

# At risk

## Heritage of migrant workers

A national monument in the heart of Johannesburg has long been overlooked despite its role in placing the history of migrant labour as one of the centres of South Africa's heritage. **Anne-Katrin Bicher** looks at the migrant compound's history and current attempts to revive it.

In the eyes of the past municipal authority, the newly erected workers' accommodation in Newtown was the "best ventilated and arranged compound belonging to the Council". The city engineer stated this with some satisfaction in his 1914/15 report. This was the year when the U-shaped single-sex hostel for African workers and the adjacent semi-attached cottages for white staff were built.

If one had recorded the voices of many hundreds of labour migrants who lived there under degrading conditions until the early 1980s, their judgement would be a different one. From its opening in 1995, the Workers' Library and Museum aimed to preserve and popularise the workers' history 'from below' at the Newtown compound. But in recent years, the physical and organisational structure of the museum have suffered serious decay. In 2006, a heritage project was launched that aims to halt the advanced

deterioration of one of the most important resources on labour history in southern Africa.

To understand the historical significance of the Newtown compound, one has to look at the centrality of the migrant labour system for South Africa and the region.

### HISTORY OF MIGRANT LABOUR

For most of the 20th century temporary labour contracts were the dominant pattern of workers' employment in the South African economy, which was based on the country's mineral resources. With the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in the late 1860s and the emergence of gold mining on the Witwatersrand in 1886 a flexible workforce was needed. This was especially so on the Rand where mining magnates realised that the long-term profitability of the gold mining industry rested on the availability of an 'ultra-cheap' labour pool who would extract gold from

low-grade ore.

Before the building of railway lines, migrant men often took the great risk of walking long distances to work on the mines. They were pushed to earn wages by drought and rural poverty, the colonial hut tax and the desire to buy weapons for defence or to buy European goods.

Initially migrant labour was largely an individual affair but the turn of the 19th century saw the introduction of migrant labour recruitment agencies like the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association and later the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) under the Chamber of Mines. These agencies led hundreds of thousands of workers from South Africa's rural areas, as well as from countries like Mozambique, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe into mining.

South African workers were offered contracts of between six to twelve months while migrants from beyond South Africa's borders were given up to 24 months. During this time, the men were not allowed to settle permanently with their spouses in the urban areas. Women thus played a major role in running rural homesteads. They supplemented their husbands' meagre earnings through subsistence farming, pottery, beadwork and crafts in order to secure the family's survival. Later women became migrants in their own right, often finding domestic work in the cities or jobs on plantations.



*A hostel dormitory that can still be seen at the Newtown site. Built in 1914 it housed 40 men in one room on concrete and wooden bunks with a central stove*

The migrant labour system was common especially in mining, manufacturing and public sectors. From the outset, all sectors worked hand in hand with the coercive legislation of a racially-divided state. Spatial segregation, influx control, pass laws, single-sex compounds, the colour bar, anti-unionism and low wage policies fed into a tight system of control and exploitation. The system bred poverty, health problems, as well as social, family and community disintegration, which affected millions of Africans. Conditions only slowly began to improve in the 1980s when a powerful labour movement was built. Influx control was abolished in 1986 as industry felt a greater need for skilled, permanent workers rather than unskilled migrants.

Until today, the impact of the migrant labour system is still felt. Urban and rural economies and

infrastructure have been shaped by it and as well as South Africa's economic, political and cultural relations with neighbouring countries. Upgraded single-sex hostels on the mines are still in use. Present-day 'informal' labour migration widely relies on the social networks that were established by family members who had previously come to South Africa on a contract basis. Rising xenophobia has its roots in stereotypes that were formed in the last century. On the other hand the intangible heritage of migrant workers is extremely rich embracing music, dance, poetry, drama and sports, all of which influence contemporary South African popular culture.

#### **NEWTOWN COMPLEX**

The Newtown migrant workers' compound is evidence that local authorities made use of the migrant

labour and compound system even before the Urban Areas Act of 1923. This Act obliged municipalities to provide segregated accommodation for their African workers. The compound is structured like a 'Rand Model' mining hostel, and is a typical example of the cost-effective and controlled nature of compound housing.

The U-shaped single-storey building could house up to 312 migrant workers in seven dormitories. Each room was designed for 40 people to sleep side by side on concrete bunks with wooden boards on top. The entire space per worker was only 25mm high and 75mm wide.

