-classicism was resorted to because it could provide dignity and status, foster pride and build character and place the Institute, which focused on basic technical training, on the same architectural par as the Wits Campus which preceded it. However, to "break with tradition and introduce the (architectural) style of our century " at Wits in 1936, was hailed as a victory of the contemporary spirit over "officialism" in the Architectural Review of October 1944. ¹⁷ Neo-classicism had fallen in disfavour when the railway architects adopted it for Esselenpark . Their design was frowned on and derided by their contemporaries, but they nevertheless implemented it with dogged determination. ¹⁸

NAME CHANGES

The " Central Training Institute " was officially renamed " The Railway Training College ". in the Railways' weekly circular no. 3067 of 7 November 1946. ¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, on 23 November 1949, the Minister of Transport approved the name " Esselenpark Railway College " after the late Mr Louis Esselen, Railway Commissioner from 1941–1945 and esteemed champion of railwaymen. Mr Louis Esselen was the right hand of the Minister of Transport and was responsible for improving the housing, educational and employment conditions of the lower-paid railway staff. In 1993 " Esselenpark Centre of Excellence " became the new name for the centre so as to re-position it as a multi-purpose educational campus. ¹⁹

¹⁶ du Plooy, M. p.11.

¹⁷ Chipkin, C. p.77.

¹⁸ Discussion with Prof C. Strauss Brink, 1991.

¹⁹ du Plooy, M. p.11.

THE 1950 “ SKETCH PLAN OF WHOLE AREA ”

A layout plan of the Esselenpark Railway College entitled “Sketch Plan of Whole Area” was completed in October 1950 (Illustration 12 : Sketch Plan of Whole Area, 1950). This drawing is valuable because it illustrates which buildings had been completed and which buildings were still under construction in 1950.²⁰ “Buildings Contemplated” were also indicated, which gives an idea of the architects’ concept of the final layout.

The Railway Museum was proposed to the east of the athletics track, in almost exactly the same position as the Junction which was completed in 1991. The Second World War (1939-45) prevented the establishment of this museum of transport even though the collection of artefacts was centralised at Esselenpark until 1956, when it was moved to Johannesburg.²¹ The Central Block was to have had a 20 x 60m swimming bath in front of it, and a “Hospital” with a formal garden was envisaged to its west. The Main Hall was completed only 15 years later in 1965. Only 6 houses for “European staff” had been completed by October 1950, 11 were under construction and 4 were contemplated.

Planning for Apartheid, where large residences for teachers were provided next to the main complex, and support staff were to be located in small homes much further away, was inherent in the design.

150 erven for “Non - European Staff Quarters”, a school, a sports field, parks, and a superintendent’s office were proposed opposite the road from the existing European staff housing. The layout suggests that the architects envisaged accommodation for resident male and female staff in family houses, i.e. not single sex hostels. This self-contained and separate Apartheid styled black township, complete with “Superintendent”, was sited at some distance from the residences for whites closest to the main complex. However, it was never built, and most black staff had to travel to work from distant townships. A hostel for “Non-European Police Trainees” was under construction close by.

²⁰ Protekon : Esselenpark design drawings, Plan Room.

²¹ Notes on the history of the Transnet Heritage Foundation by its curator Eric Conradie, 1993.

Besides giving an indication of the progress that had been made up to October 1950, the "Sketch Plan of Whole Area" indicates how the architects planned to develop Esselenpark and its environs at that stage. The architects intended that the footprint and aesthetics of any new development should as far as possible acknowledge and reinforce their 1950 layout. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Development could not proceed to the north of the Central Block, as shown in the 1941 layout plan, because dolomite and poor soil conditions precluded construction in that area. The architects were therefore forced to concentrate development assymmetrically in the area to the south of the Central Block.

THE HISTORIC PARK STATION STRUCTURE

In 1952, during the completion phase of the College, the historic Park Station structure, which covered platforms 3,4,5 and 6, was dismantled and transferred to Esselenpark from Johannesburg station (Illustration 13 : Park Station structure). On 26 April 1951 the Chief Civil Engineer informed the Resident Engineer, Construction, Germiston that :

" Towards the latter part of this year the historic exhibition platform roof over platform No. 6 Johannesburg station will be demolished. The General Manager's approval to re-use this covering at Kaalfontein is being sought. It is the intention to house the Station Foremen and Platelayers and possibly the Road Motor sections of the College under this covering." ²²

Commendably the Chief Civil Engineer stressed the historic value of the structure to the General Manager in a letter of 5 June 1951 :

"The platform roof will suit the purpose of housing the Station Foreman's section besides which it would also preserve and put to use an historical structure." ²³

²² Chief Engineer's works files.

²³ Ibid.

The General Manager's letter of 13 November 1952 to the Chief Civil Engineer calls for the completion of the facilities for the training of station foremen by the end of January 1953, so it may be deduced that the historic structure was moved to Esselenpark during 1952.²⁴

COMPLETION AND COST

Alterations to the brief caused extensive delays to the completion of the project. The General Manager's letter of 3 December 1946 to the Chief Civil Engineer informed him that "...the institute is to be brought into use as from the 1st April, 1947...". Subsequently the General Manager requested that "...46 instead of 14 classrooms and a hall to seat 1 500 instead of 1 200 " should be provided. On 6 May 1947 the Acting Chief Civil Engineer informed the General Manager that "Fourteen drawings are involved. Eleven have now to be scrapped and three altered. The total time lost in designing, drawing, tracing and checking is estimated at 200 man days...". Working drawings for dormitory block extensions and sub-stations were finalised in June 1948 and the construction was eventually completed in 1956.²⁵ (Illustration 14 : Aerial view, 1956)

Esselenpark (without the Main Hall which was completed in 1965) took about 15 years to complete, and the original estimate of 107 500 pounds in 1940 increased more than twenty fold to 2 233 650 pounds in 1953. This vast increase was partly because much more accommodation had to be provided than originally envisaged. Further, "... an additional 271 500 pounds is required for this portion of the work mainly on account of stone facing to buildings..."²⁶

Various additional buildings were erected: in the 1960's a Dutch Reformed church; in the 1970's training buildings west of the centre and 1980's the simutrain building (Illustration 1). Unfortunately these buildings were not all of a similar style and quality to those completed in the 1940's and early 1950's. Equally disappointingly, many of the cypress and palm trees originally planted to complement the buildings were removed in the 1980's at the behest of the principals of the day. For this reason attempts were made in 1989 by the architects at Protekon to have the entire area declared a Conservation Area.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Letter from the Resident Engineer, Reef Construction to the Chief Civil Engineer on 14 October 1953.

