

**Motivation for declaration as Grade One heritage site:  
The Owl House, Nieu-Bethesda**

The Owl House is unique and irreplaceable in every possible sense of these words. The fact that it is located in a small village with few economic drivers makes it even more valuable. It has been the focus of a large portion of the visitors and artists that made the pilgrimage to Nieu-Bethesda in the last three decades. As such, the community stands to lose their most important and well known attraction if not protected or managed sensitively.

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 contribute to the complexity of the meaningful ensemble that is on the site.

The material on the site inside the boundaries (including the fences) should be considered for declaration. It should, however, be stressed that conservation of the site should also include the context. Future visitors should be afforded the privilege to read the double meaning of wire-work texts against the fences and in the context as Martins left it. If it would be available only on photographs or seen against a multi-storey building on the neighbouring site, then part of the conservation would have failed. The dry riverbed, the dusty street and desolation at the edge of the town is as part of the choreographed entrance into this private world as the front door of the impoverished house.

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Received a B.Arch. degree from the University of the Orange Free State in 1988. Was chairperson for the Permit Committee of Free State Heritage 2004 – 2011. Currently teaches Design and History of Architecture at the UFS. Received a M.Arch. degree (by research, *cum laude*) in 2012 on “The Historical Development of Farmstead Architecture in the Brandwater Basin of the Eastern Free State up to Union.” His architectural practice was awarded an Institute of Architects Merit Award: Conservation (1997) for House Van Rensburg in Philippolis.