

Sophiatown a state of mind

Reviving a passionate spirit

Sophiatown is a symbol of the destructive social engineering of apartheid and the diverse and culturally rich nation that we would like to become. **Kenda Knowles** takes us through this vibrant history and introduces an exciting new Sophiatown heritage project.

The Sophiatown spirit is almost impossible to define in one sentence, yet it is so alive with possibilities and still magically present in the stories of all those who lived there before the forced removals began in 1955.

Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston in his book *Naught for your Comfort* written in 1955 spoke of Sophiatown like this, "Sophiatown! It is not your physical beauty which makes you so lovable; not that soft line of colour which sometimes seems to strike across the greyness of your streets; not the splendour of the evening sky which turns your drabness into gold – it is none of these things. It is your people."

This 'spirit' is slowly rekindling itself among ex- and current Sophiatown residents of a new generation. They are eager to understand and revive the old values and make them relevant today. A new initiative 'Sophiatown Encounters' opens the doors to the stories and heritage of that time. Right now, in Sophiatown you can step back into the heritage experience and in early 2009 a new physical home for the permanent Sophiatown Heritage Museum will be opened.

MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY

What was it about the people and

this place called Sophiatown? Part of the answer lies in how Sophiatown came about.

Sophiatown was established in 1899, after a property developer named Herman Tobiansky bought 237 acres of land, in the west of the city. His intention was to build a suburb for white people settling near to the city, and Tobiansky named the settlement after his wife, Sophia. However, the city council announced its intention to build sewerage disposal works next to the area and also build the Western Native Township next to Sophiatown. This resulted in potential buyers losing interest.

Tobiansky then decided to sell his properties to any buyers and at that time there were no restrictions on property ownership based on race. Therefore any people who could afford the stands began to buy them. People of all races – black, coloured, white, Indian and Chinese created an homogeneous, vibrant, multicultural community. Those who owned stands rented out backyard rooms to the growing population, drawn to the city after the war, who could not find rooms in the nearby township.

It was perhaps this diversity and the influences it brought from all over the world that added some of the flavour to a society that was very often on the cutting edge of

politics, art, writing and music. It was a community in which all people were equal and free to express themselves. This freedom of expression was seen in the brilliant writing of Can Themba, the poetry of Don Mattera, the music of Hugh Masekela and Stompie Manana, the voices of Dolly Rathebe and Miriam Makeba and the journalism of Henry Nxumalo to name but a few.

This vibrant suburb, like most areas, had its darker side in the formation of gangs, like the notorious Americans, the Berliners, the Vultures and many more. Sophiatown residents also created their own language, Tsotsi-Taal, and nicknamed their suburb 'Kofffi' – place of darkness.

With two cinemas, jazz clubs and many churches as well as shebeens, Sophiatown was an exciting, stimulating and self-sustaining world. Highly educated professionals teaching younger generations, emerging politicians and activists, choirs, poetry, drama, street life and survival all went hand in hand – much like township life today. Fashion and style was an essential part of this society, as the magnificent materials, accessories and photography of the time show.

TREVOR HUDDLESTON

Woven into the rich fabric of the history of Sophiatown are



Sophiatown's freedom of expression could be heard in the voices of people like Dolly Rathebe

numerous stories of friendship and inspiration and the dedication of people like Father Trevor Huddleston and fellow monks from the Community of the Resurrection in the UK. Education was one of the focus areas for the mission schools run by the CR fathers and convent sisters, and for many years children in and around Sophiatown enjoyed a high quality of schooling and a holistic education that included music, art, writing, sport and spiritual growth until the stifling introduction of Bantu Education.

Father Huddleston was sent by the Community of the Resurrection to head the Sophiatown and Orlando parishes in 1943. On arrival in Sophiatown, he already had a strong social conscience, evident in his support of workers' rights and socialist ideas in England. In 1944 he moved into the rectory at 73 Meyer Street, and continued the work of the CR already established there.

Sophiatown became his most beloved home. He built friendships with many residents and was especially loved by children. He provided support in many ways to

the community, one of which was the promotion of music lessons for some of the young people. He started the Huddleston Jazz Band, which played a vital role in influencing the talents and careers of world renowned musicians such as Hugh Masekela.

