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South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA)
111 Harrington Street
CAPE TOWN
8001

Attention: Palmira De Almeida

HERITAGE STATEMENT RE:

SOUTH AFRICAN ASTRONOMICAL OBSERVATORY (SAAO) NATIONAL HERITAGE SITE (NHS), CITY OF CAPE TOWN, SUBURB OF OBSERVATORY, OBSERVATORY ROAD, ERF 26423-REMAINDER

APPLICATION IN TERMS OF SECTION 27 OF THE NATIONAL HERITAGE RESOURCES ACT (ACT 25 OF 1999; NHRA)

PROPOSED UNIVERSAL ACCESS RAMPS AND ROUTES

SAHRIS CASE NUMBER: 15098

A. INTRODUCTION

The following Heritage Statement has been prepared to accompany a Section 27 NHRA permit application for alterations to the SAAO NHS for the purposes of providing universal access ramps and routes relating to the Technical Building and Auditorium.

Neither the Auditorium or Technical Building have heritage significance. Heritage issues relate primarily to the landscape qualities of the site and the heritage value of the heliograph telescope located immediately adjacent to the west of the Auditorium. The location of the proposals including the naming of buildings is indicated on Drawing No. L1000/Rev B dated 2020/05/21.

The provision of universal access on the site is regarded by the institution as an immediate priority. A number of design options have been considered to ensure compliance with the regulatory framework for universal access, address issues and concerns of end users and minimize heritage impacts. The initial proposals prepared by IDC Consultants were for a different and more extensive alignment linking the Technical Building, Auditorium and Main Building and which faced a number of challenges in terms of level changes and creating a sense of fit within the landscape.

The current proposals are more contained with the omission of a new walkway linking the Auditorium and Main Building and provide a more positive response to the landscape context in terms of layout and design.

The proposals are indicated on the following drawings:

- Drawing No. L1000/Rev B dated 2020/05/21
- Drawing No. L1010/Rev B dated 2020/05/21
- Drawing No. L1011/Rev C dated 2020/05/21
- Drawing No. L1012/Rev C dated 2020/05/21
- Drawing No. L2013/Rev _ dated 2020/05/21

Annotated site photographs are attached as **Annexure A**.

Given the nature of the proposals, it is unnecessary to provide a detailed history of the site. A detailed history is covered in the SAAO Heritage Inventory prepared by Nicolas Baumann and Sarah Winter dated May 2011 and in various publications, notably a book on the history and heritage of SAAO authored by I.S Glass (2015). A brief historical summary is attached as **Annexure B**.

The heritage inventory data sheet for the Heliograph is attached as **Annexure C**.

As per email confirmation from SAHRA, consultation with registered heritage conservation bodies is not required for this type of case or permit application.

B. STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE INCLUDING LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

B.1 Broader landscape and site scale

The SAAO NHS site is of considerable historical, scientific, architectural and aesthetic significance. It forms an integral part of Two Rivers Urban Park (TRUP) which has been identified as a Grade II in terms its pre-colonial and early colonial history, particularly in term of its associations with colonial expansion and defense and Khoekhoen resistance during the mid-17th century. TRUP has high local significance as a green environmental room embedded within the City. The institutional layering and environmental significance of TRUP represents a place of scientific inquiry, healing and quietude.

The site has very high historical significance as a scientific institute dating to the early 19th century and the first permanent observatory in the southern hemisphere. It is associated with a number of astronomical advances of international significance from the 1830s. It has considerable aesthetic significance with a number of architecturally significant buildings and a distinctive dome typology set within a wooded landscape at the confluence of the Liesbeek and the Black Rivers.

