

1915-2015

# CONSTRUCTURE

100 years of the  
JAG building and its  
evolution of space  
and meaning

Editor: Tracy Murinik



# SNAGGING AT THE JOINTS

Stephen Hobbs

## The project

Given its four-year time frame, the *JAG/SNAG* project served as a unique opportunity to test a number of ideas about the nature of the ruin as a site of imaginative potential. It was a conceptual design project that sought to revel in urban and architectural decay for its own sake, in so far as the patina of time and 'some' collapse is a more interesting reflection on the state of things than constant cosmetic fixes; and equally to objectify decay – as in neglect and lack of care as a shocking condition that continues to be ignored.

In the lead up to the 2014 *JAG/SNAG* exhibition in JAG's Meyer Pienaar building extension, the interim approach involved a series of smaller exhibitions in Space A, formerly the Lace Room, a basement gallery adjoining the auditorium below the Lutyens building.

For chief curator Antoinette Murdoch, the requirement was that this artistic intervention be complimented by a more supportive collaboration on re-assessing the condition of the building, with a view to at least stabilising its water penetration issues, but preferably also to help develop and adopt a plan to radically alter the 1986 Meyer Pienaar addition relative to the faulty materials used at the time – the copper domed skylights being an example.

Hence the second and equally compelling aesthetic component was the research journey into JAG's maintenance archives relative to a survey of the key 'negative' points in the Gallery's timeline – whether the incorrect orientation of the original Lutyens Gallery entrance, or the potential sale of the Gallery in the early 1960s to become a national eye research centre, amongst others.

Space A's bunker-like condition, submerged at the basement level of the Gallery, served well to showcase some of this archival material and various other artifacts, the key being the Meyer Pienaar Architects' competition model for the 1986 addition. This configuration of material, set against a wall-to-wall black and white painted Johannesburg city grid, served Murdoch with a strategic starting point for orientational tours centred on exposing the state of the building.

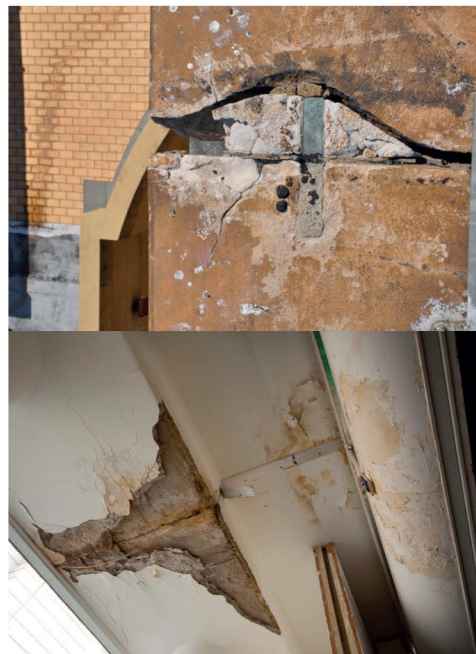
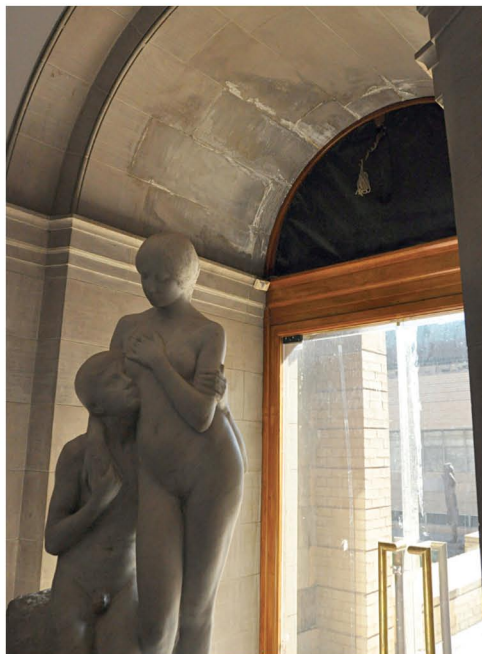
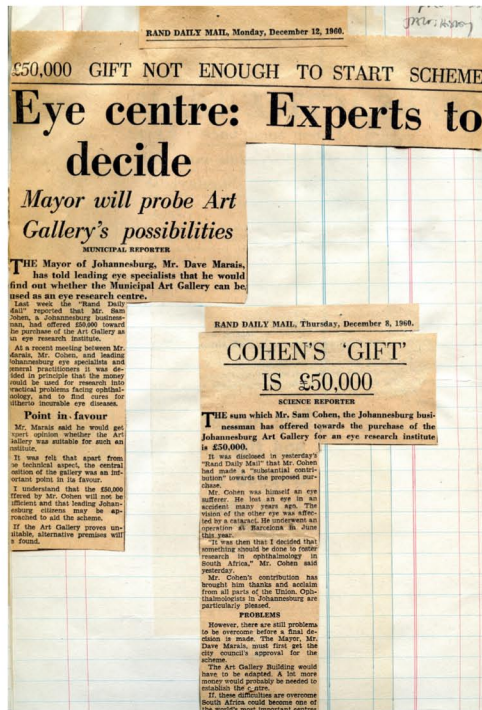
Given the myriad socially engaged and educational workshops and exhibitions that took place at JAG, both preceding and parallel to *JAG/SNAG*, the project tended towards a more conceptual and observational approach to the various subject areas under investigation, namely the building, Joubert Park, the Park fence, city users and inhabitants, transport nodes, points of connection and contact, water penetration, maintenance, the art collection, audience development, staffing, security, storage, JAG's exhibition programme, and so on.

