

Cape Town's District Six and the Archaeology of Memory

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When slavery was finally abolished in 1838, government compensation had been invested in property, and streets and row houses were built outwards from the castle and the shoreline, reaching up towards Devil's Peak. The new suburb was named in 1867, when the municipality was divided for electoral purposes, and this area became District Six, a 'doorstep dormitory' for inner-city industry by the early years of the twentieth century. District Six derived a distinctive character from its port-side location, and as the first destination of many immigrants to South Africa. But this cosmopolitanism was counter to a deep-rooted segregationism, a wish to preserve privilege and cauterize miscegenation that found its logical extreme in apartheid.

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Thirty-one years after District Six was declared a 'whites only' residential area, a land commission was convened in a disused church housing memorabilia of the destroyed suburb. Amid photographs, artworks, collected street signs and archaeological exhibits, the commission heard testimony from one-time residents who had spent half a lifetime scattered in resettlement areas away on the windy Cape Flats. The commissioners ruled that District Six should be returned to its former occupants, recognizing their inalienable rights. This second history of the area — from the beginning of its destruction through until the initiation of its reconstruction — is a case study in the alienation and restitution of cultural property.

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Martin Hall

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South Africa's Hiroshima

Despite a wealth of documentary evidence for the construction of social history, little is known about the urban architecture of nineteenth-century District Six. General municipal surveys mapped out streets, lanes and the block plans of houses, but there were few individual drawings; as with many other nineteenth-century working-class suburbs, District Six developed rapidly, and as a set of variations on a few standard designs (Derek Japha and Karen Strom, pers. comm.). Archaeological work at several houses has, however, revealed the detail of house plans; front and back rooms with narrow corridors and back yards, and frequent modifications as tenants sought to make the best of crowded circumstances (Hall 1994; Hart and Halkett 1996).

Although the district varied from street to street, it was long overcrowded, with poor services and a mostly poor population. Residents were employed in clothing, leather working, tobacco, furniture and

processed food production, and in a sizeable service sector within the suburb: retailing, shop workers, building and transport trades, self-employed tailors, carpenters, dressmakers, seamstresses, shoemakers and cabinet makers (Bickford-Smith 1990, 1995; Nasson 1990). Its cosmopolitanism led to a sense of distinction, defined by a rough, communal character. Although there were marked inequalities — landlords exploiting slum dwellers, pawnbrokers profiting from low incomes, skilled artisans holding themselves aloof from labourers — there was also ‘an environment marked strongly by mutual needs and sharing between families and neighbours, whatever the divisions of income, occupation or religion’ (Nasson 1990: 64). Overall, it was marked by poverty. In the words of Richard Rive, a writer born and brought up there, ‘it was a ripe, raw and rotten slum. It was drab, dingy, squalid and overcrowded’ (Rive 1990: 111).

The beginning of the end of this part of District Six’s history came in February 1966. Proclamation 43 set District Six aside for white ownership and occupation. The government estimated the population at about 62 000 people, three-quarters of whom were tenants, and all but about 1000 of whom were classified ‘coloured’ — of mixed descent — in the racial typology of the Population Registration Act (Horrell 1967). The intention had been to clear the area completely within five years, but by 1978 there were still coloured families in District Six and compensation, resettlement and demolition had cost the government six times its original estimates (Hart 1990). By this time, District Six had become a rallying point for opposition to the forced removals that were taking place throughout the country. There had been protest meetings at churches and mosques, while the 1976 Soweto uprising had raised the stakes in the politics of white minority rule. It was politically important for the government to continue, despite a clear lack of viability. When plans to house 15 000 whites in townhouses and high-rise flats failed because of negative publicity, the government turned to state-funded projects, planning housing for military and police employees and, from 1979, the Cape Technikon, reserved for white students only. Part of the cleared land was sold off to private developers and a small portion was redeclared ‘coloured’, apparently as a sop to reformist opinion (Hart 1990; Soudien 1990),

Despite these delays and political setbacks for the government, removals were complete by early 1984, almost two decades after the original proclamation. Mosques, churches and schools remained, as well as cobbled and paved streets, curbstones and the traces of wall footings where the bulldozers had been less efficient. But seen from the Table Bay shoreline, District Six was now a jagged scar, separating Cape Town from its suburbs; in Richard Rive’s words, ‘South Africa’s Hiroshima’ (Cape Times, 9 January 1986).

