DISTRICT SIX – KANALADORP*

*Sandra Prosalendis***

DECEMBER 1996: Two years after its opening, the District Six Museum stands in Buitenkant Street in all its shabby splendour. People jostle in and out of the entrance, alongside the makeshift graffiti-style sign; foreign and local tourists to Cape Town brush shoulders with ex-residents, a mixture as heterogeneous as the spirit that the museum celebrates. Inside, to a background of impromptu piano recitals, three exhibitions compete for space. An air of festivity reigns as old friends meet and rediscover their past, and yet there is still a sense of repose and remembrance that lingers in the museum, a legacy of the building's past roles as church, school, community centre and political sanctuary.

People have always seen District Six in different ways; to many it was home and community, to others a vibrant society, and yet others that described it as a 'rathole'. District Six was many things; an extraordinary place that inspired artists and authors to capture its essence, its most recent history is that of a symbol of resistance against the Group Areas Act and the forced removals that ensued.

It was named for the sixth municipal district of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a community of freed slaves,

merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants, District Six was a centre with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of this century, however, the history of removals and marginalisation had begun. The first to be 'resettled' were Africans, forcibly displaced from the District in 1901. The more prosperous began moving away to the suburbs and the area became the neglected ward of Cape Town. In 1966 it was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act and by 1982 the life of a community was over.

* The concept and tradition of Kanala is one of sharing. The word kanala is a colloquialism for please and is widely used in Cape Town. It was originally Arabic. Kanaladorp was the first informal name for District Six.

** The first part of the paper is written by Sandra Prosalendis, Project Director of the District Six Museum, together with Jennifer Marot, administrator at the Museum, and Peggy Delport, curator of the 'Streets' exhibition, on behalf of the District Six Museum. The second part, beginning with *THE RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT*, was written with the assistance of Professor Crain Soudien and Mr Anwah Nagia, both trustees and founders of the Museum. This part was presented at the Stockholm conference *Local Tradition and Global Destiny* in September 1998.

136 Sixty thousand people were forcibly removed to a then barren outlying area aptly known as the Cape Flats, their houses razed to the ground by bulldozers.

It was virtually impossible to resist the removals, once the area had been flattened only the mosques and the churches remained. The community from the mosques and churches continues to worship in District Six, refusing to sell or deconsecrate their grounds. The last protest was to 'salt' the earth to prevent any one from building until there was a democratic political dispensation. Fierce and bitter political battles were fought as the State and wealthy business concerns tried to occupy and develop the land. Today, only 35% of this land remains vacant. The concept for a museum grew out of the struggle to fight forced removals, the Hands off District Six Committee, the Ratepayers and Resident Association, the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist Church formed a board of Trustees to found a District Six Museum.

During a period of six years, these community activists developed ideas through vigorous argument, conflict and community consultation to a point where they and their ideas inspired the Central Methodist Church and an international human rights trust to donate, respectively, the space and a small grant to be used to start a museum. With the acceptance of these donations, it was necessary to develop from an entirely voluntary process, with an inherent impermanence, to a sustainable organisation, accountable to the donors and the community. There was a

dawning realisation that it is one thing to have a dream and to be filled with moral passion, another to give this a material reality. The solution appeared to be to employ a project director to be responsible for raising more funds and opening the space and ideas to the public at large. An exhibition to announce the formation of a District Six Museum was planned.

It is hard to believe that, at that time, two and a half years ago, we sat in an empty church feeling anxious and uncertain about the task ahead. Our dilemma being that what makes museums distinctive is that they are about material objects and collections and what makes District Six distinctive is that it is a story of complete destruction.

In our casting about, we became aware of a secret collection of street signs and traced them to the cellar of a house in Mowbray. The collector was in fact a foreman, who, acting on behalf of apartheid's infamous and ironically named Department of Community Development, had been briefed to 'dump District Six in Table Bay'. He did his job well: the rubble of District Six is the landfill beneath Duncan Dock. However, not the street signs. For whatever reason, these he systematically collected and saved.

