



SAD SIGHT: The gutted remains of the once-imposing Rissik Street post office in central Joburg. The building is now being restored to its former glory.

PICTURE:
NEIL
BAYNES

Historic building to regain its glory

ANNA COX

Restoration of Rissik Street post office takes off

AT LONG last, there is hope for the historic Rissik Street post office which was gutted by fire twice in three months this year.

Work has finally started on its restoration.

The building has a long history of broken promises with many failed attempts by both the private and public sector to restore it.

After the fires, the City of Joburg's property management agency, the Joburg Property Company (JPC), was accused of failing to secure it properly.

The building has been empty since 1996. In 2002, the clock hands and bells were stolen from the tower. Its brass light fittings and switches and wooden balustrades had already been stripped.

The post office was built in 1897. It was designed by Dutch architect Sytze Wierda, who also designed the Palace of Justice in Pretoria in 1897. It was declared a national monument in 1978.

At one time, it was the tallest building in town and is a mix of styles, including Renaissance, French, Dutch and other European influences.

Now, it is being restored as a heritage site in two phases.

JPC spokesman Brian Mahlangu said the restoration would be in line with heritage approvals.

"The city has assembled a team that consists of a heritage consultant, engineer, quantity surveyor, contractor and health and safety officer."

The first phase of the project was under way, with teams involved in clearing, salvaging and developing a restoration strategy."

The Gauteng Provincial Heritage and Resources Agency confirmed it had served a restoration order on the City of Joburg and appointed Motsepe Architects to review the site and recommend conservation measures.

The fall of a famous Joburg landmark:

● The responsibility for its maintenance belonged to the post office, in terms of the long-term lease agreement, which was entered into between the post office and the city at a rental of R49 a year.

The post office, despite

requests, instructions and threats of court action, never fulfilled its obligations in regard to maintenance and the building deteriorated from year to year.

● In 1994, when the provincial government relocated from Pretoria to Joburg, the post office was to be refurbished for the offices of the premier.

Although the city later made the building available, it was not in a position to finance restoration. A private sector consortium was put together by the Central Joburg Partnership, finance was raised and a lease deal offered to the provincial government was accepted, but later rejected.

The city negotiated with the post office to cancel its lease

and vacate the building. The deal included R3.5 million in compensation for lack of maintenance, but that money was never spent on the post office.

In 1988, the then Southern Metropolitan Local Council called for proposals for the future use of the building. It accepted a Malaysian property developer's plan to turn the building into a five-star boutique hotel at a cost of R35m. The deal delayed all other possibilities for a number of years and was finally cancelled in the early 2000s.

● The city then put out another proposal call for the re-development of the building and received some good commercial proposals including retail, hotel and commercial uses.

● However, the building has stood empty since 1995 and was occupied by squatters.