Father Huddleston was an outspoken critic of apartheid. He supported the Sophiatown community in their protest against apartheid regulations and the threat of forced removal. In 1955, after the forced removals of Sophiatown took place, he was recalled to England. He continued with the campaign against apartheid when he was abroad and became president of the anti-apartheid movement in the UK.

Although he continued his work in both the UK and in Africa after returning to England, his heart and soul remained with Sophiatown and its people. In his book *Naught for your Comfort*, he was able to tell the world about the apartheid system and the atrocities taking place in South Africa. His book was described by many as one of the first powerful messages to the

international community which created a deeper awareness and understanding of apartheid. He was great friends with Oliver Tambo, and worked closely with him in the UK, during Tambo's many years abroad. Perhaps one of his greatest moments was when South Africa finally became a democracy in 1994, and he was able to come back and visit a free South Africa, which he had come to love so much.

He died in the UK in 1998 and according to his wishes before his death, his ashes were brought to Sophiatown and buried at the Christ the King Anglican Church in Ray Street. His spirit lives on in the hearts and souls of Sophiatown residents and surrounding communities, and his legacy of dedication to improving the lives of the community and its children is recreated in the Trevor Huddleston CR Memorial Centre.

The Centre is a service provider to Sophiatown and surrounding communities, and to people with Sophiatown roots. Our focus is in line with his passion – assisting people to fulfill their potential, getting people into work with training in ICT for youth and women, arts and crafts training, and design classes, and living our cultural traditions and understanding our heritage through the 'Encounter Sophiatown' initiative for everyone including children's programmes and special festival events.

DESTRUCTION OF PLACE, BUT NOT SPIRIT

Sophiatown residents were forcibly removed between 1955 and 1962. In the early morning of 9 February 1955, in the rain and darkness, people were pulled out of their houses, their meagre belongings thrown onto trucks and they were then dropped off at various places

that the government had allocated to them.

People were sent to different areas according to their different races. Black people were sent to Soweto, including Meadowlands and Diepkloof, coloured people were pushed out to Coronationville and Eldorado Park, Westbury and Newclare, Indians were sent to Mayfair and Lenasia whilst Chinese people were moved to Fordsburg. Families dumped in Soweto were given two loaves of bread and a pint of milk as there were no stores

or places where they could get food in this vast and barren piece of land that was to become home.

Sophiatown was literally reduced to a huge pile of rubble. Street by street the homes, schools and businesses were bulldozed to the ground. Thereafter, a new white suburb named Triomf by the Nationalist government was built to replace Sophiatown. However, following the reclamation and restitution legislation after the ANC came to power, Triomf was renamed Sophiatown in 1996 at an official

renaming ceremony which took place in 2006.

Even though the suburb had gone and people split up all over Johannesburg, their spirit lived on in the great writing, music, art, poetry and of course the politics of South Africa. This was most evident in the work of people like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Abigail Kubheka, Thandi Klaasen, the Manhattan Brothers, Jazz Pioneers and the playwrights and poets we still appreciate today.



Sophiatown Heritage Museum

The Trevor Huddleston CR Memorial Centre, in partnership with the City of Johannesburg is in the process of creating the Sophiatown Heritage Museum, at a house in Toby Street that belonged to the late Dr Xuma, president of the ANC from 1940 to 1949. It is one of only two houses not torn down during the removals.

The late Dr Xuma was a practising doctor, and also as president of the ANC he had many 'secret' political meetings in his home. One of these was the significant meeting with Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu in 1949 in which this group of ANC youth leaders called for his support of the new and more aggressive programme of Mass Action. In the end Dr Xuma did not support this and was not re-elected as president later that year.

It is stories like this and many more of the community spirit, politics, art, music, writing and the 'state of mind' that was Sophiatown's great legacy, that need to be told, celebrated and made relevant to our diverse nation today.

And so, the aim for the Sophiatown Heritage Museum is to reveal the stories and values of people, so that we can have a meaningful encounter with this vibrant heritage that belongs to all of us, and from which we step out, Kofifi style, to make a 'people united in our diversity'.

A number of Sophiatown tours are available, to suit various requirements from 30 minute 'Taster Tours' for busy professionals, to family and larger group tours between 2 and 4 hours.

For information and bookings, contact Trevor Huddleston
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