

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2022

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-6-issue-1-april-2022/>

Martin Gershoff (Ed.), *District Six: Memories, Thoughts, and Images*.

Publisher: Marge Clouts & Book, Cape Town, 2021, 383 pages, ISBN # 978-0-620-88986-5.

Reviewed by: Mogamat Kammie Kamedien, Independent Researcher & Member of the Western Cape Department of Heritage and Archives Committee.

This is an amazing compilation of the existing memories, life stories, and vignettes to showcase the lives of former residents and visitors of the historic District Six urban community. Many readers have referred to the superb technical aspects of this privately funded publication as a work that was edited by Martin Greshoff and assisted by sub-editor, Marge Clouts and the book designer, Charles Abbott.

What has made a lasting impression on me is the way the editor and his team portrayed the life stories shared by the contributors about historic District Six; they did this with great empathy, circumspection, and reverence. Unlike the more aloof academic books and media articles on the old District Six that were penned by several outsiders, this work stands out because of its aesthetically produced characteristics. The editorial team succeeded in allowing the authentic voices, which are uniquely grounded in actual lived experiences, to come to life in each of these chapters.

As a child of both the early days during the destruction of District Six and the last days of South End (Port Elizabeth [renamed Gqeberha]), this extraordinary collection of personal memoirs resulted in many of the chapters keeping me engrossed and immersed. While some chapters held me spellbound in recognising the remarkable District Six personalities, both famous and infamous, others were keeping my eyes fixed on the distinctive landmark placed names.

Then, there were those chapters that recollected significant historical events, both national (such as the 1966 assassination of Dr. Hendrick Verwoerd while he was apartheid South Africa's Premier) and parochial (such as the collapse of a section of the new freeway that was under construction at the time). These photographic images captured the very streets that I used to traverse across District Six. And it was during a time when the area was a bustling neighbourhood; one where my grandmother's home - in Cowley Street below the Avalon Bioscope – was situated.

The selection of the photographs includes streetscape entries; these were wonderfully interwoven across the various chapters highlighting diverse life stories. He anchors these intangible living memories with these concrete landmarks of the historic built environment. Further, he enables the readers to journey beyond the streets, lanes, and alleys as well as the stoeps, verandas, and front doorways into the privacy of these long-gone homes of the former residents penned by these chapter contributors.

The black and white photos of the streetscapes in the Jan Gershoff attractive selection are a bonus. They are a comforting re-assurance for many of the last generation of young ex-District Six residents who, as juveniles at the time, have fleeting, fuzzy, and hazy recollections of these landmark buildings and architecture. I could partially remember and visualise the classrooms of my Muir Street Moslem Primary School, but I had great difficulty in picturing the exterior of the whole school complex itself without a photo – in this collection – as reference point.

One striking sub-theme, cutting across several chapters, was that the streets of District Six; these were playgrounds where kids played all sorts of games and occupied themselves. This was indicative of District Six's historic vibrancy; it was a crowded neighbourhood with loud cries of children, which is in direct contrast with current inner-city communities amid urban gentrifications. I vividly recall that one of our ex-Robben Islanders, Achmad Kathrada (d.2017) commented that the one thing these political prisoners on the notorious island missed was the lively chattering voices of boisterous children that came from District Six.

A few of the contributors made passing mention of Verwoerd's assassination without realizing that this seminal event in the country's national history would have tragic ramifications for mixed pockets of multicultural neighbourhoods such as Cape Town's District Six, Gqeberha's South End, and Johannesburg's Fietas. The Group Areas Act of 1950 was merely words on the statutory books until Verwoerd's successor, John Vorster (d.1983) took office as the apartheid state's new Premier. Vorster was the one who expanded the state machinery to give concrete effect to large scale urban forced removals.

