

**'You can take the people out of the hart of District Six, ou pellie, but you'll never take District Six out of the heart of the people.'**

**District Six Resident, 1966**

# ***District Six – apartheid wins, the nation loses***

**A**LTHOUGH District Six had its beginnings more than 300 years ago, the area was given its historical name only in 1867 after it was declared the sixth district in the municipality of Cape Town. The area began to grow after the freeing of the slaves in 1833.

In 1901 large slum areas were burnt and razed after an outbreak of bubonic plague. New buildings soon arose from the ashes and flourished. District Six grew and developed into a densely populated city within a city that became synonymous with the coloured community.

Today there are few coloured people who cannot trace their ancestry back to this cosmopolitan community at the foot of Table Mountain.

There were 16 churches, four community centres and 17 schools and training colleges. It was the most multi-racial residential area in South Africa.

At its height, it is estimated that the area generally known as District Six was the home of about 60 000 people; predominantly coloured and Indian, with smaller communities of whites and Africans.

But for the last 30 years District Six has been under a cloud of uncertainty. Since 1945 little has been done to maintain or improve the area.

When District Six was proclaimed white in 1966, about 30 000 people living in the specific group area were affected. In 1966 the City Engineer, Dr S. S. Morris, put the total population of the affected area at 33 446, 31 248 of them coloured people.

There were 8 500 workers in District Six, of whom 90 per cent

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were employed in and immediately around the central business district. There are at present about 6 000 pupils in schools in District Six, many from homes in the Cape Flats and with parents who formerly lived in District Six.

At the time of proclamation there were 3 695 properties, 2 076 (56 per cent) owned by whites, 948 (26 per cent) owned by coloured people and 671 (18 per cent) by Indians. But whites made up only one per cent and Indians four per cent.

On October 2, 1964, a departmental committee (set up by the Minister of Community Development) met to investigate the possible replanning and development of District Six and adjoining parts of Woodstock and Salt River.

On June 2, 1965, the Minister announced a 10-year scheme for the replanning and redevelopment of District Six under CORDA — the Committee for the Rehabilitation of Depressed Areas.

Ten days later all property transactions in District Six were frozen. A ten-year ban was imposed on the erection or alteration of any building.

In a statement on February 11, 1966, the Minister of Community Development and the Minister of Planning stated that a part of District Six was to be declared

a white area. This proclamation led to a wave of protest that has continued to this day.

The Minister denied that there would be any mass eviction of people from District Six or that they would be bundled out of the area overnight with consequent hardship and disruption. He announced that District Six would be redeveloped as a business and residential area. In 1968 demolitions began and the following year the mass removal of people was in progress.

On May 24, 1975, a part of District Six (including Zonnebloem, Walmer Estate and Trafalgar Park) was declared coloured in a surprise announcement by the Minister of Planning but the remaining area that had been declared white was unaltered.

The move was presented as a gesture of conciliation to the coloured people. In practice it did little to lessen the bitterness caused by the original decision.

The Government's plan for District Six, finally unveiled in 1971, was considered excessive even for that time of economic boom. Today, eight years later, there has been very little development in the empty shell that District Six became.

The plan has been attacked and discredited by nearly every author-

ity on town planning, architecture and property development but the Minister of Community Development, Mr Marais Steyn, has rejected expert opinion.

In May 1978, Mr Steyn announced a R9-million rehabilitation scheme for District Six. This included a pilot project to build 50 luxury houses for whites at a cost of R1,5 million.

The details of phase one of the development scheme were announced several months later. The projects included a R2,5m flat complex for white police and defence force personnel; R1,5m for roads and services and a R500 000 white housing complex of 25 flats.

In addition the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging announced plans for a R2m high-rise building to house crèches, a home for the aged and a hostel for working girls.

The city council later announced that the provision of services for phase one of the government plan would cost R2,3m, of which the council would have to pay R1,3m.

The Department of Community Development has spent about R2,5m in purchasing District Six properties. The cost of the demolition of houses, the administrative machinery to find alternative homes, as well as the interest on the capital expenditure, is conservatively estimated at a further R30m. The total is probably much higher.

The depopulation of District Six has contributed to the stagnation of the central business district. It has been calculated that city retailers have suffered a loss of many millions over eight years in potential sales.

The city council is losing R700 000 a year in rates as a result of the demolition of buildings as the land acquired by the Government is exempt from rates.

To date only seven properties, representing a total return of R233 000, have been sold. If the area were fully developed as a residential area it would yield R2m a year in rates. This would amount to four per cent of the city's total revenue from rates.

There is a basic conflict between the attitude of the Government and that of local authorities. Earlier last year the Prime Minister stated that 'District Six is a blot which the Government has cleared up and will continue to clear up'.

In the opinion of the city engineer, Mr Brand, 'The decay of District Six was not so much a blot on the city's landscape but a blot on the city's conscience'.

The Government's destructive policy has not only brought about the spiritual and physical death of a once vibrant community but the principle of local autonomous authority has been flouted.

In the light of the events culminating in the mass removals in District Six, it must be asked whether these Government policies constitute 'urban renewal' or whether they amount to blatant racial discrimination.

At the time of the proclamation in 1966 there were some 29 000 people in the area that was proclaimed white. Today, some 10 000 people are still resident in the area.

Most of those who have been removed from their homes have been moved to the bleak townships on the wastes of the Cape Flats. Some have gone to Mitchells Plain.

A lucky few have managed to find accommodation in Walmer Estate or Woodstock.

Thirteen years of bulldozing and official harassment has had a devastating effect. The spirit that once thrived has been largely broken by years of insecurity, resulting in apathy and despondency.

Today removals are being carried out by the Department of Community Development more vigorously than ever before, with residents offered little choice in their place of resettlement. Often the offered alternative is miles from their work, hospitals and schools. Resettlement often involves substantially increased rent, sometimes five or six times as much.

Few acts by the Government have caused as much misery, resentment and frustration as the

proclamation of District Six as a white group area with the subsequent mass removals. Opposition has been expressed at every turn.

The Cape Town City Council has consistently opposed in principle the redevelopment of District Six as a white group area, although it co-operated on the physical aspects of development when faced with the accomplished fact. City planners have warned of the detrimental consequences of Government policies on District Six.

The view has been expressed that District Six has become the symbol of the hurt and distress that has resulted from all Group Areas removals, and is consequently more sensitive an issue than other similar situations.

It is possible that a positive act of conciliation in District Six would have far-reaching effects in improving relations, both at a local level and beyond.

The favoured strategy being discussed is to declare District Six an 'open area'.

This course would involve a re-examination of present plans with a view to:

- Accommodating the residents that remain in upgraded dwellings at rentals which they can afford.
- Renewing and re-using as many of the existing buildings as possible.
- Rebuilding the demolished areas to accommodate the population of workers serving the city that would naturally live there.
- Ensuring that the renewed or redeveloped area could accommodate a sufficiently wide range of incomes to satisfy the functional requirements of the central city area.
- Including such amenities as are necessary to sustain a balanced community.
- Reconsidering the viability of areas at present zoned for commercial and industrial uses.

If the present stigma attached to District Six were removed and the full co-operation of the private sector mobilised, there is no doubt that this blighted area could be rapidly redeveloped to become a useful and attractive part of the city of Cape Town.