Negotiations were difficult: He was anxious about meeting us, scared of being prosecuted for 'war crimes'. Some of our members were bitter and resented him, wanting no dealings with everything he stood for. However, the power of this remaining concrete evidence of District Six was stronger than both fear and anger.

This old photograph is taken in District Six before the whole area was flattened. In 1966 it was declared a white area, and 60 thousand people were forcibly removed. All photographs: District Six Museum.

138 It took several meetings to negotiate his donation of the signs to the museum, but eventually with the assistance of a local artist, they were hung in a series of ladders, filling the empty space of the church. They began to work their magic: a step in healing and reconciliation in a divided society. It was interesting that, having acquired a 'collection', we realised that our museum would be more than just a static display. It would be a space which would enable us to confront the issues of our past.

The signs acted as a catalyst for new ideas and, at last, our opening exhibition had a name: *Streets*. We converted the floor of the museum into a giant map, retracing the original street names and the grid of District Six – a means for ex-residents to reclaim their addresses by writing their names onto the map. The map is a fitting memorial, since, in an attempt to erase District Six from the map of local history, many of the street names, even the grid itself, were changed to make way for the white suburb of Zonnebloem and the development of the Technikon. During this flurry of enthusiasm, there was the behind-the-scenes slog of fundraising, as well as the coordination of requests for material from ex-residents. In the beginning we did not have sufficient funds to mount such a huge exhibition or run a sustainable museum. Every day we continued to act, there was always the risk that financial support would not materialise. And yet, caught up in the power of this phenomenon of creating something from nothing, over two hundred volunteers (a diverse group of ex-residents of District Six, narrators, architects, artists, poets, printers, families and strangers spanning

at least four generations) offered their time and expertise. Hard work paid off – funds to build the exhibition did materialise and on the 10th December 1994, our two week exhibition entitled *Streets – retracing District Six* was opened by Dullah Omar, Minister of Justice.

The success of the exhibition exceeded our every expectation. At the end of two weeks we realised that the public had taken ownership of the idea and that we would not be able to close the doors. With a dawning sense of terror and unpreparedness we realised that the Museum had begun and that we were committed to raising two and a half million rand to sustain it into the future.

In the next two years, the museum became an interactive space where it is the people's response to District Six which provides the drama and fabric to the museum. What we continue to collect is the intangible spirit of community. The path through which each object arrives and the relationship of the community to the objects that they have entrusted to us animates the museum. We attract people who care and want to understand what was destroyed in the name of 'community development' and what needs to be done in the name of community redevelopment.

The museum raises all sorts of issues around memory: remembering and forgetting. Who are the people who want to remember District Six, and who are those who would prefer to forget? Consider the tale of Dougie Erasmus. In 1949, the heyday of jazz in District Six, Dougie Erasmus of Windsor Street started the first Latin American band in Cape Town, the Copacabana Band which became

The opening exhibition in the District Six Museum was named «Streets». Here we can see the street signs from the old streets of District Six.

The floor of the museum was converted into a giant map, retracing the original street names and the grid of District Six. Ex-residents were asked to reclaim their addresses by writing their names onto the map.

timing of its opening in the South African political and social landscape. Its success also lies in the tacit understanding of all the players that achievements are collective and not solely the result of any one person's efforts. The absence of individual ownership of the museum means that every participant, donor, visitor, employee or trustee can lay equal claim to owning the museum.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT

SEPTEMBER 1998: In order to understand the significance of the museum in the process of reconstituting the city of Cape Town as a non-racial and open city it is important to locate the place of District Six in South Africa's larger history. It is the site of one of the most publicised experiences of forced removals in the country. While the forced removals

of people from District Six cannot be said to be more traumatic than that of other communities in South Africa, it is certainly the best documented. The process of documenting this experience has assisted other affected communities in recalling how they might too fight to win back their dignity and even their land.

