

# Ornico revives Natal Bank Building in CBD for new head office

Ornico, a brand and media intelligence company, will move into and operate from the newly restored historic site of the Natal Bank Building, which is situated at 90 Albertina Sisulu Street in Johannesburg. It will now be called Ornico City.

Ornico's move from Sandton to inner city Johannesburg is being celebrated by throwing the doors of the heritage site open to the public. This past weekend, it hosted a public art exhibition, which featured top local artists, including internationally acclaimed artist Mbongeni Buthelezi, together with Tshidzo Mangena, Solomon Omolayo Omogboye, Azael Langa, Ndabuko Julukani Ntuli, Johnnyguava, Michael Tshepo Selekane, Dario Manjate Art, Nkhensani Rihlampfu, and Cebo Simphiwe Xulu.



“I was looking for a new location for Ornico’s head office, and was set on moving back to Johannesburg from Sandton,” says Oresti Patricios, CEO of Ornico, who acquired the premises after the media and brand research company had outgrown its old premises in Grayston Drive, Sandton. “Urban spaces are our future, and Johannesburg’s inner city is very much the heart and soul of what it means to be South African. One loses a sense of that pulse out in Sandton. There is energy, enthusiasm and opportunity for massive innovation in the city that is contagious.”

## Heritage site

Ornico acquired the old Natal Bank Building situated at 90 Albertina Sisulu Road, Johannesburg in January 2016, and has been working for the past year to restore the grand old site to its former glory. The building was provisionally declared a national heritage site in 1990, and is the oldest standing bank building in Johannesburg.

“The building is remarkable. The minute I walked into it, it was love at first sight - the mastery of the construction, the absolute detail in the counters, lights and pressed ceilings. The height from ceiling to floor, the typical curves so common to architecture of its time, and the balconies that lead out and overlook Johannesburg,” Patricios enthusiastically explains. The design of the building is Neoclassical in style, with a broad arched window dominating the front, with Ionic columns on all three levels.

Ornico City, formerly called the Natal Bank Building, was constructed immediately after the Anglo Boer War. Occupied in 1903, the original cost of the building’s construction was £29,847 (a princely sum at the time). Just one block from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and the National Bank of the South African Republic, the Natal Bank overlooked the old market square, on what was then Market Street.

## Local construction

Ornico has spent the last six months working with Sakhive Construction, a Jozi based construction and restoration company, to repair and renovate the site.

Ornico City’s interior refurbishment is being done by StudioA, an international award-winning boutique interior architecture firm based in Johannesburg. Founded by 28-year-old Tristan du Plessis, a locally renowned young designer who has had eight years’ experience in the South African hospitality design sector, StudioA’s portfolio of completed projects includes some of the most spoken about hospitality spaces in the country and abroad.

“We handled the full interior design concept,” says du Plessis. “Our biggest challenge was to create a space that felt like it celebrated the Ornico brand, while being respectful to the history of the building.”

As a heritage site, the owner is tasked with maintaining the building’s historical integrity. “We accepted the task of restoring the property to its former glory, which meant furnishing it to Ornico’s needs and giving it a contemporary edge, while still respecting the beautiful historic building,” says du Plessis.

## Colourful history

The building has a colourful history. In 1914 the Natal Bank was taken over by National Bank, which in 1926 was taken over by Barclays Bank. In 1961 it was used by a theatrical group, the Bank Players, as a storage and rehearsal centre; and in 1963 it housed the SA government’s Republican Intelligence, the forerunner to the infamous BOSS (SA Bureau of State Security).

In 1978, Barclays converted it into the Barclays Bank Museum, which then became the FNB Museum. The building was provisionally declared a national monument in 1990, and it is the oldest surviving bank building in Johannesburg.

The interior contains finishings that were typical of banks of the day, which have all been restored and repaired due to their historical importance. “Beyond that, the workmanship is irreplaceable,” says du Plessis. “Nothing we could do today could compete with it. There are beautiful, carved counters, and a heavily ornate ceiling that must have taken years to complete. It’s typical of the era, and the budget spent was significant — as witnessed by the level of detail and opulent materials that were used.”

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