

Rebuilding a community (Published: 09/03/2008)

Sophiatown is a fractured community that is coming to terms with its past. But new plans are afoot to bring about cohesion, writes Mary Corrigan

At night, when all its residents have withdrawn into their face-brick homes and chained their gates closed, an eerie silence falls over Sophiatown, punctuated only by barking dogs or vehicles passing in the street. There are no restaurants, bars, cinemas or street cafes where locals congregate in the evenings and relieve the stresses of the day. Sophiatown is an introverted community, in which people are ill at ease with each other.

Like many suburbs in South Africa still grappling with the transformations that have taken effect in the wake of democracy, Sophiatown's persona is overshadowed by its history and is slowly edging towards an undefined future.

Considering the rollercoaster ride the suburb has been on over the past 50 years, perhaps it is not surprising that its denizens are troubled and disconnected.

In the 1940s Sophiatown was a hotbed of unparalleled creativity and struggle politics. Inhabited by a multicultural society, it was a vibrant and progressive locale. In 1955 Sophiatown experienced an about-turn when the Nationalist government forcibly removed all its residents to townships on the outskirts of the city and destroyed almost every edifice in a bid to segregate white and black communities.

The suburb was then reincarnated into a region earmarked for impoverished white people and renamed Triomf (Triumph). The Nationalist government's conquest, however, was not everlasting. When the ANC came into power in 1994, the suburb looked set to be reinvented once again when the suburb's old name was reinstated and some township dwellers gradually moved back to reclaim their roots.

Although there are no obvious signs of Sophiatown's painful past or its current fractured society, the conflicting signage around the neighbourhood, which refers to the area as both Triomf and Sophiatown, speaks of the schizophrenic character of this small patch of suburbia.

But Sophiatown is gradually transforming. Eager to turn this iconic neighbourhood into a tourist attraction, the City of Jo'burg, in association with the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre, has established a number of heritage projects to give the suburb some historic flavour. A variety of social and educational initiatives have also been introduced by the centre to try to bring cohesion to this divided society.

"We are trying to make the community at home with each other," says Tricia Sibbons, chairwoman of the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre. "We are not trying to bring back what it was, but rather what Sophiatown might have been; a culturally diverse community."

The centre has to negotiate the needs of a diverse group of people. There are the Afrikaans residents, some of whom still cling to the suburb's Triomf incarnation and are sceptical of changes to a place they consider theirs. There is also a faction of ex-Sophiatown residents to consider, who were forcibly removed in the 1950s and are

seeking to re-establish some kind of a foothold in their old neighbourhood. And then there are the suburbs' newer residents who hail from townships and are searching for a sense of belonging.

"We are dealing with many entrenched views; there are people who don't want to engage with what we are doing, others say they want to be part of this new country," observes Sibbons.

Apartheid might have been scrapped but it has left a residue in the minds of the residents of Triomf/Sophiatown, suggests Victor Mokhine, an ex-resident, who grew up in the suburb during its heyday.

"You cannot erase those perceptions overnight. It is only when people get to know each other that they realise that we have been afraid of something that is not there. It is a fear about each other that was put in our heads by the [old] legislation," says Mokhine.

There have been overt clashes between opposing parties such as when the old Anglican church - Christ the King, on Ray Street - was reconsecrated in 1998 and the suburb's ex-residents were stoned by existing residents as they entered the church, according to Mokhine.

"There was a lot of animosity back then," he recalls.

Cathy Seefort wanted to live in Sophiatown for as long as she could remember. Her aunt had lived in the suburb during its prime, and growing up on a diet of tales about the suburb, she was eager to reconnect with the past. She also wanted to live closer to the inner city. When she initially moved into the suburb in 1995 she didn't feel welcome.

"Some of the white people would not even look at me," she says.

"There was this rumour that there was a dossier with all the original tenants' names and there was this fear that they would all come back and reclaim their properties."

