

Heritage Opinion

**Erf 4747, Swakopmund: Tourism activities related to the proposed new
Residential and Retail Development**

Proponent:

Messrs Lighthouse Property Investment Trust



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For

EAP

Environmental Compliance Consultancy (ECC)



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Swakopmund Heritage Opinion Erf 4747

Background:

The client has expressed the wish to have Erf 4747 Swakopmund developed into a residential and retail development along the popular beachfront in Swakopmund. Since this prominent site is located within the historical former harbour site of Swakopmund during the German colonial period (1884-1915), the wish has been expressed to subject this project to a heritage review of the site in question.

Historical background:

German period (1892-1915)

Swakopmund was developed as a harbour town as from 1892 onward, the reason being that (British) Cape colonial authorities were reluctant to have the German colonisers make use of the harbour facilities in Walvis Bay (annexed in 1878).¹

Initially ships used to anchor at sea right in front of the fledgling harbour town, while cargo offloading and passenger landing was performed by smaller boats. These had to traverse the heavy sea swell and sea breakers at the beach, often resulting in heavy loss of human life and cargo. Crew boys who were experienced in traversing the tricky sea breakers were recruited from Liberia to steer the cargo boats through to the beach.

It was not for long that the wish was expressed that a wave breaker (harbour mole) should be built. This project was tackled in 1900, and completed in 1903. The wave breaker extended 310m seawards, with a rectangular transverse arm facing north at its tip, spanning another 35m or so.²

A customs shed was put up just east of the harbour where goods could be inspected by custom officials. This customs shed was completely destroyed in 1914 by British battle ships and stood in a ruinous shape until it was put into new use as museum in 1960, a function it has served ever since.

The lighthouse (11m high) was put even further land-inward on a small promontory in 1903. It was extended to its current height in 1910 (35.5m).³

The dwelling of the harbour master/port captain was situated just north of the harbour area. This building (also known as “Vierkantvilla”) was translocated to mile 4 when this area was developed into up-market condominiums in more recent times.⁴

The three remaining structures (mole, customs shed and lighthouse) are the only visible and historical remainders of the former Swakopmund harbour at the mole basin.

Soon after the completion of the harbour mole the harbour basin silted up with drift sand from the Swakop River and to a large degree lost its functional value. In future the former mole

harbour basin it was mainly used for recreational purposes due to its protected and safe swimming area and sandy beach. The actual harbour area shifted to the beach between the jetty and the mole.

About 1905 bathing facilities (“Wannen-Badeanstalt”/“Badehaus”) with bathtubs and heated water were put up at exactly the location where Erf 4747 is today.⁵ They provided a public service for recreational, but also hygienic purposes. It should not be forgotten that at that stage the water supply for Swakopmund was rudimentary, and few houses would have had private baths and toilets, thus warranting a public bathing facility.

Since the waver-breaker/mole project had been a flop, a new initiative to extend the port facilities of Swakopmund was therefore undertaken from 1904 onward, resulting in the construction of a wooden pier, located a few metres to the north of the iron jetty. This wooden pier was ultimately 300m long, extending into the sea. It made the landing of goods and passengers much easier, as it carried three steam-driven cranes and rail tracks which eased the transport of the landed goods and even passengers who were hoisted on land by crane.

Unfortunately, a bore-worm gnawed away the structural support of the wooden jetty, so it was decided to construct an iron jetty, the building of which commenced in 1911. It was projected to be 640m long. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the First World War halted the construction works and it was only built to about 200 m or roughly one third of its originally planned size.

Mandate period (1920-1948)

After the First World War Swakopmund lost its harbour function to Walvis Bay which is situated 30km south of Swakopmund. Walvis Bay’s harbour facilities were extended, a cold storage facility for the export of beef to outside markets was added, and new high-rise cranes made offloading of goods much easier. Swakopmund was connected to Walvis Bay through a railway line which ran along the beach. The Swakop River was traversed by a railway bridge in 1927, which was washed away in 1931. Its pylons can still be seen in the Swakop River mouth just south of Swakopmund.⁶ A new railway bridge was put up 6km up east of the Swakop River mouth in 1934.⁷

After 1920 the former harbour area in Swakopmund was solely used for recreational purposes. A Strand Café, public changing cabins and a beach supervisor’s office were put up along the beach. Swakopmund was hailed as “the number one seaside resort of former SWA.”