²⁷ Chief Director (Building Services) : Esselenpark Masterplan 1989.

This was not achieved, but a realisation of the historic and architectural importance of this sandstone complex, which is thought to be the largest in South Africa, was brought home to the management of Esselenpark.

For example, trees were planted in the 1990s to replace those removed in the past and to formally complement the buildings. In addition, the sandstone was restored and cleaned in 1994 at a cost of R1,2 million, which created new appreciation for the beauty of the masonry and the craftsmanship required to construct the buildings (Illustration 15 : Renovations).

THE FUTURE

According to the public relations officer, ms Pearl Cannel ²⁸ no new buildings are envisaged on the Esselenpark campus in the immediate future.

250 ha of the farm were set aside for subsidised housing to the north of Esselenpark, adjacent to Tembisa.

When demand arises 60 ha opposite the road to the south would be suitable as an extension of the Birchleigh residential suburb.

CONCLUSION

During the interwar years, at a time when the South African Railways and Harbours were expanding rapidly, the need for basic technical training of employees became so critical that adequate training facilities had to be planned and provided. The training facility became not merely a place where technical skills were acquired, but a "university in the veld".

The design and architecture of Esselenpark sought to provide its trainees with an ambience equal to the tertiary educational environment provided by universities. Like universities, Esselenpark claimed to have "magnificent architecture, superb facilities, picturesque setting and a peaceful atmosphere". ²⁹

The layout and design in the neo-classical style could have been influenced by the Wits campus design which preceded it. The design was criticised and derided by architects at the time for smacking of "officialism" and failing to

²⁸ Interview with P. Cannel, 23 March 1998.

²⁹ du Plooy, M. p.7.

However, Minister Sturrock approved of the neo-classical approach because of the austerity, dignity and pride which it imbues in trainees. Sketch plans and building plans were amended while construction proceeded, which meant that the initial brief and budget had to be substantially modified as circumstances changed.

Esselenpark was not completed as planned in 1941, and seems doomed to remain asymmetrical about its central axis. The layout reinforced Apartheid by separating residential accommodation for white and black employees and by never providing any accommodation for blacks at the campus.

However, to-day Esselenpark is a fully integrated technical and management training facility which is a beautiful, unique asset well used by both Transnet employees and neighbouring communities.

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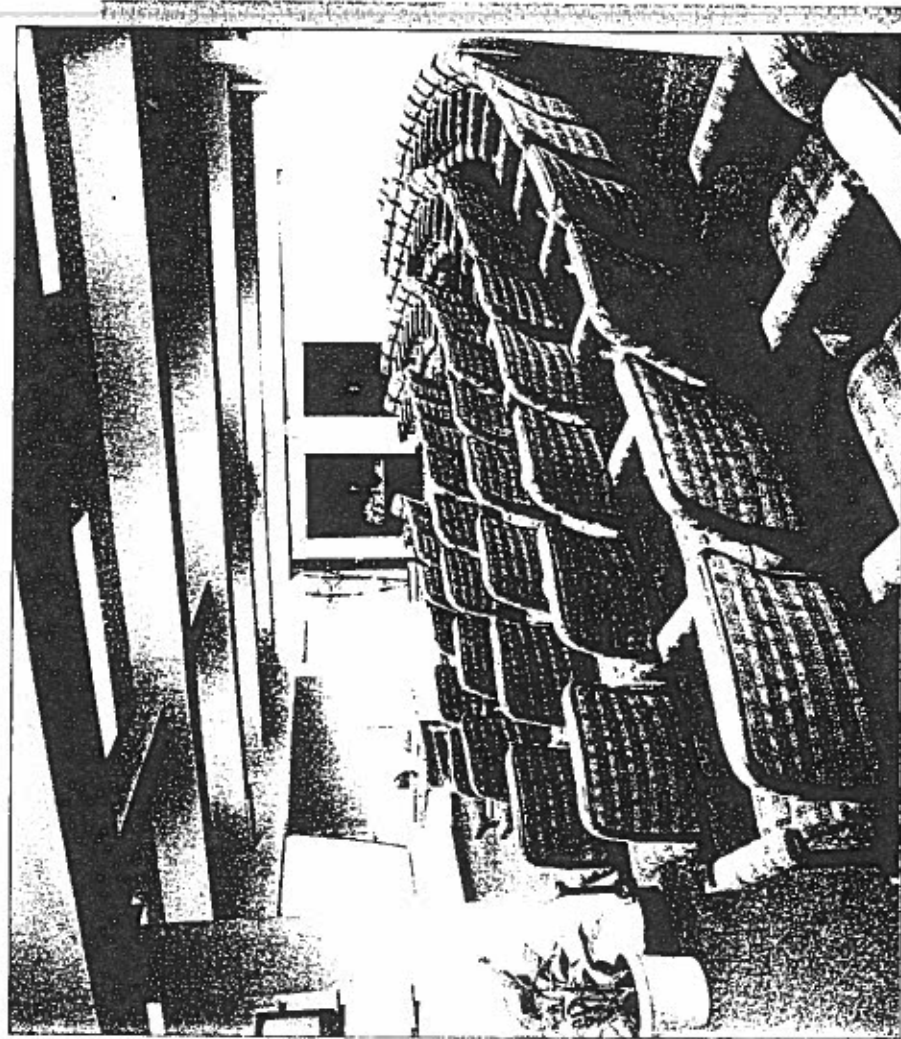
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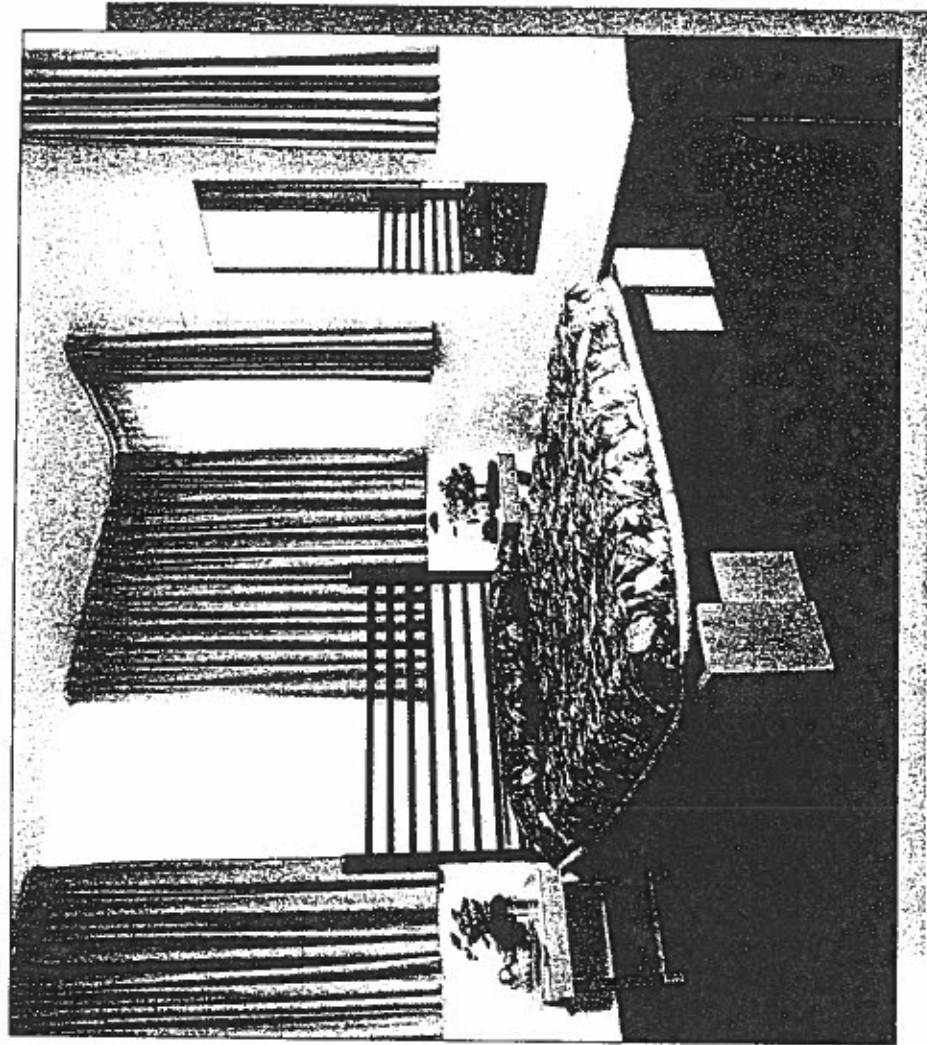
Facilities