## The main conversation

At the forefront of Murdoch's concerns, and a key focus from the start of her five-year contract as Chief Curator, was the restoration of the building as a project outcome for 2015. As a starting point therefore, a process of near forensic analysis of every flaw-bearing nook and cranny was undertaken; from mould, plaster collapse, exposed reinforcements, rust, damaged electrical services, to ceiling rot and roof damage. The resultant photographic audit lent itself to a conventional building condition report.

## Joints, leaks, city edge

With the input of roof specialists and structural engineers, the building was explored in its entirety. The internal investigation offered fascinating insights into the evolution of the Gallery over the decades of building add-ons, and repairs; from Lutyens' first build in the early 1900s, to the east and west wing additions in the mid-1930s, all the way to the 'modern' addition in 1986. The lack of transfer of knowledge and skills for the maintenance of older building materials, carved sandstone, ornate wood finishing, beveled glass and hand crafted ceiling moldings relative to the more recent bricks, mortar and modern servitude that came with the 1986 addition, highlighted a 'crisis' in the necessary management and maintenance of such interfaces, old and new.



TOP LEFT: Clippings from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> December 1960 editions of the *Rand Daily Mail* reporting on the potential sale of the Gallery building to become a national eye research centre.

TOP RIGHT: Installation view of the Meyer Pienaar Architects' model for the 1986 addition set against a wall-to-wall black and white painted Johannesburg city grid which served as strategic starting point for orientational tours centred on exposing the deteriorating state of the building. BOTTOM: Selective images of the audit into the condition of the building. Images ©JAG and Stephen Hobbs.





Standing on the roof in 2012, with a view of the Noord Street taxi rank, Joubert Park and surrounding buildings north and south of the railway lines, my realisation was that the conservation plan for this building seemed intrinsically linked to the wellbeing of the surrounding buildings, the inhabitants of the city and the necessary daily operations required to maintain continuity of functions and practices of people and city. It was clear to me from this point that without an understanding of the greater plans of the City and private sector to effect change in this environment, this art project would need to have both a philosophical and collaborative attitude towards failure and futility. I would equally need to look to new practical and aesthetic solutions in picturing this condition, offering insights and tactically engaging specialists whose work assists or confronts local government and so on.

## Means of engagement: Public realm

The necessary process of self-familiarisation with the interstices of JAG's architecture, and its interface with the city and public realm has, at its core, an all too familiar contradiction between inclusion and exclusion, largely attributed to the fencing off of the Park, which almost privatises the north entrance to the Gallery; the perceived threat of taxi violence, and the general tardiness of the area.

Without an actual project for social engagement, wandering the streets and photographing people seemed too voyeuristic and opportunistic to me, however there were moments of identifying urban edges peopled in such a way as to explain spatial conditions and character. Fast-forward to

recent evictions of street traders surrounding Joubert Park (and greater Johannesburg), and one is confronted with unfathomable decision making that neither supports the social and economic fabric of the area, nor builds on the diversity of offerings on the street.

