

Once upon a time in Kliptown

Museum history of Soweto

If you want to see South Africa in one township, come to the Kliptown Open Air Museum in Soweto, writes **Khwezi Gule**. It takes you from the Freedom Charter to jazz music and across time and back.

The building in which the Kliptown Open Air Museum is housed used to be a hardware shop and its office a surgery run by Dr Jada. His family also lived there.

The Jadas were one of the Indian families that lived in Soweto in the early days. But in the 1880s they were forced to move because of the Group Areas Act whereby different races were separated into different living areas.

During the Congress of the People (COP) in 1955 the building was a storage area for the belongings of delegates that gathered on the grounds of the nearby market. Thereafter the grounds were named Freedom Square by the residents. Today the structures are heritage sites.

With a new structure that includes space for shops, a tourism office, an auditorium, hotel and a museum, the square has since been renamed the Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication. It was opened in 2005 at the 50th anniversary of the COP.

Other prominent families are the Lollans. Stanley Lollans was one of the organisers of the COP and secretariat member of the South African Coloured People's Congress.

Residents take great pride in the fact that the community hid and

shielded political activists including its most famous fugitive, Nelson Mandela.

For generations fresh produce for weddings and funerals for Sowetans came from Kliptown. The market was the heart of social life until its recent replacement by the Walter Sisulu Square.

PAINTING AND MUSIC

The cultural life of this township is also rich. In the 1940s the famous painter Gerard Sekoto lived there with his cousin before moving to Dakar, Senegal and later to Paris.

Artist Durant Sihlali captured the vibrancy of the market. In the 1950s the San Souci theatre was famous for concerts by leading musicians of the time, such as Dolly Rathebe and Miriam Makeba.

To capture this rich history, a number of books have been published. Ismail Vadi who was born in the township wrote *The Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter Campaign*. While another resident, Prince Messingham, authored *Kliptown Stories*.

The museum houses a variety of replicas of historical objects such as khaki uniforms worn by volunteer organisers of COP. Replica blankets used by the delegates in the wintery evening of 25 June are also on display.

MEANING OF FREEDOM

Let's rewind. The year is 1955. The setting is a small vibrant township 30 kilometres south west of Johannesburg. The place is abuzz with activity even though it's in the middle of winter. About 3 000 people from all races gather in dusty Kliptown to talk about the future. This is extremely unusual because blacks and whites don't mingle in any other place except at work.

The occasion is the COP. The people have come together to discuss the most fundamental question facing the country at the time. Come to think of it, the question still haunts us even to this day: What does freedom mean to you?

After a visit to the United States, where he met several black leaders, Prof Zachariah Keodirelang 'ZK' Matthews thought of a Congress in South Africa.

On his return he encouraged the African National Congress (ANC) to organise the Congress. Several organisations joined the call. But the most prominent were the Congress of Democrats, representing mostly white South Africans, the South Africa Coloured People's Congress, the South African Indian Congress, and of course the ANC.

Organising the COP took two years. A long time by today's standards but an incredible

achievement in terms of the geographical area that was reached by the message which cut across racial and class lines. All of this was happening under a repressive state machinery.

Unlike in today's media-driven world much of the organising took place from the ground up. Several people in the local ANC branches and other organisations volunteered to go across the country to galvanise support for the Congress.

Even youngsters were encouraged to participate. Zwelakhe Sisulu was part of a group called 'disupatsela' (volunteers) that went around neighbourhoods spreading the message about the COP.

Out of this meeting came the most important document in the country's history: the Freedom Charter. An extremely ambitious document and yet some feel it was tame and not going far enough.

The ANC then split however. The new faction, led by Robert Sobukwe and other Africanists, saw the Charter as a compromise document that was 'too' white. They felt the needs and aspirations of the 'African' majority in South Africa were ignored.

CHARTERISTS VERSUS AFRICANISTS

At the time, blacks were either African, Indian or Coloured, collectively known as non-Europeans, and whites were called Europeans. However, today most people accept that we are all African by birth. But things were not so clear-cut back then.

Influenced by the African Diaspora and its leaders like Marcus Garvey the Africanists declared: 'Africa for Africans'. The notion of a South Africa belonging to all that live in it, black and white alike, was seen as a betrayal of the liberation struggle.

Fifty years on, it seems that history has justified the so-called Charterists' commitment to non-racialism. However, Kliptown today remains impoverished. It seems to

have benefited little from the multi-million rand square built within its community.

However, a visitor to the museum can experience the place's history through a number of sites.

OBJECTS AND STORYTELLERS

Upon entering the square there are two monumental conical structures facing each other on either side that stand in the middle.

One structure is built out of corrugated iron sheets recovered when older structures were demolished to make way for the new square. Similarly, the structure opposite is partially made from bricks from the old market. The structures look like the conical structures of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe.

Inside the brick structure are tablets arranged in a circular format which bear the ten articles of the Freedom Charter. There are four doors representing the cardinal points of a compass. At the top end of the structure there is a cross (X) cut out from the concrete ceiling representing the voting crosses of the 1994 ballot that ended apartheid and signalled the beginning of a new age.

The theme of the cross is repeated in several places around the square including the benches and the façade of the building. At one end of the square there are ten pillars also representing the articles of the Charter. While at the other end is a hotel, which not only offers accommodation but regular musical entertainment on Sunday afternoons, and then of course is the museum.

There are numerous other sites that would be of interest to the historically inclined visitor. There is the house that Gerard Sekoto lived in, the Charlotte Maxeke house and the church. You will remember that Maxeke was the first black woman in South Africa to graduate with a BSc degree in the early 20th century. She also established the



American Episcopal Church in the country after her studies in the USA.

A visit is also incomplete without going to Bolo Studios. Oom Bolo is the only surviving member of the Kliptown Snappers. This was a collective of photographers who plied their trade in the area. The studios are a wealth of the township's images and of its residents, past and present. It is an archive of both the famous and the most ordinary. Bolo Studios are a museum in their own unique way and it doubles up as a restaurant and a nice place for a drink.

For the curious visitor and those who are interested in where our country came from, a visit to Kliptown is worth the journey; not forgetting that the township has its oral storytellers who have seen it all. By chatting to Prince Messingham, Gene Duiker, Aunt Koekie and Oom Bolo one gets the meaning of this historic place through the lived experiences of its residents. **LB**

Khwezi Gule is chief curator of Soweto Museums: Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum, and Kliptown Open Air Museum.