B.2 Landscape precinct scale

The proposals relate to four landscape character precincts on the site:

1. The area occupied by the Technical Building within the northern portion of the site immediately to the east of the termination of a north-south linkage route on relatively low-lying land related to the confluence of the Liesbeek and Black Riverine Corridors. The Technical Building is a late 20th century intervention on the site and is a building prototype at variance with the core grouping of historic buildings. It has no heritage value. The immediate building curtilage including paths of movement are relatively resilient and robust.
2. The area occupied by the Auditorium within the north western portion of the site immediately to the west of the termination of a north-south linkage route in close proximity to the Technical Building with a treed space to the north. The Auditorium is a late 20th century building of no heritage value. It is distinguished from the Technical Building by the change in topography, i.e. approximately 3m above the floor level of the Technical Building. The building has no heritage significance but is in very close proximity to the heliograph telescope which has heritage significance.
3. The central area occupied by the Main Building and associated stables set on an elevated plateau within an orthogonal space to the north framed by buildings and movements routes and forming part of the heritage core of the site.
4. The north-south linkage route between the historic core and the northern portion of the site where the main late 20th century interventions on the site are located including the Technical Building and Auditorium. The north-south linkage route traverses a landscape compartment which is treed and sylvan in character with soft landscaping interventions particularly the rockery and the stone lined edge treatment of the access road.

B.3 Individual structure/element scale

The heliograph has heritage significance as the oldest dome of the site dating from 1848 and contributing to the characteristic dome typology of the site. It has modest scientific significance. It has public educational value in terms of the public outreach program of SAAO as it used for visitors to view sun-spots with the telescope.

The “stand-alone” quality of the telescope has been somewhat comprised by the siting of the Auditorium in immediate proximity to the structure.

C. HERITAGE INDICATORS

The proposed interventions need to be informed by the following heritage indicators:

1. The need to balance heritage issues and the requirements for universal access. Relates to this is the need to recognize the role of the site as a living scientific institution with scientific networks across the world and thus the need to accommodate change within acceptable limits rather than adopting a static approach to heritage management. Furthermore, the need to encourage interventions that enhance the public appreciation of the heritage value of SAAO, compatible with its growing public outreach program to coincide with bi-centenary celebrations in 2020.

2. Respond positively to the landscape qualities on the site in terms of creating a sense of fit in the landscape in terms of topographical conditions avoiding as far as possible major cutting into slopes and the need for considerable balustrading and structural interventions resulting in visual-spatial impacts.
3. Respect the principle of buildings located within a matrix of green with the siting and geometry of universal access ramps integrated into the pattern of built form and existing movement routes as opposed to being distinctly separate.
4. Respect the character of the landscape precincts identified above, in particular the sylvan and soft edge conditions of the north-south linkage route and the quality of the area occupied by the Main Building and stables.
5. Ensure that new interventions provide the heliograph with sufficient breathing space to the east and allow for continued ease of visitor access.
6. Ensure that the palette of materials and textures as well as planting patterns are compatible with existing patterns.

D. ASSESSMENT OF IMPACTS

The location of the ramp to the Auditorium is well considered in terms of avoiding cutting into the slope and being integrated into the existing built form and movement routes. The location of the ramp to the south-west of the Technical Building responds to the geometry of a corner condition defining the central area, although planting along the road side edge of the ramp wall will be required to soften the urban nature of the intervention and ensuring a continuity of existing edge conditions.

The current proposals have been subject to a design development process to address initial heritage concerns regarding the urban nature of the interventions within a sylvan or 'green' context and the impact of the verticality and solid treatment of the ramp walls either side of the north-south linkage route creating a 'pinching' effect on the experiential qualities of this section of the road. To mitigate this impact substantially, the ramp wall to the Auditorium has been set back to allow for a planter below mid-level of the height of the wall.

The proposals will not obstruct views of the heliograph from the north-south linkage route or impinge on continued ease of visitor access.

The proposed palette of materials and planting is compatible with existing palettes. The use of red brick paving and a combination of smooth and stippled plaster to the ramp walls is evident on the site. A mixed indigenous, waterwise planting incorporating one or two iconic fynbos species is appropriate in terms of the existing planting pattern.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that SAHRA approve the proposed interventions as having minimized the heritage impact on the landscape qualities of the site and the heliograph telescope. Importantly, the proposals have balanced heritage issues and

the requirements for universal access and the role of a site as a living scientific institution and having public appreciation value.

It is recommended that SAHRA approve the proposals on condition of the submission of a close out report to SAHRA within 30 days of practical completion of the work including landscaping.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Winter

With input from Nicolas Baumann

List of Annexures

Annexure A: Site photographs

Annexure B: Historical overview

Annexure C: Extract from the SAAO Heritage Inventory dated May 2011