



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

---

The District Six Museum: An Ordinary People's Place

Author(s): VALMONT LAYNE

Source: *The Public Historian*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (February 2008), pp. 53-62

Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the National Council on Public History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2008.30.1.53>

Accessed: 30-08-2017 01:53 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*National Council on Public History, University of California Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Public Historian*

# The District Six Museum: An Ordinary People's Place

VALMONT LAYNE

**Abstract:** This article describes the founding and work of the District Six Museum. Under the apartheid system, District Six was declared a white-only area. Many residents were forcibly removed, and almost all of the buildings were bulldozed. The District Six Museum was launched in 1994 to keep alive the memories of District Six and displaced people everywhere. It is a space where the forgotten understandings of the past are resuscitated, and where different interpretations of that past are facilitated. The museum also assists in the reconstitution of the community of District Six and Cape Town.

**Key words:** District Six Museum, Cape Town, apartheid, memory, sites of conscience, social justice.

DISTRICT SIX WAS THE SIXTH MUNICIPAL DISTRICT OF CAPE TOWN, a port city on the southern tip of Africa that nestles between the mass of Table Mountain and the indigo waters of the Atlantic Ocean. In the 1960s and 1970s, under the apartheid system, District Six, which had been a thriving, dynamic community, was declared a whites-only area. Its residents were forcibly removed, and almost all of the buildings were bulldozed. Today, the words District Six, for the vast majority of people in South Africa, are synonymous with some of the worst vestiges of the apartheid system.

The District Six Museum was launched in 1994, the year after apartheid ended in South Africa, to keep alive the memories of District Six and displaced people everywhere. It came into being as a vehicle for advocating social jus-

tice, as a space for reflection and contemplation, and as an institution for challenging the distortions and half-truths which propped up the history of Cape Town and South Africa. The museum is an independent space where the forgotten understandings of the past are resuscitated, and where different interpretations of that past are facilitated. The museum not only tells the stories of forced removals, it also assists in the reconstitution of the community of District Six and Cape Town by drawing on the area's pre-apartheid heritage of nonracialism, nonsexism, anti-class discrimination movements, and by the encouragement of open debate about the past, present, and future.

### *History of District Six*

The area known as District Six has been home to many different communities over the years. The lower slopes of the Table Mountains provided a place of refuge to the indigenous *Khoi* as they resisted the Dutch invaders in the 1600s. Slave resisters hid in these same mountains almost two centuries later as they sought protection from draconian slave-masters. With the emancipation of slaves in 1834, slave owners were compensated for agreeing to the abolition, and a great deal of this money was used to develop the District Six area. Among the very first people to move into the district were the newly emancipated slaves. The slaves in South Africa came mostly from the East, from the East Indies, from India, and from Malaysia and Madagascar. Most practiced Islam, which flourished at that time, as the Christian church did not proselytize among slaves in the very early colonial history of South Africa.

In addition to the freed slaves, immigrants coming from all over the world moved into this convenient, central district. Some came from the West Indies. Many were sailors who would work a passage to Cape Town but who were not guaranteed a passage back. Others from the West Indies came as dock workers. Africans from all over South Africa came to live in the city as they increasingly lost their land. Significant numbers of African Americans came with their churches. Then of course there was the European contingent. They included those coming to preach and convert, and those seeking riches in a country in the midst of a mineral revolution, with diamonds having been discovered in the 1860s and gold in the 1880s. And as recently as between the world wars, people fleeing persecution in Latvia and Lithuania arrived. District Six was a convenient starting point right at their point of entry to the newly adopted country.

In District Six, few people would have been classified as white. District Six, a predominantly working-class community, was very cosmopolitan with all these different influences, these interwoven strands. It was an exciting mix of cultures and ideologies. For such a predominantly working-class neighborhood, it had a vibrant artistic life and a vigorous intellectual life which to a large degree supported a left-thinking ideology. It was home to a range of acknowledged intellectuals, artists, musicians, political leaders, and writers

who contributed to and were supported by their community in organic ways. The evolution of community activities associated with the area—the musical traditions and performative processions, dance-hall activities, dramatic societies, sports life, and avid cinema-going—flourished, partially because of the need for working people to be involved in creative and pleasurable activities.

