

JOHANNESBURG



HERITAGE FOUNDATION

26 February 2024

To the Premier of Gauteng and other stakeholders

As the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF), we are writing this open letter about the risks currently being faced by Chancellor House – a very important heritage building in the heart of Joburg’s CBD (not to be confused with Chancellor House Holdings, which is an in-house investment firm for the ANC, named after the building in question but based elsewhere).

As you may know, Chancellor House has extraordinary significance. Not only is it an excellent example of Modernist architecture (designed by Frank Jarrett, an immigrant who was inspired by the international Bauhaus movement), but it also housed the law offices of Nelson Mandela and O.R. Tambo – two struggle stalwarts who first opened their practice here in 1952.

Located directly across from the Magistrates Court, the Chief Magistrate was thus forced to face two of his greatest foes daily for 10 years, until Oliver Tambo was sent overseas by the ANC and Nelson Mandela was jailed on Robben Island, after which the partnership lapsed. Until then, on any given weekday there would be long queues of desperate people lining the pavement of Fox Street awaiting their turn for an interview; their one hope of relief from the Apartheid system.

After 1994, Chancellor House became a significant tourist attraction and a heritage site of national importance. It was also the focal point of several tours led by the JHF (and others) that commemorated the history of the struggle, especially around Human Rights Day.

Following severe neglect on the part of the previous property owners, the city took over the property and undertook extensive restoration that was completed in 2011. However, since then, Chancellor House has remained unoccupied. We find it very surprising that the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), which is entrusted with the care of this site, has not been able to find a suitable tenant in over a decade – especially considering the convenient location across from the busy magistrate’s court. This is a profound failure on the part of the JDA as any heritage site that is not put into productive use is bound to decay.

Surely there must be an NGO or legal-aid organisation that would be interested – perhaps at a discounted rental?

We further note with great concern that an ever-growing contingent of homeless people has begun to camp out along the pavement outside Chancellor House – both day and night. While we do not wish to demonise or dismiss the plight of the homeless, the reality is that the public can no longer enjoy safe access to the site. We also fear that the building is in danger of being invaded – as has happened with many other abandoned buildings across the CBD.

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This would be especially tragic in light of the expensive renovation undertaken by the city, which includes an excellent shop-front museum with info boards detailing the site's unique history, and the original 'Mandela and Tambo - Attorneys' sign painted on the 2nd floor window (which is very fragile).

We have repeatedly alerted the JDA and the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg of the situation. We have also enquired of them as to when the building would be let to tenants (even at a nominal rent), and when they would remove the homeless people from this important heritage site. But there has been no reply and no indication that JDA has even visited the site to assess the situation for themselves.

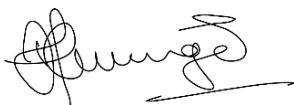
Our concern for the future of Chancellor House is supported by the Heritage Association of South Africa and many other like-minded organisations. We are also cognisant of the upcoming World Tourism Association for Culture and Heritage conference, which is being held in Johannesburg in October 2024. This international gathering of cultural and heritage tourism practitioners will no doubt be interested in Chancellor House, and it will show the city in a very poor light if even our most important heritage sites are standing empty or illegally invaded.

As such, we strongly urge you and the relevant stakeholders to apply pressure so that we can resolve the issues facing Chancellor House as soon as possible. As a heritage site, it is under direct threat and only a beneficial occupation by responsible leaseholders will ensure that it doesn't become yet another casualty of the inner city's decline.

We look forward to your prompt response.

For further information, please contact the JHF through Barbara Cron: mail@joburgheritage.org.za

Yours most sincerely



David Fleminger – Chairperson, Johannesburg Heritage Foundation