The full spectrum of human resources development is available at Esselenpark: formal or informal; individual or en masse; and corporate or public. Whatever the need, Esselenpark is committed to providing it.

This is borne out by the fact that Esselenpark can boast some of the most sophisticated conference facilities in the country.



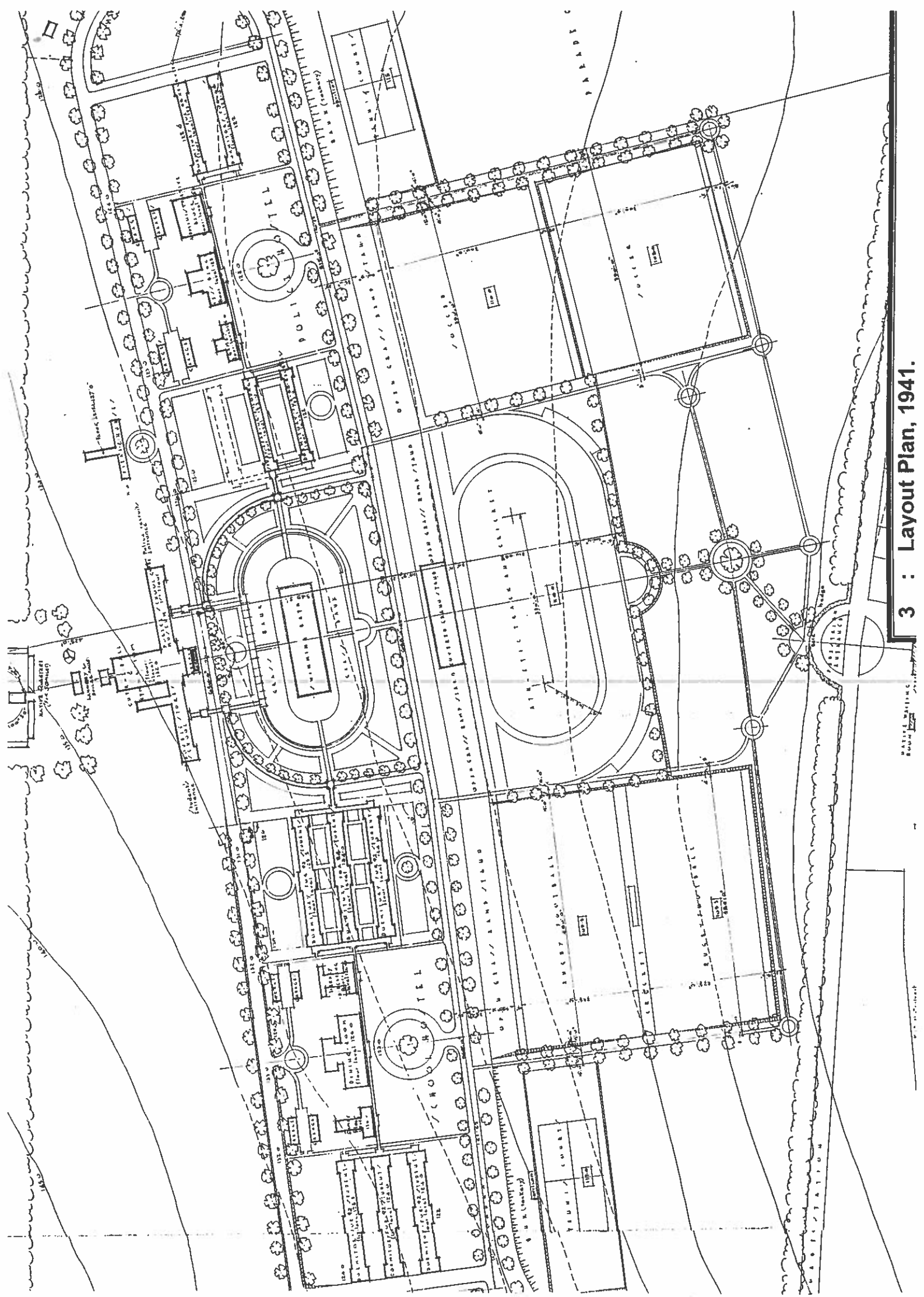
The auditorium is just one of the many superb facilities available to conference delegates.



