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City of Johannesburg
Arts, Culture and Heritage Services

IMMOVABLE HERITAGE INVENTORY FORM

Name of Site: Bantu Mens' Social Centre

Other Names (if any):

Location: 1 Eloff Street Extension, within the JMPD complex / Headquarters

Stand no:

Street address: 1 Eloff Street Extension, Johannesburg.

District/Province/Region: Region F / Gauteng

Ownership: City of Johannesburg

Previous Owner:

Present Owner

Site Type: Municipal building

Photo



State of Conservation:

The brick facades and overall structure are well preserved. The interior has however been altered over the years, taking away much of the original character. The hall has lost its original timber floors (replaced by tiles), stage and other fittings. Some of the original context has been lost, especially as the previous access to and from Eloff Street has in more recent years been closed off with a high wall.

Description

This is a handsome double-story brick building dating from the 1920s, distinguished by fine decorative brick-work. Much of the space is taken up by a large hall on the south side, with double volume spaces, and offices attached on the north side.

History:

The Bantu Men's Social Centre was opened in 1924, founded by the Reverend Ray Phillips, an American missionary, together with other liberal minded blacks and whites. The aim of the centre was to provide recreational facilities for young black men in the city. The place was frequented by budding political leaders, writers, intellectuals, teachers and journalists.

The BMSC developed into a lively venue, where meetings, lectures and debates were held, cultural events such as plays and concerts, as well as dances, weddings and sporting events. The hall served in the past as a famous concert venue, and hosted the annual Eisteddford, or choral festival. In 1934 the Transvaal Eisteddford became a national event, and renowned singers came to Johannesburg for several days of competitions at the BMSC.

The facility was well funded, and had a branch library of the Carnegie Corporation, including an impressive collection of works by African American authors. There was also a tennis court alongside the building.

In 1932, playwright H.I.E. Dlomo and others formed the Bantu Dramatic Society at the BMSC, where they produced a series of productions for mixed African and white audiences, although with a limited following. The Bantu Dramatic Society continued its efforts to promote literary drama at the BMSC in the 1940s.

On 24 February 1944, a group of young men (and one woman, Albertina Sisulu) met at Johannesburg's Bantu Mens' Social Centre at the south end of Eloff Street, where they were regular visitors. Amongst them were the lawyer Anton Lembede, an aspirant lawyer, Nelson Mandela, teachers Oliver Tambo and A.P. Mda, and two estate agents, Walter Sisulu and David Bopape. This young elite proceeded to form the African National Congress Youth League, which went on to inject militancy and radicalism into the ANC.

Membership of the BMSC declined in later years, probably as the Group Areas Act started to bite, and in 1971 the centre closed its doors. The West Rand Administration Board moved into the building in 1973. Currently, the Johannesburg Metro Police occupy the building, part of a large complex that houses their headquarters.

Statement of Significance:

From the Late 1920s, the Bantu Mens' Social Centre (BMSC) served as a lively center of cultural activity for black men in the city, many of them forming the cultural elite, attracting and nurturing many outstanding intellectuals and artists. For decades, the segregation policies of successive white governments, saw to it that the Bantu Mens' Social Centre was virtually the only downtown facility for black people. The BMSC looms large also in the annals of political history, as the birthplace of the ANC Youth League, which went on by the 1950s to inject a new militant energy into the ANC.

Inscriptions:

Dating from the opening of the facility, a granite plaque on the north side of the building bears the following inscription:

“The stone was laid by

His Worship the Mayor Clr. M.J. Harris.
January 20 1924”

In 2015, a blue Johannesburg City Heritage plaque was installed at the entrance to the BMSC. The inscription reads:

BANTU MENS’ SOCIAL CENTRE

Opened in 1924 to provide recreational facilities for young black men, the BMSC became a great centre of cultural activity, frequented by intellectuals, artists, writers and emerging political leaders. Sporting events were held here, plays and concerts, and the annual Eisteddford, which became a national event. In 1944, the Youth League of the African National Congress was founded here, which went on to transform the politics of the parent organisation.

Legal Status (Decree/Act):

General Protection: Section 34(1) Structures under the National Heritage Resources Act, 1999.

Authority Responsible

Provincial Heritage Resources Authority – Gauteng (PHRA-G)

Use

Previous: Recreation centre

Current: The building houses the Internal Investigations Division of the Johannesburg Municipal Police Dept. (JMPD).

Documentation/Research

Photos ☒ Maps ☐ Site Plans ☐ Others.....

Source(s) of Information

Callinicos, Luli. The world that made Mandela: a heritage trail. Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2000.

Hyslop, Jonathan. Gandhi, Mandela and the African Modern. In: Johannesburg: the elusive metropolis. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe editors. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008.

Name & Address of Recorder:

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Postion: Deputy Director: Immovable Heritage

Signature

Date

January 2016