



an agency of the  
Department of Arts and Culture

## **SUBMISSION TO THE HRM COMMITTEE OF COUNCIL – 08 June 2017**

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SUBMITTED BY: Built Environment Unit

DATE: 20 December 2016

FILE REF: 9/2/033/7/ SAHRIS SITE ID 7653

ENQUIRIES: Mr Ben Mwasinga

**ITEM: Proposal for National Heritage Site Declaration: The Owl House, Erf. 306 Nieu Bethesda.**

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### **A1. PURPOSE**

- A1.1. The submission is made to discuss and recommend approval for the declaration of The Owl House as a National Heritage Site.

### **A2. BACKGROUND**

- A2.1. Helen Martins' Owl House (Erf 306, River Street, Nieu-Bethesda) often cited as South Africa's finest example of outsider art, is an extraordinary, other-worldly home of concrete and ground glass sculptures. The Owl House is a typical Karoo style house that was built in the late 1800 and transformed by the late Helen Martins over a period of almost 30 years with colour, glass and mirrors and the yard with more than 400 cement sculptures. The house is in New Street with an unobstructed view of the river and the mountains. Helen was born and died in this house. She later named it the Owl House and started to transform the house in a magical dream world of glittering glass particles, lamps and mirrors, stars, moons, spires and cement statues. Helen's world, her mecca, all created and placed according to her creative ideas to bring forward a message that was beyond the understanding of most of the people of the town.

A2.2. The Owl House and Camel Yard is bounded by Erf 303 Outbuilding and circular dam owned by the Owl House Foundation (Used for restoration/repair of sculptures as well as to access the front of the Owl House from the Ticket Office)& Erf 304, the information and Ticket Office owned by the Owl House Foundation. Therefore the site as a whole forms a precinct which is experienced holistically with a coherent connection with the landscape of Nieu-Bethesda.