But few land reclamations were forthcoming, according to Sibbons.

Unlike District Six, where there were empty plots that former residents could reclaim, in Sophiatown there were only a few instances where land reclamations could be practically realised. Although this may have eased existing residents' fears, for those who had been forcibly removed from Sophiatown in the 1950s and couldn't afford to buy back their land, it presented an obstacle to healing old wounds.

"There is still a lot of pain. We had to find ways to allow Sophiatown's ex-residents to find a place or a role in the suburb. They have a past that needs to be understood and shared," says Sibbons.

"When I walk through Sophiatown, I still feel a deep sense of loss. I don't think that can ever be eradicated," asserts Mokhine.

The reversion back to its original name, Sophiatown, which was gazetted in 1997, was one of the first public gestures of acknowledgment of the suburb's past.

But it was almost 10 years before the name change was publicly instituted, with public officials and prominent former residents marking the occasion with a ceremony.

The decade that passed between initiating the name change and implementing it "gave people time to come to terms with the fact that there would be change. There were mixed feelings about the name change," observes Sibbons.

Seefort has encountered residents who have declared that vir ons dit is Triomf (for us it is Triomf).

"It is a similar story with the old and new South African flags," Mokhine points out. "There are still people who don't want to identify Sophiatown with Triomf."

Buses, garages, shops and an imposing Dutch Reformed church situated on the main thoroughfare in Sophiatown all bear the "Triomf" name.

But eventually the name the Nationalist government conferred on the neighbourhood will disappear, Mokhine says.

"It is only a matter of time before those signs will all change."

Although altering the name of a place might cause dissention, the suburb's current atmosphere suggests it is only a superficial gesture towards transformation.

Museums are usually only charged with conserving and interpreting the past, but a new Sophiatown museum, which is due to open in June this year, has been designed to shift attitudes and foster unity in the neighbourhood.

Situated in Toby Street in a house that once belonged to Dr AB Xuma - the ANC president from 1939-949 and a general practitioner in Sophiatown during the suburb's heyday - the museum won't simply house a collection of documentation and mementoes from the past.

In an effort to make history relevant in a dynamic and engaging manner, the Sophiatown Museum will be staffed by actors playing shebeen owners and other characters who inhabited the suburb during its heyday.

"We don't want the youth and the surrounding community to feel left out. People consider a museum to be a place for historians, so we are going to try and make it a more visual [experience]," says Muduzi Thusi, one of the museum's curators.

To be inclusive of every aspect of Sophiatown, past and present, the museum will blend history with current facets of the community, according to Mokhine, who is overseeing the establishment of the museum.

The culture of Sophiatown didn't die when the suburb was bulldozed, Mokhine says.

The music, dress and patois particular to the suburb were maintained by its ex-residents in the townships of Meadowlands and Moroka, who then passed it on to their offspring. Contemporary fashion and music trends can be traced back to Sophiatown's Forties and Fifties street culture, rendering the culture of that era more than just a dated movement but an integral feature of South African society. The culture of Sophiatown has had a great impact on our society and it should be acknowledged, believes Mokhine.

"We talk today of the rainbow nation. But in a place like Sophiatown a rainbow nation was created many, many years ago. The community of Sophiatown was a mixture of tribes and races. Segregation didn't play such a central role in this society. People saw each other as friends, neighbours and a community," Mokhine recalls.

A lot seems to be riding on the museum. Its curators are hoping that the multicultural message it disseminates will shift not only attitudes in the neighbourhood but also elsewhere in the country.

"The museum will show young people that what was achieved in Sophiatown - all different races of people living together in harmony - can happen again," says Thusi.

Born and bred in Sophiatown, Mokhine only grasped how unique the suburb was when his family was forcibly removed to Meadowlands in 1956.

Although Mokhine was only 10 years old when he witnessed the first removals that took place in Toby Street, he remembers the traumatic events of those days with great clarity.