The completion of the District Six removal programme coincided with the growing popular uprising against the government, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency in 1985, the unbanning of a range of political organizations in 1990 and South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994. This umbrella of increasingly successful resistance affected local politics in many parts of the country. In Cape Town, the Woodstock and Walmer Estate Residents Association (WOSAWA) was one of many ‘civics’ that took up local issues within a framework of national-scale opposition. WOSAWA used several issues in District Six as rallying points, including the preservation of St Mark’s Church in the face of technikon expansion and attempts to demolish the Silvertree Crèche (Soudien 1990).

In 1986 an international oil company, BP (Southern Africa), announced an initiative to rebuild District Six as South Africa’s first open residential area, continuing in the government tradition of imposing policies on communities without consultation. BP’s proposal — joined by a number of other companies and the Cape Town City Council — further focused opposition and stimulated the formation of the Hands Off District Six Campaign (HODS), an alliance of more than twenty organizations and a significant number of former residents of the area, which campaigned for the abolition of the Group Areas Act prior to any redevelopment (Soudien 1990).

District Six’s second historical phase, then, can be seen as the period from the beginning of forced removals in 1966 until the Land Court ruling of August 1997, which gave the area back to its former residents; a victory for the position taken by WOSAWA, HODS and the District Six Restitution Front,

which had successively resisted government, private and municipal attempts to control redevelopment. In distinction to the period prior to forced removals, when the area had been a poor, crowded and cosmopolitan suburb of Cape Town, the geographical configuration of this second phase was a nested set of traces on the landscape. The footprints of houses — some left exposed by demolition, a few excavated, many more masked by debris and tall grass ~ were contained within a grid of streets and still-standing churches, mosques and schools. Seen from still further away, District Six was a single place within the apartheid geography of the Cape; a physical monument to those who had been dispersed to the resettlement townships and beyond, and to those who had successfully resisted the redevelopment of 'salted earth' at the hands of others.

The Construction Of Memory

This narrative of District Six — the history of its origins, growth and economy, its destruction and the rise and success of protest against the apartheid state — is the framework within which the complex and intertwined forms of domination and resistance can be teased apart and better understood. This unravelling can be started with three threads — three of many possible stories ~ sharing a common focus, but each different.

One: In September 1981 an artist heaps bricks, torn linoleum, a discarded kettle, a child's shoe and other remnants of the demolition on the floor of a gallery in downtown Cape Town, a few blocks from District Six. Six shrouded chairs — 'a sign of mourning, as a sign the owners have gone away' — and a recording of the recollections of former residents, the muezzin and the battering noise of the bulldozers complete the installation. Proceeds contribute to a fund for the creation of a museum to the community and its destruction (Argus, Cape Town, 18 September 1981).

Sue Williamson, who titles her heaped collection of debris 'The Last Supper', is a member of the Women's Movement for Peace, protesting forced removals and asserting her place in a community wider than apartheid's imposed racial divisions: 'the focus is District Six but the larger theme is what happens when people with power use it against those with no power and the wreckage these actions leave behind' (ibid.).

Two: Fifteen years later, a group of archaeologists make a systematic collection of artefacts from what had once been Tennant Street, close to the heart of District Six. The site had been a mid-nineteenth century urban midden, containing a rich collection of domestic debris from nearby tenement houses. The fieldwork is the centerpiece of an educational project in which school pupils, some of them the children and grandchildren of the dispossessed community, learn about archaeology and history, and the excitement of discovery and piecing together fragments of broken tableware (Clift 1996). Collections from similar archaeological sites form displays at the newly opened District Six Museum.