Anecdotally, this reviewer was told by family members and relatives that he (this reviewer) became an unofficial *malboet* (the announcer/broadcaster of burials notices); this was when he, on the way from school, barged into the passage of his granny's cosy home with the news of Verwoerd's death. He, perhaps, naïvely and gleefully declared with grave innocence: "Die Baas van die land is dood" (The master of the country is dead).

Leaving that event aside, in several chapters the writers documented that the social capital embedded in this working-class neighbourhood and specific self-help and mutual aid practices popularly known as a culture of *kanalla*; these provided a socio-cultural safety net for the community. Among these are the narratives about working mothers dropping off their children at the homes of

family members and friends in District Six during the working week, and latchkey children who were entrusted to the warm & welcoming care of District Six's family and friends.

Another window into social solidarity was the recognition and respect towards the churches and mosques as well as their corresponding religious practices; these included the ringing of church bells throughout the area and the numerous public calls by the *bilal* (announcer inviting the believers to the five daily congregational ritual prayers). These were aesthetically captured in the chapters where the writers recollected miscellaneous life stories.

This collection is an unexpected linguistic gem. Its editorial team has preserved archaic expressions known as *kombuis taal* (kitchen language); the usage of this language, as the Afrikaans *lingua franca* of this distinctive working-class neighbourhood, was in direct contrast to the language of the more sturvy (in Cape Town colloquial meaning: uptight English-speaking people) neighbourhood; that is, the English-speaking communities in Upper Woodstock or in Walmer Estate (aka Black Seapoint). Their residents usually had middle class careers and professional occupations as compared to those from District Six. The generally Afrikaans speaking District Sixers tended to work in the garment & textile factories in Lower Main Road and Sir Lowry Road.

The editorial team should be commended for their foresight in retaining these idiomatic expressions with their colloquial qualities. In my view, these will make this compendium of life stories a ground-breaking source for, among others, linguists, playwrights, and poets. It is important to note that this compilation raises the curtain on the rich lives of born and bred District Six residents. From these personal recollections or life stories, they afford present-day passers-by that regularly drive past historic District Six recall and remember that former residents had 'dreams and aspirations' (of a Fairyland). These residents' lives were rudely and abruptly severed causing them to be radically changed.

It is hoped that this extraordinary book will serve as a model template. A template that will inspire both displaced and non-displaced communities that, together, experienced the racist social re-engineering processes and developments that caused various urban mixed suburbs to be uprooted and transformed. It is indeed interesting to observe that, during this global age of distrust and alienation, 63 contributors reached out to this publication's three-member editorial team.

In this trans-oceanic endeavour, they have collectively contributed to a tome that has become a notable monumental work; one in which all the participants not only transcended a divided past but one that included the Group Areas Act's implementation and impact. The work also underlines the community's mutual search for restorative justice. These are reflected in their self-biographical memories that became instrumental in the healing process of a

fractured nation; a society that is still trying to find itself in a post-1994 democratic environment.

On a more personal note, this portable archive of District Six's life stories is an answer to prayers of the last generation of District Six youth - a generation that is directly connected to the soil of historic District Six and who were never afforded the opportunity to say "goodbye or farewell" to many of their fellow classmates. Many were simply forced to relocate overnight to unknown townships on the sprawling Cape Flats as they return home from respective racially divided schools.

Up to now, the reviewer himself has never met up with any of the street neighbours of his granny, except one immediate neighbour, the late Hadjie Muhammad 'Gamat Slams' Abrahams of Cowley Street. I recently heard from relatives of the other neighbours from that block, bounded by Combrink Street & Pedersen Street, that they were spread-out across the Cape Flats, and one or two are overseas (probably residing in Australia or elsewhere).

A final word about this striking and pleasing work: the book, which is a 400-page hardcover with 208 beautifully illustrated photos and that was printed on quality paper, is indeed a remarkable coffee table book. Not only should former District Six residents seriously consider purchasing it, but others who are interested in the City of Cape Town's social history should lay their hands on and include this book in their collection of books.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2022 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other propose-3d uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990