District Six is significant also for its urban history. Much of this history has been about impoverished and marginalised people managing to build a sense of community and retaining their own humanity in the face of considerable state neglect and oppression. District Six is remembered by many who had lived there as a place where they were able to cross religious, class and social boundaries. As a place where they were able to share their everyday experiences and to live not as 'coloured', 'whites', 'Africans' or 'Indians'. but as South Africans, District Six occupi-

142 es a special place in the history of South Africa. It is argued by many that it was destroyed precisely because it offended the racist inclinations of the apartheid government. It was one of a number of places, like East End in Port Elizabeth and Vrededorp and Doornfontein in Johannesburg, that disproved the apartheid ideal. People lived together in relative harmony. The colour of their skins was not the only factor that mattered in their lives. Often much more important was the fact that they all shared a bond of poverty. The memory of District Six and the sense of community and solidarity it generated is important for South Africans who have been forced into apartheid townships and into apartheid identities.

The museum has played an important role in the many struggles around the social, cultural and civic renewal which are taking place in the City. It has provided a forum for the discussion and debate of the future of the city of Cape Town. It has emerged as one of the few sites and structures in the city with the legitimacy to talk to and about the future of all its citizens. It is one of a handful institutions able to speak about Cape Town and its people in terms which include the entire spectrum of its social makeup. It has also created the space for ordinary people to intervene in the bigger politics of urban renewal and to express their views about the future of the city. It has facilitated several cultural events, mainly in the form of exhibitions, which have drawn heavily on the input of ordinary District Sixers. These events have been path-breaking in so far as ordinary people have been able to describe themselves as they wish to be seen.

While these developments have not been without their difficulties the museum has, thus far, proved to be an enormously generative space. It has brought to the fore the complex role a museum such as the District Six Museum plays in providing a bridge between the different experiences and knowledge of the everyday world and the more traditional academic approach of the museum. How knowledge is produced in this through exhibitions, publications and other presentations is a key contribution which the museum is poised to play not only museologically but also in terms of urban planning.

At the heart of these developments has been a specific conception of history with which the museum has worked. As part of this historical work, the museum has sought to draw on the rich urbanity which has characterised the life of District Six. It is this resource which the museum, and indeed the District, offers to the process of reconstruction in the city. The resource is mediated through the museum's exhibition policy which is fundamentally about finding ways of incorporating the subjects of the stories of District Six – the people themselves – into the exhibition process. In this process attempts are made to have people participate in the decisions about how they are to be represented. The past is not so much an archive awaiting unveiling, but a tapestry on which individuals and groups are able to inscribe themselves. They announce their positions and interests and take responsibility for their self-portrayal.

An important feature of this process is to show how human – as opposed to natural – our histories are, and how sus-

ceptible to shifts in power the story telling is. In working in this way the museum has helped to show how stories and the histories which are constructed around them, are seldom free of the personal interest of the story-teller. Difficult as this stance might be, the museum has sought to use this as a resource and a strength, rather than as a problem.

CONFLICTS AND SOLUTIONS

Having spoken of history as a social activity, it is clear that museum work cannot, of course, be without its conflicts and contradictions. Memories and how memories are transacted, mediated, represented and made use of are questions which invoke difficult debate. In the process of establishing the museum, evident from the very beginning were contrasting understandings of what the museum ought to do, how it ought to deal with the past and how it dealt with the various claimants who spoke on behalf of District Six. On the one hand, there were stakeholders, many who were in the Trust which oversaw the establishment of the museum, who saw it as a place which would serve as a reminder of the oppression experienced by the ordinary men and women who had built the city. There were, on the other, pressures to freeze and package the memory of District Six in ways which were distinctly inimical to the struggles which were taking place around District Six. Apologists for the apartheid era, for example, sought to enshrine the District Six Museum as a 'coloured' monument. Interestingly, these struggles persist in one form or another.