Overall, the archaeological project seeks a detached stance — a considered, measured history. But the involvement of children in the construction of their own heritage, making them aware of what they had not experienced directly in their own lives, brings informality and excitement:

It's terribly sad to think that all these people's most valuable things were demolished. Everyone is looking so busy. After a while we were tired and rested. Finally, the day of suffering as archaeologists has ended and we children of unit 4 — Madikaah, Mishtaah, Donna, Fatima, Fareda, Thabiet, Leila — would like to thank all the people who made this excursion possible ... What a success!!! Thanx a million and we loved it!!!! (Extract from field notebook, Tennant Street, 1996, quoted in Clift 1996)

Three: The following September, the District Six Museum organizes a sculpture festival, with works scattered through the rank grass and ageing debris field. Several thousand people come to listen to the bands, eat koeksusters and boerewors and wander among the installations fashioned from broken glass, bricks, plastic and building rubble. Many have once lived here. Among them is Igshaan Jacobs,

forcibly removed from Constitution Street, and an avid collector of ceramic sherds: 'This porcelain is how I relate to my history. If I could just piece together one small cup from all the pieces I've gathered I would have something to hold onto' (Sunday Times, Johannesburg, 28 September 1997).

For Igshaan Jacobs, the collection and reconstruction of broken crockery is much more than a stimulating outing; piecing together the broken sherds serves as a metaphor for reconstructing his own history, and the impossibility of finding the perfect teacup expresses the limitations of history; the impossibility of restoring a culture that has been crushed and dispersed across the windy resettlement areas of the Cape Flats.

These small sequences in the much larger script of District Six are claims to cultural property. Everyone involved in these small examples — and in the thousands of other, similar instances that constitute actions and responses to one of South Africa's most notorious forced removals — is asserting a connection to District Six's history through action: protesting, returning and mourning, documenting, discovering. Together, these shared actions constitute 'culture', contributing to a mass of books, photographs, oral testimony, art, documents, artefacts and memories which constitute the archive of a community — heritage, 'theatres of memory' (Samuel 1994).

But, in Raphael Samuel's words, 'heritage' is a nomadic term, which travels easily ... a term capricious enough to accommodate widely discrepant meanings' (ibid.: 205). Beneath the apparent homogeneity of intent in the construction of District Six's archive are complex and often conflicting interests. In 1993, Sue Williamson returned to her earlier theme with 'The Last Supper Revisited'. Now, the fragments from District Six's destruction had been encased in resin and placed to cast pools of light on a white shrouded table. 1980s' agitprop has become 1990s' high art; artefact-icons were sold in individual perspex cases as a numbered edition, and the installation moved from Cape Town to the Venice Biennale. For one reviewer, this was no more than 'a large dressing table upon which is arranged the findings of our very own conscience-crazed bag lady'. But for another reviewer, 'Last Supper Revisited' was 'an excellent demonstration of art's more subtle powers' (Cape Times, 12 and 26 May 1993).

Parallel issues have arisen on a larger scale — in a sense, the whole of District Six has been up for sale. The 1997 Land Court had to adjudicate between two competing claims for the area. On the one side was the Cape Town City Council, which had set up the Cape Town Community Land Trust to steer the redevelopment of the area 'in the public interest', refusing individual claims by former residents in preference for a council-controlled housing project. On the other side was the District Six Restitution Front, arguing for direct restitution or financial compensation for former residents (Sandra Prosalendis, pers. comm.; Mail and Guardian, Johannesburg, 8 August 1997). Seen in this context, Igshaan Jacobs' search for a complete teacup places him quite precisely in a complex political play with high stakes. Most of District Six's one-time residents were informal tenants and their claim in terms of the Land Commission ruling will be made through oral testimony rather than through the documents of title deeds and leases. Igshaan Jacobs' ceramic sherds could be much more than metaphors for a fractured memory.