## Plan of the Owl House and Camel Yard

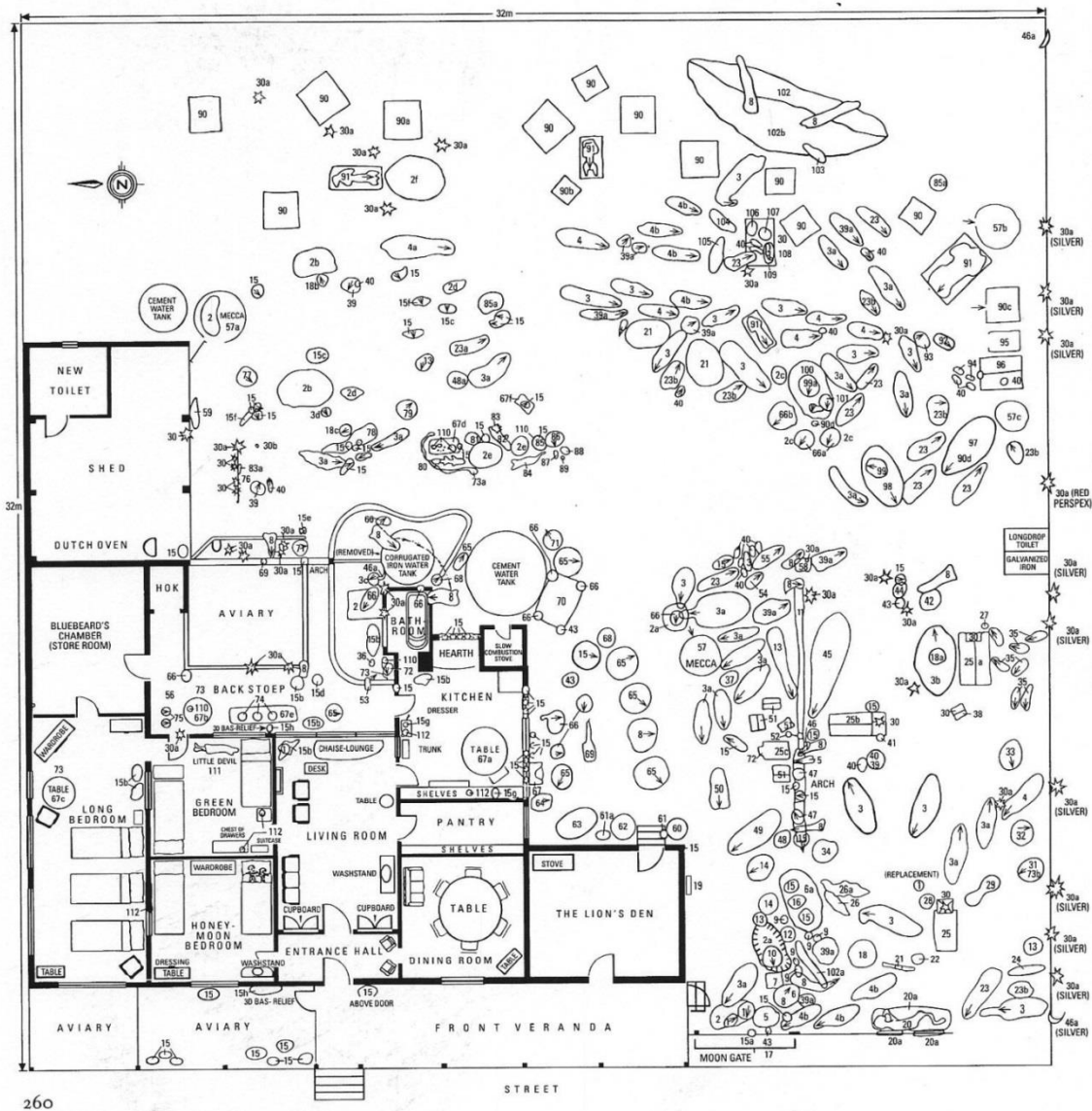


Figure 1: Image showing the layout of the Owl house and Camel Yard. (Owl House Foundation)

- A2.3. The Owl House and Camel Yard represent South Africa's foremost example of outsider art. The Owl House and Camel yard were created by Helen Martins and her assistants, most notably, Koos Malgas became well-known after the internationally recognised Athol Fugard play, 'The Road to Mecca' in 1984, a play that is still performed worldwide. It was after this play that visitors started looking for the Owl House.
- A2.4. Helen Martins is internationally recognised as one of the top ten female and top 13 outsider artists in the world and the Owl House has become a significant tourist destination for the Eastern Cape and South Africa. The Owl House, Camel Yard and context of Nieu-Bethesda form a coherent unity and cannot be considered separately. On the Erf is the concrete manifestation of the strange and unique world that outsider artist Helen Martins and her assistants (most prominent among them, Koos Malgas) created. Part of their output was very concrete and tangible in the form of the sculptures. It would, however, be limiting to ignore the references to a personal world that the artist also left us. The artist included often contradictory elements such as the real East and then also an alternative east. It is this fusion of a real landscape and an imagined field that contributes to the complexity of the meaningful ensemble that is on the site. (JL du Preez; Submission; 2015)

### **A3. CULTURAL HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

- A3.1. Outsider Artists all over the world start to create and transform their immediate environment according to their own fantasy and dream, a yearning to live their dreams. Usually outsider artist are lonely people inspired by their unconsciousness to change their world into a better place. Symbolism plays a major role for outsider artists, to convey their message. Unusual material that is accessible is used. They are in most cases without training and the message that they want to convey is original and cannot be associated with normal art. (Bekker; 2015)

### **A4. DISCUSSION**

- A4.1. It is clear that the criteria as prescribed from the brief overview that all criteria under Section 3(3) (a-i) of the NHRA is met.

**(a) Important in the community, or pattern of South Africa's history**

“Helen’s work encapsulates in varied and complex ways the events and experiences of her life: the light and the dark, the sun and the moon, the joy and the shadow. The Owl House and the Camel Yard are great works of imagination, both original and passionate, through which runs a cohesive and thematic thread of yearning, a quest for meaning and for wholeness, conceived with a commitment which makes her work unique and at many levels, profoundly moving.” (p258, This is my world, Ross 1997)

**(b) Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of South Africa’s natural or cultural heritage**

The site is the most complete and well preserved example of “*Outsider Art*” that is well known inside South Africa as well as internationally. This is not say that the work of Helen Martins & Koos Malgas is the only work that exists in South Africa. However it provides a complete and single-minded commitment to a particular aesthetic discipline which is the best preserved and accessible that tells a story a particular act in a particular time encapsulated by a particular moment between two individuals from a particular context, apartheid. This collaboration resulted in an output of work which is unique and powerful in its own right.

**(f) its importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period**

The Owl House and Camel Yard represent South Africa’s foremost example of outsider art. The Owl House and Camel yard were created by Helen Martins and her assistants most notably Koos Malgas and became known after the internationally recognised Athol Fugard wrote a play ‘The Road to Mecca’ in 1984 that is still performed worldwide. After this visitors started looking for Nieu Bethesda and the Owl House. Helen Martins is internationally recognised as one of the top ten female and top 13 outsider artists in the world. The Owl House and Camel Yard became a significant tourist destination for the Eastern Cape and South Africa.

## **A5. RECOMMENDATION**

- A5.1. It is recommended that the GDRC endorse the Owl House for declaration as a National Heritage Site.

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### 1. LANDOWNER'S DETAILS AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS DECLARATION

- 1.1. The land on which the site occurs is owned by the Dr Beyers Naudé Local Municipality and is currently under a land use agreement with The Owl House Foundation who are in charge of the management and protection of the site as a resource.

