

## Raising Charles to History

*Tuesday 10 November 2009*

The decaying Sharpeville municipal beer hall and brewery that marks the entrance to the township will be refurbished ahead of next year's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary remembrance to the massacre.

Executive Mayor of the Sedibeng District Municipality, Mahole Simon Mofokeng, says municipal beer halls presented the single most importance revenue source in townships and the initiative was an attempt to retain the history these halls played in apartheid-era townships.

For the residents, they were the only venue where black people were legally allowed to purchase alcohol and gather socially, while according to Johannesburg council records, they provided the municipality with income meant for the development and upkeep of township amenities.

“Beer brewing was also the main form of economic survival for black women, despite brewers and their customers being automatically criminal as it was against the law for Africans to brew or drink beer,” he/she says.

Built at the eastern end of Seeiso Street in the early 1940s, the municipal beer hall was opposite the municipal office responsible for the township's upkeep and provides “a rich, fascinating history”. By the end of the decade the beer hall was making “a modest profit”, but in 1950 a new brewing recipe dramatically changed the business model.

Cheaper to produce and more popular, the new beer boosted sales and profits and the decision was taken to build a new brewery to match consumption demand. Mofokeng says within three years Sharpeville was alongside Durban and Johannesburg in terms of volumes produced and the profits financed the Sharpeville Extension one development.

However, the final Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report states that during the September 1984 marches against rent increases, the beer hall and the municipal offices were “stoned and set alight ... to remain burnt-out husks for the remainder of the apartheid era: symbols of how the state attempted to control Sharpeville's residents and how Sharpeville's residents refused to be controlled”.

Mofokeng says the ground floor of the brewery building has been informally occupied by a hairdresser and an artist, while the other three floors are homes for pigeons. However, investigations have indicated the building “appears structurally sound” and the municipality believes it should be transformed into a tourist facility to anchor the multi-million-rand Sharpeville dam development.

“The building should stand as a gateway to the green picnic areas surrounding the dam and welcome the public in a way very different from how the building previously functioned. It also



provides an excellent space to tell some of the colourful stories around beer and township life,” he says.

Envisioned in the rehabilitation and subject to approval by the South African Heritage Resources Agency, is a multi-purpose space with each floor fulfilling a different role. This will include a ground floor restaurant, retail craft hub and exhibition relating the beer hall history; first floor office space and upper floor function and conference facilities.

“The intention is to refurbish the old brewery while maintaining its structure and façade and to utilise the structure as the core for the new leisure hub adjoining the dam. The outcome will be a testimony to triumph in the face of a dark history,” Mofokeng says.

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