'Culture', then — and particularly culture as property — is as likely to be an arena of disputation as an expression of common cause. But there is an additional twist in the case of District Six. The concept of property indicates value — the ownership of a resource, whether the title to land, material possessions or memories. Some forms of property may be alienable and have a market value, while others are inalienable. Property may be owned by individuals or may be the common asset of a family or a community. But the cultural property that gives substance to the current discourse of District Six has been constituted in the act of its destruction. Williamson's commonplace debris becomes iconic because of the remembrance of forced removals, giving a one-time resident's abandoned trash a high monetary value. Archaeological and documentary research becomes part of a literature of the history of the city in which the attempt to erase a community has served to lift it from the ordinary, making District Six unique, rather than representative of, immigrant and workingclass suburbs of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial cities. Igshaan Jacobs' sherds, beneath notice in any other urban wasteland,

become a metaphor for his loss at a time when, after thirty long years, he may have the opportunity for recompense.

This paradox can be understood by thinking not of the destruction of cultural property, but rather of the construction of memory. In turn, the way in which memories of District Six have been constructed and contested, and given substance through the recognition of the otherwise mundane as valued cultural property, can be teased apart. This can be approached by thinking in terms of a multiple discourse that tends towards instability and fragmentation, rather than cultural homogeneity, social spaces that are 'vitaly filled with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection' (Soja 1996: 68).

Seen in this way, archaeology, art and dispossessed remembrance become inherently unstable dimensions of an ever-changing spatial zone that cannot be reduced to a unitary construct of cultural property, or a simple binary of domination and resistance. Archaeology is inherently Cartesian, measuring and plotting, establishing context and date. Art recontextualizes, playing on memory in constructing an image of a past landscape and the violence done to its people. Others claim a 'third space' that is directly lived through its images and symbols, and is inherently unstable and challenging (hooks 1990; Bhabha 1994; Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996).

Memory As Cultural Property

Between 1966 and 1997, the raw scar of District Six was encrusted with a variety of meanings. For its former residents, it was marked ground, the geography of dispossession and dispersal. For the apartheid government, it stood for white entitlement and the principle of separate development. For reformist business and municipal interests, the land was an opportunity for investment and economic development. Such representations of space are different interpretations of what spatial configurations mean and how they can, or should, be manipulated (Lefebvre 1991).

The most notorious of these representations was the language of apartheid. Indeed, apartheid can be seen as the spatial proposition, 4 claim that the privilege of a small minority can be maintained by assigning it a disproportionately large share of the best land, and that this separation can be justified by a theory of inherent racial superiority. But, again, there were difficulties in bringing this vision to realization. Just as the state's plan of clearing out District Six's community in five years and resettling whites in new buildings foundered, so the classifications upon which separate development depended were difficult to resolve. Typical was the problem faced by the writers of the official yearbooks. It was common cause that coloured origins could be traced to miscegenation between settlers from Europe, slaves and indigenous hunters and herders — 'surely no country on the face of the earth could have been more mixed in its inhabitants than the Cape' (Union of South Africa 1953: 1096). But such mixing was the very thing that was supposed to be atypical, justifying separate development as natural in human history. The only solution was to define the 'Cape Coloured' in terms of exclusion from other 'races and tribes', falling back, bizarrely, on the Liquor Act of 1928 to define 'a Coloured person is one who is neither a White, nor an Asiatic, nor a native'. Having failed to achieve clarity through the use of race as a criterion, the 1952-3 Yearbook confused matters further through a clumsy attempt to lay down a grid of class, noting the three categories of 'educated Coloured people', farm workers, unskilled labourers and domestic servants and, finally, 'the undesirable class ... 'skollies', the habitual convicts and ex-convicts, the drunkards, the daga-smokers, and the habitual loafers' (ibid.).

