

THE DRILL HALL

historical overview

Built on the ruins of a “native prison” in **1904**, the Drill Hall was erected as a mark of British military might and of the Empire’s victory in the brutal Anglo Boer War (**1899 – 1902**). Eager to secure the entire region as a British colony and to control the gold that lay beneath the city of Johannesburg – alongside the spectacular profits it was bound to bring – Britain agreed to support a resident army. The Transvaal Volunteers, a regiment comprised of South African soldiers who fought alongside the British Empire in the Anglo Boer War, were formally established, receiving horses and equipment. On June 11, 1904, the regiment’s first headquarters, the Drill Hall, opened its doors.

From that moment onwards, this military structure became a centre for activities that would shape South Africa in years to come. In their first 10 years of existence, Drill Hall regiments saw action in their home town, in the neighboring South African colony, on the African continent and as far as Europe. Drill Hall troops assisted in quelling the Bhambada Rebellion in the Natal colony in **1908**, one of the last instances of consolidated armed resistance waged against colonial forces before the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe more than 50 years later. The First World War saw Drill Hall regiments pursuing the German enemy throughout South West Africa and fighting in territories as far as Palestine and Europe, while at home, the Drill Hall became an artificial limb factory for returning maimed and injured soldiers. **1907** and **1913** marked the beginning of military actions against ongoing mine strikes in Johannesburg that finally erupted in the violent Red Revolt of **1922**. During the Second World War, the Drill Hall was a stage for demonstrations of alliance with the British Empire and international action against the Nazi regime.

But it is with the infamous Treason Trial of **1956-57** that the Drill Hall is most widely associated. The Treason Trial brought 156 leaders of the Congress Alliance to the Drill Hall, and broadcast apartheid’s images to the world for the first time. A turning point in the struggle against apartheid, the Treason Trial is ironically most significant for facilitating an extraordinary gathering of leaders: for a period of one year, the accused

leaders of different parties and races gathered daily at the Drill Hall proceedings at a time when political and multi racial meetings were outlawed. The trial has thus been described as “the longest uninterrupted meeting in the history of the struggle.” The trial is also significant for convincing some of the struggle leaders, including Mandela, that peaceful resistance against apartheid would no longer work.