"They way they did it was like a war situation; there were big trucks and mounted police surrounding the neighbourhood."

Once the residents had removed all their possessions from their homes, the police immediately destroyed the homes, as if in a final gesture of defiance to communicate to residents that there would be no returning. "It was terrible; people screamed and cried."

The Mokhine family's turn came in 1956. It was torture for them, as they waited outside their house the whole day before the municipal trucks eventually turned up in the evening. It was a bleak and dark journey to Meadowlands.

"We moved to a place we had never seen before and travelling in the dark we didn't know where we were going."

Mokhine wasn't happy with his new home in the township. Although newly erected, the house had already been vandalised and gaps in the roof allowed the cold winter's air to circulate around the house. There were no interleading doors and the floors and walls had not been plastered. "Wind was just howling right through the house. It took us days to plug all the holes."

The forced removal was psychologically and physically disorienting for the Mokhine family.

In Meadowlands the Mokhines were separated from their former neighbours.

"We had been divided according to our ethnic groups; we were no longer all living together like we had in Sophiatown.

"If you were Zulu you were sent to a different zone, if you were Shangaan to another, that is how it went."

Mokhine yearned for Sophiatown, especially the Odin cinema, where he and his friends would sneak in and watch the likes of Dolly Rathebe or Miriam Makeba perform or marvel at members of the gangster groups called the Black Riders, the Vultures or the Americans, who arrived in coupés with beautiful women draped on their arms.

Determined to hold on to what was left of Sophiatown, Mokhine continued to travel to Sophiatown on weekends to visit the Odin. But eventually the cinema was also obliterated by bulldozers and there were no reminders left of Mokhine's happy childhood.

"There was a terrible sense of loss; everything had become totally different for us."

It would be decades before Mokhine visited his home suburb again. And when he did in 1994, when the old government and its laws had been completely dissolved, he was disheartened by what Sophiatown had become.

"The atmosphere had changed completely. It was a totally different place. It is very quiet, almost worse than Westpark Cemetery."

"Sophiatown is not as bland as it appears," asserts Sibbons, who moved to the suburb in 2004.

Sibbons says the neighbourhood's vibrant past is gradually returning with makeshift barber stands sprouting up and jazz evenings being held at the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre.

"It's a step-by-step process. We have had to earn the trust of the community and interpret that into building a new community. But ultimately we are guided by what people here want," says Sibbons.

What Sophiatown's residents do seem to be in agreement about is that they would like to improve their lot. The City's ambition to turn the neighbourhood into a tourist hotspot has been welcomed by entrepreneurs in the suburb.

A bed-and-breakfast establishment has already been set up and the Sophiatown Business Association will encourage new businesses to start up in the area to service the suburb's residents as well as an influx of tourists. Restaurants, cafes and art galleries are all rumoured to be in the offing.

The Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre will also establish an arts and crafts centre

that will see to the manufacturing of a "made in Sophiatown" merchandising range that will link up with the museum, according to Kenda Knowles, the centre's operations director.

The social and economic welfare of Sophiatown's residents, however, seems to be taking precedence over ambitions to establish the neighbourhood as the next big tourist destination for the 2010 jamboree.

Social events for residents and ex-residents and a comprehensive education programme for young children, school-leavers and domestic workers have all been instituted to uplift the lives of the suburb's residents.

"We want to turn Sophiatown into a place where everyone feels at home, where they fit in and no one is alienated," says Sibbons.

Racial tension has been easing with no recent reports of any incidents, according to Seefort, who is the chairwoman of the Sophiatown Residents Association.

"Bad feelings have died down," she says. "My neighbour greets me now."

Are the residents of Sophiatown ready to unite and revive the suburb's reputation as a vibrant, liberal melting pot?

With all the goings on at the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre and the City of Jo'burg programmes for revitalisation, Sibbons believes that Sophiatown's new incarnation is only five years from being fully realised.

"Everyone has a place in the Sophiatown story. We all have brick to lay."