At the commencement of this project The Trinity Session was midway through its three-year contract with the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), as public art curator/coordinator, and while there were discussions between JAG and the JDA about a possible public art intervention in Joubert Park, the interest came and went. In this mode of practice, however, a piece of public art produced through a collaboration with local inhabitants and users might have elicited a research component or fact finding conversation on the ground that, with the help of a capital projects budget, could have provided a metaphorical bridge between the Gallery, the relevance of its practices and specifically its collection to a local audience. Typically an exhibition of the outcomes of such a process of social and design engagement with local users and inhabitants goes a long way to engendering a means of narrative and collective ownership of the final artwork, as its relevance is ideally plugged into the attitudes and practices of the area, expressed in an artistic way. Yet this did not happen.

## Usability

Of all of the days in the weekly cycle of Joubert Park, none would seem more telling of the social and cultural layers that accumulate, than a Sunday; between various small outdoor prayer services, large-screen sports broadcasts, family picnics and children playing; chess games and park

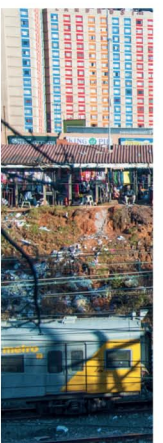
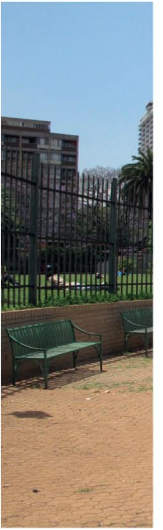
photography; young couples pushing baby strollers in the Phillips Gallery in JAG, it would seem all is as it should be.

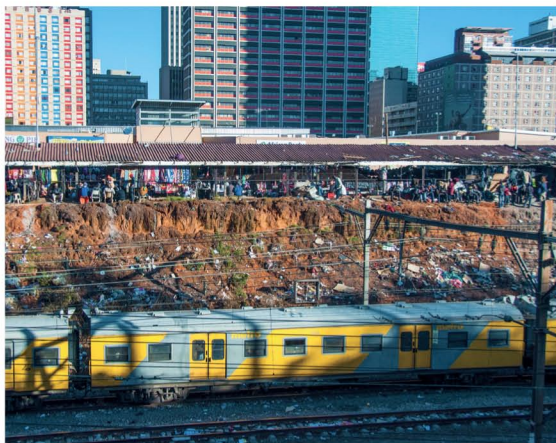
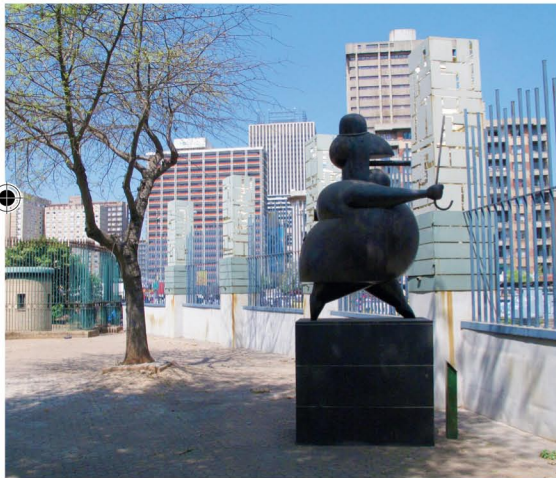
Indeed for most, Sunday is a day for pause and relaxation, it's the remaining six days of the week that require special effort in continuing to build a programme of relevance and usefulness between the building and its surrounds.

## Small exhibitions and holy spaces

For the lead up period to the *JAG/SNAG* exhibition in 2014, Space A was updated on a quarterly basis, in tandem with the Gallery's rotating exhibition programme. These updates included elements relating to new image and object making attendant to the project, text pieces, photographic studies and so forth.

On one occasion it was amusing to be informed that an installation element had been damaged during the movement of a Mozambican Christian congregation to and from the auditorium. The cracked work, which happened to be an upstanding piece of mirror plate, clad with adhesive tape, held together. The damage to the mirror was later playfully exploited when re-introduced to the exhibit with an external dowel stick armature for support. The metaphor of building as body, and reconstruction as surgery, was already inherent to the project. For my work, however, the accidental moment served as a catalyst for exploring the interface between new uses for the building, the cognitive relevance of the artwork to the present audience and most interestingly, the clash between a colonial building and African architectural traditions over the centuries.





TOP & CENTRE LEFT : Views of JAG facing Joubert Park showing the isolating fence. CENTRE CENTRE: View to the south from JAG's roof. CENTRE RIGHT: View of Stephen Hobbs' reconfigured cracked mirror plate installation piece in Space A. BOTTOM LEFT: View of the railway line to the south of JAG. BOTTOM RIGHT: View of the taxi rank on Noord Street. Images ©Stephen Hobbs.