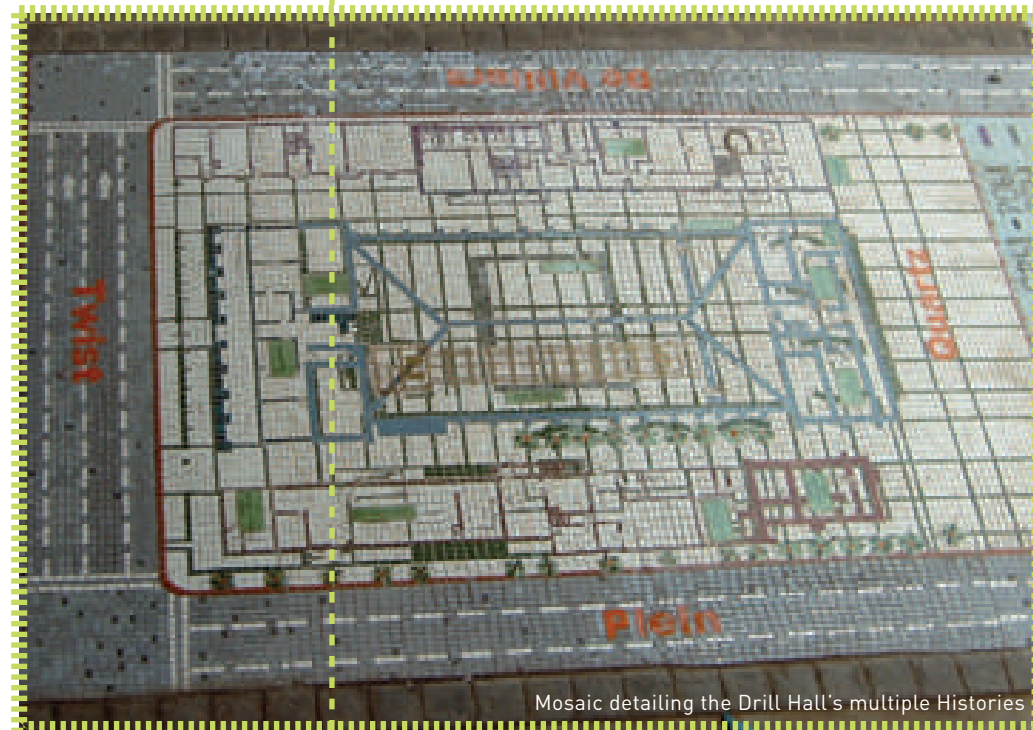


Historical image of Drill Hall

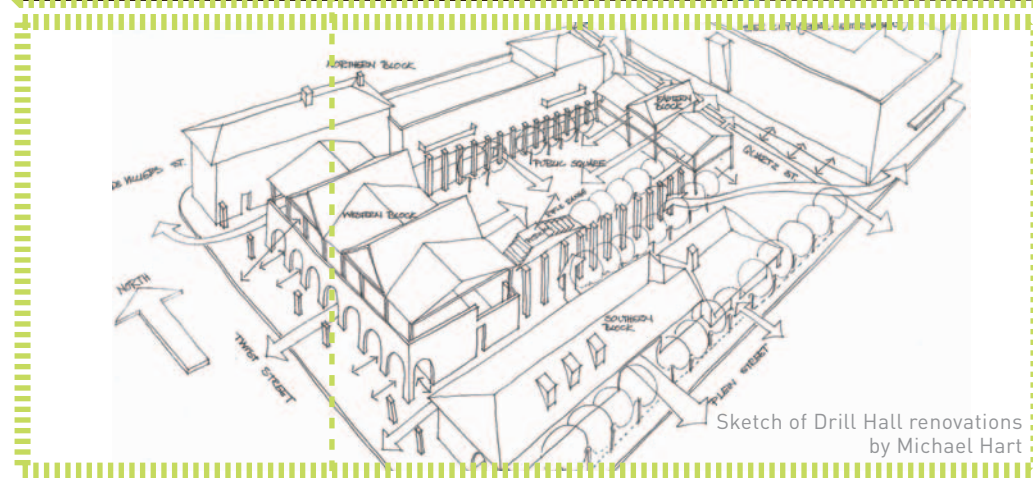
From the **1960s** until apartheid's demise, the Drill Hall was used as a site for gathering military strength. As a conscription centre, the space was central for feeding youth into a military structure that supported the government's "Total Onslaught" policies. Regiments from the Drill Hall not only undertook operations within the country's borders and townships, but also engaged in activities that would destabilize the entire Southern African region, by weakening newly independent neighbouring states that supported the armed struggle against apartheid.

With apartheid's fall, the Drill Hall found itself standing within a rapidly changing environment. Loosening of Land and Area Acts increased the flow of migrants into the inner city in search of employment and better lives. As businesses moved out of the city, abandoned buildings became inhabited by a new generation of city dwellers. The military abandoned the Drill Hall in **1992**, and soon after, homeless people began moving in. By **2001**, 350 families lived inside the Drill Hall in makeshift shacks, without lights or running water, and without proper sewage or sanitation. It was not long before tragedy struck: in June 2001 a fire burned down the entire East Wing of the building. It was followed by another fire in April 2002, which practically wiped out the entire structure.

As of **2003**, through the efforts of the South African Heritage Resources Agency and the City of Johannesburg (through the Johannesburg Development Agency), the Drill Hall stands as a renovated heritage site with an open public square in the heart of the inner city. Within the context of the densely populated, distinct and teeming neighborhood of Joubert Park the Drill Hall provides a compelling human and physical framework in which to locate cultural work. It is a platform for the convergence and participation of the city's diverse residents, and a point from which to articulate Johannesburg's future and identity through arts and culture, memory and imagination. The Drill Hall houses not only the JPP, but also the Rand Light Infantry - one of the Transvaal Volunteer regiments - as well as two organisations devoted to social welfare and cultural development: the Johannesburg Community Chest and the Johannesburg Child Welfare.



Mosaic detailing the Drill Hall's multiple Histories



Sketch of Drill Hall renovations by Michael Hart