Communal showers and toilets also allowed no privacy. The Newtown compound's detention and induna room are relics of the tightly structured 'manager-induna-police boy' control that was in

general practice in all single-sex hostels. The Newtown site reflects the history of suppression, control and exploitation of the black migrant worker and his rural community. The Newtown compound lies next to a set of cottages for white 'shiftmen', the compound manager, and the living quarters of their domestic staff. It is located in the originally mixed race working class district of Newtown. The site is a symbol of the segregated South African working class of the 20th century.

The compound and cottages initially belonged to the Department of Transport and Cleansing. According to historian Sue Krige, in about 1928-1930 the Johannesburg Gas and Electricity Supply Department bought the site. They used it as staff quarters for the surrounding electricity precinct that had gradually been established around President and Jeppe streets from 1906. Though during World War II Newtown lost its status to Orlando as the city's main location for power, back-up turbines are still function today. An ex-resident recently told that the Newtown compound housed African workers as late as the early 1980s.

### STRUGGLES TO PRESERVE THE SITE

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Workers' Library, which was founded in the mid-1980s, recognised the historic significance of this deserted compound. In 1995 it launched the Workers' Library and Museum (WLM) at the site. With the financial support of the City of Johannesburg, which welcomed Newtown's transformation into a cultural precinct, the cottages and domestic quarters and one side of the compound were historically restored. The other wings were turned into a temporary exhibition, a conference centre, workshop and library space. The architects Henry Paine and Alan Lipman won an

Award of Excellence for their heritage sensitive restoration. In 1996 the site was declared a national monument.

Whilst launching exhibitions and accumulating basic artefacts, the programme focus of the WLM in the 1990s was on promoting the heritage of workers. Popular Saturday workshops were regulars as well as film festivals and celebrations of Heritage and Workers' Day. The WLM offered a space for debate and social exchange rather than solemn showcases.

The library and the 'Zabalaza Conference Centre' became the most popular services. Several volunteers and a full-time librarian and curator worked were employed. However, in 1999/2000 a severe financial crisis of the non-state funded institution resulted in the resignation of all staff. Facing the decline of the complex, a dedicated committee of volunteer academics and labour activists worked to save the WLM, but gave up in 2004. By mid-1999, the committee had entered into a partnership with Khanya College, an NGO that supports, among other things, working class history. The College then gave the WLM financial support while also using the site as offices and for their educational programmes until April 2006.

Between 2003 and 2004 the Johannesburg City Council threatened to evict the WLM and Khanya College. However, after a successful campaign that was widely backed by social movements the eviction was staved off.

Last year, Khanya College with improved staff capacity and in close cooperation with members of the WLM board, launched a new project that focuses on sustaining the compound and one of the cottages as a museum of labour migration.