There was resort to religion and language. 'Cape Malays' were a sub-set of 'Coloureds' if they were Afrikaans-speaking (if they were not Afrikaans-speaking they were Indian Muslims), although Muslims not living in the Cape were 'Coloureds', along with Christians of mixed racial descent. Once defined, after a fashion, 'Cape Malays' could be described in terms of their 'racial elements' of 'Javanese, Arabs, Indians, Ceylonese, Chinese and Europeans' with a common 'Malay strain':

[the] pure Malay of the East ... small in stature ... with an olive skin which is sometimes yellowish, light brown or cinnamon-coloured ... flattish face, high cheek-bones, black (slightly slanting) eyes, a small nose, wide nostrils, a large mouth ... introspective, polite, kind towards women, children and animals ... inclined to speak slowly, to be passive and indolent [modified at the Cape] as a result of Arabic and other infiltration. (Du Plessis 1944: 3)

Thus, in an extraordinary convolution, religion and language were used to determine race, and race was presented as the determinant of language, religion, marriage customs, cooking, temperament and a host of other cultural characteristics — the particular madness of apartheid.

This, then, was the government's representation of the 'cultural property' that filled the space of District Six prior to the beginning of ethnic cleansing in 1966. Not surprisingly, the area was cast as slum — what else could be the fate of a suburb occupied by 'habitual convicts and ex-convicts', 'drunkards', 'dagga-smokers' and 'habitual loafers'? There was an urgent need to 'shock the public into a realization of the conditions prevailing in these areas', to make the white voter aware that 'subeconomic housing still leaves the worst slums untouched' (Du Plessis 1944: 83).

Other representations of District Six filter images through the lens of nostalgia. Thus, for example, there is a genre of painting and drawing the 'native subject' that can be traced to nineteenth-century representations of Cape Town and its people in the work of artists such as Thomas Bowler (Hall 1991). Emile Maurice, writing in the catalogue for an exhibition of the art of District Six, captures this in the concept of a particular sort of outsider 'who stares, who, from the safety of distance, gapes, perhaps with curiosity and intrigue, as he captures objects not subjects — caricatures of people, not people themselves — in his snare, his magical, dexterous and seductive weave of broken lines and subtle textures that so cajoles us to waft on the wings of nostalgia' (Maurice 1995: 20, original emphasis).

The romantic image is nostalgia with a twist of charm — a place where the sun shines, the gangsters are friendly and the hangovers don't interfere with play. One of the most successful examples of this image has been District Six — the Musical, written by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen, and played between 1987 and 1990 before audiences of more than 350 000 in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth, as well as at the Edinburgh Festival. Its spirit is captured in the lyrics of one of its most popular songs, 'The Heart of District Six':

From Hanover Street/ Comes a lovely sound/ Can you hear the music that I hear/ A rhythm
and a beat/ Of the people all around/ Melodies are ringing in my ears/ And it goes klop klop/
Beating out a rhythm/ Klop klop a rhythm that is living/ It's the heart that beats in District Six.

District Six ~ the Musical was followed in 1991 by Fairyland, which opened in January 1991, following the same formula: 'a light-hearted look at the people and places that characterized District Six' and capturing 'the authenticity of the era' (Cape Times, 8 January 1991).

Neither Fairyland nor District Six — the Musical have plots or lyrics cast in terms of racial superiority and prejudice. Indeed, the intention of their writers is quite the opposite of Katie Hendriks. Kramer and Petersen aim to show the people of District Six as innocent victims of an evil policy:

We want to tell a story tonight/ About a place called District Six/ Together we lived there/
Brown black and white/ But the government changed that/in sixty six/ All the so-called
'coloureds'/ Who had lost their rights/ Were forced to move because this area/ District Six/
Was reserved for whites.