## Building practices in Africa

Some time prior to JAG/SNAG's move into this space, the media reported on the theft of a small classical sculpture in the Lutyens Room, a small adjoining grey sandstone gallery, a level above Space A. Shortly after the theft, the remaining sculptures were relocated and the room remained empty. Yet the aura of the theft seemed to linger. As a response to the vacuum of memory in this 'antechamber', a construction of re-commissioned timber, reaching to the skylight, aimed to highlight the permanence of the colonial building in opposition to contingent building methods in many African cities.

Being the tiniest of all the exhibition rooms in the Gallery, the Lutyens Room receives special late morning sunlight, which pours in as arcs of gridded yellow and white light silhouetting the form of the window frames. The regularity of this atmosphere during setups in Space A brought a strange comfort to my exhibition process, which aimed at targeting faults within the system. In fact, despite the contradictory positioning of the original Lutyens building entrance, entering the Phillips Gallery from the south side, one is often welcomed – quite therapeutically! – by a warm sunny interior, expressing the full volume of the building and its generous high entrance and repetitive alcoves.

## Condition as art. And practical solutions.

In retrospect, the *Lutyens Scuff* tower served as something of an artistic indulgence. It was clear going forward that the balance between artistic treatment, presentation of

archival information and the new documentation arising out of building condition reports to work, the approach for the final exhibition in the Meyer Pienaar Gallery should avoid artiness through conventional object-based artworks, and rather engage the entire building as a situation where the building would become material; be the material. All attendant objects and data would be in line with the factual, albeit at times bizarre, narrative of changes and contradictory management decisions inherent to the history of the building.

Working with the notion of information as aesthetic material, an important justification for the JAG/SNAG exhibition was that the months in advance of the show played a constructive role towards Antoinette Murdoch's building restoration agenda.

Months of picking at key documents in the Gallery library and maintenance files prompted a two-day workshop and public open session where critics, historians, heritage specialists, artists, architects, user experience designers and the Friends of the Gallery were invited on a tour of the faults of the building. The following day featured a public open session, which then led into a design-thinking workshop. The primary objective of these sessions was towards generating a report that sought to balance negative public perceptions, and introduce radical architectural intervention solutions and practical steps towards arresting water penetration and other damage in the Gallery, caused primarily by poor atmospheric conditions and control.

The willingness on the part of Murdoch to publicly expose these faults – with a view towards finding a constructive solution for the Gallery buildings – came with real shock and horror to the workshop attendees who got to gauge firsthand the threats to aspects of the building's structural

integrity, as well as the real threat these posed to JAG's collection and greater heritage value.

The following extracts outline the introduction and conclusion of the report.

### INTRODUCTION

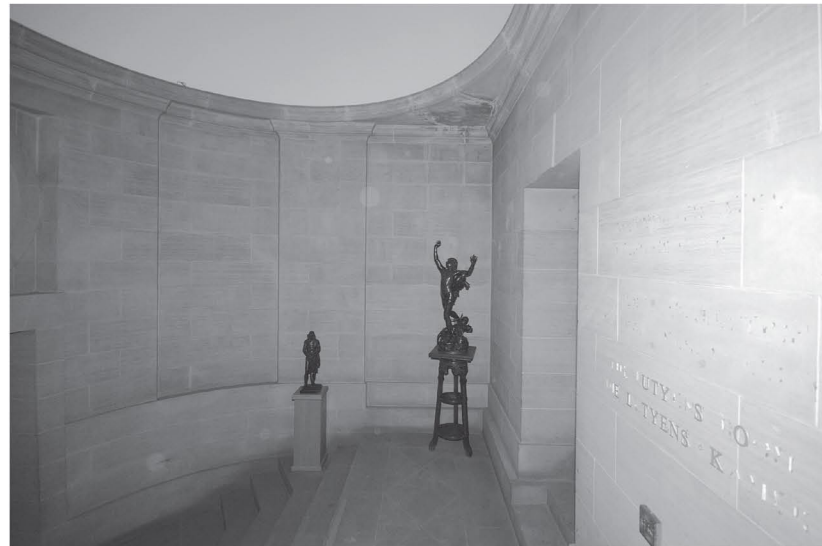
*The core of the problem solving process around JAG's current condition centres on the following actions:*

