

Concern Over Extended Closure of City of Johannesburg Branch Libraries

By Karibu Staff

Johannesburg's public libraries have faced persistent challenges over the past five years, severely impacting students, researchers, and communities who rely on these vital public spaces. Issues include prolonged closures, deteriorating infrastructure, limited accessibility, understaffing, and sluggish maintenance and regeneration efforts.

As of present, at least seven libraries under the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) remain closed, demolished, or under renovation. These include:

- Louisa Prince Library (Ennerdale Ext. 9): Closed since 2021 following a brief reopening after its initial 2020 closure due to electrical faults.
- Southdale Library: Reportedly closed due to a collapsed roof.
- Brixton Library: Closed for several years.
- Murray Park Library (Jeppestown): Demolished; a new library is being built.
- Matholeville and Kaalfontein Libraries: Also reported as inaccessible.
- Protea North Library (Soweto): Closed, according to recent reports.

The most significant closure has been the Johannesburg City Library, located at the corner of Albertina Sisulu Road and Pixley Ka Isaka Seme Street. This historic institution, housing over 1.5 million books and archives, was closed in May 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions and structural disrepair. It partially reopened in March 2025 and was fully reopened on 09 August 2025 in an event where the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg, Mr Sello Dada Morero, spoke in celebratory mood.

The reopening followed extensive renovations, including fire safety upgrades and infrastructure modernisation. It coincided with the library's 90th anniversary, celebrated on National Women's Day, 9 August 2025. The restoration was led by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), with support from civic organisations such as the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation and Johannesburg Crisis Alliance.

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"The library is one of the ever-dwindling public spaces where people of all ages can gather, learn, develop relationships, and exchange points of view in person," writes Katie King. For many Johannesburg residents, this sentiment reflects a growing concern over the erosion of public spaces.

While some argue that shopping malls offer alternative gathering points, comparisons to countries like South Korea—where mall-based libraries thrive—may not be applicable due to South Africa's distinct socio-economic context.

The Killarney Library, tucked away in the basement of Killarney Mall, has become a focal point for local activism. A community group known as the Friends of the Killarney Library, comprising around 70 members, was formed over concerns about the library.

The group has launched awareness campaigns, hosted book sales, and proposed events such as book clubs, children's readings, and even a seed library. Their efforts aim to transform the space into a vibrant community hub.

While the reopening of the Johannesburg City Library will mark a significant milestone, the continued closure of several branch libraries remains a concern. Civic groups and residents are calling for renewed investment and attention to these essential public institutions, which serve as cornerstones of education, inclusion, and community life.

This article was submitted on 10 August 2025. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online (www.Karibu.org.za), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.