This is not to say that residents of District Six lived without conflict, did not bear prejudice, or never engaged in discrimination. The pre-apartheid era does risk becoming mythologized as an era of total harmony, preventing us from learning from and celebrating the challenges of how marginalized people confronted inequality and injustice within their own communities. However, it is important to recognize that there was a very deliberate process of community mobilization in District Six that forged ideas that served to challenge the foundations of apartheid and which ultimately helped shape the new constitutional order in South Africa. For the politics of South Africa's Western Cape region (and of District Six), the idea of nonracialism was a fundamental tenet of the movement against apartheid. Organizations in District Six, including the Non European Unity Movement, mobilized against the idea of race defining people, in response to new radical ideas coming from new parts of the world. The African National Congress had a presence in the area as well. Among the intelligentsia there was a rejection of the ideas of apartheid and the experience of the Second World War, and a strong feeling of solidarity with socialist experiments in Russia and Europe. So these ideas were partly birthed in places like District Six, where intellectuals lived and were active, where they forged the ideas in practice. Of course the place and the people themselves weren't perfect, but the conditions existed in that neighborhood for these ideas to flourish. One of the legacies that District Six bequeaths to the nation, then, is this idea of nonracialism.

In 1950, District Six was changed forever when the apartheid government laid down one of the pillars of its ideology in the Group Areas Act. This act decreed that people had to live in an area specially designated for them according to their classification. Under apartheid, there were fifteen classifications, including White, Black, Honorary White, Chinese, Asian, Other Asian, Cape Malay, Cape Coloured, Coloured, Other Coloured, and Bantu. District Six became a predominantly Black area; that is, it was mostly populated by people who were classified in apartheid terms as Black.

In 1966 District Six was declared a "whites only" area and all "non-white" people living there were told that they had to move. Slum clearance was an often quoted official justification for the leveling of District Six, but there are many who think that the creative political vigor that was alive in the cosmopolitan and mixed area was a more likely explanation for why officialdom could not let District Six survive.

As a result of this decree, 60,000 people were moved out of their homes in District Six, beyond the mountain and onto the Cape Flats. The government anticipated that the program would take two years to complete. In fact, it took fourteen. By 1982, the area was completely bulldozed and flattened;



District Six, South Africa before and after the forced demolition under apartheid law. (Courtesy of District Six Museum - TBC)

only the churches and mosques were left. The cost of the removals in monetary terms was immense; the cost in human suffering was incalculable.

Once the full-scale removal was effected and the people physically removed, the opposition that began in the 1960s strengthened. Concerned and angry people banded together to form the “Hands Off District Six” group, in 1987, arguing, “If we cannot live on this land, we salt this earth. It should not be there for anyone else to live on until apartheid is abolished and the people of District Six can decide what to do with the land.” The resistance to the removal started very gradually. There were different campaigns around individual sites in the District, for instance when supporters of St. Mark’s Church refused to let it be removed. Then there was resistance to the building of the tricameral parliamentary complex on the site. These individual challenges grew into a widespread movement, including a groundswell of resistance literature, all contesting the government’s attempt to reframe the land in the image of a “reformed” apartheid. The District Six community was surprisingly successful in preventing the development of the barren land. The pressure brought to bear resulted in the land of District Six remaining open and bare, a memorial scar within the cityscape.

A general groundswell of creative writing, journalism, and music followed, all referencing the destruction of places such as District Six and Sophiatown in Johannesburg. Richard Rive, Alex la Guma, and James Mathews all emerged as literary figures during this time, as did artists such as Peter Clarke and musicians such as Dollar Brand (aka Abdulla Ibrahim). District Six was mourned and celebrated, and became one of the central themes of the emerg-

ing South African jazz, literature, and journalism of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, a major conference on poverty and its causes included the commissioning of a film about forced removals at District Six as a case study of how such removals caused widespread poverty. The film raised significant awareness of the relationship between poverty and displacement. The success of the campaign was also supported by the fact that the bulldozed landscape of District Six was so visible a marker in the middle of the city.

