

Project 27

During the recent ASSA Symposium, details of a dream project, involving the possible re-use of the historical 27-inch Lamont refractor as an educational/public outreach telescope were announced. If this ambitious project can materialise, it would make it the largest public telescope in South Africa and the largest refractor in the Southern hemisphere.



The final session of the 7th ASSA Symposium was held in the Observatory Theatre, former home of the Lamont-Hussey Observatory. Photo by Hannes Pieterse

What is today known as the "Observatory Theatre" (or "Sterrewag Teater") on Naval Hill in the City of Bloemfontein, once housed the Lamont-Hussey Observatory, owned and run by the University of Michigan in the USA. When it closed down in 1974, the valuable parts like the telescope lens and finder telescope were removed and shipped back to Michigan and the facility handed to City Council of Bloemfontein. The Public Works Department then moved in, dismantled the telescope and pier for the re-use of the building.

The lens, still in the crate in which it was shipped to Michigan, remains in existence. In fact, it is in the office of Dr Patrick Seitzer, the person who announced Project 27 at the Symposium. Dr Seitzer, who is very involved in the public

outreach program at Michigan but is also a historian and honorary member of the Friends of Boyden, explained his interest in the possible re-use of this historic telescope at the Boyden Science Centre.

The telescope tube (in two parts), the equatorial mount and counterweight were discovered a few years ago at the Erlichpark fire-station in Bloemfontein where they are currently in storage at the Mangaung Fire Station Museum.

Because of the sheer size of the telescope, it is not only impractical, but will be very costly to attempt to re-erect it in its original configuration. However, various more affordable options exist whereby the lens can be mounted in a stationary configuration, fed by starlight via a siderostat or celeostat arrangement. Some designs



Dr Seitzer here busy explaining one of the possible configurations in which the 27-inch Lamont refractor can be set up again. Photo: Hannes Pieterse

being considered involve the original telescope tube; alternatively it can form part of a museum display at Boyden.

Initial thoughts about the project were discussed on 27 September 2006 at Boyden Observatory between a representative from the University of Michigan (Dr Patrick Seitzer), the Boyden Observatory and Science Centre, ASSA Bloemfontein Centre and ASSA's Historical Section. Currently the project is only a dream – a dream that can either evolve to a successful reality or might turn out to be nothing more than a fantastical idea. There is no timeline for project implementation at this stage. As the project continues, the astronomical community of Southern Africa will be kept up to date of developments. ☆

Centre reports

For the AGM held on 16 August 2006, each Centre chairperson had to submit a report on their activities for the year ending 30 June 2006. Four of these were received for publication in *MNASSA*, namely from the Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and Bloemfontein Centres.

Johannesburg Centre - Brian Fraser

We have been very fortunate to have had a committee of dedicated, active, capable and energetic people running the affairs of the Johannesburg Centre. They have been a pleasure to work with and have managed the affairs of the centre with a degree of excellence that I believe we have not experienced before.

With the loss of most of our catering equipment and half of our chairs in a series of burglaries we were effectively forced to use the lecture hall next to the Innes dome for all of our monthly meetings. This has had advantages in that the facilities are more comfortable and we have had the use of the 65cm Innes refractor on a number of occasions. How-