South African period (1948-1990)

The loss of its harbour function after the First World War extended a heavy blow to the economic situation of Swakopmund. In future, its economic survival hinged on two functions: education (because of the more pleasant weather, which makes learning easier) and recreation (especially for guests from the inland who would visit the pleasant town during summer vacations in the hot December-January months).

In order to promote the inland tourism, Swakopmund engaged on a number of promotional activities such as, to name only a few:

- the erection of the old bungalows as from 1952,
- the establishment of the Swakopmund museum, housing the collections of Dr. Alfons Weber (opened in 1960),
- the annual equestrian championships (Reitturnier),
- the new A-frame bungalows from 1972,
- the music week (Musikwoche),
- a recreational hall (Haus der Jugend) in 1972,
- the new heated Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool in 1971, which was put up on the site of the former Badehaus. This swimming bath in turn was demolished a few years ago to make room for the new development that is under discussion in this heritage opinion.

Important infrastructural improvements at this time were:

- the completion of the tarred road from Windhoek to Swakopmund roundabout 1968, and
- the construction of the road traffic bridge over the Swakop River mouth, the building of which was started in 1967.⁸

Roundabout 1960 the old Strand Café made room for the older Strand Hotel, which was again replaced in recent times by the new Strand Hotel, run by O & L.

Swakopmund experienced another economic upswing when the Rössing Mine near Arandis was opened in 1976. It also gradually started to open to international tourism.

Independence and beyond (1990 and thereafter)

The period after Independence saw a further upswing of Swakopmund as a tourist destination, which by now had been firmly established for both the inland and international tourism sectors alike.

The former mole harbour area saw new development in the form of upmarket condominiums (Am Meer etc.), new restaurants (Rafters), the brand new Strand Motel (after 2010), the demolition of the old heated swimming pool recently, etc.

Also, new uranium mines like Langer Heinrich, Valencia and Husab added to the economic upswing after Independence. Even outside the borders of Swakopmund, enormous developments have taken place since Independence (Mile 4, Langstrand, Hage Heights, DRC), to name only a few.

It seems that roughly since Independence the former mole harbour area moved increasingly into the parallel direction of both an upmarket dwelling and upmarket tourism function, with prestigious condominiums like Am Meer on the one hand, and upmarket hotels like the new Strand Hotel and the new residential and retail development on Erf 4747 on the other hand. This is not surprising given its historical focal point of Swakopmund's earliest harbour function, and

its long-standing usage for holiday makers and beach-visitors. It is for this reason that it will continue to be a major attractor of visitors to this coastal town in future.

The heritage value of Erf 4747

The question now arises as to what the heritage value of Erf 4747 would be?

The answer is relatively simple: It has very little or no heritage value, because of the following facts:

- During the short-lived period when the mole basin was the focal point of the Swakopmund harbour (1892-1904), there were no recorded buildings on this site.
- Also, nothing noteworthy (e.g. stranding of a ship or discovery of a historic ship wreck) was ever recorded here.
- The only historical building on this site was the former Badehaus, which had little historical value. It was put up in 1905 after the mole basin had lost its harbour function as the basin had silted up (1903-4). It was a simple timber-frame building; had a mundane function (hot-water bathing facilities; in its tower there was most probably a water tank and a water heating geyser utility). Apart from appearing on a few historical photographs of this area, its existence has been almost forgotten. When it made room for the new heated Olympic-sized swimming pool before 1971, few mourned its demolition. It was also never included in a heritage register. (The Swakopmund heritage register of the NIA by Klaus Brandt and Edda Schoedder was only compiled in 1986.)
- To the town of Swakopmund, the former Badehaus had a simple practical function like a garage or a changing restroom with ablutions typical for a seaside resort. There was no highly or even remote symbolic or significant historical association, nor did anything significant happen there which would make it a prominent heritage site.
- Even when the Badehaus made room for the new heated Olympic-sized swimming pool, it did not trigger an engaged heritage conservation controversy or anything similar (such as for instance in the case of the Woermannhaus which in 1971-2 was to be demolished to make room for a school hostel, but after public protest retained and turned into a public library and art gallery). The public and the authorities probably all agreed that the new swimming bath (also controversial in the beginning) ultimately added significantly more value to Swakopmund as a tourist destination.
- Even the successor of the Badehaus, the Olympic-sized swimming pool went without much fuss when it was demolished a couple of years ago. It also was a functional building (bathing facility) with no historical or symbolical relevance. In this it followed along the functional recreational lines of the former Badehaus, but also carried very little or no heritage significance.