### *The District Six Museum*

In 1988, “The Hands Off District Six Campaign” organized a conference, resulting in two major resolutions. The first was to insist that District Six be discussed only in the context of a democratic South Africa and that this discussion involve the removees themselves. The second was that a museum of District Six be established. Participants realized that memory was the most important weapon they had and that they needed to organize around a way of remembering District Six and keeping it alive. The District Six Museum Foundation was formed in the late 1980s, with a mission stating that the aims of the museum would be to ensure that the history and memory of forced removals in South Africa endured and that in the process it would challenge all forms of social oppression. It would aim to foster understanding between people, isolated by segregation, by focusing on the cosmopolitan nature of District Six.

The museum chose to frame the significance of the area in terms of its legacy of forced removals. It could have chosen other criteria, such as the uniqueness of its urban culture, the uniqueness of its street and carnival culture, its architectural heritage, its links with the slave past, or its status as a birthplace of South African jazz, the site of Zonnebloem College as a colonial college for African nobility, the Stakesby Lewis Hostel, the Bethal Church, or an important site for the emergence of black South African journalism and literature. All these are important, but the museum believed that the destruction of the area remains its most critical legacy.

With this mission in mind, the foundation, which was made up of just a handful of people at first, began to look for a suitable place where the story could be told. While they searched, they organized exhibitions and conferences and talk-shops to keep the memory of District Six alive. In 1994, they found a place, the abandoned Central Methodist Mission church on Buitenkant Street.

The foundation felt that the Central Methodist Mission was a very appropriate space, as the church itself has a great history of social justice and was known during its years of operation as the “Freedom Church.” Many people have great memories of celebrating the abolition of slavery in the church, of a congregation of more than one thousand rising to their feet and weeping with joy on the anniversary of this triumph of social justice. From 1966, when

the forced removals from District Six began, the churches of the area had an increasingly important role to play in providing sanctuary and succor to the community that was being displaced. The Freedom Church, in its location opposite the central Cape Town police station, also provided invaluable sanctuary to those protesting against apartheid, most particularly in the struggle years of the 1980s. The church served the community until 1985, when the Central Methodist Mission amalgamated its two central Cape Town congregations into a single nonracial congregation situated in Church Street, and the Buitenkant Street church was abandoned.

The museum's founding director, Sandra Prosalendis, remembered:

With the Museum Foundation having found a place, I was employed to raise the money that would give shape to all the ideas and notions about the museum. When I first walked into the church, my first thought was that we desperately needed a collection. I am not from a museum background, but I understood that a "collection" was the heart of any museum. I read in the newspapers about a man who had collected District Six's street signs and my heart leapt: here surely was the start of a collection!

Through some creative sleuthing, I managed to locate this man and one of the trustees of the Museum Foundation and I went to visit him. We were stunned to discover that he was the government lackey whose mandate was to demolish District Six. He was so afraid to meet with us. Afraid of the past returning to visit him. But we did meet; in fact, we met several times. He told us that he had kept the collection of street signs for over twenty years in his cellar. He had lived daily with the fear of exposure both from the State and the people of District Six, as he had been ordered to dump the rubble in the sea. He let us see them but was not sure about giving them to us. But we kept going back and eventually one day he and his wife said to us, 'Look we've prayed about this, we've thought about this, and we want the signs to go to you.' We were incredibly excited. We packed the signs into our car immediately and rushed them off to the museum.

The museum got an artist to hang them up. This immediately created a form of magic; the signs really jolted memory in a very effective way. People coming into the museum would see the name of the street they had lived in, and this would open up a flood of memories and stories. One man even brought in his old postcards addressed to him in District Six and hung them on "his" street sign.

Once the signs were in place, the museum founders mounted an exhibition called *Streets*. The committee realized that the museum could not put the signs back into the landscape. The landscape as it exists, as a space of absence, has its own message; it is a huge scar in the center of the city, and it speaks volumes. What it could do, though, was put them back into the right relationship with each other. This was especially important when one realizes that in their devastation of the area, the state not only destroyed the buildings, but also renamed the District and the streets. The museum decided to create, in collaboration with artists, many of whom were ex-residents of Dis-

trict Six, a large canvas floor map that filled the center of the exhibition space representing the streets as they were before the demolition. The map was painted, and artists were invited to inscribe images and poetry on it.

