Chapter 12
11 February 1966
Proclamation 43

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Proclamation 43, issued by the South African government on 11 February 1966, marked for destruction a community of more than 60,000 people living close to the centre of Cape Town (Hall 2001). Mostly of mixed descent, ‘Coloured’ in apartheid typology, their suburb of District Six had been declared a white ‘group area’. The destruction of District Six would come to stand for the many similar episodes in other parts of South Africa, and would serve as a rallying point for the internal opposition to state repression that would lead to the collapse of the apartheid state some fifteen years later. More widely, systematic discrimination on the grounds of race in South Africa became the mark against which universal principles of justice and human rights came to be set in the second half of the twentieth century, building on the momentum of the US Civil Rights movement and crystallizing in the iconography of Nelson Mandela. As with other ‘defining moments’, the destruction of District Six acquired its meanings through political action, representation and ‘memory work’ in the years that followed. This chapter traces the strands of these meanings through to the recent past, in which some of the issues set in motion by Proclamation 43 remained unresolved.

Legislated segregation

Proclamation 43 was issued in terms of the Group Areas Act of 1950, a key plank in a raft of apartheid legislation that included the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), the Immorality Act (1950), the Population Registration Act (1950) and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953). Promulgated in the years after the National Party gained power in 1948, this legislation formalized discrimination based on race that had long shaped South African society and access to economic advantage. All South Africans were to be classified and registered according to the racial categories ‘White’, ‘Indian’, ‘Coloured’ and ‘Bantu’ (later ‘African’, with ethnic subdivisions such as Zulu and Xhosa). In turn racial classification determined rights in terms of where people could live, work or visit, and with whom they could have sexual relations. While presented as ‘separate development’, this system of racial organization sought to ensure that economic advantage remained concentrated in white hands.

District Six was not the first episode of what would today be called ethnic cleansing. Three years after the Group Areas Act was passed into law, the government announced its intention of moving communities from the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown away from the city centre to what was to become the massive black township of Soweto. The destruction of Sophiatown’s houses began in February 1955 and continued in the face of extensive peaceful protests until 1963 by which time all that remained was a number of churches. The suburb was rebuilt as Triomf (‘Triumph’) and was restricted for white ownership and residence. Hence by the time the apartheid government turned its attention to District Six – Cape Town’s equivalent of Sophiatown – the issue of group areas removals was already politically attenuated. While many other communities were destroyed in terms of the Group Areas Act, and these sites of destruction remain largely unmarked and increasingly forgotten, District Six was to become and remain a widely recognized signifier for apartheid and its consequences.

The destruction of District Six gained notoriety because the South African government’s project to entrench and extend white privilege through legislated racial discrimination was seen as the exception in an era that embraced universal values. White South Africa was a dinosaur in a time of decolonization and civil rights. But in another sense, apartheid was the apogee of modernism – of the belief in the role and authority of the state to undertake massive exercises in social engineering in disregard to the wishes and rights of individuals. While he did not use it as an example, the set of apartheid laws that sought to dictate who could live and work where, restrict rights of marriage and punish sexual transgressions would have served well as a case study in James Scott’s Seeing Like a State (1998). Scott’s subtitle, ‘how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed’, is an ironic epigraph for the final collapse of apartheid modernism in 1990, when Nelson Mandela, who had been among those opposing the bulldozing of Sophiatown in 1955, walked free from Cape Town’s Pollsmoor Prison.

High modernism, as Scott shows, depends on a logic that drives forward grand projects for improvement; however dysfunctional such logic may seem from outside its system of argument, the perception of internal consistency is important to those driving the programme forward. Apartheid was an
archetypal modernist bureaucracy – a massive administrative system that redistributed economic benefits to whites by employing them in substantial numbers. The underlying logic was the concept of ability pre-determined by race, the set of assumptions widely accepted as givens in the nineteenth century and the earlier part of the twentieth century. The execution of Proclamation 43 was driven forward by an unremitting administrative bureaucracy of clerks, police officers, surveyors and contractors who managed the relocation of families and the demolition of their homes over the following decade. They were supported by politicians, clergy and media who provided an ideological apparatus of justification within white South Africa, and in conjunction with sympathetic governments in the United States and Europe, that saw white South Africa as a bulwark against the 'red tide' of Soviet and Chinese interests in sub-Saharan Africa.

The ways in which race was defined in apartheid ideology is a study in itself. Here, given that the focus is on Proclamation 43 and District Six, are some of the ways in which the category ‘Coloured’ was described and defined. Apartheid racial theory saw personal ability, culture and physical features as ineluctably linked. Thus, for example, ‘Cape Malays’ (a Muslim sub-set of ‘Coloureds’) were defined as comprising ‘racial elements’ drawn from ‘Javanese, Arabs, Indians, Ceylonese, Chinese and Europeans’, and with the following characteristics: ‘small in stature … with an olive skin which is sometimes yellowish, light brown or cinnamon-coloured … flattenish 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’ (Du Plessis 1944: 3).

