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The Smuts Street backyard bears resemblance to a dumping ground. According to former resident, Johannes Kuhlase, the chaotic state can be traced back to the actions of the previous occupants. Photo | Wayne van der Walt

# Lives eked out in Smuts Street house

## Wayne van der Walt

ERMELO - An abandoned house in Brink Street has been vacant for an extended period, and its deteriorating condition has made it an attractive target for vandals, the homeless and trespassers.

Broken windows, scattered debris and an overgrown yard are a sorry sight for the residents of this neighborhood. It is unclear

who the house belongs to.

This house is one of several examples of neighbourhoods being dotted with neglected or abandoned properties. In 2020, Highvelder initially reported on the Department of Justice allegedly renting an old state house at 28 Smuts Street from the Department of Public Works.

The dilapidated building is still occupied by homeless individuals. Highvelder

experienced first-hand the dire conditions in which they live. At the time, between nine and 12 people inhabited the building, their ages ranging from 24 to 60.

Johannes Kuhlase (60) revealed at the time that they had been living there for almost nine years. He supposedly had lived in the old house the longest, and as a result, the largest room was assigned to him. Dusty wooden floors creak underfoot, the walls

bear years of soot from fires, windows are broken, ceilings are dilapidated, debris fills the house and yard, and everything that could indicate this was once a home has been stripped away.

Rooms are partitioned with curtains draped from the rafters, as the doors have also been dismantled.

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Fana Malaza resides in one of the rooms in the Smuts Street house. Here he is glimpsed through the black-sooted windows of an outdoor building where a fire is kindled for cooking.  
**Photo | Wayne van der Walt**

# Residents of decaying house share hardships

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The property lacks access to electricity and water, and the housemates take it in turns carrying water to the premises.

The backyard resembles a dumping ground, but Kuhlase attributed the rubbish in the yard to the previous occupants.

The occupants said they are seeking employment, but that jobs are scarce. In the evenings, they take it in turns providing and cooking food.

Upon visiting the building again on November 16, one of the occupants, Fana Malaza (52), informed Highvelder that there were now only five people occupying the abandoned building. Malaza has been staying at the house for about a year. The house was also the site of a murder a year or so ago after an altercation between two occupants. Malaza stated it was over a room in the house, but Nomusa Mnisi (29), a female occupant, said the victim, who she referred to as 'Small', and the person who stabbed him were quarrelling over beer.

Mnisi, originally from Chrissiesmeer, relocated to Ermelo in search of employment opportunities. One of her parents died in 2016 and the other in 2018. For the past eight months, she has been recycling bottles and cans, earning about R80 a day. Mnisi expressed concerns about the safety of staying in the house, citing frequent theft incidents.

"My clothes and food have been stolen on many occasions while I'm out collecting recyclable items." She also shared details about her daughter, who resides with her father, the man with whom Mnisi had the child. He is also unemployed and is cared for by his sister. Mnisi expressed a desire to see her daughter more frequently, but is only able to visit every three months.

Most of the occupants face the same challenge of unemployment and resorting to collecting scrap and selling it at scrapyards

for a daily wage.

Andries Khumalo (59), another occupant, previously worked on a farm in Amsterdam. He claimed that he was no longer needed to tend to the sheep and cattle, prompting him to come to Ermelo in search of job opportunities. When asked about sanitation facilities, given the lack of water or toilets, Khumalo mentioned they resort to using filling stations.

Inquiring about Johannes Kuhlase, who used to reside in the building, Malaza said he now receives a pensioner's grant and lives with family in Wesselton. "He often comes to visit us when passing through town."

In response to previous inquiries regarding the abandoned house, the Department of Justice said the building was originally

designated as residential housing for its officials working in the Ermelo magistrate's offices. The house was vacated in 2015 when the officials relocated. According to Steve Mahlangu, spokesperson for the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, subsequent attempts were made to

transfer the property to the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) in 2016. The goal was to repurpose the house as office accommodation to address challenges at the main court building. However, these efforts faced obstacles, primarily due to budgetary constraints. Mahlangu emphasised that the house was never intended for homeless individuals and revealed that those residing there are from surrounding villages and farms, seeking better opportunities. He indicated that the house might be repurposed for office accommodation once budgetary constraints were overcome. According to Malaza, no one of the DPWI or justice department has come to the house.

Fears are mounting that the house on Brink Street may face a similar fate if authorities do not intervene.



**My clothes and food have been stolen on many occasions while I'm out collecting recyclable items**