

COMMUNITY HOUSE



a site of activism

41 Salt River Road

Salt River

7925

Tel: 021 - 447 7319

Fax: 021 - 447 7312

Email: comhouse@telkomsa.net

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

On Thursday, 3rd May 2012 Community House celebrated its official declaration as a provisional heritage site. MEC Ivan Meyer did the unveiling at this auspicious occasion.

Background

Community House, 41 Salt River, Cape Town, has unique social and political significance. The mid-1980s saw heightened repression in apartheid South Africa, the revival of the workers' movement and an intense struggle for liberation. This created the need for infrastructure and a stable environment from which trade unions and civic and service organizations could wage this struggle. To meet this need the Western Province Council of Churches (WPCC) and the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT), an NGO, purchased a dilapidated auto-workshop in Salt River, an area known for its textile and light metal factories that marks the origins of industrial unions in the province.

Community House was officially opened on 21st August 1987. Eight days later agents of the apartheid state bombed the building. Shortly after this the building was occupied. A site of cross-fertilization, support and collective mobilization for a diverse range of organizations was established.

While this history, of community solidarity and service, stretches even further back, to the early 1900s¹, Community House's significance is not merely symbolic. Today, Community House continues to accommodate organisations engaged in struggles for socio-economic justice and equality. This continuity constitutes its character as a living heritage site.

However, in the construction of South African national heritage, the histories of organized workers and working class communities have been marginalized. In 2007 the Community House tenants and activists, concerned at the lack of recognition and the deterioration of the site, embarked on a plan to establish Community House as a multi-purpose labour and community heritage site. Key elements of the plan were to seek provincial heritage status, to resource public areas as a museum precinct and to conserve the building.

The heritage process was initiated by the collaborative work of the longstanding anchor tenants, the Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU], the Labour Research Services [LRS], the International Labour Research Group [ILRIG] and Workers World Media Productions [WWMP]. As part of the site development process, after 24 years the founding Community House board members have stepped down. Representatives from COSATU, LRS, ILRIG and a tenant representative from Workers World Media Productions have replaced them. This partnership now forms the Board of Community House – and continued to drive the heritage project.

¹ In the early 1900s Community House was owned by the 'Bond vir Maatskaplike Werk', a white, Afrikaans social services formation that conducted community work in Salt River for 20 years. In 1930 they handed the site over to the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging [ACVV]. It was used as a hostel for 'low income' young white rural Afrikaans women who had moved to the city in search of work.

FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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In 2010 after a protracted engagement with Heritage Western Cape [WCDSRAC] official provincial recognition was gazetted stating: *"In the height of Apartheid repression in the 1980s, Community House came to symbolize the collective spirit of a mass movement that fought the final battle against an unjust regime. Today it still functions as a home for civic organisations"*².

Strategically, the heritage concept is multi-pronged. It seeks to celebrate the role of working class communities in the making of history; to redress historic imbalances; to enhance the working environment of tenants and their constituencies; to open the site to casual visitors; to conserve history for posterity; to revitalize and resource the site to meet the needs of local communities and communities of interest; and to strengthen its long history of self-reliance through office rentals and the hiring of its three halls.

These objectives were packaged as a labour and community museum initiative. As opposed to a traditional museum, Community House sought to implement the concept of museum as a multi-purpose site of civic engagement, a space of knowledge and debate, informed by memory and history but forward-looking. Its stated objective: *to ensure a resourced site that reasserts Community House's identity as a vibrant centre of debate and action – a worker and community resource for reflection, knowledge production and self-organisation.*

In June 2010 funding was secured from the National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund for the phase one heritage development. Notably:

- Redesign the Trade Union Library, the heart of the heritage project, to ensure a cutting-edge, accessible archive and community resource centre.
- Commission seven permanent art installations to honour the people commemorated in Community House's foyers and halls in the 1980s, namely Elijah Loza, Storey Luke Mazwembe, Jeanette Curtis, Ashley Kriel, Neil Aggett, Imam Haron and Wilfred Rhodes. With the exception of one, their lives were sacrificed for the liberation of our country.
- Implement a pilot oral history project, documenting memories of community activism in the Western Cape in the 1980s and install an audio booth for public viewing/listening.
- Commission an outdoor mural reflecting the significance and symbolism of the site.
- Establish a memory garden in the main courtyard.
- Upgrade the three halls to provide functional conferences /meeting facilities that meet the needs of tenants, outside organisations and the community.
- Repair and maintenance work to conserve the building.

This Phase One development was completed at the end of March 2012 and it has established Community House as a labour and community heritage site.

Issued by Rita De Morney

Manager – Community House

083 413 3454

² Significance: Provincial Gazette 6699, Friday 19 February 2010