

Old Synagogue deteriorating

City commuter writes:

Travelling into the CBD along Paul Kruger Street I am always struck by the sad state of the Old Synagogue building as I pass it in a bus or a taxi.

This historic building was the first Jewish house of worship to be consecrated in Pretoria.

It is a beautiful building designed in the architectural traditions of the Eastern Roman Empire and built in 1897.

It fell into disuse as the residential population moved out of the centre of the city and was expropriated by the Department of Public Works (DPW) in 1952.

The DPW transformed the synagogue into a Supreme Court complex where some very infamous apartheid-era trials were held.

Furnished with a dock, tables, chairs and public pews and holding cells behind the main building, the synagogue was where the so-called Treason Trial of African National Congress (ANC) leaders, including Nelson Mandela, was held.

Huge numbers of supporters thronged the streets outside the courtroom singing protest

songs during that trial as well as later ones, including the Cillie Commission of Enquiry into the Soweto student uprising in 1976 and the countrywide “unrest” that followed and the inquest into the death in police custody of Steve Biko in 1977.

This fine historic and architecturally unique building is no longer used as a synagogue or a court but is a Grade II Provincial Heritage Resource and protected under the National Heritage Resources Act (25 of 1999).

This surely indicates that it is a significant building with historical and architectural importance.

So why has it been allowed to deteriorate to the extent that it has?

It has been abandoned for years and is in a shockingly derelict state, with peeling paint, broken windows and ugly wire fencing all around it.

Why has it not been turned into a museum where the people who were tried there can be remembered and commemorated?

Why is it being allowed to deteriorate in the heart of the capital city?



The Old Synagogue: Photo: Wikimedia Commons