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Heritage concerns

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The lack of funding for the conservation of heritage buildings under the care of Iziko Museums of South Africa has become “concerning”.

Iziko Museums CEO Rooksana Omar says the organisation is “deeply concerned about the state of some of [their] museum sites”, after what they say is a failure on the part of the national Department of Public Works (DPW) to share the burden of the heritage buildings’ maintenance and conservation.

“The [heritage buildings] require ongoing and specialist care. The onus for maintenance, repair and renovation of buildings is a joint responsibility, shared with the national DPW,” she explains.

“Iziko has a dedicated but small maintenance team that do their utmost to attend to daily maintenance issues across Iziko’s nine museum sites. Over the past decade, the day-to-day repairs of the buildings, as well as the maintenance of the garden areas, have fallen upon Iziko. Given the age of many of our buildings, our best efforts have proven to be inadequate for maintenance needs.”

Rust en Vreugd and the Old Town House are both regarded as priority sites, both Iziko sites, and are both currently in a “state of disrepair”.

According to Ian Pretorius, chairperson of the Van der Stel Foundation, the Old Town House dates from 1756 and “has remained almost unaltered since then”.

“It probably is one of Cape Town’s first double-storey buildings ... [and] its early Rococo style decorations may well have played a seminal role in the development of Cape architecture over the next half century that followed. This building and its contents therefore represent an integral part of South African heritage. We will be much poorer as a nation should we lose such an important heritage asset.”

Pretorius says the foundation is aware of the state of disrepair in which the building currently stands. He adds they have noted that renovations are underway, although they have been unable to establish the scope of the renovations or how far along they are. Pretorius adds that the Old Town House is just one of the government buildings over which the foundation is concerned, with another being Rust en Vreugd.

Omar says: “Rust en Vreugd and the Old Town House are among the most beautiful and significant heritage buildings in Cape Town. The current state of disrepair is a consequence of the fact that since 2005, no funding has been allocated for major repair and renovation projects.

Iziko has dealt with this challenge proactively by lobbying the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) for significant funding for a conservation and maintenance plan for each site.”

Architects experienced in working with heritage buildings were appointed in August 2016 to develop various essential reports, including an Existing Building Condition Report for each site and in addition, these architects have identified the most urgent, emergency repairs to be implemented as soon as possible, Omar adds.

“The DAC has subsequently allocated funding to address some of the most urgent and visible areas of deterioration that would substantially improve these buildings. Iziko initiated the process to secure the necessary permissions to proceed and had submitted all the required documentation in September last year. However, further assessments were required. Iziko subsequently procured the services of architects to do these assessments. Iziko is working in collaboration with the appropriate local and provincial authorities and is fully committed to ensuring that the urgent maintenance is implemented as soon as possible.”

Neither the DPW or DAC had commented at the time of going to print.