Another question that could be posed is as to the wider heritage context of Erf 4747.

There are a few historical buildings defining the heritage context of the mole basin:⁹

The narrower context is supplied by the following:

- The lighthouse (1903/10)
- The mole (1900-3)
- Former customs shed (today Swakopmund Museum)
- Former Vierkantvilla (translocated app. 2000)

As these were functional building structures with very little architectural finesse, they only influence their surroundings marginally. Their bearing on the design of a new residential and retail development would be near to zero.

The wider context comprises:

- The Bezirksamt (Presidential Palace) (1901)¹⁰
- Altes Amtsgericht (1905)¹¹
- Kabelmesse (1899)¹²

Although all of them (listed above) constitute fine examples of German colonial architecture, their existence would also have near zero influence on the new residential and retail development, since there is no direct visual contact between these buildings and the new development.

Although, as has been shown above, the heritage value of Erf 4747 is relatively low, there is one aspect that should be considered, namely the height of the development to be established.¹³

To this, the following considerations are forwarded:

The former mole basin is probably Swakopmund's most popular and prominent recreational area, with sheltered open sea swimming opportunities, sandy beaches and numerous tourist attractions (restaurants, museum, craft markets etc.) nearby. It is basically this recreational function, and not its arstwhile and short-lived harbour function, which defines this part of the town historically, and to which most people – visitors and locals alike – have the strongest attachment.

Also, residents and authorities of Swakopmund have always ensured to maintain a low skyline of the town. A few prominent and rightly justifiable exceptions (Woermannhaus, Lighthouse) accentuated the low skyline in a delicate and conscientious manner. This added to the charm of a seaside resort that was meant to be recreational, and not sensational with high billboard, flashy lightshows, avant-garde high-rises, etc.

The design of the new residential and retail development should take this into consideration. It should add to the recreational value of the entire former mole basin, and latch onto it in this function rather than being a pompous and prestigious development at all costs. If therefore the height of the new development would critically infringe on the aesthetic or recreational appeal of the mole basin of such, it should be carefully revised. This, however, is an aesthetic and design issue in conjunction with the town development guidelines and height restrictions, and NOT, strictly speaking, a heritage issue. The guiding hand of a skilled architect is needed more in this than the retentive hand of the conservationist.

In short, the new development should add to the charm of the former mole basin rather than encourage both visitors and residents to the beach or as guests of the new development to stay away from there because it is so ugly.

This warning should not be taken lightly. Many fine beaches for instance in Spain and along the Mediterranean coast have been spoilt by high-rises on the beaches, leading to the neglect and decay of the houses right behind them because their sea view has been cut off. In addition, and this is specific to Swakopmund, the afternoon shadows on the building behind the new development (should it be too high) will be severely felt. As a rule the mist hovers from the morning and clears up in daytime. For those living on the eastside of the new development to be subjected to the shadows of the new development for the larger part of the afternoon, would constitute some serious detriment to their quality of living, ultimately resulting in a reduction of the property values there. This is to be understood as a thought only and not be read as a heritage issue.¹⁴

The picture complement on the following pages will point out the conservative skyline of Swakopmund very convincingly.¹⁵

About the author of this heritage opinion:

Andreas Vogt, born on 26.7.1962 in Windhoek/Namibia, unmarried, attended primary and high schools in Windhoek/Namibia. Conscripted 1981-2, studied humanities thereafter (law, languages, political sciences, political philosophy and philosophy) at Stellenbosch University/South Africa during 1983-88, obtaining *B.A.* and *Hons.-B.A.*-degrees.

Employed between 1989-2001 at the then National Monuments Council of Namibia in Windhoek/Namibia (today National Heritage Council). Attended a post-graduate study course in heritage conservation at the Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg/Germany with a bursary of the German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst - DAAD*) in 1993-4. Obtained *M.A.-degree* in the subject of cultural history from Stellenbosch University/South-Africa in 1995. Doctorate (Dr.phil) 1997-2000 at the Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg/Germany, again as bursary holder of the German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst - DAAD*).