Much more complex, have been oc-

casions when the museum, either in the person of individual trustees or museum workers, have had to speak publicly or participate in one or other public process on the question of District Six. Born out of the struggle to save District Six, the museum's broad stance has been to align itself with the dispossessed people of District Six and to offer itself as a vehicle for their participation in decisions about the future of the area. In practice this stance has not been without difficulties, because situations have arisen where different people claiming to speak on behalf of District Six have sought to appropriate the museum or to enlist its endorsement. Each of these occasions has been dealt with individually. The over-arching approach of the museum has, however, been that of inclusiveness.

An important issue for the museum, which illustrates this approach has been the question of the restitution of the rights of the dispossessed people of the area. The restitution process is based on a commitment by the state to compensate communities who had lost their property and their homes as a result of the implementation of the Groups Area Act. It invites affected communities to make application to have their rights restored or made good monetarily or by way of the award of an alternative property in another area. In this process, which involves the museum, have been debates about democracy and legitimacy.

Stakeholders within the community of District Six have been divided over the processes and the structures which have emerged to deal with the state and the local government (the City Council of Cape Town). While the question of histo-

Above: The District Six Museum with the exhibition «Streets».

To the right: The District Six area after the houses had been razed to the ground by bulldozers.

ry has been subdued within this debate, interestingly, it has been the spirit of inclusiveness which has prevailed. Borrowing from the heritage of District Six and its ability to assimilate into its fold new individuals and communities, the debate has been resolved through the invocation of District Six as an urban space which provided refuge to all and sundry. This achievement has been due, in no small measure, to members of the museum.

The approach which has been taken has been to work with people's demands. Museum representatives in the process worked from the premise that the victims of forced removals were the first priority. Victims were engaged through a series of community participation projects and forums and venues. They were given 'hearing space' in all of these projects. Attempts were made to appreciate people's personal

experiences as the building block of the eventual reconstruction. This community has become a coherent group and channelled their thoughts and demands into a central vehicle called the District Six Beneficiary and Redevelopment Trust. This Trust enjoys a legitimacy as the negotiating instrument to interact with other bodies especially Council and Government. In other words the Council and Government must join the community rather than the other way around.

While the process has been uncomfortable and often acrimonious, it has been resolved in a way which is typically District Six in its character. The process has involved hard talking and repeated attempts to be sensitive to different people's experiences and backgrounds: it has involved listening to each other; appreciating other people's limitations and seeing them as strengths. Holding the process

together has been a constant reminder of what there is to lose if the process were to fail.

PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES

What the restitution process has highligh-

ted are the possibilities which are offered to public debates by knowledge producing institutions like museums such as the District Six Museum. While the Museum recognises the dangers of producing a self-serving history which legitimates graft, greed and the abuse of political power

145

- 146 (both individual and corporate), it seeks to argue that it can facilitate, in what it exhibits and how it exhibits, the coming together of people of different mindsets. Looking at the difficulty, in the District Six example, of returning 45 000 people to the city and including their history in the many histories of South Africa, it is clear that the museum is a site of profound reconstruction. In this sense the role of the museum and the way in which it has offered its space for people to affirm their own delegitimated identities and to question their own pasts is an important example to the rest of South Africa.

Sandra Prosalendis is Project Director of the District Six Museum

Adr: District Six Museum, P. O. Box 10178

Caledon Square 7905, Cape Town, South Africa

Fax+21-461 8745

Email: d6museum@global.co.za

RATIONALE

The rationale of the museum and, by implication, of the different projects in which it finds itself, is to contribute towards healing, nation building and also capacity building, but from the bottom up. The process must be in control of the 'victims' who for the first time in their history have a direct say and influence in the return, reconstruction and occupation. The rationale is to keep the process as participatory and transparent as possible and in so doing build confidence and trust.

IMPACT

The impact of the museum and its work has been overwhelmingly positive. People feel a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the city. Unfortunately it has also engendered some impatience. Long delays in the restitution process have allowed mistrust to creep in as people's hopes have been stalled by the complexity of the bureaucratic process.