Prosalendis recounted that an exciting dynamic emerged. From the minute the museum opened its door to the public, the ex-residents came and began to sign the map themselves, to write themselves back into the center of the city, to claim their history, and to claim the space. People marked bus stops, places where somebody sold peanuts, their old schools, and their homes. They recorded the routes of the carnivals through the streets. And that process still continues today. The map is still in the museum, and ex-residents come almost as a sort of pilgrimage to make their mark on the map. I remember vividly the day I brought my recently widowed mother to the museum to see the portraits, the map, and the photos from my childhood in Bloemhof flats. I took her to the spot on the map where Virginia Street was marked, where the Layne family had stayed decades before I was born. Here others such as the Barandella family had noted their names and had also included an inscription with the Layne family. My mother also pointed to the portrait of nurse Gouw, the woman who had served as midwife when she was born, as she had for countless other children of the city.

At one of the earliest exhibition openings, the original curator of *Streets*, realizing that there was no visitors' book, hurriedly gathered a calico curtain off the window and got the ex-residents to sign their names on it. And the tradition has continued. That original cloth hangs in the museum. And this curtain, now referred to as the "Memory Cloth," is now over 1600 feet long and is filled with the memories and comments of ex-residents.

Another important part of the mission of the museum and one of the goals of the *Streets* exhibition was to harness the memories that would critique received notions of race and representation in South Africa. One of the ways the museum did this was to create a portrait gallery, which I mentioned in relation to nurse Gouw. The purpose was to show that District Six, declared a slum by the past government, a place of drunkenness and brawls, was in fact the home of important political and social thinking, and also a lot of creativity. So the museum hung portraits of some of the people who had achieved a degree of fame, who were considered noteworthy even if they were not famous or wealthy. And the museum did this very simply, but most effectively. It took small photographs and ran them through an architect's sepia machine. These spectral images surround the exhibition space; they hang in the galleries looking down over the map, over the people wandering over the streets.

The *Streets* exhibition was planned to last for two weeks. But the museum found that once it had opened *Streets*, we could not close the doors. People started to come in for all sorts of reasons. They would come and stand on the map and talk to the different people who work in the museum, who are mainly ex-residents and children of ex-residents, and tell their story. The museum is an ordinary people's place. Not a day goes by without people coming to be heard, to tell their stories, to share their memories, to laugh, and to cry.



Former residents of District Six triumph as the first returnees are announced. South Africa's District Six Museum educated restitution claimants and provided space for the Land Court and signing of the Accords. (Courtesy of District Six Museum - TBC)

Mr. Petersen,<sup>1</sup> eighty-two years old, was brought to the museum by his daughter. Together they walked the map, and he marked with his walking stick the block where he was born, Queen Anne's Place. Overcome with emotion, he wept over a model of the building, and kissing the cardboard cutout, he whispered, "What a beautiful place was the National Cinema."

And there are the tragic stories. There were people who didn't survive this huge fragmentation created by the razing of District Six because they were psychologically crushed. Families tell us that many old people died of heartache. And naturally there are stories of the racism that existed: what it was like to wait for the birth of a child to see how dark or fair it would be; how one woman, whose husband was much fairer than she and was classified white, pretended always to be the maid of the family, never being able to claim her rightful place as the mother.

With this whole process, it began to dawn on me that a museum "collection" is more than an accumulation of artifacts and materials. In the District Six Museum, our most precious collection is the memories, the stories, and the emotions of our ex-residents and our visitors to the museum.

### *The Future of District Six*

To date the development of the museum has been a very spontaneous and organic unfolding. Since the opening of the newer *Digging Deeper* exhibition, the museum has begun to debate what its future should be and how it can continue to be relevant. In these conversations, we always come back to the realization that the most important thing we collect—and the most important thing we give back to the broader community—is memories and stories.