These ‘Cape Coloured’ communities were, then, seen as originating in miscegenation. This presented a problem for apartheid theorists, since such mixing was the very thing that racial theory saw as pre-determining race. In the words of the official yearbook felt it necessary to warn that the racial category included an ‘undesirable class … ‘skollies’, the habitual convicts and ex-convicts, the drunkards, the daga-smokers, and the habitual loafers’ (Union of South Africa 1953: 1096).

Such a writing of race led inexorably to the view that ‘Coloured’ communities were a social pathology that needed to be eliminated by the state in the interests of improved racial hygiene. It was inevitable that District Six would be seen as slum that should be cleared. In the words of a contemporary academic apologist, 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 ‘sub-economic housing still leaves the worst slums untouched’ (Du Plessis 1944: 83).

What was this suburb that attracted such opprobrium? District Six had been so named in 1867. By the early twentieth century the area had become the first destination for many immigrants to South Africa, serving as a dormitory for inner-city industries and dock workers. Residents were employed in clothing, leather working, tobacco, furniture and processed food production, and in a sizable 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; Nasson 1990). General municipal surveys and contemporary photographs show streets, lanes and the block plans of houses. Archaeological work has provided more detail: small houses with front and back rooms, narrow corridors and back yards, and frequent modifications as tenants sought to make the best of crowded circumstances (Hall 1994). Overcrowding was rife and municipal services were poor or non-existent. District Six’s cosmo-politanism resulted in a sense of distinction, defined by a rough, communal character, ‘an environment marked strongly by mutual needs and sharing between families and neighbours, whatever the divisions of income, occupation or religion’ (Nasson 1990: 64). Poverty and hardship were prevalent. 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, squallid and overcrowded’ (Rive 1990: 111).

Proclamation 43 initiated the process of destruction by setting aside the area for exclusively white ownership and occupation. The state estimated that it would need to move about 62 000 people and planned to do so within five years. A decade later, however, removals were still incomplete and costs of compensation, demolition and resettlement were six times the original estimates (Hart 1990). The job was finally done in early 1984, leaving a jagged scar across the foot of Devil’s Peak, described by Richard Rive as ‘South Africa’s Hiroshima’.

Politics and nostalgia

A first way in which the destruction of District Six gained the attenuated meaning that is characteristic of a ‘defining moment’ was as a rallying point for intensified opposition to apartheid. Media coverage of bulldozers at work and families being moved out to remote, wind-swept suburbs on the Cape Flats gave tangible substance to the dry administration of racial management. Early objections were given momentum by the wave of protests that started in Soweto in June 1976 and spread across the country. Civil society organizations attacked the state behemoth at its vulnerable points: negative

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1 Cape Times, 9 January 1986.
publicity forced the state to abandon a plan to house 15 000 whites in a high-rise development; there was widely supported opposition to the destruction of a crèche and a church; an attempt by a multinational company (BP) to redevelop the area was thwarted by an alliance of more than twenty civic organizations and former residents (Hart 1990; Soudien 1990).

This political work continued after the collapse of apartheid hegemony in 1990 and the first democratic elections of 1994. After initially seeking a common cause, different sets of interests moved to polarized positions. On the one side was the Cape Town City Council, seeking to assert the authority of municipal government through a land trust which would control the redevelopment of the area. Opposed were former residents, organized as the District Six Restitution Front, who were seeking direct restitution or financial compensation.2 This immediate dispute was resolved by a land commission in 1997, which ruled for the former residents; however, discontent and conflict were to continue for more than a decade (Hall 2001).

The political momentum that started with Proclamation 43 in 1966 and continued with effective force for thirty years and more was fuelled by memory continually provoked by the visible evidence of destruction: an open swathe of land close to the heart of the city, framing still-standing mosques and churches. However, there were contesting claims on memory – the happy-go-lucky caricature of the ‘Cape Coloured’ of apartheid race-construction and the commodification of history for the purposes of a surging heritage industry in the post-apartheid era. Differentiation between these forms of appropriation and the claims to the recognition of rights by former residents and their descendants requires a finer-grained understanding of how memory works within the dynamics of power. In this respect, Svetlana Boym’s distinction between ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgia is useful.

Drawing on a range of claims on the past, and particularly Eastern Europe, Boym shows how restorative nostalgia seeks a reconstruction of the lost home in a quest for truth and present rights. In contrast, reflective nostalgia thrives on the feelings of longing and loss in themselves, drawing on ‘the imperfect process of remembrance’ (Boym 2001: 41). Both restorative and reflective nostalgia will invariably call on heritage – on material remnants of the past that can be re-imbued and saturated with associations and interpretations (Stewart 1993, Samuel 1994). Both will tend to collapse history into a mythology of the past – ‘the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history’ (Boym 2001:8). However, and as the case of District Six well illustrates, the political manifestations of these differing forms of nostalgia can be very different.