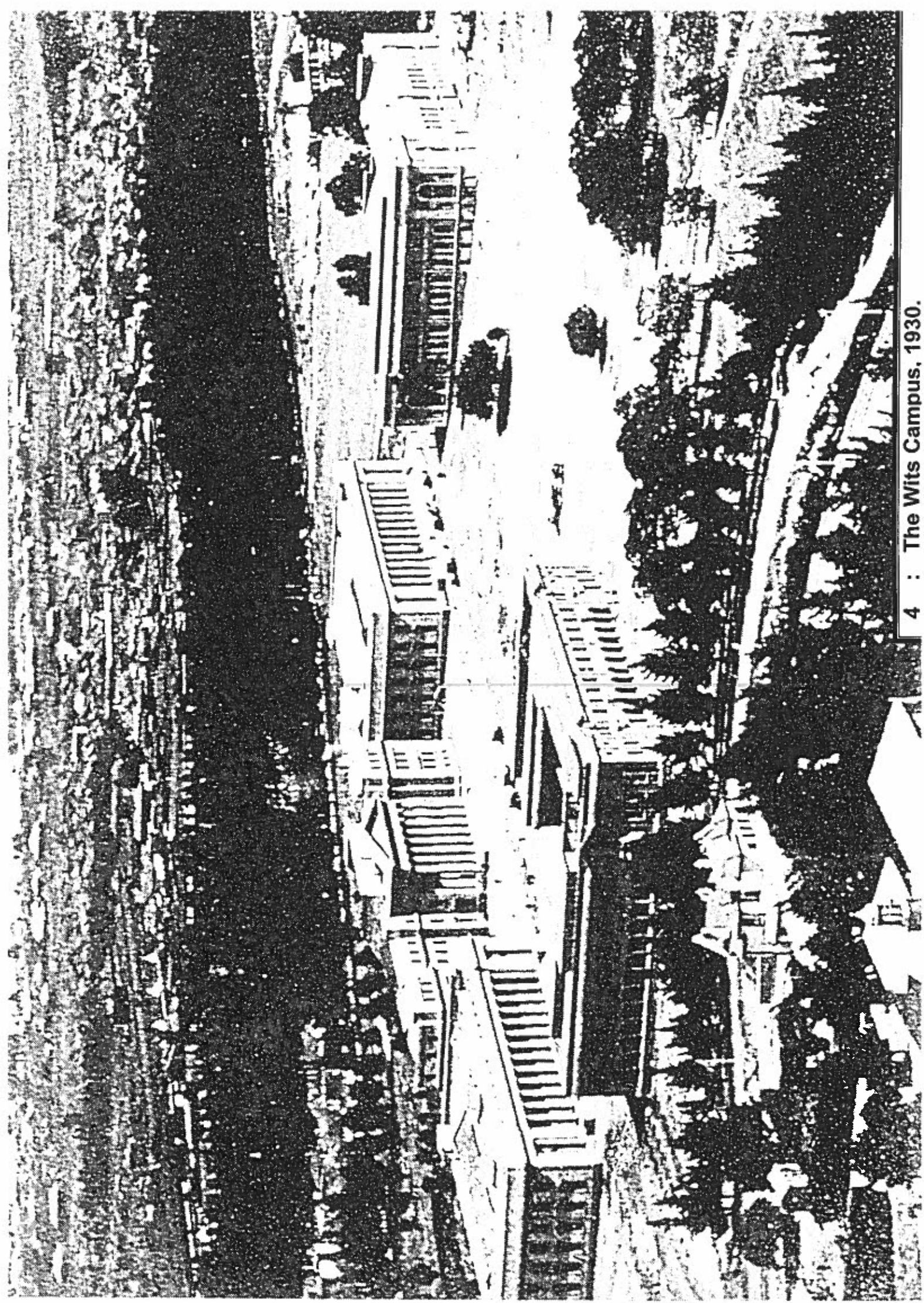
The rooms of the Port Captain's Lodge and Railwayman's Inn offer delegates regal luxury to relax in.

Fully equipped with the latest presentation aids and technology, these facilities are a presenter's paradise. With large lecture rooms, auditoriums, smaller syndicate or group discussion rooms, as well as stores for safekeeping.