- *An urgent technical audit managed by a 'traditional' project management team, lead in the main by a structural and civil engineering assessment ... to provide an accurate costing for all technical restoration.*
- *Interim storage plan for relocating the collection to better facilities.*
- *Identifying marketing opportunities in relation to this, through the exhibition of this collection, and using this as a fundraising strategy and proposition for a satellite division of the Gallery's holdings (Tate Gallery & Tate Modern for example).*
- *The development of a marketing strategy that both raises funds for the above and focuses on the centenary celebrations of the Lutyens building in 2015.*
- *The development of a design strategy to repurpose the parts of the Gallery whose components as a result of failure – in terms of water penetration etc – require revised or entirely new architectural design.*
- *Alignment; of all pro-bono specialists' input and support to realise these objectives (heritage, marketing, advertising, restoration, etc).*

### PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

1. *Presentation of report and strategy to Langalihle Mfuphi, Deputy Director Museums and Galleries and the Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage.*





FAR LEFT: Installation view of Stephen Hobbs' *Lutyens Scaff*. TOP & CENTRE: Views of the Lutyens Room, before and after the theft of a classical sculpture from this space. BOTTOM: View of the early JAG/SNAG installations in Space A. Images ©Stephen Hobbs.





2. *Jeremy Rose (architect) to submit Professional Team recommendation.*
3. *Christopher Till to source funding for the above team.*
4. *Adrienne Hall – assisting with fundraising strategy.*
5. *Randall Gross to commence strategy development in tandem with centenary planning.*
6. *JH-01 to carry out user experience design and user audit of Joubert Park and Gallery, with the exhibition of findings in SPACEA. Commencing March 2012. Outcomes of this process to form a report on current audience status at JAG and surrounds.*
7. *Development of an advertising and marketing brief to Draft FCB to facilitate various objectives outlined here.*
8. *Setting up and marketing of donor fund for Centenary restorations (additional meetings with PUMA required).*
9. *Appointment of a focused 2015 committee – after meetings and charettes consisting of staff, Friends, guides, CoJ agencies, corporate supporters, art educators, CBD businesses, arts organisations, community resident organisations, broader media and taxi association.*

## CONCLUSION

*The advent of the Lutyens Building 100 year milestone in 2015, is as much a symbolic moment to celebrate the endurance of the Gallery, as it is a real incentive for assembling the right support and momentum for the necessary*

*renovations to the entire building. As of mid-2012, the Meyer Pienaar extension will be closed indefinitely in order to conduct the necessary assessments and evaluations of the building's condition.*

*The success of this endeavor will invariably be found in public partnership, where investment from the City should be used as leverage for private sector support. Through the course of the workshop, a debate ensued around the impact and implications of corporate ownership of the collection; this as with many other challenging issues engendered a sense of panic at times, where a solution for protecting the collection was [deemed] urgent and critical.*

*Going forward, the establishment of a centenary committee would be aimed at overseeing the communications and fundraising strategy for the restoration and or architectural redevelopment of parts of the Gallery in preparation for 2015.*

## JAG/SNAG Meyer Pienaar Gallery: May-August 2014

From the outset it had been nearly impossible to raise funds through conventional national or provincial funding bodies

for the project, which was ironically useful, in that the desire for any structural design change would come in part from local council, but in the main most likely benefit from an exchange with the world of commercial suppliers and professionals. Hence the installation that unfolded comprised a series of planned stages and integrated interventions in response to this funding predicament.

Exhibition elements:

1. Breakdown of old exhibition screens to reveal original aspects of the Meyer Pienaar design, and stockpiling of all old and new materials for their own aesthetic value and potential future use.
2. Scaffold support for most noticeable ceiling collapse and surface water damage.
3. Re-orientate the visitor entry into the space on its north/south axis.
4. Placement of video and photographic work.
5. Design-in gaps; create open spaces for educational projects and industry collaborations that would unfold through the course of the exhibition.
6. JAG progress and milestones wall installation.
7. History wall, detailing the various building add-ons and key archival information.





Installation view of Stephen Hobbs' *JAG/SNAG* in the Meyer Pienaar Gallery, 2014. Images ©Stephen Hobbs and David Ceruti.



## Re-design project: University of Johannesburg FADA, Department of Architecture

### MTech 2014 - *Urban Update #3 JAG: So where to from here?* (seven-week programme)

In their *Urban Update 2014* project – *JAG, so where to from here?* – students in the first year of the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Architecture Department's master's programme were asked to propose architectural updates to JAG and its precinct, critically considering the building's neo-classical (1915; 1940) and postmodern manifestations (1986), and to interrogate the physical and psychic disconnectedness of the building and its art collection from its immediate context.

