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News Brief – 034 – Heritage Association of SA City of Johannesburg & Museum Africa

The Heritage Association of South Africa (HASA) is, with growing concern, following reports from heritage preservationists and activists about the crisis unfolding at Museum Africa – in our opinion custodian of one of the finest and most valuable Africana collections in the world.

In short, the crisis stems from critical staff shortages, in some cases, at least, two decades in the making, as important curator, educational, conservation, cleaning, facilities management and security posts have been left vacant.

Simply put, it appears that the City of Johannesburg has failed at that most basic management requirement – skills retention and development.

As a generation of specialist curators have left the museum either through retirement, re-deployment or resignation – no arrangements have been made to ensure the transfer of what amounts to highly specialist skills to a new generation of curators and conservators. To be clear, graduate students – and let's be frank – black humanities graduates are leaving university with little prospect of finding employment in the heritage sector. One would think that the City of Johannesburg would proudly avail its cultural institutions to provide the necessary opportunities for these new job seekers.

We quote from a recent article in the City Press ("MuseuMAfricA's crisis – some positions unfilled for 18 years" by Grethe Koen, City Press, 10 January 2015), "[t]he museum is currently lacking more than eight vital positions, including a costume curator, curator for the traditional black cultural collection, history curator, image curator, conservator, a building manager and educators and a schools specialist."

We understand that by the end of this month, Museum Africa will effectively be operating without a Curator of Collections – a position which currently oversees photography, black material culture, valuable (and one of the world's largest) KhoiSan collections, costumes, furniture, architectural objects and drawings and ceramics. These collections will be closed and left inaccessible to the public in general and local and international researchers more specifically, until such time as the City appoints new staff members.

While we accept that the City of Johannesburg has other important things to focus on – least of all water and electricity distribution in an election year – the full implications need to be clearly understood:

- According to foreign and local visitors and tourists, as reported on TripAdvisor, Museum Africa is a stinker. The Nairobi National Museum gets more and better reviews than Museum Africa. Here we must be absolutely clear: such reports are due to no fault of the staff. When there are no funds for new exhibitions and when curators have to change light bulbs or have to climb on the roof to prevent flooding of the historic collections – we know that management at the highest level is, well, not managing. When the city promotes Newtown as a "cultural precinct" and tourists miss your main attraction, alarm bells should be ringing.
- Collections are at risk: without curators, the time consuming and ongoing process of cataloguing collections cannot be completed. This means that not only are collections left vulnerable when there is no one to oversee them – in particular at a museum that has experienced cases of theft in recent years, but equally worrying asset registers are left hopelessly incomplete and inadequate (which, if nothing else, transgresses government's own policy on asset management. We hope National Treasury and the Auditor-General take note).
- Unless the City can pull a rabbit out of the hat by the end of January, researchers ranging across disciplines from architecture, town planning, engineering and more will not have access to archival material which means that even staff within the City will not be able to access important records that are vital for urban research and planning. We know that these are the most used collections in the Museum and are important not only to the city's institutional memory but also feeding the wider knowledge economy as well.

We are sure that City leaders will respond to the immediate crisis and we welcome that wholeheartedly. However, it is also clear to us that a long-term solution is required – incidentally, at all the museums under the care of the City of Johannesburg there have been similar cases reported – to ensure that politicians and officials fully understand the significance, value and role of these collections, that they accept the daunting scale of the crisis and that they work in collaboration with the heritage community and the private sector to find the necessary solutions.

Johannesburg has a proud legacy – it was two decades ahead of the rest of the world when it presented art biennales that are still pivotal moments for contemporary African art. It has invested in new museums that celebrate the city's uncontested role in the struggle against apartheid; it has implemented progressive public art- and pro-heritage rates- policies that put other metros to shame. For this reason, we hope that the Mayor will visit all the city's museums and realise they're more than colonial and apartheid hangovers, they're our continent's jewels and deserve much better.

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