

A LEAKING roof is not interesting. That is unless it is located in a place where leaks are unexpected, like the interior of a public art museum that is geared towards the preservation of cultural products, which should include the dated building itself.

It is also interesting when the leaking roof in question, located in the Meyer/Pienaar extension of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (Jag), has been facilitated by an artist, who counts this as a key moment in his quasi mid-career survey exhibition.

As the title of Stephen Hobbs's exhibition, *Jag Snag: End of Exhibition* implies, this is a non-exhibition of sorts; though there are framed images to view, such as architectural drawings pertaining to the gallery's past and projected future, pictures of the staff and other articles, the artistic gestures are in fact things that can't be framed, unless you consider the scaffolding surrounding the damaged ceiling a framing device.

Hobbs hasn't created work here so much as dabbled with the internal structure of this gallery as a means of commenting on its legacy, the politics attached to this museum which are inseparable from its structure, and perhaps the status of museums in a post-apartheid, post-postmodern era. It has produced a society which no longer requires an institution such as this to reveal in, elevate or assign iconic status to its cultural gestures.

As such there are no endearing visual spectacles here to see, except perhaps if you count the projection up against a large screen of footage of the gallery when it was flooded as arresting. It should be. That exposing a decaying, damaged museum might not be a spectacle is part of this exhibition's irony, though this is undercut by the fact that the faults with the building aren't confined to this gallery. The chipped paint on its exterior, the broken pathway leading to the entrance facing Joubert Park, the weeds that grow between the bricks in the parking lot and the rubbish that has been left in an external alcove all attest to the neglect of this institution and its bleak future.

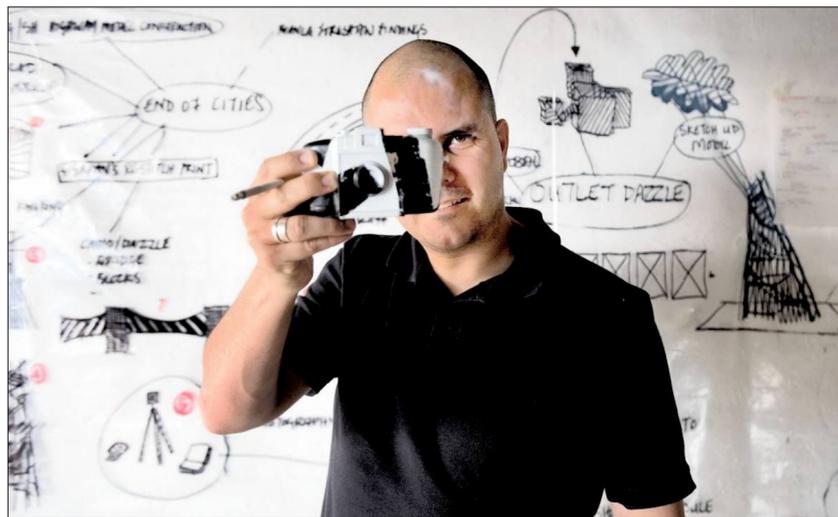
This situation is so entrenched that it is no longer a headline story. A front-page story cannot save this building and a sense of resignation has set in.

It wasn't difficult for Hobbs to create his leaky ceiling, which appears to be supported by scaffolding. The damaged ceiling was a natural result of what would have occurred without any maintenance. Hobbs was able to cultivate it because he knew exactly how the building would 'respond' without maintenance as he has spent the last three years closely observing the building and documenting all its design faults – the titular "snags". The faulty roof in the Meyer-Pienaar extension is the main weak point. Built in the mid-1980s, it has plagued a string of past directors, and its present one, Antoinette Murdoch, would welcome a permanent solution, if support from the City of Joburg and the necessary political will existed. Others hold Murdoch responsible for Jag's demise, pointing out that she has had the same funds at her disposal as the previous director, Clive Kellner.

"It's hard to imagine that it can go all this way on its own but it did," observes Hobbs looking up at his ugly 'creation' on the ceiling. Late summer rains in the month before the opening of the exhibition helped along his seemingly nihilistic proj-



Jag's Edwardian design is thought to be off-putting to visitors, though this is part of its heritage.