But nostalgia and its weighty legacy tended to take the work where its authors did not intend it to go. District Six — the Musical opened in the last years of apartheid government, when civil unrest was a way of life, but when there was still no intimation that, within a few years, the state would concede and seek a political transition to majority rule. In its celebratory review, the Cape Times was quick to hope that District Six and the struggle of its people could now be consigned to history. It was 'inevitable', the reviewer supposed, that the musical 'must involve politics', but nevertheless the work was 'the definitive

monument' to this now-destroyed part of Cape Town. This was because, despite the references to struggle and dispossession, the lyrics and music captured an eternal romance — they were 'ultimately about the people, their loves, their joie de vivre and their culture'. And, the reviewer lectured, the former residents of the District must realize that they were 'just as much to blame for the tragedy as those who callously ordered its demise' because 'people should question and not merely go along with plans, schemes and decisions made for them by the authorities' (Cape Times, 13 April 1987). Nostalgia — a yearning for the return to the past — is very much a matter of who is remembering what. White writing and art may celebrate either a rustic idyll, in which the native shunned the city, or the merry riot of carnival untouched by politics, but victims will remember their own histories, blunting the rough edges of daily life with a romantic patina. Not surprisingly, representations of District Six's street and community life by those who once lived there are qualitatively different from outsiders staring 'from the safety of distance'. As Raphael Samuel has warned, historians have become 'accustomed to thinking of commemoration as a cheat, something which ruling classes impose on the subaltern classes'. But an expression of romance and nostalgia, which is reactionary and racist when inscribed by one seeking closure on the past, can be an effective act of remembrance in the service of an 'insider'. District Six — the Musical illustrates this well. While appealing to those who would consign the past to a chocolate box of romantic images, it also served to keep alive the memories of one-time residents. Many went to the performances, particularly when it was restaged at the Joseph Stone Theatre in the Coloured Group Area of Athlone. Many oral histories capture this same spirit of nostalgic remembrance. For example, Linda Fortune writes in her published memoir:

People who grew up and lived in District Six knew everyone who belonged in the area. So did the gangsters, who grew up there and lived there. They recognised strangers immediately, and some of them would linger about, waiting to rob an unsuspecting victim. They never bothered any of us living in District Six. (Fortune 1996: 58)

Indeed, the gangsters are cast as agents of redistribution, robbing Jewish-owned shops in what was termed 'free entertainment' by residents. For example, Shrand's shoe shop on the corner of Tyne and Hanover Streets was frequently burgled, often in broad daylight:

No bystander ever told the truth and no one ever saw or knew anything when - questioned by policemen. If the Law asked which direction the thieves had gone, someone would always point the opposite way. Later in the week you - would see children and grown-ups wearing brand new shoes that were obviously stolen. They would even dare to walk right past Shrand's shoe shop and stop to do window shopping! (ibid.: 62)

Kramer and Petersen captured this often-told image of the 'community gangster' in their *Sexy Boys*: 'We are the Sexy Boys/ En ons is unemployed/ Die mense we annoy/ We are the Sexy Boys'.

Preserving the recollections of former residents such as Linda Fortune is central to the purpose of the District Six Museum, which originated in protests against redevelopment without community participation; opposition that crystallised in the Hands Off District Six movement of the late 1980s. Opened at the end of 1994, the museum became immensely popular with people who had been dispossessed by apartheid removals and, through its Trustees, connected the early work of WOSAWA with the eventual success of the District Six Restitution Front in winning back the land. Former residents are drawn to the museum's photographic display of life in the area. Noor Ebrahim, who took hundreds of photographs of the District from 1968 until he was evicted from his Caledon Street home, has found that photographs stimulate recollections of people, places and events, starting conversations that bring the community back to life (Noor Ebrahim, pers. comm., October 1997). This is nostalgia as a yearning for the past by those who feel loss, representations that create cultural property from fragments woven into a remembrance that blunts the edges of hardship in order to keep alive a sense of community. This is a nostalgia which is uncompromisingly opposed to the cameo histories of merry carnival, raucous flowersellers and amiable drunks, but which uses many of the same images.