Dr Vogt had been engaged in numerous heritage conservation projects in Namibia during his employment period at the National Monuments Council. He has authored several books, as well as numerous publications and articles in popular magazines and scientific journals pertaining to Namibian and African cultural history, heritage conservation, national monuments and topics related to tourism in Namibia. He currently lives in Windhoek as freelance journalist and writer.



This picture of Swakopmund in 1930 clearly shows the mole harbour basin with the Badehaus featuring prominently in the foreground, the Vierkantvilla to the left, the lighthouse, the customs shed, the old Strand Café and the old harbour mole in the immediate foreground.



This more recent picture of Swakopmund prior to the building of the new Strand Hotel shows the exact same mole harbour basin with the Olympic-sized swimming pool featuring on Erf 4747, the condominium development in the foreground left, with the lighthouse, the old customs shed Swakopmund Museum, and the old harbour mole in the immediate foreground.



Construction of the harbour mole in 1903



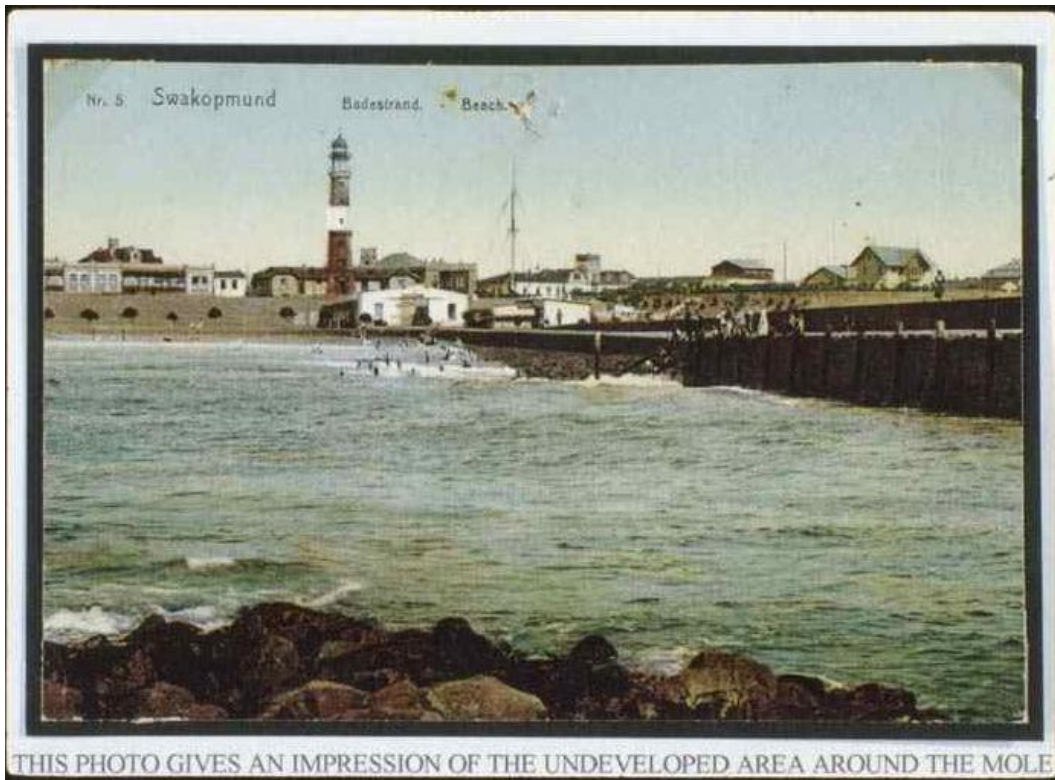
The old lighthouse before it was raised to its current height



The old customs shed (“Kaiserliches Hauptzollamt”) between the mole and the lighthouse after its destruction by British shell fire during World War I. It was developed into the Swakopmund Museum in 1960.



„During 1920 an open music pavilion was erected near the Strand Hotel.“



THIS PHOTO GIVES AN IMPRESSION OF THE UNDEVELOPED AREA AROUND THE MOLE

„This photo gives an impression of the undeveloped area around the Mole.“



THIS PHOTO CLEARLY SHOWS THAT THE TREES HAD GROWN NICELY AND THE STRAN

„Seebad Swakopmund S.W. Africa. Badestrand - Seaside“



Swakopmund, Südw.-A., Lighthouse — Leuchtturm

The Swakopmund and old Bezirksgericht (later used as summer residence of the administrators, now presidential palace).



