



## **The Johannesburg Inner City crisis: room for the poor?**

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No-one should have to live in derelict buildings which have been abandoned by their owners. The risks can be fatal, as the fire at 80 Albert Street showed. People live there because formal accommodation options are few and far between. They do so because of what access to a central location offers: job searching; informal, formal and irregular employment; savings on transportation costs from the peripheries of the City. They do so because they cannot afford accommodation developed by the private sector. They do so because the state subsidised social housing programme does not accommodate many people's low levels of affordability. They do so because, even if they could afford formal accommodation options in the inner city, there are little to no vacancies.

Unfortunately, once an immediate crisis is over, it is often the case that the responsible authorities tend to recede and with them go any hopes of a sustainable solution to the systemic problems which underpin what is happening in Johannesburg's inner city. This time it must be different.

What happened at Albert Street is a shocking symptom of the multi-faceted crisis in inner city Johannesburg. Unfortunately this fire is not the first but could well be a harbinger of the worst. A housing crisis first and foremost, political and commercial interests are also at play.

Regarding the housing aspect of the crisis, government already has the legal and policy mechanisms at its disposal. It need not develop new ones. However, the people living in abandoned buildings must be central to any interventions.

The primary tool at the disposal of the state is the **Emergency Housing Programme**, famously the outcome of the historic Grootboom judgment. The programme exists to accommodate victims of disasters like the people in Albert Street, to address living conditions that pose threats to the health of residents and for the provision of temporary accommodation for those who would be rendered homeless by an eviction. The programme is clear that victims of disasters and evictions together with those living in dangerous living conditions are eligible for the grant.

Were the City of Johannesburg to programmatically attend to the perilous conditions in the many derelict buildings, something which it should urgently do, it would need to take the rights of those who occupy them into account. Not doing so would result in thousands of homeless people sleeping rough on the streets. Unlawful evictions and warrantless raids have no place in a socially just, constitutionally compliant, developmental and humane state response.,

We propose a three-pronged approach: Firstly, **the immediate provision of services** to all residents currently living in abandoned buildings, in order to address safety, health and basic needs on an interim basis. Secondly, **the repair or upgrading of buildings** to ensure that they do not pose a threat to the health, safety and lives of residents. Thirdly, if the threats cannot be addressed through *in situ* repair and incremental upgrading, then **consensual or court ordered resettlement or relocation to alternative accommodation** should proceed.

The Emergency Housing Programme can fund all three interventions.

In order to support the access to services and the upgrading of the buildings, we are calling on voluntary professional services providers: engineers, planners, architects and other design professionals. If you are able to play a part, please provide us with your contact details using [this link](#).