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Anyone give a fig for the post office?

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DURBAN'S post office building is shady.

Designed by Phillip Dudgeon in 1882, for the past 131 years the building has been central to commercial and private activities in the city centre. Despite its historical significance, though, no one seems to give a fig about its derelict condition.

Right at the top and visible from far away is the post office clock tower which has guided the ebb and flow of daily activities even before our time.

However, a giant fig tree stands sentinel next to the clock tower, while apparently there are also smaller specimens casting shade across the building

and which can be seen from other angles.

Experts have warned that the trees, firmly rooted in position, could result in significant damage to the ageing infrastructure.

Architect and historian Paul Mikula said not removing the tree was the first sign of urban decay.

Fig trees had one of the most invasive root systems and were known to cause serious damage to foundations, pools, gutters, retaining walls, and to lift asphalt and concrete.

He said: "This building is ancient and it's standing there and it looks very elegant. In fact it should have been the city hall. If you love your place and you want to keep it alive and you love your city then you must take care



A FIG tree stands sentinel next to the clock tower of the Durban post office, one of the oldest buildings in the CBD. However, experts say the tree could cause considerable damage to the building, which has been observing the hustle and bustle of life in the city centre for more than a century. | DOCTOR NGCOBO African News Agency (ANA)

of it. But the whole system of respect has collapsed."

Mikula said if the building was not being maintained, despite its heritage and history, then it should be done away with.

"If you are anti-colonial then you say 'we are going to knock this thing (building) down and we don't want any memory of the colonial period'."

The *Independent on Saturday* first reported fig trees growing out of the building's clock tower three years ago. We also highlighted the storm damage to the roof, fittings that were vandalised and the trash piling up behind the railing surrounding the building.

At the time the SA Post Office said it was one of three buildings nationally which had been earmarked for major

refurbishment. Despite this, from street level it appears no maintenance is yet under way and nothing has been done to stem the damage the trees rooting up there could cause to the building.

Last week eThekweni Municipality told the *Independent on Saturday* that the building was the responsibility of the Department of Public Works. The department said it belonged to the SA Post Office.

SA Post Office communication specialist Suzie Khumalo commented briefly via WhatsApp.

"We can confirm that plans are in place to refurbish the building as soon as we receive funding. I don't have the details but the building will be refurbished," she said.