

INNER-CITY FIRE ANALYSIS

A building and lives left to burn – 80 Albert Street must be remembered in this way



A total of 76 people died in a fire in Johannesburg in the Marshalltown neighbourhood on 31 August 2023. (Photo: Supplied)

By Rebecca Walker

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The death toll from the inner-city blaze at 80 Albert St in Johannesburg now stands at 76. The building used to be the Usindiso Women's Shelter, and before that in the apartheid era, it was a Pass Laws office. Here, Rebecca Walker, who co-ran an art-based project for women when it was a shelter, writes how brutality repeats itself, over and over again.

Once a week on a Thursday morning, my colleague and I would arrive at 80 Albert Street in Johannesburg's inner city, arms full of bags of material, ribbons, wire ... whatever the women had requested for their art creations.

The building was run down and imposing from the outside. Endless bricks and windows with glimpses of its former importance. Inside it was clean but felt dirty, crumbling but functional. It smelt of disinfectant and nappies. The noises of women and children echoed down the long empty hallways and everyday tasks masked the sense of listlessness and endurance.

Our art room was on the fourth floor, just along from the main office and close to what was – during apartheid times – a kangaroo court room (now turned into a church).

The building reeked of its apartheid past – the cells on the ground floor, the basement full of Pass Office documents, the sense of repressive law and violent order lingering in the walls, doors and brick work.

The organisation running the shelter remarked on how a space of oppression and violence had become one of healing and safety. That claim felt like a bit of a stretch to us.

The building might have been safer than home for some of the women and their children who had landed up there, but it couldn't work miracles. The occupants in the shelter needed jobs, financial support, documents, access to education – the basic requirements to make life work in an imposing and relentless city.

Some of the women were from Johannesburg itself, some from rural towns and others from across borders. Their origins were less important than where they wanted and needed to be.

Temporary reprieve

The shelter offered a temporary reprieve. Not a solution, not healing, but a space to call home for a while.

In winter the art room was freezing. We brought in old heaters, which blasted out hot air and made us all feel sleepy. The toddlers loved this. They sat and drew on paper and then climbed onto their mom's backs or any available laps for a nap while the art session carried on. We ate cakes and drank tea and the women made jokes and laughed at one another. They called it "the Wardrobe Project".

In 2014, as we finished the project, we discovered a basement full of archives from the Pass Office days (the original *dompas* stamp, meeting minutes, street plans for Soweto – everything meticulously recorded and captured, frozen in time).

We begged the City to come and collect them; to recognise their value. But they didn't. There was no genuine interest – papers, people, lives – none really mattered unless there was political gain.

So, the papers stayed. Archives of violence beneath the feet of the women and children, beneath the shacks of the families and individuals who moved in once the shelter left, beneath the bodies of those burnt to death in the early hours of Thursday, 31 August 2023.

I wonder what happened when these children, men and women woke up to the smell of smoke and death and hear the cries for help. Did they rush past the courtroom, scramble over pews and stacked chairs?

Did they try to climb onto the roof where the washing was hung out or use the materials we left behind to lower themselves out the window? Did they slip on the stairs as they scrambled to get out, call out desperately from behind the bars that blocked the front doors?

Did they know that they would be blamed for their own deaths? Labelled criminals, "illegal immigrants", non-citizens by the very same state that has denied their existence.

A state that let them burn.

A state that symbolised the epitome of callousness when they stood in the simmering smoke and fluttering ashes of young children, women and men, and said that this was their own fault.

A state that also blamed the organisations that had prevented unlawful evictions that would have seen families thrown onto the street. A state that didn't even pretend to care. It only wanted to blame others.

Let's not be fooled. The state and the City of Joburg didn't care any more for the people in 80 Albert Street than the apartheid state cared for the black bodies forced to line up and pass through the building to be given the right to move around their own city, to exist.

Brutality repeats itself over and over: poor people, black people, foreigners – they didn't matter in life or death. Not a hijacked building, but lives and deaths hijacked for personal and political gain.

80 Albert Street must be remembered in this way. A building and lives left to burn. A building and lives that did not matter – until they were gone. There is no healing here.