

Organisations and Residents Calls for the Reopening of the Johannesburg Library

By Noluvuyo Lata

28 May 2024

On 18 April 2024 about a hundred activists from various organisations and residents gathered outside the Johannesburg Library on Albertina Sisulu Road and Pixley Ka Isaaq Seme Street, Johannesburg, calling for the reopening of the Johannesburg Library.

The protest which was led by the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF) was joined by the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, Joburg Crisis Alliance, Joburg Inner City Partnership, the Association for Accountability, Defend our Democracy, Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA), Khanya College as well as citizens and students from around Johannesburg.

In May 2021 the Johannesburg development agency declared the library completely closed to the public and deemed it unsafe for human use, saying that it would take millions of Rands and at least until the 2025 financial year to get the library ready for public use again.

JHF did not however take this lying down noting that the library staff was still reporting for work from May 2021 to date, a fact which puts questions on the idea that the building is not safe.

After multiple engagements with the city, the JHF managed to get two professional architects to inspect the building and give their expert advice. The experts established that one part of the building could be open for public use while another part was being renovated.

According to Johannesburg Heritage Foundation's David Fleminger, reading is not a luxury but is our right as citizens of the country to have access to information at our fingertips.

"Inside this library, you will find more than a million books, about 120 computers that have free Wi-Fi, daily newspapers that are delivered for free reading, not to mention all the archives that are there that are just sitting in there collecting dust," said Fleminger before he adding, "With the current education system books and libraries play an important role in curbing this crisis where people can self-educate and improve the literacy in the country. The Mayor of Johannesburg must take us seriously and partially re-open the library and renovate where there is a need, we demand it."

There were a few authors who were also at the protest calling for the re-opening of the library. Authors, including Lebogang Mashile, Zakes Mda, Enver Surty and Dr Max Price pledged to donate some of their works to the library as soon as it reopened, for the public to enjoy.

Amongst the speakers was author Professor Njabulo Ndebele who quoted the Freedom Charter saying, "When freedom comes the doors of learning will open for all." Ndebele emphasised that there is no democracy if people are denied access to information.

"I run a book club in my hometown of Pretoria, and I am here today supporting this cause because I feel that access to knowledge is very important. Spaces like libraries provide people with safe and quiet [environment] where they can read and let their imagination take you to different worlds while sharpening your cognitive skills. People who suffer the most are black working-class people because we can't afford to buy books for ourselves so libraries must be there to bridge that gap."

"I think I would feel much better if some of the books that are just locked in there were given to community libraries, NGOs, aftercare centres, people who have an actual use for these books, it is truly unfair. Libraries in the townships have to [have] books, going there in most

instances you find less than 300 books in a library that is in a working-class area,” said Queen Mdluli (30) from Johannesburg who decided this was a cause worth fighting for.

20-Year-old Thobile Xilanga told Karibu, “I am currently doing my second year at Wits, and I came out today because as someone who is working towards being in the education field and as a citizen of this country, I need to show up for education, information for our people. Reading is an important skill to master because then you understand concepts and ideas. It is selfish and quite arrogant of our government to think that it is okay for them to treat us so horribly that you don’t want people to read, denying them such a beautiful thing.

It is no secret that South Africa has a big literacy problem, grade 4 learners can’t read for understanding, yet government still thinks it is okay to close libraries. Time and again the government manages to disregard the wellbeing of the working-class people. Be it education, health, basic services etc, the working-class are constantly put on the backseat while they suffer the consequences of the governments decision making.

The organisations and the residents protesting made two demands submitting them to the Mayor of Johannesburg.

- The immediate partial re-opening of the library; and
- For the Mayor to stop dragging the work and begin with renovations on the other side as soon as possible.

The mayor was given seven days to respond to these demands with immediate action towards opening the library.

Strangely, a building that has been deemed unsafe can hold employees daily while the public is blocked from coming in. It is also puzzling what the staff is being paid salaries for when the building lies empty. It is true reading is not a luxury at all, everyone should have access to information and knowledge Open the Johannesburg Library Now!

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