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Old Pretoria Shul's revamp meets 'thundering silence'

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The Old Pretoria Synagogue, a national heritage site with major historical significance, has been left to rack and ruin two years after a string of empty restoration promises by the department of public works and infrastructure.

The failure to restore the majestic building that witnessed the start of the Rivonia Treason Trial as well as the inquest into the death of Steve Biko, "shows either a lack of political will or complete indifference", said Madeleine Hicklin, Democratic Alliance shadow deputy minister in the public works department this week.

The ornate building, on Paul Kruger Street in the Tshwane city centre, was the first shul consecrated in Pretoria in 1898. More than half a century of active Jewish communal life took place there as the community grew, contributing massively to the growth of the city. After it was expropriated in 1952 by the department of public works, it was converted and refurbished into a court house where famously, the late Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress (ANC) struggle stalwarts appeared.

For years a place of *simchas*

by the ANC to the citizens of South Africa, whether it's the Jewish community, for whom this building holds so many memories, or the heroes of our modern democracy, who were sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment in the Rivonia Treason Trial that took place in this very building."

Accusing the department and the ANC of taking no pride in South Africa's heritage, she said they "care even less" about the requirements of the National Heritage Resources Act, Section 24 and Section 9.

"These sections determine that the South African Heritage Resource Agency's mandate to restore and refurbish heritage buildings that have fallen into a state of disrepair must be accomplished, while adhering to strict guidelines on exactly how this must be undertaken," she said.

In July 2021, answers to her written questions to then Minister Patricia de Lille promised that "the department is planning for the restoring and linking of a suitable adaptive reuse of the heritage asset within the Tshwane Inner City Regeneration Programme ambit".

"I was assured this was well underway, as well as a pre-feasibility study for the redevelopment of the precinct having been undertaken to maximise the state land," said Hicklin.

In addition, Minister de Lille said, "In this regard, the recommendation is to accommodate the department of sport, arts, and culture's [DSAC's] head office on the property. The old Jewish Synagogue is proposed to be used as both a monument and as a multi-use centre for conferences and exhibitions, open to the public and tourists. The proposal has been submitted to the DSAC, and is awaiting its concurrence."

De Lille said that a feasibility study had been commissioned and, pending its outcome, the execution of the project via a public-private partnership (PPP) would be on the cards. In December 2021, it was confirmed that the feasibility study had been completed years earlier but was "for internal consumption only", according to the minister, and that the "historic value of the building was a critical factor considered during the due diligence process, which included engagements with the City of Tshwane".

Minister De Lille confirmed that, as of 3 December 2021, only the roof of the structure had been stabilised, but that this had already been done in 2011.

"Since then, nothing has been done. Absolutely nothing. Except for the placement of the 24-hour security guard, who is nowhere to be seen," said Hicklin.

She said the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the



The Pretoria Shul in its heyday

Pretoria Jewish Community, and many concerned individuals would "gladly get involved in a PPP to restore this building to its original splendour given half a chance".

Councillor Leanne De Jager, who accompanied Hicklin on two site visits, told the SA Jewish Report that though

they couldn't gain access to the inside of the building, the outside was deteriorating.

"The solution would be for this building to be restored as a heritage site, and used as a possible tourist attraction or information centre in a PPP," De Jager said.

"This matter has been brought to the attention of the department of public works many times and has been raised as a parliamentary question several times. It's simple, public works just has to agree to a PPP, and then it can go to people who can actually look after it."

Diane Wolfson of the Pretoria Council of the South African Jewish Board of

Deputies, expressed sadness at the demise of the building.

"It's falling apart which is so sad, considering that it was a place of so many *simchas*, being the main shul of yester year, a reminder of Pretoria Jewry's significant contribution over the years to the city of Tshwane, not to mention its historical and political significance," she said.

Hicklin said that when Nyeleti Makhubele was appointed acting deputy general in the department of public works in real estate, she asked her if there were any outstanding issues she could address.

"The matter of the Old Pretoria Shul among others, was raised with her on 24 May 2023," but since then, there has been a "thundering silence", she said.

Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Sible Zikalala hadn't responded to questions at the time of going to print.

Member of Parliament Madeleine Hicklin outside the Old Pretoria Shul



Photo: Facebook

followed by struggle scenes of pain and anguish during apartheid, the building today lies forlorn and vulnerable to dilapidation and severe neglect.

For two years, Hicklin has seemingly been fighting a losing battle to have the building and several other buildings of historical significance, including the Union Buildings, restored.

"I've been stonewalled," she told the SA Jewish Report this week.

"Since May 2021, the department of public works and infrastructure's lack of commitment to the restoration of the Old Synagogue in Pretoria has been painfully evident in every engagement on this matter."

During a site visit last Friday, 30 June, Hicklin was dismayed to see that "absolutely nothing had changed".

Exasperated, she said, "Not even the promised 24-hour security guard, meant to ensure that the already desecrated building be spared from further plundering, was on the premises.

"This is another example of the hollow promises trotted out

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