One of the first challenges was to

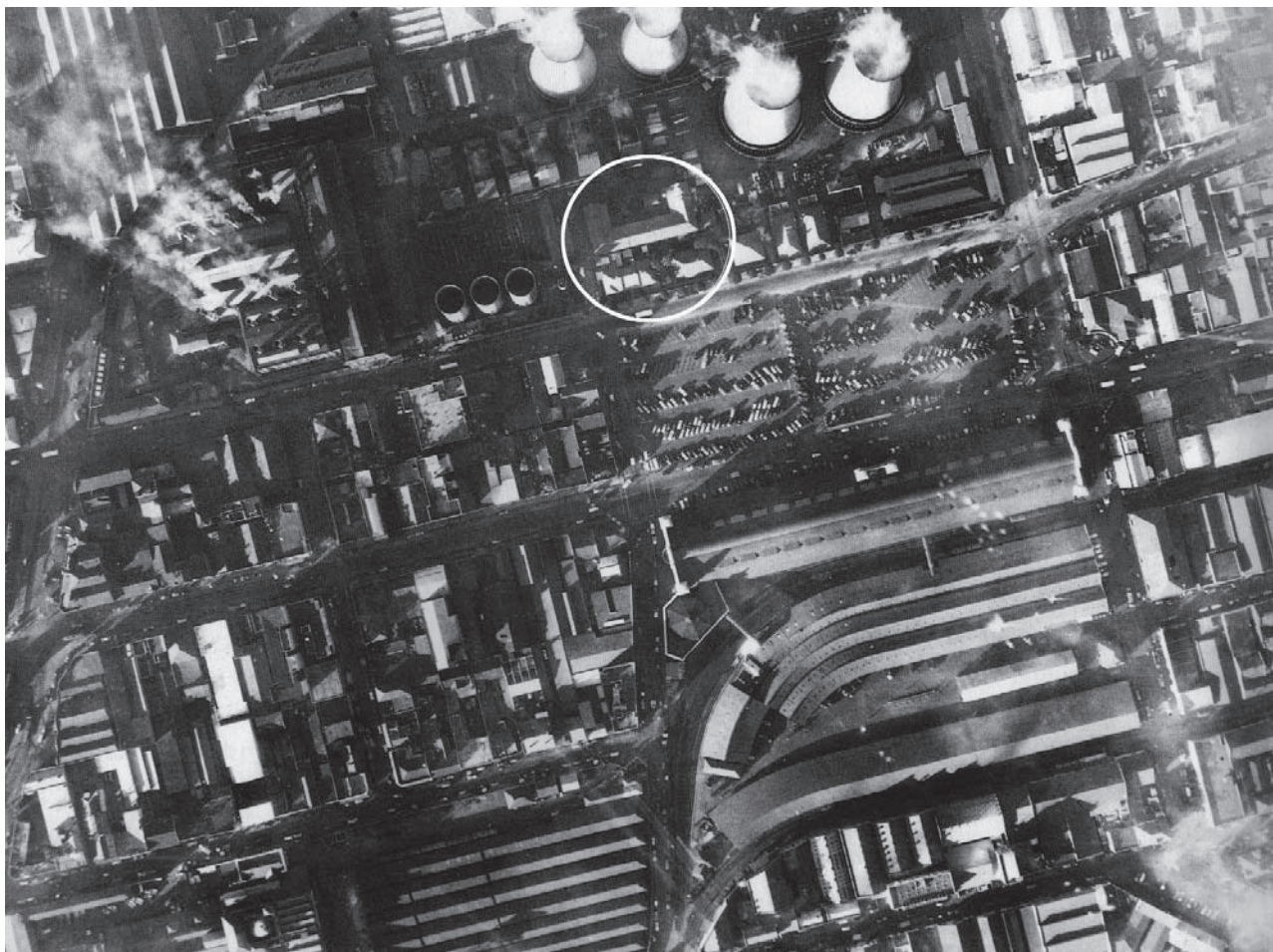
prevent the building of an exclusive hotel right in front of the Workers' Museum. The heritage campaign against the plans was joined by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) cultural activists, architects and historians, who argued that the site's integrity and heritage value must be preserved. The South African Heritage Resource Agency finally ruled against the building of a hotel in the historic compound.

### BARRIERS TO KEEPING OUR HERITAGE ALIVE

The serious struggles the WLM has faced since the late 1990s cannot be reduced to internal management problems alone. The reasons are multi-fold.

Firstly, in the public domain there is a lack of acknowledgment of workers' contribution to the nation's wealth and identity. In the 1990s the power of the labour movement and the focus on labour history lessened. Important support by activists and trade unions that enabled the creation of institutions like the WLM became rare. A recent launch of a branch of the Global Labour University at the University of the Witwatersrand raises hope for change. Nevertheless, the danger still exists that when academics engage in relevant debates about new perspectives on labour migration, the importance of popular education on the topic is easily neglected.

From a heritage point of view, small institutions like the WLM or its sister Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum in the Western Cape, are not immune from the general problems of the national heritage sector: Too little public engagement, a lack of training provisions, fragmentation of policy frameworks and management structures, non-cooperation



*Newtown from the air in 1956. The power station with the cooling towers marks the precinct of which the adjacent cottages for the white staff were an integral part (see circle).*

between national, provincial, and local governments are some of the problems. Also, as pointed out by heritage experts Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz in 2006 in their article 'Museum Frictions', national policies regard the cultural sector as an industry that brands South Africa in international tourism. Museums are primarily seen as businesses, set up by consultants as a "specialist display environment". They lack the support from the public which keeps small institutions alive.

On a local level, privatisation and property development is the preferred strategy of urban developers. Cultural institutions are measured by their ability to raise income rather than for their educational potential. No doubt, the preservation of historic buildings is costly, but the positive spin-offs for

community integration, education and tourist development are often underestimated. The history of the Newtown compound as a harsh provisional 'home' for a diverse group of migrant workers makes the emergence of a historically rooted 'museum community' unlikely. Thus the involvement of state authorities in safeguarding the public ownership of the site to provide space for potential reconciliation processes are particularly important.

All relevant stakeholders will need to cooperate in achieving the sustainability and educational success of the site. This can build on important progress made in the past year. Khanya's recent activities on the museum project led, among other things, to the participation in a city-wide learnership, improved external communication, a link-up

with museum networks and local partners, and fundraising activities. The College and the WLM board also entered dialogue with Johannesburg's Arts, Culture and Heritage Department on new investments in the museum's development. In October 2007 the Workers' Library will be re-opened to the public at Khanya College in 123 Pritchard Street and a conference on the heritage of migrant labour is scheduled for September 2008.

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