Reflective nostalgia for District Six has a lineage that draws on 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). And Bill Nasson has captured this as the stereotype of the ‘Cape Malay’:

... exclusively a merry community, with a rich, vigorous and rowdy popular life; a higgledy-piggledy riot of buildings and architectural styles, thronged with characters with an insatiable appetite for conviviality and an insatiable thirst for alcohol; a District Six of January Coon Carnivals, of cackling flower sellers like the durable and celebrated Maria Maggies, of blaring horns from hawkers’ carts during the snoek season ... a colourful, legendary place, characterised by the perpetually open front door and cuddly youth from the Globe Gang, helping frail old women across Hanover Street with their weekend shopping from Spracklens or the Parade. (Nasson 1990: 48).

Figure 12.1 Nostalgia for District Six: poster for a musical recalling the culture of the segregated township

More recently, this ‘imperfect process of remembrance’ has found new vigour in the ‘New South Africa’ that has taken form since the early 1990s. The re-regulation of the casino industry in 1996 has enabled massive investments in ‘entertainment destinations’ by multinational corporations. (Hall 2005; Hall and Bombardella 2005; see also Hannigan.

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2 Mail and Guardian 8 August 1997.
These complexes are ‘decorated sheds’ – large, steel-framed hangars in which are assembled the technologies of theatre and illusion (Venturi et al. 1977). Cape Town’s GrandWest Casino and Entertainment World is one such complex, equipped with characteristic design features - a central casino and gaming area surrounded by a range of entertainment options that include cinemas, restaurants and shops selling designed goods. Visiting GrandWest – in common with similar destinations the world over – is essentially a theme park experience with an edge, a day out for the family with the dangerous edge of gaming, or a night out in a simulated town.

GrandWest’s pitch is heritage and nostalgia for District Six (Hall and Bombardella 2007). The design of its restaurants and specialist retail outlets seeks to evoke the narrow streets, washing-lines and vernacular facades that were destroyed by Group Area removals – a reincarnation of the caricature of colonisation. The design of its restaurants in which are assembled the technologies of theatre and illusion (Venturi et al. 1977). Cape Town’s GrandWest Casino and Entertainment World is one such complex, equipped with characteristic design features - a central casino and gaming area surrounded by a range of entertainment options that include cinemas, restaurants and shops selling designed goods. Visiting GrandWest – in common with similar destinations the world over – is essentially a theme park experience with an edge, a day out for the family with the dangerous edge of gaming, or a night out in a simulated town.

The same concept of marking has been extended into the landscape itself. This was vividly demonstrated in the September 1997 Sculpture Festival (Soudien and Meyer 1997). Most of the Sculpture Festival’s installations made use of the debris of destruction: plastic, ceramic sherds, broken glass, stone, building foundations. Installations included a skeletal tree spray-painted luminous red and orange, with a small cairn of gold foil sand bags 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 on 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.

District Six, then, has persisted as much more than idea. 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 (Hall 2001, 2006). 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). The material world of District Six, then, signals a
radically unstable space. Objects are continually re-
interpreted 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.

Boym, writing from the perspective of Eastern Europe, is
worried by nationalistic obsessions with ‘original stasis’ and
‘prelapsarian moment’. In the political economy of heritage
in South Africa, this preference is reversed. Restorative
projects, such as those of the District Six Museum, contribute
to social justice by mobilizing memory and memorabilia in
the interests of contemporary communities. ‘Reflective
nostalgia’, in contrast, has been appropriated by investment
interests as part of a global trend in individualized
entertainment that promotes consumption through desire
for a state of life seen as better than the present, but ever just
out of reach. The two forms of nostalgia may use the same
symbolic sets – photographs, street signs, recollections,
household treasures – but the implications will be very
different. ‘Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and
future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and
cultural memory. The two might overlap in their frames of
reference, but they do not coincide in their narratives and
plots of identity. In other words, they can use the same
triggers of memory and symbols, the same Proustian
madelaine pastry, but tell different stories about it’ (Boym
2001: 49; Hall and Bombardella 2007).

Continuing dissent

The instability of District Six has continued today (see Beyers
2005). By the end of 1998 – a year after the Land
Commission ruled – some 2,500 claims for restitution had
been submitted and a trust had been established to represent
the interests of former land owners, tenants and traders who
had the right to claim in terms of the 1994 Restitution of
Land Rights Act. In 1998 the District Six Beneficiary Trust,
the City of Cape Town and Department of Land Affairs
signed a Record of Understanding and then, in 2000, a
formal agreement intended to enable land restitution to those
claimants who had elected not to take financial
compensation.3 However, Cape Town’s unstable political
environment saw a coalition municipal administration

3 ‘District Six Task Team to fast track housing and commercial development
in District Six’. Statement by the Chief Land Claims Commissioner. Argus,
Cape Town, 6 September 2007.
opposed to the provincial and national ANC governments and the earlier consensus began to unravel.