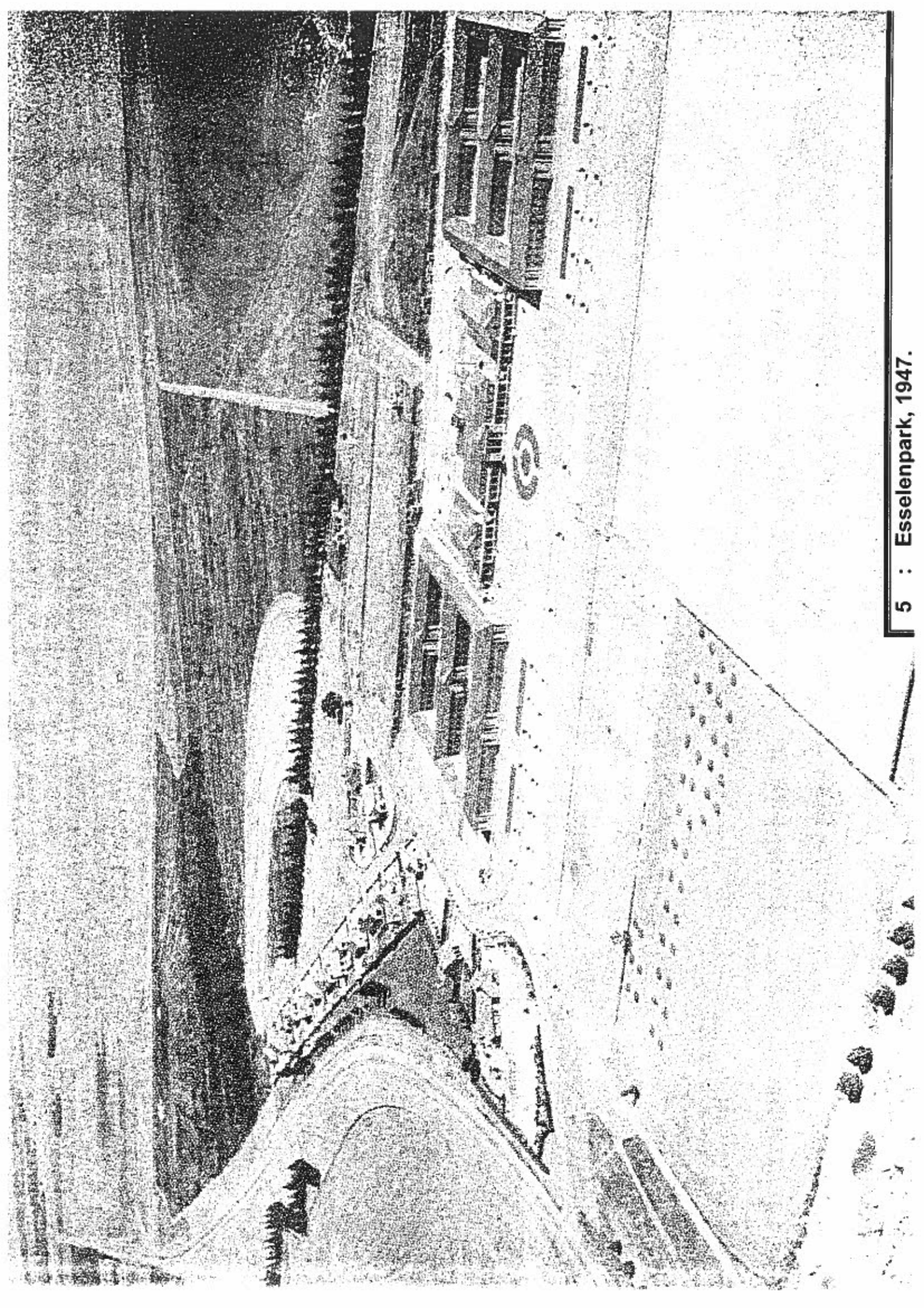
Up to 600 delegates can be pampered in true 5-star style or other luxury accommodation. Function halls with separate bars and kitchens cater for groups of 10 to 600.