The beach along the former harbour mole basin, with the Vierkantvilla, Badehaus and the Swakopmund railway station on the background right (app. 1930).



Holiday makers in the old harbour mole basin, with the Swakopmund railway station at the back (left), the Altes Amtsgericht, the changing cabins and the beach supervisor's office, the lighthouse and the old Strand Café (app. 1930).



The old Strand Café (app. 1930)



Inside the old Strand Café (app. 1930)



Inside the old Strand Café (app. 1930)



The old harbour mole (app. 1930)



The old harbour mole basin (app. 1930)



Swakopmund viewed from southeast, probably in the 1920's. The Badehaus is clearly visible; the custom goods shed is still in a ruinous shape. The Altes Amtsgericht, Bezirksamt and lighthouse are all clearly visible.



The mole harbour basin, probably in the 1930's; this time heavily silted up (perhaps after the floods in 1934). The Badehaus is again clearly visible.



Artist's impression of the old Badehaus, probably in the 1960's



The old Vierkantvilla (app. 1998) shortly before its translocation to Mile 4



The old wooden jetty with its three steam cranes



The old wooden jetty with its three steam cranes and railway tracks



The new steel jetty, built as from 1913, abandoned in 1915 after the war.



The rusted steel jetty (app. 1960), used by fishermen and people who took a walk there.



The head of steel the jetty app. 1998



The steel jetty after restoration in 1998



Swakopmund Lighthouse, Bezirksgericht, Intercontinental and Marines Monuments, app. 1970



The harbour mole basin and the old Strand Hotel (app. 1959)



The old Strand Hotel (app. 1959)



The new Magistrate's Offices (app. 1960)



The new police offices and post office (app. 1960)



View of the harbour mole area (app. 1958). The customs shed is still ruinous; the palm trees are still relatively small.



The entrance of the Swakopmund Museum, located in the old customs shed for the German colonial period, with the lighthouse in the background (1998)

Notes

¹ Regarding the founding of the town of Swakopmund see François, C.v.: Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Geschichte der Kolonisation bis zum Ausbruch des Krieges mit Witbooi. Berlin 1899. Nachdruck Haller, Swakopmund 1993, and Rautenburg, H.: Das alte Swakopmund 1892–1919. Swakopmund, 1967.

² Stengel, H.W.: Der Bau der Mole in Swakopmund. Die Muschel, 1967, p. 52-63. See also Marais, C.: Swakopmund Our heritage - Ons erfenis - Unser Erbe. Gamsberg Macmillan, 1996, p. 9.

³ Marais, C.: Swakopmund Our heritage, p. 9.

⁴ This building is identified as „Beamtenwohnung“ in Marais, C.: Swakopmund Our heritage - Ons erfenis - Unser Erbe. Gamsberg Macmillan, 1996, p. 71.

⁵ Rautenburg, p. 177.

⁶ Stengel, H.W. Die Brücken Swakopmunds. In: Namib und Meer, Band 1, p. 69-81.

⁷ Stengel, H.W. Die Brücken Swakopmunds, p. 69-81.

⁸ Stengel, H.W. Die Brücken Swakopmunds, p. 69-81.

⁹ For these buildings see Marais, Chr.: Swakopmund Our heritage - Ons erfenis - Unser Erbe. Gamsberg Macmillan, 1996.

¹⁰ Marais, p. 7

¹¹ Marais, p. 13

¹² Marais, p. 67

¹³ The aesthetical approval from the new development was obtained from the municipality in June of this year, based on the acceptable height, design and color scheme of the new development approved by council. A sun study was also conducted from February last year to December last year which showed no residential building east of the development would be shadowed by the new development. This study was also approved by council in tandem with the aesthetical approval granted. (ECC)

¹⁴ A sun study was also conducted from February last year to December last year which showed no residential building east and southeast of the development would be shadowed by the new development based on the suns orbit from east to west over the town. This study was also approved by council in tandem with the aesthetical approval granted. (ECC)

¹⁵ The contents and pictures of this heritage assessment are copyrighted and may not be used outside the scope of the agreement between the author and ECC without prior consent.