#### 1.1.1. Site Owner: **Dr Beyers Naudé Local Municipality**

Ms. Leonie Fouche  
IDP Manager  
Dr Beyers Naudé Local Municipality  
PO Box 71  
Graaff-Reinet  
6280

Mr Jama Vumazonke  
Acting Municipal Manager  
Dr Beyers Naudé Local Municipality  
PO Box 71  
Graaff-Reinet  
6280

#### 1.1.2. Site Manager: **The Owl House Foundation**

Chairman of the Owl House Foundation  
Mr Peet van Heerden  
Owl House Foundation  
P.O.Box 7  
Nieu-Bethesda  
6286

- 1.2. Both parties have expressed their support for the declaration. An extensive process of engagement between SAHRA, the municipality and the Owl House foundation has taken place in order to assess the conditions that need to be met in order for the resource to be protected. A feasibility study commissioned by the Provincial Heritage Resources Agency is also evidence of this engagement.

## 2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND NOTIFICATION

- 2.1. The Section 27 letter of notification has been sent out thus far no objections have been noted either from the owners or Interested and affected Parties. A second notification will be made by the municipality using the letter as well as published in the local newspaper to ensure that there are no objections.

Land owner – Dr. Beyers Naudé Local Municipality

Tenants: the Owl House Foundation

## 3. OFFICIAL DESCRIPTION OF THE RESOURCE

- 3.1. The Owl House is a typical Karoo style house that was built in the late 1800 and transformed by Helen Martins over a period of almost 30 years with colour, glass and mirrors and the yard with more than 400 cement sculptures.

### 3.2. Erf Diagram from Municipality Zoning Map



Figure 2: Proposed National Heritage Site

#### 4. DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA TO BE DECLARED (SITE BOUNDARIES)

##### 4.1 Currently the declaration will include the three sites related to the Owl House:

- Erf 306 - The Owl House owned by the Camdeboo Municipality
- Erf 304 - Information and Ticket Office owned by the Owl House Foundation
- Erf 303 - Outbuilding and circular dam owned by the Owl House Foundation (Used for restoration/repair)

4.2 The main resource is the Owl house and Camel Yard however all three sites are well connected and provide an overall cultural precinct which fits in with the village context and were these sites not protected then the management and overall oversight would compromise this significant resource. The Owl House Foundation and Municipality's properties give the Owl House a way in which the loading capacity of the site and program are not overly burdened when high numbers of visitors are on site.

##### 4.3 The declaration boundaries are defined as follows:

Site Name	Erf No / Farm		Province	Town	Municipality
The Owl House & Camel Yard	Currently	Erf. 306	Eastern Cape	Nieu- Bethesda	Camdeboo
Information and Ticket Office	Currently	Erf. 304	Eastern Cape	Nieu- Bethesda	Camdeboo
Owl House Foundation	Currently	Erf 303	Eastern Cape	Nieu- Bethesda	Camdeboo

#### 5. CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT OF THE RESOURCE

##### 5.1 Summary of Ownership and Administration of the Owl House

###### Owners:

- 1880? - The house is believed to have been erected around 1880 which makes the building little older than the town of Nieu-Bethesda itself.
- 1889? - 1945 - 'Oom Piet' Martins ("Transportakte Nr. 199 gedateer 17 Julie 1889")
- 1945 to 1976 - Helen Martins
- 1976 to 1983 - Estate of the late Helen Martins (Herman Martins)
- 1983 to date – Property transferred to the Local Authority (Municipality of Nieu-Bethesda, Nieu-Bethesda Transitional Local Council, Camdeboo Municipality) now Dr. Beyers Naudé Local Municipality

### **Administration:**

- 1980? to 1990 - Municipality of Nieu-Bethesda
- 1990 to July 1996 - Friends of The Owl House (The SA Museums Association, the SA Association of Arts,
- the National Monuments Council, the municipality of Nieu- Bethesda, as well as all the regions are represented.)
- August 1991?? Owl House Museum Board formed. (no further correspondence regarding the Museum Board or its administration of the property found)
- July 1996 to date - **Owl House Foundation (OHF)**, a non-profit Section 21 company, assume Management of the Owl House. **OHF** administers the Owl House for the Municipality of Nieu-Bethesda that takes the form of a lease agreement.

## **6. CONDITION ASSESSMENT AND POTENTIAL THREATS**

- 6.1. Currently the site is in good condition, despite some minor issues pertaining to the ad-hoc restorations that have taken place which have compromised some heritage objects on site. Most of the site requires constant maintenance, the Built Environment Unit and the Heritage Objects Unit will provide advice to the municipality in terms of how ongoing maintenance will be undertaken once formal protections are in place.
- 6.2. Potential threats to the site are the role that the municipality have to play in including the community in the socio economic potential of the site being declared a National Heritage Site. The Heritage Agreement needs to speak to these issues so that the resource can have ownership in the community in general.

## **7. RESOURCE UTILISATION**

- 7.1. The site will remain a museum and the connecting buildings belonging to the Owl House foundation will complete the village site precinct as a whole. This will continue to be the case when the site is declared as a National Heritage site.
- 7.2. A Heritage Agreement between SAHRA, the municipality the the Owl House foundation will be put in place to ensure that the Heritage Resources of the National Heritage Site are not compromised.

## **8. BIBLIOGRAPHY OF DOCUMENTATION RELATING TO THE THE HERITAGE RESOURCES OF ERF306, OWL HOUSE & ERF303, ERF 304**

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31 May 2017