Following a small but successful pilot housing project in District Six, 2007 opened optimistically with the announcement by the District Six Beneficiary Trust that 4000 new homes were planned – more than sufficient for the 2400 or so remaining tenants and land-owners with a claim to restitution – and that one hundred families would be granted houses. However, the Trust’s announcement prompted an immediate protest from former landowners, who claimed that they were being treated unfairly in comparison with former tenants. By August, there was open conflict between the District Six Beneficiary Trust and the City of Cape Town – reminiscent of the dispute heard by the Land Commission a decade earlier – over who has jurisdiction for planning the development of the District, leading the Executive Director of Housing for the City to publicly attack the bona fides of the Trust, alleging ‘obstinate self interest’ and attempts to control the allocation of lucrative contracts. There was the semblance of reconciliation as the District Six Beneficiary Trust and the warring city, provincial and national government departments agreed to work together as a task team, but this arrangement soon showed its fragility as the 360 former landowners of the District Six Advocacy Committee pressed ahead with their legal challenge and the City of Cape Town announced that it would not defend the action, since it shared the landowners’ concern about the legality of the restitution agreements and the standing of the District Six Beneficiary Trust.

Tension was further heightened when a number of large scale private developments were announced on land that, it was claimed, is not subject to restitution. Most controversial of these was the Red Brick Building, with 84 up-market residential apartments for sale off plan. This project was described by Anwar Nagia, founder of the District Six Beneficiary Trust as ‘bloody unfair and insensitive … This is very, very sacred land. There is history on that land. People have been forcibly removed and chased to the wastelands of the Cape Flats’.9

By the end of 2007, then, the politics of land restitution in District Six had regressed to the conflicts of more than a decade earlier. Former residents and the City of Cape Town were at loggerheads, and were waiting on a decision by the Land Claims Court as to the legality of the restitution process as a whole. There was conflict between former landlords and former tenants – both victims of apartheid removals, but clearly with differing interests. Large business interests, reminiscent of the ill-fated attempt by BP to privatize the reconstruction of District Six in the 1980s, were pushing for lucrative development around the margins of land seen as ‘sacred’ for its associations and memories.
Memory writing about the controversial excavation of a large burial ground a little way from District Six:

After several years of holding their breath the rich can now move into their luxury apartments and pretend this was never a burial ground; the developers can make good on their investments and breathe a sigh of relief as if it was just another business deal; and the relevant political authorities such as the South African Heritage and Resource Agency, the City of Cape Town and the Ministry of Arts and Culture can pray that their inability to protect ordinary Capetonians from the rapacious greed of an apartheid beneficiary class which continues to benefit in the name of trickle down development will attract only academic interest. (Henri 2008:9).

Henri marks out a direct link between the uncovering of the burial ground, the history of forced removals in Cape Town initiated by Proclamation 43 and the rights of disposed communities and their descendants to restitution. Rather than the residents of District Six pitted against the apartheid government, this is now their marginalized descendants pitted against the City of Cape Town, state heritage agencies and the national government: ‘since a few thousand people have been given symbolic reparation in acknowledgement of such claims and millions have been denied their right to compensation the process of historical excision has been rendered both more complex and seamless’ (Henri 2008:9).

The persistent landscape of District Six’s destruction, along with burial grounds and other material remnants of the previous form and structure of the city, demonstrate the potency of what Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal (2008) has called ‘manifestation’. Gonzalez-Ruibal argues that narrative alone can ‘saturate memory’ and result in trivialization. This directs us to the power of materiality – of the ‘recognition effect’ through which repression can be ‘metamorphosed into exaltation’ (Lefebvre 1991: 220): ‘social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also relations. As objects, they possess discernable peculiarities, contour and form. Social labour transforms them, rearranging their positions within spatio-temporal configurations without necessarily affecting their materiality, their natural state...’ (Lefebvre 1991: 220, 77).

By building on the work of Lefebvre, Foucault and others, Gonzalez-Ruibal opens up the possibilities for an ‘engaged archaeology’ through allowing the non-verbal to be remembered as ‘places of abjection’ (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008). Given the lack of resolution of claims to District Six, and the continuing and prominent existence of the scar that Richard Rive described as ‘Cape Town’s Hiroshima’, it might well be apt to describe this as such a place of abjection, denying closure, and reminding us that the legacy of the ‘defining moment’ of 1966 continues today, and into the future.

References


