

**Minister of Public Works
Mr J Radebe
19 May 1999**

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Comments on the Occasion of a Media Walk-about through the Palace of Justice Church Square Pretoria

This is not the occasion for long speeches. We have all benefited greatly from the detailed briefing from the documentation and inputs of the Department of Public Works, particularly the project manager Ms Susan Pike. I just want to use this opportunity to highlight a few points.

As we have heard the history of this building is extremely interesting. We can but imagine some of the conversations, events and incidents that these silent walls have witnessed over the last 100 years or so. I particularly like the legend that it has its origins in the admonition of President Paul Kruger to the 1895 Jameson Raiders when he commuted their death sentences for invading his Republic to heavy fines. Wagging his finger at them he is supposed to have said: "You wanted to undermine the state. So your fines will be used to build a symbol of the state, the Palace of Justice."

Just last night I attended a function at the Old Synagogue, just down the road from here. That building now awaits restoration to its former glory, a witness also to some of the most interesting and tragic events in our bedevilled past. From place of worship to a jewel in the tarnished crown of apartheid justice, its halls became the very preserve of injustice. So too the Palace of Justice that has come down to the present generation as a building most famous for the venue of the Rivonia Trial.

This Palace of Justice project is funded wholly from government funds. I am greatly encouraged with the example of the Old Synagogue. A private sector company, Independent Newspapers, has come forward to provide the funds to kick-start the restoration process at the Old Synagogue. This is a very fine example of private-public sector cooperation, in the knowledge that state resources are limited. I would call on other companies to consider a similar "adopt-a-heritage-building" approach to ensure that we preserve those heritage assets that are politically, historically and architecturally significant.

The prime objective of the NDPW is to meet the accommodation needs of its Client Departments. In so doing we administer a large number of buildings, many of them heritage buildings of various architectural and historical significance. When the Mandela government took office in 1994 and I became Minister of Public Works, we were surprised to notice that the old department did not have a specific division dedicated to the administration of heritage buildings. It seems that practically all the work of restoration was passed through the general maintenance budget of the department. One of my first steps was to instruct that the transformation of the department would include the creation of the Sub-Directorate: Heritage Assets Management. The wisdom of that decision is before us today: the work this unit has done all over the country is exemplified today in the magnificence of the work of restoration in the Palace of Justice.

The challenge for the Department is to manage its heritage assets within the realities of the day. It is a given that facilities need to be constantly upgraded to meet the changing needs and standards of the client department, and of modern society. Technological- and safety and security requirements and standards need to be incorporated into the existing structure. Add to this the fact that financial resources are always limited, and the scope of the challenge is clear.

The prime objective in heritage management is to keep the buildings functionally occupied, preferably for the purpose they were originally designed for, but it is also often necessary to find an alternative use, and to do the necessary to adapt the building for this new occupation. To find the best possible solution provides excellent opportunities for creative problem solving from sensitive consultant teams, and it is certainly possible within the parameters of responsible heritage asset management.

Heritage is a multi-faceted concept, and the significance of the social memory, is a facet that is not always credited. Buildings provide the stages where things happen to people - individual experiences combine to form a collective memory, and would eventually make a place meaningful to a community. Many of the events of the political past took place in the courts of law and the prison buildings belonging to this department. Many of these buildings are conservation worthy as buildings per se, and most of them are still fulfilling the same function, but a very specific layer has been added to their history and to the individual memories of those who passed through. All these layers combine to create a sense of place that can be perceived almost on an instinctive and subconscious level. It is the task of the heritage conservation specialist to preserve evidence of

the layers as reflected in the physical fabric of the building, so that it can be interpreted as a form of documentation for those that come after us.

The NDPW further realises that it has a role to play beyond the direct management of specific buildings. Its decision to keep government offices in the centre of town makes a major contribution to the efforts of local government to keep the historic city centre precinct viable, and this is a direction that should be supported by the local business and professional communities. It is also something that could be emulated by other cities and towns in our country.

We believe that the restoration of heritage buildings plays an important role in consolidating the foundations of our new democracy. These buildings must become part of our living heritage, reminders of great events or tragic and historic incidents. The silence of the walls of historical buildings must give way to sound and sight of the people who passed through their halls. We must recall the rough with the smooth, and remember. We must allow reconciliation in our country to blossom through the resurrection of memory and the transmission of our history to future generations.

A major feature of our restoration efforts is the use of labour intensive methods of work. This is in line with our general policy of trying to ensure that government actions on its own sites does not lead to the type of job losses we see in the private sector. The building industry is a particular case in point. I want to highlight just three examples of how our policy has paid off.

The creative character of restoration work provides opportunities for the development of specialist skills of ordinary workers. Victor Mongwe, Frans Mahlangu and Dawid Tlabela are workers on this site and their experiences provide an exceptional example to us all. In no small way, they are our own "heroes of labour".

You can see the amazing tiling we are standing on, and we have heard the intricate details involved in their manufacture and restoration. Until this project, Victor Mongwe had dealt with normal ceramic tiling. He however showed a keen interest and confidence in his abilities to turn his attention to the diagonal encaustic tiling. Internationally renowned experts indicated that only three or four people in the world could currently be entrusted with the restoration of these tiles on such a large scale. The costs they quoted us were prohibitive. Mr Mongwe volunteered and after a few tentative attempts proved that he was indeed perhaps the fifth person in the world who could successfully complete the task. In the process he has developed his own methods, which no doubt he will keep secret from us, and today we see the results of excellent craftsmanship. It is a remarkable achievement and today we stand on what is perhaps the largest area of restored encaustic tiles in the world.

Frans Mahlangu is a plasterer with more than eleven years' experience with his present company. He has been trained under his current contract, and completed the BIFSA training with distinction. Of his own initiative he moved on to undertake the extremely difficult task of delicate plaster renovation. We have seen examples of his work all over the building, and I can simply marvel at the artistry of his work. He has shown how to translate training and theoretical knowledge into specialist application. In the process he has given expression to his artistic soul with passion in an area that the normal citizen on the street does not recognise as an art form.

Dawid Tlabela is no longer a young man. When he joined his company he was already a qualified finishing carpenter but he is currently undergoing further training with BIFSA. Faced with a new challenge he too took the initiative and began the tricky task of recreating the intricate carved finishings on the windows and other wood elements in the building. Again, one person's passion and love for his work and the medium of wood in this instance have produced something that transcends the realm of individual achievement.

I want today to recognise these three extraordinary men. Gentlemen, words cannot express my congratulation sufficiently, but accept my strongest appreciation of what you have done for the heritage of our country and the people of South Africa as a whole.

I want also to thank the company that has facilitated the training and the project management as well for the support they have given them. I believe that this and other projects have produced equivalent stories of achievement. I feel an enormous degree of pride that South African workers have been able to achieve world-class work in a project such as this. The Palace of Justice must surely become a monument to the achievement of all the people working on the project. We need to find a way to ensure that these human stories of success are themselves recorded and trumpeted to the public who will one day walk through these chambers and porticoes again after the completion of the project in 2001.

I thank you.

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