Stephen Hobbs has spent three years documenting Jag, which has become his artwork.

ect. Hobbs's fixation with the building is largely due to its state of disrepair; he would not be interested in Jag as an artistic project for his par-

ticular kind of architectonic preoccupations if it was in good condition and "working". While his work at the Trinity Session has been fo-

cused on managing public art in the city and constructing new public structures, in his artistic practice he has been preoccupied with the life-

Architectural Ambitions

The Johannesburg Art Gallery might be on its last legs, but Stephen Hobbs has found a unique way to keep us talking about it, writes Mary Corrigan

cycle of them, which is often most noticeable at their nadir. It is at this time when they seemingly reveal themselves and their structure, and history becomes more visible.

He has documented his leaky roof's gradual degradation, which features as a slide show – as if it should be the subject of a spectacle, yet with an awareness that it is too banal to ever function as such. It is the absence of spectacle that gives his work import, while, paradoxically, this somehow undermines its value as an artistic product in a museum, which is usually something to be admired and facilitates transcendence. This is not just an ideological or psychic shift, but allows the viewer to be transported from the physical space where they are viewing the art object.

Hobbs's non-exhibition, which includes tearing down screens to reveal the building's more positive attributes that have been concealed for more than 20 years, like a window with a view of the sky, directs our attention towards the museum

itself. By doing so, he grounds viewers in the place where they are. The museum is no longer a portal that provides access to somewhere else nor is it an invisible vessel. As such he rewrites what the museum and art are, what they can be. This has positive and negative connotations; as the focus the museum becomes the dated relic-object that is no longer useful to a society but is also one that should be admired, preserved.

With more money at his disposal his interventions would have been grander and more permanent. "If I had R20 million I would cut through this building. If there was the political will, I would take a chainsaw to the building."

It is fortunate in a way that this wasn't the case as the attention would have been on what Hobbs had done to the building rather than directing us to relook at what is already there. Hobbs's slideshow of decay gives visitors the chance to observe the fragility of the building and demonstrates that it is ever-

changing despite its seeming immovability. Buildings are rarely thought of as vulnerable. Their physical dimensions, the scale, the hard materials work at creating this sense of permanence. It is for this reason perhaps that Hobbs is obsessed with their impermanent qualities, how time slowly erodes this literal and metaphorical façade. He has sought to capture this throughout his practice most directly in photographic series such as *Mirage City* (1997) and *Auto Camouflage* (2002) where he uses optical illusions, reflections on the surface of glass buildings, to create the impression that they are fluid structures.

Demonstrating Jag's fragility and the gradual erosion of its structure has ramifications beyond just making the point that the city is in constant flux. It suggests that its colonial and apartheid legacy is in the process of being overturned. It was built in 1915 by the British architect Edwin Lutyns at the behest of Lady Florence Phillips as a repos-

itory for the best of British art, until a new Afrikaner order advanced local artists and disallowed work by black ones. These legacies are locked into the design of the museum but through its erosion this seemingly anachronistic building and what it represents in the heart of a bustling urban location, where people sell sweets off cardboard boxes and others dance to distorted sounds emanating from broken speakers while they queue to step into a packed taxi, is evolving or devolving – depending on how you view it. Up until recently Jag has appeared to be an island of privilege in a sea of urban decay, though some of the buildings adjacent to Jag have seen a lick of paint – the buildings cater for low-income groups. In its current state, Jag has never seemed more at ease with its surroundings – it is as dilapidated as many of the buildings surrounding it. Pressure on the City to fix the building should therefore also extend to its surroundings, says Hobbs.

Jag's demise is not only struc-



Scaffolding (all three pics above) around a leaking roof is the centre of Hobbs's Jagsnag project.

tural. Since Kellner left – it is rumoured that constant wrangling with the City gave him a heart-attack – there has been no solid curatorial vision guiding its programme. In this way, Jag is rotting inside and out.

Attention has been redirected towards the new museum – the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art (Mocaa) – being built at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town. This will be a much larger, privately funded institution, boasting 80 galleries. Coincidentally, it is designed by another British architect, Thomas Heatherwick and its main patron is German billionaire Jochen Zeitz. The arts community has been poring over Heatherwick's architectural drawings that have been on view at the museum's satellite exhibition space with the kind of awe and excitement that Luytens and Meyer/Pienaars probably elicited all those years ago. Unlike Jag, Zeitz Mocaa won't (immediately) be at odds with its surroundings, though Heatherwick has conceived what he calls an "inside out" design, which will translate into a building where its architectural personality will be buried inside rather than flouted externally.