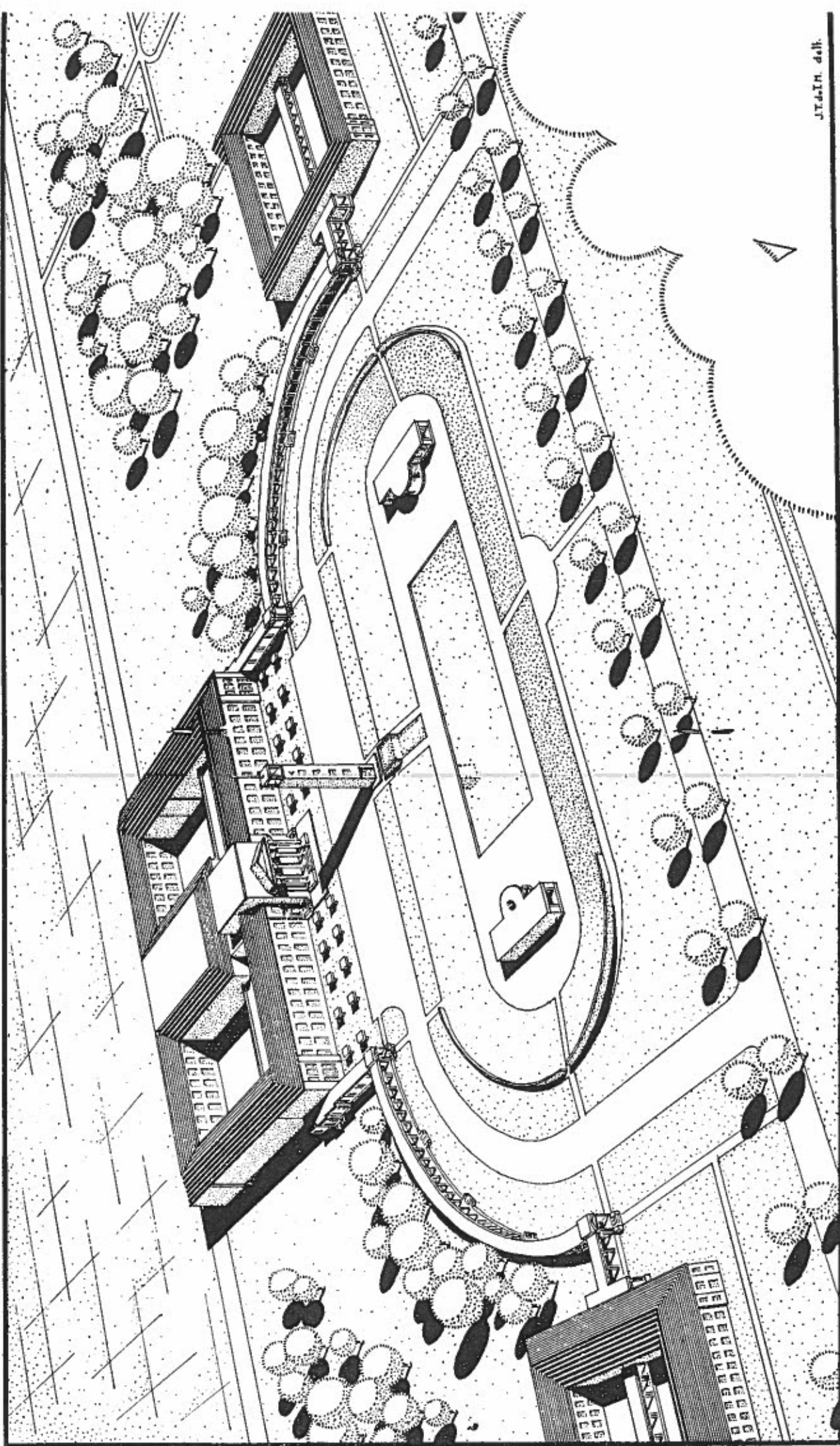


3 : Layout Plan, 1941.



4 : The Wits Campus, 1930.

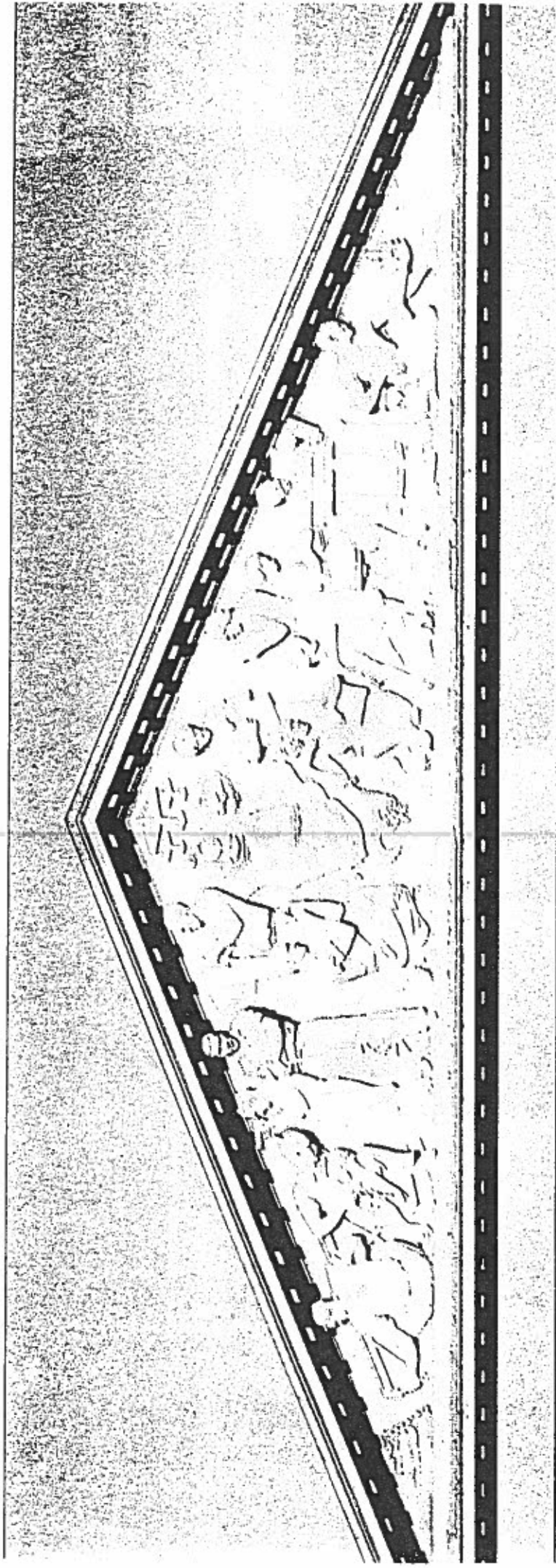




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Central Block, Central Training Institute.

6 : Isometric view, 1943 in foundation stone laying ceremony booklet.



