

'Voices on the landscape':

the campaign to declare District Six a National Heritage Site

'Complexity' is often cited as the reason that both the declaration of District Six as a National Heritage Site (NHS) and the restitution of land rights to people, have been delayed. Yet, when embraced not as a problem but as a given condition within a difficult situation, complexity can give rise to creative solutions and finding new pathways to overcome challenges.

Complexity, however, seems to have become a justification for the stasis which has afflicted both of the above processes. It has become an excuse for the lack of progress.

District Six Museum believes that the best tool available for protecting the District Six land is the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999, which makes allowance for the declaration of sites of national significance, for protection. This should be mobilised hand-in-hand with the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1995 to ensure that comprehensive restitution is attained. Although the two are separate processes, they are inevitably interlinked in the common goal of securing the rights of people as enshrined in the country's Constitution and Bill of Rights.

The vibrant and colourful panorama of District Six infused by the smells of koesisters and samoosas and the sounds of the *ghoema* beat which is called to mind by nostalgia, often leads people to imagine that this is what will be promoted by the NHS declaration. There is a sense that a trip down memory lane on the reconstituted landscape will be an attractive destination on the cultural tourism route. While there is an important place for nostalgia, this is not what is imagined for the NHS declaration.

In the making of the campaign, the Museum has sought to ensure that the community nurturing the campaign is one which grows competencies to engage actively with the physical development, and is able to strengthen their collective resilience to contest any future attempts to diminish the land available for restitution, including the threat of gentrification. We understand the 'community' in this context to consist of current and former residents, their descendants, and all others who self-identify as being part of this common community of purpose. Platforms and tools will be created for members to shape the design of the reclaimed space, so as to contribute to the memorialisation of its pertinent history by utilising the landscape as a canvas. We will devise strategies to influence the ways in which the development will respond to their current needs, their connection to the past and ensure that it is shaped towards future growth, development and new generations.

The memory methodologies which the Museum has acquired over the years of its existence has served as a strong point of reference in developing the various components of the campaign. I would like to refer to two recent examples which demonstrate ways in which complexity can be used as a creative tool. The first is *Huis Kombuis*, a project of the Museum which started as an oral history and storytelling project, developed design and product-development competencies, and which has just produced an acclaimed publication co-created with participating former residents of District Six and other areas of displacement. The second example is one which is still in the making. It is the design process involving former users of the old Peninsula Maternity Hospital on the corner of Caledon and Primrose Streets. Now being adapted to be a new community hospital, an immersive process involving artists, community members and the archive has resulted in wonderful artworks which will pay tribute to its heritage. This will be launched during the course of the coming year.

Understanding what it means to live on a National Heritage Site, its limitations and opportunities, will form a major part of the campaign. As some District Sixers have chosen not to return, ways in which they can claim their connectedness will also be factored in. A major drive to interpret the meanings embedded in the two relevant Acts, will be rolled out during the year. Our aim is to ensure that everyone who is keen to do so, will be conversant with the regulations and can be competent watch-dogs for protecting the site. This is in part popular education and in part public participation. The processes will be geared towards inviting as many people as possible to participate, and will simultaneously be focused on ensuring that such participation is meaningful and makes a difference.

The structure of the public process component aims to challenge the limited forms that these often take. Government public consultations often seem to be premised on the understanding that consensus is unattainable so only notionally aimed at, with the result that minimal planning is invested in the process of interrogating, building and soliciting public opinion and knowledge. We prefer to explore processes that are premised on the existence of divergent views, assuming that complete consensus will never be achieved and neither is it desirable.

The campaign has its beginnings in 2005, with a research and public process emerging from an international conference hosted by the Museum, titled 'Hands on District Six: Landscapes of Postcolonial Memorialisation'. Provisional protection was granted by SAHRA (South African Heritage Resources Agency) in 2006 but this has since lapsed. Delays and lack of clarity in terms of the next steps of the process have been extremely frustrating, and stand in contrast to the transparency and empowerment components intended to be embedded in the process as led by the Museum.

In addition to protecting the site, the declaration aims to demonstrate how a community can mobilise around legal frameworks and build citizen engagement, and to test ways in which policy can come alive in community. It intends to model a process whereby different locales of expertise

can be brought together (such as local community knowledge, designers, urban planners, architects) in shaping a new neighbourhood. Very importantly, it aims to ensure that the spirit of place that defined the historic District Six, finds its way into the new history of the area.

The campaign to advocate for the declaration of the area known as District Six, as a National Heritage Site, is the Museum's most ambitious undertaking since its creation in 1994. There are many factors relating to land restitution that are outside of our control, but in terms of the above ways in which we believe we can make an important impact, we have recommitted ourselves to do so on Saturday 11 February, on the day commemorating the declaration of District Six as 'whites only' in 1966.

Who would have imagined that a place wracked by trauma would over time be an inspiration on so many levels: of artworks, literature, musical compositions, stories, plays and very importantly, the inspiration for a desired way of life and being in the world, protected now by a rights-based culture.

District Six might be but a small drop in the national ocean of transformation, but an important one which holds the possibility for demonstrating on a micro-level, what can be achieved on a larger macro-level.

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