Stefano Nappo, PhD

12 Fleetwood Apartments

2 Northwold Road

London N16 7HG

UK

29 May 2015

SAHRA

Dear Sirs

Re: The Owl House, New Bethesda – National Heritage status and management

To introduce myself, I am a very experienced world traveller and a lover of art and culture in all its forms. I have lived in London for 25 years, and enjoy everything cultural the city has to offer to someone like me and international travellers to the capital.

I had recently the pleasure of visiting New Bethesda with my good friend Melinda Bekker. She had described to me the extraordinary treasure that is the Owl House, the then home of Helen Martins. I have been a devotee of outsider art for many years, experiencing it regularly here in London (see The Museum of Everything - <http://musevery.com>) and as you know it has been recognised as separatist and unstructured group of artists since Jean Dubuffet referred to “Art Brut” in his letters to fellow artists of the time. Preeminent world museums such as the Tate here in London recognise the movement, and promote it (see <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/art-brut>).

Helen Martins is recognised as a member of the Outsider artist community (not movement as there was and is no such organisational aspect relating to the artists), and certainly as the most significant South African Outsider artist of the 20th century. As such, the Owl House is of incalculable cultural value to South Africa, requiring appropriate respect, preservation and protection.

**Lack of National Heritage status**

With regard to protection, I was very surprised that the Owl House has not yet been accorded National Heritage status. Having read the relevant statutes (I am a lawyer of 22 years by profession) all the criteria appear to be fulfilled, and most certainly the default position ought to be that it is protected unless shown to otherwise fail to meet those criteria.

I therefore urge SAHRA to act without delay to make the decision, record the declaration and publicise the status as soon as possible. Given that Helen Martins died in 1976, nearly 40 years ago, I am astonished that this has not already happened. I and the world will await that declaration with anticipation, and I am urging my art lover and art professional friends to make representations as I do here.

**Damaging current management of the Owl House – urgent action needed**

After my visit I feel compelled to request that you review and remedy as a matter of urgency the current poor management of the Owl House. All and any current or future plans to make further decisions and changes must be halted immediately to prevent further irreparable damage to this highly important cultural asset.

I was dismayed and shocked to see how the Owl House is being run currently. I cannot believe that anyone of adequate curatorial learning and experience has contributed to the uncaring and disrespectful way the museum has been and is being handled. If such a person has been involved, I should like to know who that person was or is, and why they have presided over such a dereliction of their responsibilities.

The issues are numerous and include:

* Entry to the property – the original front door of the Owl House has been blocked shut. Visitors are therefore prevented from experiencing the careful placement of objects, mirrors, translucent light effects and many other nuances created by Helen Martins intentionally or otherwise. This is already unforgiveable.
* The Camel Yard – the key mirror statement to the House itself, and which would have been the last thing a visitor to the House would have seen, is now the first thing seen, first through the fence, and then as a visitor is forced to go through the yard to purchase a ticket and enter. This is a travesty, and must be changed without delay to entry by the front door, and the fence rendered solid to stop the ridiculous ability to view the Yard from outside the museum.
* Unfettered access to objects in the House – this is one of the worst aspects of the current arrangements. That any visitor can wander freely and if they wish, take objects is completely unacceptable. If this was permitted in any other museum in South Africa or elsewhere, there would be an uproar. A solution is to restrict physical access to spaces whilst preserving views. However, whilst this is done in some places, it has been so poorly by screwing plexiglass to wooden door frames, that it actually causes damage to the fabric of the museum. Another, and far better solution in my view, is to have group visits with a member of staff in attendance at all times to ensure no objects are removed.
* Removal of objects to cabinets in the shop and elsewhere – some of Helen Martins’ personal effects have been placed into the shop area with little conception of how best to display them, or to the selection of any such objects. They are also not likely to last long given the lack of any control on light and humidity.
* Ticket office – the placement of this is appalling. It encroaches on the House in an unacceptable way, and contributes hugely to the wrong circulation. It should be removed, and placed elsewhere entirely e.g. outside the property proper.
* Ticket staff – the staff are lackadaisical, unhelpful and focus on their cell phones rather than on the visitors who have travelled far to experience the House. People who are passionate about the House should employed instead. There will be many in the local community, of all origins, who would meet that criteria.

For all these reasons and more, I urge you without any delay to take control of the museum away from the present controlling group, and to put in place caretaker arrangements whilst a permanent and appropriate solution is found.

If SAHRA does not act with the urgency required, current plans to make further damaging changes I am aware of may happen.

I ask that SAHRA therefore takes the steps required without delay.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Stefano Nappo