Students were encouraged to consider ways in which public art may be reconsidered in this context; were tasked to reflect on the strict typological delineations of 'museum' and 'park' and explore ways of redefining and reconnecting these; to interrogate the validity of a term like 'African museum' and what such a phenomenon might mean or look like; to deliberate on the performative value of the body in space and compare more fluid attitudes to the generally static ways in which most art works still tend to be framed and shown to audiences.

Through their designs students were encouraged to radically improve and extend on the building's current function(s). The proposals that emerged demonstrated interesting possibilities for improved access, participation and enjoyment of JAG as an important resource catering to a complex urban, socio-cultural and economic context and a wide range of user groups.



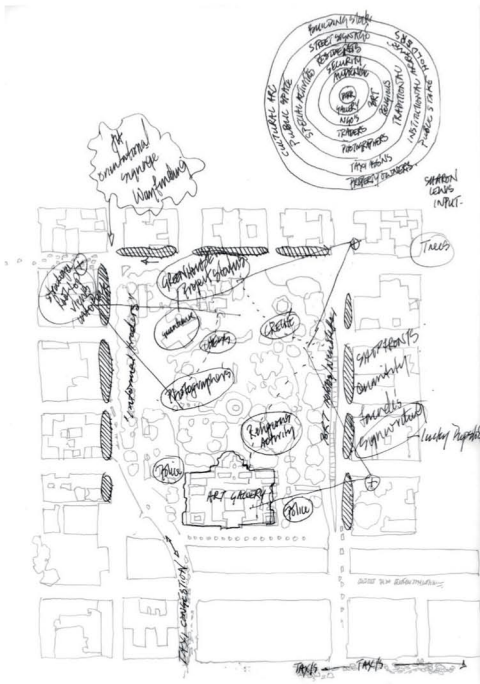
TOP LEFT: Installation view of the *Urban Update #3 JAG: So where to from here?* student project. ABOVE: One of the many stakeholder workshops. TOP RIGHT: Gauteng Institute for Architecture public event, 2014. CENTRE RIGHT: Mapping of the activities and stakeholders in Joubert Park. BOTTOM RIGHT: Stephen Hobbs engaging with *JAG/SNAG* exhibition visitors.



## Gauteng Institute for Architecture: Public Event: 24 April 2014

This was a debate that considered the following premise as a trigger:

*In 1960, JAG was up for sale for conversion to an eye research centre, an ironic reinforcement of the function of the museum. The neglect JAG experiences today is a lost opportunity, not only for design revisions and the like, but also for critical urban research and new possibilities for such culturally encoded buildings. JAG couldn't be more relevant or important, a metaphor for the continuity and discord of our time; we should use it.*



Questions posed included:

- Should it be demolished? Re-purposed?
- Alternative awareness strategies for the role of buildings in relation to Joubert Park and the CBD, broader urban condition and opportunities.
- Making visible JAG's important collection.

The ultimate intention of the JAG/SNAG project was to take advantage of an extended time frame (five years, if one includes the period of development from the 2014 exhibition to the 2015 centennial celebrations for which this text was commissioned), in order to witness and respond to the challenges and life cycle patterns of thinking and planning that only materialise, often, much later.



Given the complex funding and programming processes of big international museums, it is fair to say that their contributions to contemporary discourses can be several years behind current debates. While JAG may be considered a big museum on the continent, and an important repository of

cultural content, it is an astonishingly publicly conscious space, having demonstrated timeous responses to critical urban conditions, new trends in contemporary practices and collecting, and strong visibility at important art world events, and so forth.

In closing, it is interesting to note that there is a fundamental design tension in central Johannesburg, between its city planners and its users. The tension lies in constant efforts to reach world class city status, in the face of urban practices operating with different intent, hence the formalising forces of the world class city agenda all too often fails to harness the innovative and adaptive tendencies of its local users. The sustained legacy of defensive spatial planning in our cities is intrinsically linked to our ability to be open and considerate of difference and change. The Johannesburg Art Gallery is still standing and functional. Dear reader, come up with a plan; participate; come with something special!

## Stephen Hobbs

Since 1994, Johannesburg has served as a reference point for Hobbs' artistic and curatorial insights into the apartheid city turned African city – with a particular interest in the impact of defensive urban planning and architecture on the behavioral aspects of the city and society. Hobbs was previously the curator of the Market Theatre Galleries, and co-director of the Premises at the Joburg Theatre. Since 2001 he has co-directed the artist collaborative and public art consultancy, The Trinity Session.