The museum's ongoing relevance also lies in keeping alive the stories and

1. It is a common form of address to refer to people by their surnames, and in District Six it was a particular mark of respectability to be addressed thus.

memories of District Six as the processes of land claims and restitution move towards redeveloping the landscape of District Six. From the very beginning, the museum has been part of an exciting land claim and restitution process. In response to new legislation that allowed for restitution, a new body was established called the District Six Beneficiary Trust. The museum, on the other hand, creates the memorial framework for the trust's work. One of the innovations of the museum is that it ventures into the territory of advocacy—the museum supports the concept of social justice. The museum was used to educate claimants, and the museum's space was used as a land court and to sign important accords. The community came in full force to witness this very important signing.

The question the museum poses is: what is the intersection between these two spaces? We can't build houses, but we can certainly create a space for people to talk about what kind of community they want, and encourage people to take action to ensure that the conditions for that community become part of broader public discussion. We can't enforce any social behavior, but we can ensure that the public is involved in the discussion of what kind of community should be constructed in District Six.

Although the restitution process is fraught with political difficulty, it is generally agreed that people will return to the area. This implies that the museum is now charged with "reinventing" District Six for the present. No longer will the barren landscape jog the memories of passers by. Now its challenge is to make sure that the history of what happened at District Six is not forgotten as the neighbourhood develops, but used to promote an agenda of social justice and inclusion.

The museum has developed a number of strategies for sustaining its mission critical profiles. The one has been a deliberate engagement with District Six as a site of conscience and as a National Heritage Site. Both of these are critical pedagogical and programmatic interventions that bring a new critical dimension to the work of the museum. There is also a third critical dimension to the museum's work, namely its advocacy of critical community museum practice or methodology. In fact, the museum finds itself increasingly playing the role of advocate on developmental approaches to institution building in the new South Africa, and abroad.

Of course it almost goes without saying that we hope the return to District Six can serve as a model for restitution, as a process which has opened opportunities for citizens who ordinarily would not have had the economic means to become property-owners on this prime real-estate in an increasingly gentrified Cape Town, which has seen a rocketing of property prices. The return to District Six has facilitated the process of building re-ownership of the city by the dispossessed people.

The restitution process is of course a complex project pitting a social development agenda against the booming property market in South Africa and the imperatives of different government agencies. There exist pressures and temptations for poor, newly enfranchised landowners in the city to sell their

new houses at a tremendous profit, thus undermining the hard-earned gains of the struggle for District Six. This presents a real risk to the overall project. Hence the process is guided by a set of principles called the Social Compact. By agreement of the beneficiaries themselves, all successful claimants will sign a pledge undertaking to abide by the tenets of the Social Compact, which they hope will serve as a vehicle for securing a social justice in District Six, guiding the present and setting high expectations for the future. It argues for security of tenure, for the responsibility not to speculate on property, for the integration among poorer tenants and wealthier homeowners, and among Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. And there is an assurance that residents won't suffer the indignity of forced removals again.

In the coming years, an important part of our mission will be to work with people and communities that are returning to District Six. Delving into the lives and histories of the "ordinary" citizens who lived in District Six before the forced removals, and their formative role in shaping the ethos and spirit of the area together with the better-known leaders, can be inspirational to current ways of understanding leadership. We hope that the ways in which the community sustained itself, dealt with poverty, gangsters, ill-health, and poor housing conditions—and managed to maintain a sense of holistic living which included leisure, pleasure, and enjoyment—can serve as a model for community development.

Engagement with the site of District Six also provides opportunities to address contemporary issues of racism and racial identity, xenophobia, and the possibilities of living with diversity. The oft-referred-to cosmopolitan and diverse character of District Six before its destruction can be modelled as an example of a community which can exist without economic, linguistic, or racial antagonisms.

We have the incredible challenge of rebuilding on salted earth. We believe, though, that by continuing to collect personal stories and memories, and by fostering dialogue among many different peoples about their visions of the past, present, and future of District Six, the museum can become a community center for the diverse populations that are now beginning to come back to District Six, and can help return the heart into the city of Cape Town.

VALMONT LAYNE was appointed as the District Six Museum's director in 2002. Prior to this, he was responsible for programs at the museum. His portfolio includes new strategic projects in research, publications, documentation, planning, and fundraising. Most recently, he chaired a workshop at the World Forum on Democracy and presented a paper on community museums at the South African Museums Association Conference.