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Author: Sikho Ntshobane

KSD has plans to turn Mthatha's 'slum town' reputation around

Eyesore buildings, many hijacked by a criminal syndicate, to get facelift

SIKHO NTSHOBANE

Several of Mthatha's most rundown buildings, which residents complain have become eyesores, are in line for major facelifts.

This was revealed by King Sabata Dalindyebo mayor Nyaniso Nelani. Among the buildings on the list are historic hotels like the famed Transkei Hotel in Elliot Street and the Grosvenor Hotel on the corner of Madicira and Sutherland streets. The Munitata building which houses municipal offices, is also in line.

Authorities have conceded that more than 100 buildings — among them state properties, hotels and hardware stores — were "hijacked" in Mthatha by a syndicate of just five men.

The Dispatch was unable to contact the owner of the Grosvenor Hotel but municipal spokesperson Sorwabo Mampoza said records showed it had been built in about 1952, making it one of the oldest hotels in the area.

In its heyday, it welcomed many domestic and international guests.

The Transkei Hotel, reportedly built in the early 1970s, was owned by Transkei Hotels whose shareholders owned a number of hotels in the former Transkei region.

A shareholder, who did not want to be named for fear of extortion, said for decades the hotel had been a destination of choice for wealthy patrons.

"There was a bar inside, where the entrance was exclusive. It was very popular."

"Even heads of state would come to wine and dine in the building," he said.

However, things changed drastically after 1994 as the economic and political climate shifted.

A major event was Mthatha's loss of status as the capital city of Transkei, when Bhisho was announced as the capital of the newly formed Eastern Cape.

"The Transkei Hotel was hijacked in 1999 and occupied by



Munitata building Picture: LULAMLE FENI



Grosvenor Hotel Picture: LULAMLE FENI



Botha Sigcau building Picture: SUPPLIED



Transkei Hotel Picture: LULAMLE FENI



Mamela taxi rank Picture: SUPPLIED

illegal tenants," said the shareholder. "The management only regained control in November 2017 after a court judgment."

The shareholder said as soon as the rightful owners returned, plans to revamp the building started in earnest.

However, the building was in a poor state, with electrical wires hanging loose and illegally connected to many illegally partitioned rooms.

After these were removed to allow for renovations to start, the building caught fire in 2021.

New building plans were drafted and submitted to KSD in 2022 and approved in 2023. This allowed for renovations to start.

Last week, workers were busy with the renovations.

Both hotels were razed by fire, months apart, in 2021.

They were among more than five historic landmarks gutted by fires in recent years.

The Dispatch has also reported that Jimmy's SuperSpar in Sutherland Road and another historic building housing Umata Pharmacy and Lillian's Bedding in York Road were gutted by fire.

Jimmy's SuperSpar reopened recently after being renovated.

The York Road building was thought to be about 70 years old. In 1998, the pharmacy sheltered former president Nelson Mandela from a tornado that killed 14 people in the town.

Mthatha residents say the many rundown buildings contribute to the town's reputation of being dirty.

In a list shared with the Dispatch this week, Nelani said: "We conducted a comprehensive assessment on unsightly buildings and have identified those that require immediate attention and prioritised them based on their condition and location."

"This assessment helped us create a road map for action." He said a plan to develop the Grosvenor Hotel had been approved and construction work would commence in February.

The building will be turned into a commercial property with shops and accommo-

modation facilities.

The municipality has given the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) 90 days to either renovate or demolish another famous landmark — the Windsor Hotel, less than 200m from the Grosvenor.

The ECDC recently declared the building unfit for occupation. However, it is having difficulty accessing its own property.

ECDC chief executive Ayanda Wakaba said: "The building remains invaded."

"Efforts through the justice system to evict illegal occupants are still in progress."

He said the building, which is about 40 years old, previously

housed the Protea Hotel.

This was in the days of the Transkei Development Corporation, which owned it.

Wakaba said several buildings, including Development House — which had served as the TDC's head office — were on the list for their refurbishment programme, which was under way.

Construction on Development House was expected to start in April or May.

A plan to develop the Transkei Hotel has been approved and construction began in September 2023.

However, Nelani said it had come to a halt due to unforeseen circumstances.

The building will now house

offices, shops and accommodation.

"A notice [of contravention] has been issued to the owner, which is the department of public works."

"They have already started with the priority works on renovations and upgrading of their structures, including the Gateway Clinic and the Botha Sigcau building," Nelani said.

Botha Sigcau — built in the 1970s by the then Transkei government — was named after the homeland's president at the time, Eastern Mpondoland King Botha Sigcau.

It falls under the department of public works.

Several attempts to get comment from the department

were unsuccessful.

Mamela Motors, one of the oldest filling stations in town, had also been served with a notice, the municipality revealed.

Building plans were submitted and queried for corrections, with the approval still in progress.

The garage's owner, who bought it in 1969, said he had submitted new plans and started renovations. He asked not to be named.

The council has taken a resolution to demolish old structures at the nearby Mamela taxi rank, Nelani said. Renovations have already started on the Munitata building, which was built in 1988, after an assessment was completed.

"We have implemented strict regulations [bylaws]."

"We need to ensure the buildings' owners are held accountable for the maintenance of their properties."

Commenting on the municipality's failure to be granted metro status, Nelani said the authority was committed to the development of Mthatha.

"First impressions matter and the appearance of our town plays a crucial role in attracting visitors, businesses and potential investors," he said.

Mthatha businessman Vuyisile Nlabati, who is the president of the Eastern Cape Chamber of Business, welcomed the news.

He said Mthatha resembled a slum town, where criminals called the shots and even residents were scared to walk past some of the buildings in broad daylight.

Improving the town's aesthetic would draw investors, he said.

Mthatha Ratepayers and Residents' Association spokesperson and municipal PR councillor Madyibi Ngeekana said there were many smaller properties that needed fixing, too.

"They are also historic landmarks."

"The situation is made worse because people use them not only for business but also to sleep in, which is illegal," he said.