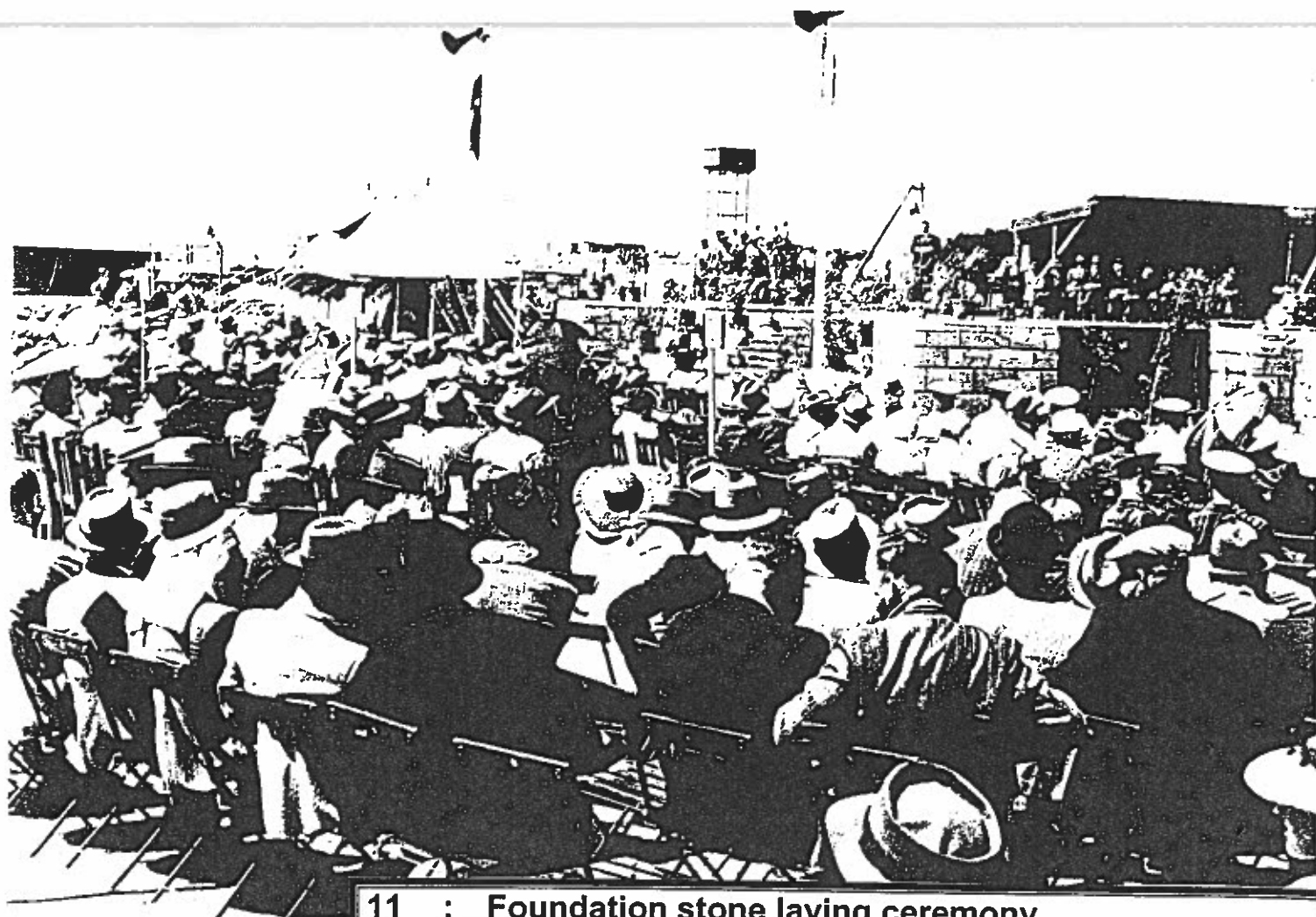


9 : Construction Area.