But such use of common images leads to ambivalence, rooted in the use of the same signs and symbols as the purveyors of repressive histories. This was evident in the September 1997 Heritage Day holiday, when several thousand people reclaimed a large part of District Six's wasteland, fanning out through the grass and rubble to look at the work of more than fifty artists. Starting with a procession led by the Alibama Malay Choir, the entertainment included a 'free musical feast', games and food stalls. The participants were mostly black, varying from the working class to the slick middle classes, well dressed and carrying cell phones (the ubiquitous South African symbol of success), to conservative Muslims dressed to custom, to the homeless (there is a new community in District Six, living in low shacks in the clumps of bushes, which will be the new victim of removals when the District is redeveloped). Some of the musicians were young, performing recent hits, but others were older, introduced with pride as 'sons of the District', and onetime victims of the racialization of entertainment. Such were the Boogie Men, a slick foursome of middle-aged men in cream linen suits, black shirts and gold chains. There was the general smell and taste of Cape Town's popular culture: breyani, boerewors rolls, solomies and Coke.

Carnival, however, is at the heart of both apartheid's ethnic caricature and the softer representations of 'coloured culture' that dismiss District Six from the stage of history. On Heritage Day, this ambiguity was captured during a momentary juxtaposition. A wiry, brown-skinned man with hollow cheeks marked the event by wearing a cardboard placard with the address of the house from which he was evicted, haranguing anyone who would listen with his contempt for those who destroyed his community. His vision of retribution was thoroughly modern: 'The devil has microwaves for the people who did this'. But the bus next to which he was standing, and which had brought people from Hanover Park, Athlone and the other apartheid townships to which District Six's residents were shipped, had airbrushed across its back an idealized, softly romantic panorama of the Waterfront and Table Mountain behind — a tourist's dream in which no trace of District Six was to be seen. At the same time the Cape Flats were experiencing open warfare between gangs and vigilante groups, beyond the control of the police. A few weeks later, the leader of the Sexy Boys gang — a successor to the musical's Nines, 'menacing but totally lovable' — was shot in the head as his luxury car pulled up at an intersection, assassinated as part of a dispute between the Cape's powerful drug cartels (Cape Times, 1 November 1997).

There is a surplus of meaning that lies in the appropriation and reappropriation of carnival, music, recollections and the other attributes of identity, and the ambiguity that is its consequence can work against those resisting the theft and destruction of their heritage. For example, the sustained opposition to forced removals from District Six has been paralleled by an accommodationist tradition that has celebrated 'coloured culture' — the happy, timeless world of carnival and song — and sought compromise with government attempts to entrench 'separate development' in the Coloured Representative Council, Tricameral Parliament and President's Council (Prah 1997). A different example: to celebrate the 'lovable gangsters' of District Six as the kingpins in a nostalgia for the past is to risk an ambivalence in the perception of violence, drug dealing and the role of the state in using organized crime to destabilize communities and assist in control and surveillance (Scharf and Vale 1996).

Marking The Ground

District Six, then, has persisted as much more than ideas. Words, music and images are rooted in the scar across the slopes of Devil's Peak — a mark of shame and dispossession that serves as a monument — a mnemonic system that makes history tangible. For Lefebvre, such 'non-verbal' signs are not merely reducible to words — they have additional qualities, and in particular an ambiguity. This allows a unity of otherwise-disparate meanings, in which repression can be 'metamorphosed into exaltation'. The material thus has a complexity that is more than words alone — a 'horizon of meaning', 'a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another

meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of — and for the sake of — a particular action' (Lefebvre 1991; 222).

