

05 March 2024

Initial report back following site meeting at the Johannesburg Central Library

On Friday 1st of March 2024, the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF) met with city representatives, engineers and fire experts at the Johannesburg Central Library for a site inspection. Our intention was to examine the building and determine the best way to re-open the library to the public in a way that is safe and practical.

In general, it was a good meeting and our advisers had the opportunity to look carefully at what the City believes to be the major problems preventing a phased re-opening.

The tour started 4 storeys down (in the stacks) where we were shown evidence of a few cracks, as well as signs of a gas-driven fire protection system (which was installed in 2012 but never commissioned – for reasons that are unclear).

We then proceeded up through the building to the roof where the waterproofing still leaks after no less than three contractors have worked on it and been paid for that work. This is fruitless expenditure. We were pleased to note that the water ingress is not harming the books or maps, nor is it preventing the library from operating.

The most urgent task, in our initial opinion, is to complete and commission the gas-driven fire prevention system. Certain doors also need to be fire-proofed. This should take 3 months to complete, after which the entire building can be safely opened up.

The redesign of the roof and repair of the waterproofing by a competent contractor must also be undertaken, but this can be done after ensuring the building is safe from fire. Work on the roof would not prevent the public from safely accessing the library.

We further note that one of the biggest problems facing the library is an overly bureaucratic approval process that results in bottlenecks. Additionally, a lot of time and money has been wasted by involving multiple consultants and contractors.

Ultimately, however, the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) is the implementing authority for the Central Library. As such, we call on the JDA to step up and fulfil their responsibility by expediting the process of re-opening. Too much time has been wasted in this regard with little to show for it. The Library needs effective management, now!

We are nonetheless gratified that city representatives do have a proposal for the library and have invited our input. As such, we have been promised the fire design, the quantity surveyor's estimates, minutes of previous meetings about the library, and detailed construction drawings. Once we have all the material, we will issue a more detailed statement on what we regard as the best way forward.

In short, the JHF would like to reiterate that the Central Library is a wonderful building, packed with important resources. It's high time to get the building re-opened to the public so that: students can access the 140 computer workstations with free wifi; people can start borrowing books again;

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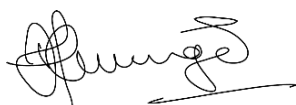
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educational and literacy programmes can resume; local community members can enjoy the facilities of the newsroom; and researchers can once again access the archival material they need in the African Studies or Reference libraries.

We remain committed to doing whatever is necessary to get the Central Library re-opened as soon as possible.

For more information, please contact Flo Bird: flo@joburgheritage.org.za or David Fleminger: david@joburgheritage.org.za.

With thanks



David Fleminger – Chairperson, Johannesburg Heritage Foundation