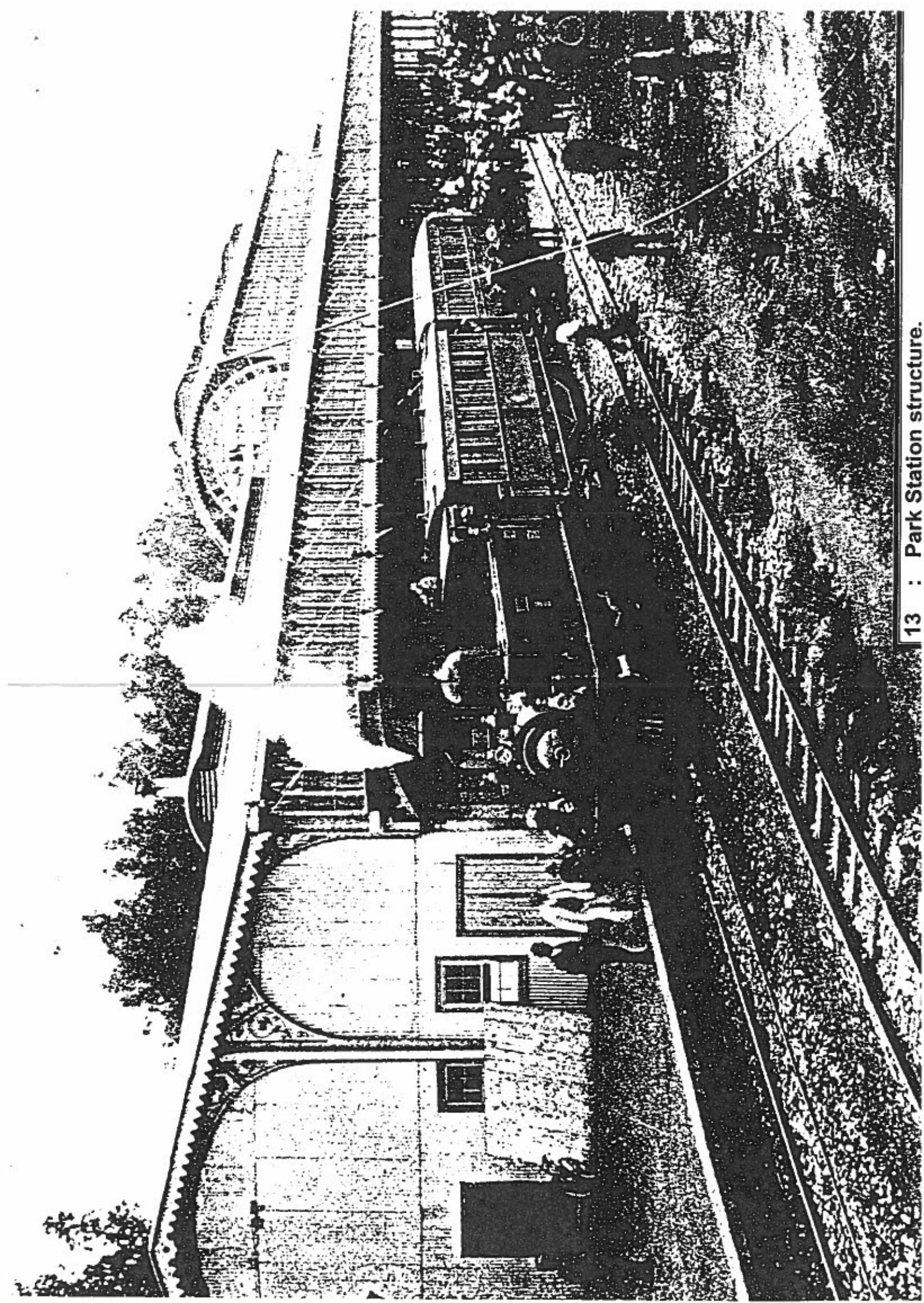


THIS STONE WAS LAID BY
THE HONOURABLE
F. CLAUD STURROCK, MP
MINISTER OF TRANSPORT

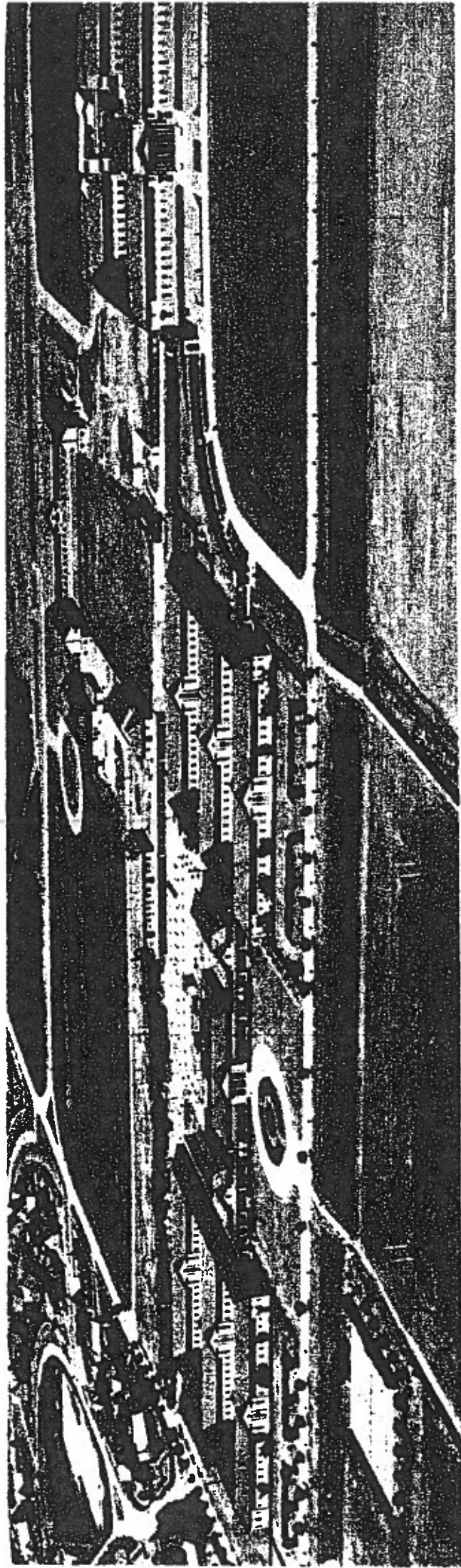
10TH DECEMBER, 1943.



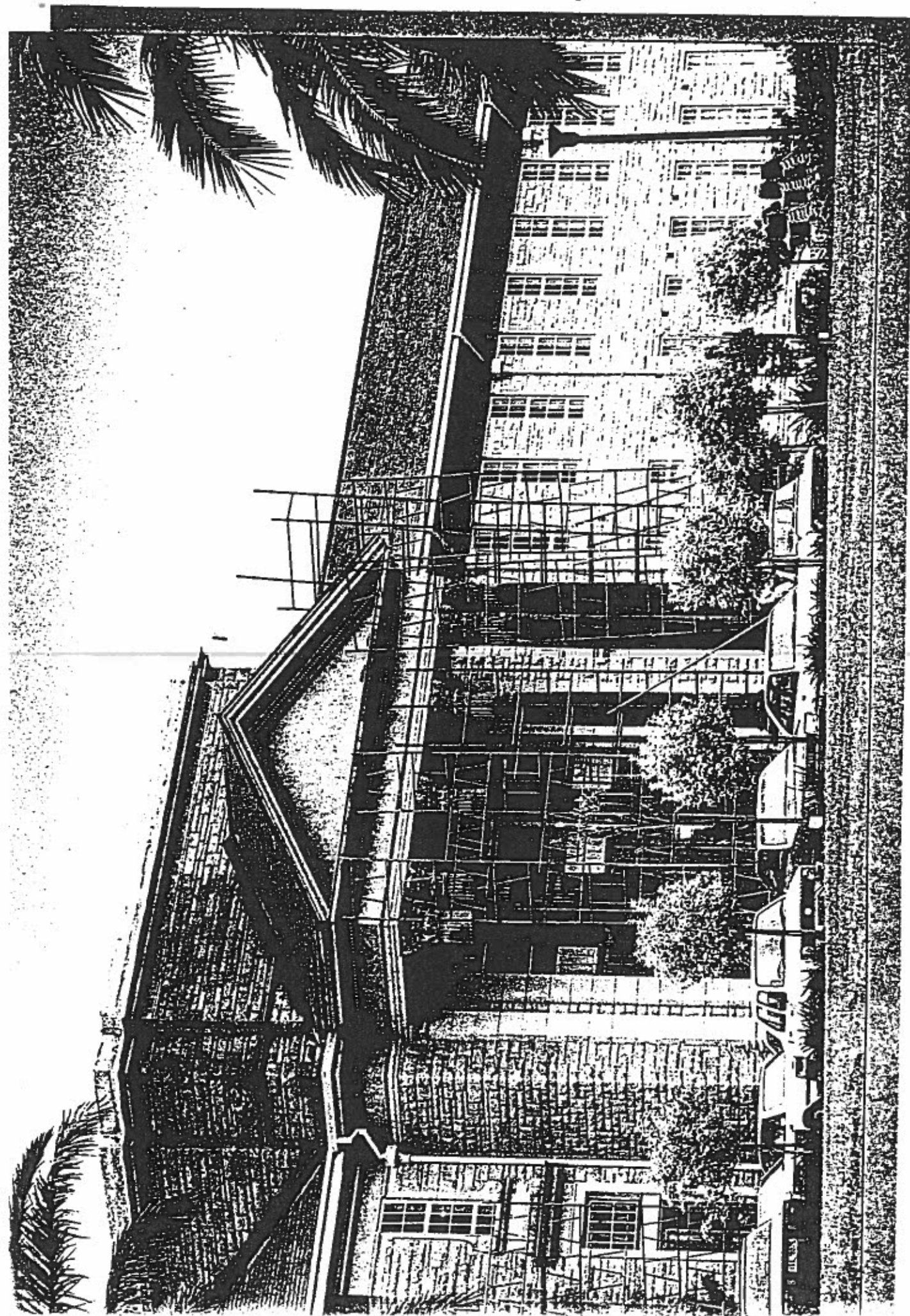
11 : Foundation stone laying ceremony.



13 : Park Station structure.



14 : Aerial view. 1956.



The exterior of the administration building during renovations in 1994 - giving it a new look.