

Memory and Justice for District Six

The struggle to reclaim District Six has been a long one and never was this more evident than on Sunday, when the ritual walk to the cairn of stones to commemorate the declaration of District Six as a White Group Area took place. As we walked through District Six and entered the CPUT residence that now surrounds the last remaining piece of Hanover Street, we heard stories that provoked laughter and affirmations from former residents, while others shed tears. Some remained silent until confronted with the act of laying a stone at the cairn. Then we heard anger - a deep distress that comes from not being heard, from waiting for justice. A mournful wait.

The land restitution process that bedevils District Six wounds the city. While we have watched in wonder as returnees have shaped their community through residents' associations, voluntary work, activism and the gentle act of caring, we have also watched a once celebratory land claims process become a source of great pain and anger. For those still waiting to come back, justice has not been delivered and they seek answers. Unsurprisingly, from those who have returned, in the midst of their joy we have also heard the constant refrain that 'things are not the same' or 'the people are different'. Many have not fully mourned the loss of District Six despite having returned in the past decade.

Forced removals shattered the vital connection between a people and its place. In describing the trauma experienced by African American communities who experienced displacement under the urban renewal schemes in US cities in the 1970s, psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove has aptly coined the term 'root shock', which she describes as the "traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part one's emotional ecosystem". In District Six and other sites of removals in Cape Town this ecosystem was an intricate and intangible web of connections that tied individuals to community, binding them to their environment in an intimate language. As the spectre of 'the Group' loomed over District Six, Tramway Road, Claremont, Tygervalley and Protea Village the web began to unravel. Thereafter, for many, living in a place of exile became the norm.

The land claims process today is imbued with the desire to return and the nostalgia for a lost language. Ironically it is institutions forged as part of a new democratic dispensation that are tasked with compensation. But from who do we demand justice? Working with a recently donated collection in the museum archive about the redevelopment plans for District Six in the 1980s and after the repeal of the Group Areas Act in 1991, it becomes evident that a robust call of accountability for what happened in District Six and other sites of removal still needs to be voiced. The archival collection reveals City plans for pedestrianised walkways on the empty site. It documents the private development of hotels as well as plans for military

and police housing - all of which was implemented post-removals. The erstwhile Cape Technikon sits at the centre, encroaching on St Mark's Anglican Church and the Moravian Chapel.

In the political cauldron of the 1990s state and community actors forged uneasy alliances that sought to bring the big picture of democracy into relief. Post-1994, those affected by the removals had little opportunity to hear *how* the crime was committed, to pick apart the convoluted role between the apartheid state and the City in implementing Group Areas or to even hold the construction companies or the estate agents who swooped in afterwards accountable for their role. The development of the foreshore remains a tangible reminder that the rubble of District Six was used to reclaim land from the sea. Do we need a city-wide process that unlocks this memory, but also the evidence of the crime against District Six and communities like it?

The work of memory – unearthing the past and acknowledging the hurt and anger – cannot take place in a vacuum. It should be tethered to that of a moral and even a legal accountability by those actors who profited from removals. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set in motion a model for working through the past and like the museum, has become a symbol of the possibilities for moving forward to reclaim joint, equal citizenship. It engaged both victim and perpetrators in a protracted search for justice. However, as we were reminded by the shouts of anger which interspersed our commemoration on Sunday, this justice feels elusive – ever spoken about, but not tangible to the victim.

Root shock, as Fullilove would have it, encompasses a physiological reaction to the upheaval of displacement. It is not merely a case of longing for the past and being unable to move forward – it is a blow which threatens the body's ability to function. To provide support to those who experience it requires the symbolism of rituals, storytelling, reunions and even Facebook group chats. But while we try to reclaim the past and create spaces for mourning, there remains a quest for justice. For that which was done, and for the current impasse around the restitution process. Many stakeholders have emerged in this nexus of memory, nostalgia and activism. While we hold current government institutions accountable for their implementation of the land claims process, so too do we need to consider the creation of a commission that locates the evidence of past crimes, not only to make them known, but to demand justice.

To continue our month-long commemoration of the declaration of District Six as a White Group area, the Museum will be hosting four film screenings in District Six, Langa and Valhalla Park. Screenings take place 17 February, 3, 10 and 17 March. The films have been selected from the Museum's archive and are themed around the struggle to return and the

impact of the leaving District Six. For more information contact reception@districtsix.co.za or follow the Museum's Facebook page.

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