The imposing Edwardian façade of Jag has often been blamed for the gallery's unpopularity with the surrounding community. At least this has been the prevailing thinking. Of course, the high-wire fence and guarded entrance may have also contributed to perceptions that this is an elitist institution.

Whether Heatherwick's quirky design will make Zeitz Mocaa a less intimidating space is hard to predict. This museum has yet to be weighed down by the annoying weight of reality. It provides a clean slate and a new era and model for public institutions.

Perhaps it is fitting that while Jag is in its death throes, another public institution guided by a different outlook is slowly rising, however, it might be worth understanding all the mechanics surrounding Jag's descent to clarify what functions museums actually fulfil in this country, though Zeitz Mocaa is intended as a tourist attraction.

Hobbs's unconventional exhibition does announce a change – the "end of the exhibition" brings to mind a post-museum culture, which is gradually taking shape already. People view art at art fairs and lifestyle events like the Nirox Sculpture Park and small galleries during fun evening events like First Thursdays in Cape Town. Hobbs's effort at structurally reconfiguring Jag compels a rethinking of the museum's invisible properties.

Superficially, but significantly, his damaged roof installation alters your relationship to the building, the institution. It demystifies it. It is like looking at a photograph of a celebrity on a beach, where you can see that they have a paunch and cellulite. You experience a sense of relief that the museum is actually just a building, and that all the ideas tied to it as being important are in your head. But where does that leave art – it can exist without the museum, but in what capacity? What happens when we let 'the structure' go?

Hobbs's *JagSnag* project is both elegiac andlaced with optimism. A sense of loss pervades this exhibition. A display of the architectural drawings for the Meyer/Pienaar ex-

tension and Luytens's own ambitions encapsulate this double-edged sword. They articulate the grand aspirations not only for Jag but the surrounds, the optimism for the future society, while also drawing attention to what was not realised and, of course, its current state.

The aesthetics of decay and unrealised dreams have been leitmotifs of cultural products centred on Joburg, capturing its demise in films like *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem*, which was set in Hillbrow, to Guy Tillim's *Jo'burg*, which captured the inner-city's degradation a decade ago. Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse produced the *Ponte City* series, narrating the state of degradation of this landmark Joburg building. This motif is encapsulated in a photograph entitled *Cleaning the Core* (2008), which shows the glut of disused material that has collected in the centre of this circular building. The debris looks like concrete rubble left after a building has been demolished.

Hobbs also made a work at the Ponte, a video titled *54 Storeys*, in which he filmed a plunge down its interior. He wasn't interested in the decay of the building but rather how the building's design and the context it created prompted so many suicides. It co-incided with a self-destructive youthful phase in his life and allowed him, vicariously, to experience the annihilation he craved, but feared. All art is about death, says Hobbs. This theme is served by buildings for him. They are like bodies: they need to be maintained and they don't last forever. He has projected the serious issues with his own health onto a non-corporeal canvas. It is easier to negotiate and process death from a vast distance and with entities that can be saved. This may be why *JagSnag* is fundamentally driven by a desire to turn the situation around. Hobbs believes wholeheartedly that if private developers would be given incentives to regenerate the area around the gallery, and it was connected to the pockets of urban rejuvenation in Braamfontein and Maboneng, the gallery would flourish and people would flock to visit it. "If there was a great coffee shop, people would come. They are only ever looking for somewhere new to eat and drink."

He has set aside a space in the gallery for experimentation with a new material dubbed Foamlock that may be one of the solutions for the faulty roof. In this way he works at the solution for the leaky roof created in the other space.

The contradiction inherent in these activities is at the root of this project in which Hobbs exploits the decay of the building as the means to transcend it. He demystifies the space, while desiring for its status to be reinstated, albeit in a different guise. This project could just be an elaborate and drawn-out farewell – a desire to get beyond the building itself. Yet it is also redolent with a sense of attachment that drives his activism.

"I think you have to peel back everything in order to move forwards. No one sees this gallery anymore. Everyone talks about the value of the collection. I want people to see it again but differently."

JagSnag is an evolving project that will show at the gallery until July 27

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