



## **Commemorating the declaration of District Six as a White Group Area**

***11 February 1966 – 11 February 2018***

A pall of disappointment hangs over the District Six community. Despite the successes of this community land claim, the way in which the Land Restitution Act has found expression in the practice has been slow beyond comprehension, occasionally opaque in its processes and often painful. The drag has had an impact on both the broader claimant and returned community, as well as those whose only interest is to be part of a positive story even though they will not be returning.

The euphoria of 11 February 2004 when two of the oldest returnees, Mr Ebrahim Murat and Mr Dan Ndzabela, received the keys to their new homes from then President Nelson Mandela, has long faded into distant memory. Some even speak of having been deluded into celebrating hollow victories, with the desperation of people's desire both for a home and for justice, having been exploited for party political purposes. Looking back, the gains that have been made cannot be denied, but they have been decidedly shallow.

Add to this frustration, the lack of success that the community has had in having the area declared as a National Heritage Site despite having started the process more than 15 years ago, and one can understand the disappointment. The fact that many of the important sites of memory such as Hanover Street and the Seven Steps have been rendered inaccessible by the CPUT building, has further exacerbated the frustrations.

The work of memory in this context is extremely difficult. In the process of lodging their land claims, claimants have had to do a verification interview in which forensic information was sought to substantiate their claims: dates of actual removal, names of neighbours and detailed descriptions of the process of removal, for example. As claimants dug deep into the recesses of their memories, narratives which were often painful and not previously spoken about, emerged. What were they to do once the interview was over, and the floodgates had been opened? The District Six Museum became the place where people continued to tell their stories after the verification interview left them troubled and dissatisfied with the incompleteness of the memory activation. As they navigated their way through the land claim process with the support of the Museum, the evocation of memory continued to be at the core.

Community memory also played a very pivotal role in developing the statement of significance necessary for the application to have District Six declared a National Heritage Site. Their relationship to the land was understood through these emerging narratives.

How to do the work of memory in this context is a question that we frequently ask ourselves. The Museum's work is not dependent on the above two processes, but it certainly is affected by them. Memory, although past-based, is always activated in the present, and there is a dynamic flow that exists between the two temporal modalities that impact on how it finds expression. It is very hard to expect a community to set aside their current realities and issues, to concentrate on matters of memory and heritage. Nostalgic storytelling and reminiscence have their place, but the Museum's work and integrity has always been based on drawing on the past to confront present realities, supporting a rights-based culture which is just and equitable. Our work is intended to strengthen this community's voice and expertise to tackle current issues that trouble them, not distract them with nostalgia.

11 February – the day that District Six was declared 'whites only' in 1966 and the day on which the late President Nelson Mandela was finally released from prison in 1990 – has become that time when District Sixers have renewed their commitment to continue the work of rebuilding the community in ways which take account of its past. A walk of remembrance which is both outward-beckoning to the city in its visibility, and inward-looking to participants who use the opportunity to strengthen their own resilience, has become its hallmark. Of late, its proximity to the State of the Nation address has been lamented, a by-product of the escalating cynicism in government promises. The hopeful anticipation that the SONA had signalled in the past, is no longer apparent,

This walk has come to be a poignant reminder of the many issues linked to the forced removals of millions of people across the country under Apartheid which continue to plague us even up to today. It is a reminder of the range of legacies left within communities who were forced to forge a life together after they were displaced under racially defined laws. It is a reminder of the unfinished business of land restitution, and of the ongoing current displacement of people even as we inhabit the space of the new South Africa.

For more than twenty years the walk culminated at a little strip of the old Hanover Street which survived the destruction. A cairn of stones to mark the spot, evolved there over time as people brought stones each year to build it. Sometimes the stones were marked with messages or names. For the past few years the ritual was interrupted by the construction of a residence for CPUT students. The environment which formed an important context for the ritual has been altered and a fence renders it inaccessible. This year, a process of reclaiming the cairn has been started, and the walk will once again end at this spot. CPUT has to enter into a new relationship with the community, and much positive potential stands to emerge from such renewal.

On a symbolic level, we are reminded on this day of other areas of displacement across the country, and the many issues which remain unresolved. We remember Sophiatown, declared 'whites only' on 12 February 1955; we remember the 'non-whites' given eviction notices from Fietas in 1957, Constantia declared 'whites only' in 1961 and Harfield in 1969; Schotschekloof declared for 'Malays only' and Athlone for 'coloureds only', both in 1957. These are just a

few from a long list of racially instigated displacements which the community of District Six is determined to honour in their own remembering.

This collective honouring formed part of the thinking behind the application to have District Six declared a National Heritage Site. It was hoped that by now it would have been completed, and on this occasion we would like to reiterate the call, emphasising the important link that exists between such declaration and the return of the District Six community and their descendants.

We are reminded of the importance of paying attention to the intangible heritage of all communities, attending to what is often thought of as the 'soft' issues of remembrance and honouring the past, which are as important as building the physical homes, together contributing towards strengthening cohesion in current and coming generations. As Don Mattera reminds us in the title of his autobiographical work: 'Memory is the Weapon'. It is an important weapon in this work of building strong and resilient communities.

**Bonita Bennett**