


# JOHANNESBURG

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# HERITAGE FOUNDATION

## **Official Statement on the indefinite closure of the Johannesburg Central Library**

**16<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

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The Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF) is extremely concerned by the continued closure of the Johannesburg Central Library since the 10<sup>th</sup> May 2021, and the unsatisfactory communication about this closure from the City of Joburg (CoJ).

According to media statements from the CoJ, the library has been closed due to safety issues. However, the JHF has made repeated requests to CoJ to kindly provide our organisation with access to the engineer/architect/Emergency Management Services reports detailing why the library has been emptied of staff and closed to the public with no timeline for re-opening. As yet, we have received no satisfactory reply.

The JHF is concerned for both the valuable book collections in the care of the Central Library as well as the structure itself, which is a protected heritage building. We further note that the building has already undergone extensive renovations costing some R68 million, re-opening to much fanfare by CoJ in 2012.

The Central Library is a beloved and well-used public facility funded by ratepayers, and we feel all residents of Johannesburg are owed a proper explanation for the ongoing closure by our City Council and those employed to safeguard and manage city assets.

As the JHF, we have requested access to the Central Library so we can do a site inspection for ourselves. This has been refused with no explanation other than the building is 'unsafe'. Meanwhile, researchers and students wanting access to reference material (much of which is not available anywhere else) have been left in the dark. Additionally, many hundreds of Joburg residents who use the library's internet and other facilities have also been shut out.

Following pressure from the JHF, along with newspaper articles and a letter-writing campaign to councillors initiated by Bridge Books, CoJ finally released a statement on 22-11-2023 (please see attached). While we were assured that the response, in conjunction with the JDA as the capital projects implementing agency, would provide "a comprehensive, technical and factual response to all interested and affected stakeholders", the actual media statement contained no useful information and we have been left with more questions than answers.

We are now demanding that the relevant authorities provide, in writing and within two weeks, credible responses to the following:

- Why has the Central Library been closed? This should include a detailed breakdown of the 'health and safety issues' that have been identified so that we can understand the scope of the problem.
- How can stakeholders gain access to all reports produced concerning the closure of the Johannesburg Central Library? The CoJ media statement informs us that the reports are available to the public at the library for inspection – but we are not sure how this is possible since the Central Library is closed and other libraries have not been able to supply the reports when requested.
- In order for the JHF to fully understand the closure and the reasons behind this, as well as for the sake of CoJ transparency on the matter, we are requesting all Council and City Management meeting minutes dealing with the condition of the Central Library, remedial actions and the closure up to now.
- The JHF is extremely concerned that currently no specialist supervising heritage architects are engaged in the proposed renovation works. In the absence of any heritage professionals the JHF has applied to be appointed as a Project Stakeholder and to attend all project meetings going forward.
- What is the anticipated budget and timeline for the restoration work? CoJ and JDA media statements in the last year have given two quite different impressions of the budget necessary to complete the proposed works at the Central Library, and we would like to be given a definitive answer which budget is the correct one and what would be the exact scope of work. More specifically, in February 2023 the JDA released a statement that two SMMEs were on the project, with expenditure estimated to be approximately R904 626. This was to complete the following work: roof leaks solutions such as replacement of damaged roof tiles; waterproofing; sealing of gutters and downpipes; replacement of damaged skylights; fire detection solutions and fire protection elements upgrades; a gas fire-suppression system commissioning and fire signage. In the CoJ media statement on the 22 November 2023, however, a budget of R25 million was quoted over the 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 financial years of which R18 million has been spent to date. There is a considerable difference in these amounts.
- Is sufficient care (including onsite security) being taken to protect the library building, its assets and the irreplaceable book collections during this closure and ongoing renovation work?

As the JHF, we call on all concerned citizens of Joburg to hold the CoJ to account with regards to the indefinite closure of the Central Library. This is a public facility and the CoJ (as custodians of the Central Library) have proven to be vague and obstructive when pressed for any details regarding the nature of the issues and the timeline/budget for the necessary restoration work.

The JHF asks that any resident or organisation that shares our concerns and wants to see the Central Library once again open to all as a vital public facility as well as an important part of Johannesburg's rich heritage, to please email us a message of support to [mail@joburgheritage.org.za](mailto:mail@joburgheritage.org.za)

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