This is evident in the way in which responses to everyday objects, observed or retrieved, shift between nostalgia and anger. Thus, for example, the testimony of former residents, collected through the Western Cape Oral History Project, is often framed around the importance of household possessions: proudly kept interiors contrasting with dilapidated house exteriors, poorly maintained by landlords; washstands, fireplaces, ornamental clocks, carpets, lace, brass candlesticks, cutlery (Nasson 1990). Linda Fortune, recalling her childhood in District Six, remembers

pieces of wood from a tomato box that the bigger boys had brought home from the market in Sir Lowry Road were piled up outside on the pavement under the sash window with the wooden shutters. An empty jam tin was put on top and wilted pieces of cabbage, carrot leaves and potato peels — fetched from the kitchen where Mom was busy cleaning the vegetables — were put inside. The jam tin was then filled with water from another tin which served as a jug. In a few short minutes the food, cooked over a fire that was never lit, would be dished up with a piece of plank and 'spooned' onto toy plastic plates. Each little girl would pretend to eat and enjoy her helping of food. (Fortune 1996: 21)

The District Six Museum's most popular exhibit is a display of street signs. Suspended as long banners from the high ceiling of the one-time church, these evoke rich memories of the District's complex physical and social geography. Former residents are immediately drawn to them — 'the street names open up their whole life, how it was' (former residents Linda Fortune, Noor Ebrahim, Vincent Kolbe and Irwin Combrink, 2 October 1997). This display also represents all the ambiguities and contradictions in the violence of apartheid in its own particular history. Long assumed destroyed with the rest of the District's architectural fabric, the street signs had in fact been secretly collected and stored by one of the white demolition workers employed by the state. Seeking relief from the burden of his history, the man presented himself and his collection to the Museum shortly after it was opened, as an act of personal reparation.

'Marking the ground' in ways such as these has been important in the continuing construction of the memory of District Six. Visitors to the Museum are confronted by a large map of the District spread across the floor, and are encouraged to mark the places where they lived. Bolts of calico are draped over chairs, and former residents are asked to sign their names and recall their memories; many metres of cloth have been marked in this way since the Museum opened in late 1994. In turn, these acts of marking encourage people to talk about their lives. The Museum's staff feel that the past means much more to people when they can handle objects such as spoons and nails, collected from the area.

The same concept of marking has been extended into the landscape itself. Churches and mosques have continued in daily life, with those who are able often travelling long distances to worship in defiance of their removal from the area. In February 1996, the thirtieth anniversary of the proclamation of District Six as a white group area was commemorated by a memorial candlelight pilgrimage, led by priests, imams and community leaders. The pilgrimage started at St Mark's Church and followed the faint traces of Hanover Street towards archaeological excavations at the corner of Roger and Stukeris Streets. After a number of speeches had been made at the site, the procession wound back to the Muir Street mosque to coincide with sunset and evening prayers. In this way, people asserted their spiritual ownership of the scarred landscape, the lines of the streets and the few, still-standing buildings.

Thus the material traces of District Six give form and shape to verbalized memory, amplifying and giving substance to the remnants of former life and the evidence of destruction. The sensory experience of this material world cannot be reduced to words alone, a commonplace observation for art, and the source of the effectiveness of the September 1997 Sculpture Festival.

Most of the Sculpture Festival's installations made use of the debris of destruction: plastic, ceramic sherds, broken glass, stone, building foundations. Although none was by an archaeologist, they were all

in a sense archaeological, creating meaning from artefacts, using material things as a medium to comment on past and present. Installations included a skeletal tree spray-painted luminous red and orange, with a small cairn of gold foil sandbags nearby — the treasure of memory — and branches touched by the sunset, or by blood. Next to this was a ship fashioned from paper and shredded plastic, with stick-figure goblins swinging in its rigging; a parody of colonial history. Cairns of Hanover Street kerbstones were taped off as a development site (or a crime scene), while further up the slope a garden of remembrance had been fashioned from stones, broken glass, ceramic sherds and the other debris of daily life, dug out from just beneath the surface; ordinary artefacts rearranged as a shrine.

The material world of District Six, then, signals a radically unstable space. Objects are continually reinterpreted and reclaimed, the ground is marked and paced out, and mosques and churches used in defiance of the wasteland. In consequence, the space that is District Six after the years of apartheid's bulldozers has remained 'lived': active, defiant, contradictory and contested. And this lived quality is founded in the material, the embodiment of 'third space' and the resistance of the margins.

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