



STAMP OF APPROVAL: An artist's impression of the proposed Rissik Street post office complex showing the back of the building.

## At long last, Rissik Street post office will get its revamp

Vandalised, burnt, the clock tower stripped; now it'll be restored

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**R**ESTORATION work has finally begun on one of Joburg's iconic inner-city buildings.

Having endured two fires, vandalism and neglect over the years, there are hopes that the Rissik Street post office will be restored to its former glory by the time it marks its 120th year next year.

Situated in the historic trio that includes the town hall and the city library, work has begun to renovate the building and revive it for potential event hosting.

The Joburg Property Company (JPC) said the building was in need of urgent attention and had launched an interim intervention plan to revamp the post office to the tune of R36 million.

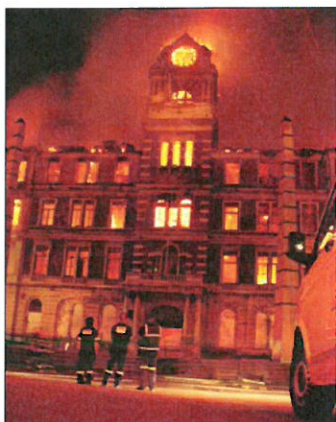
Work has already begun on the interior of the provincial heritage site, following engineers' reports that the foundation is stable.

"The Rissik Street post office building was severely vandalised and damaged by fire, therefore a significant danger exists of further deterioration of this heritage structure," said Helen Botes, chief executive of JPC.

Artist's impression drawings depict a modernised entrance with a generous garden which project manager, Gugu Hlophe, said would incorporate the Oppenheimer Park adjacent to the back of the building, switching the entrance to Helen Joseph Street.

"The frontage has always been Rissik Street but we want to have a more exciting and contemporary-style entrance," she said.

The post office is a heritage building, but it has been



GUTTED: Fire and emergency services members watch the post office burn in 2009. The building was abandoned at the time. After that, promises were made and broken to restore it; now, they are a reality. PICTURE: KAREH SANDGREN

systematically vandalised and allowed to fall into disrepair.

James Wylie, chief project architect from Paradigm Architects, said when they commenced the renovation process, there were no plans. "I actually used the post office for my thesis at university and used many of the drawings I created then," he said.

The City of Joburg is the registered owner of the Rissik Street post office and made the funding available.

"This funding is to prepare the building for construction

to make it safer for further work and interim use. The short-term intervention will be erected within the existing structure to ensure structural integrity," said Botes.

After a fire in 2010, R16m of temporary work was done to repair the roof and halt the decline and structural decay.

Hlophe said the first phase should be completed by the end of the year, when the interior work would be finished, including the strengthening of the columns and trusses to allow for future renovations.

JPC said once fully

developed into a multi-use space, the stately building could offer a variety of venues.

"This interim phase talks to the north and south wing where we'll be putting up a steel structure to reinforce the building and then starting with the external facade later," said Botes.

JPC said the roll-out of the work would depend on the allocation of the budget but onlookers would really only notice the upgrades when the outside facade was given attention.

The final phases, predicted to cost a further R100m, will include installing a clock similar to the original one. This would duplicate the pre-war device but would only happen after 2018, Hlophe said.

Wylie said the central hall, where customers once sent and received mail, was earmarked to be a large banqueting venue and plans include food service, ablutions and a warming kitchen. The attractive curved roof, the glass ceiling and wooden windows are severely damaged but still have some of the original counter-tops.

"The postal hall has elements we plan to keep and many we will replace such as the original joinery and the glass roof, which we can light from above. The terrazzo tiles will be reclaimed and returned when we level the floors," said Wylie.

The four-storey area called the north wing has been destroyed by fire damage, leaving a triple-volume ceiling, which showcases large windows and the additional top floor added a decade or two after the original building.

"It is a dramatic space and we plan to strengthen the top trusses and install concrete floors with a wood finish - it could be a contemporary space



THE WAY IT WAS: An old photograph of the Rissik Street post office.

PICTURE: BARNETT COLLECTION

for launches, music concerts or fashion events."

The cost of repair will include, among others, reinforcing the basement foundations, securing the timber flooring and removing and reinstating the roof to install steelwork.

"I am delighted something is happening at last, but I was told it would be limited to the steel skeleton to be inserted into the building to hold any future infill," said Flo Bird of the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Association.

External scaffolding, the reinforcement of concrete bases and the basement foundations will also receive immediate attention.

Barricading of high-risk areas and the creation of access areas to the site for professional teams to assess and embark on further work was

### HISTORY

THE Post Office was first built in 1897.

The original design, by Sytze Wierda, features painted plaster accents and red facebrick with sandstone alternations.

Wierda also worked on the Raadsaal (1890) and the Palace of Justice (1897), both in Pretoria.

The style of the building is known as "the second empire

style", which features an exaggerated central tower and tall windows. The facade on Rissik Street and the original market square includes two ornamental roofed elevated towers and a central turret.

Initially three storeys high, the building was deemed too small just three years after being built and a fourth story was added.

also being done.

A large chunk of the money will be spent on erecting scaffolding to allow access to the roof and creating an 11m structural frame inside the building. Reinforced concrete bases and concrete columns on both

and inside, handles and light fittings have all been stolen.

Inside, all that is left of the suspended wooden flooring is the steel base, revealing the basement area below. Fire damage is extensive.

"Externally, the condition of the building appears worse than it actually is. Besides the problem of disintegrating plasterwork and sandstone mouldings/cornices, there is nothing that a capable restorer would not be able to repair," said heritage consultant Johann Bruwer in a heritage assessment survey dated 2002.

Plans have been submitted to the heritage council and JPC has applied for permits.

Detailed plans include the revamping of the park area and contact has been made with Joburg City Parks and Zoo regarding the extensions.



WHAT REMAINS: The interior of the post office after the fire.



MODERN TAKE: An artist's impression of a section of the proposed interior of the revamped building.