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SOL PLAATJE: IN THE SPIRIT OF THE
MAN

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AFRICANA

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Introduction

In South Africa celebrations of past history have been coupled with the general concept of historical preservation which has been legalised through the laws pertaining to National Monuments. The political bias of South Africa has resulted in such monuments being largely reflections of the history of the White sector of the population. Apart from the political pressure on the system of National Monuments, the insistence on an aesthetic value for a monument has also played a major part, excluding from consideration more humble and ephemeral dwellings.

In addition the declaration of a monument carries with it a responsibility for identifying an appropriate function which will ensure its preservation: as the National Monuments Council cannot purchase and maintain every perspective monument, increasing attention has been paid to the viability of a monument during the declaration process. A decade ago the easiest solution was to persuade the local government to use the building as a Museum, with less than satisfactory results in many cases. Alternatively private ownership continued but many such owners turn to the Council with pleas for assistance for maintenance, most of which cannot be met because of funding problems.

There has been an increasing awareness of this fact that most of the existing National Monuments pertain to the history of only a single sector of our varied communities. Several communities have for many years been aware of the need to redress the imbalance within the system, although there are enormous problems

inherent in the concept itself which are outside the scope of this presentation. Non-Western history tends to be non-recorded history and the places and buildings associated with it seldom meet the other requirements for declaration. Thus the identification of a house with strong associations with a leading figure in the early days of the fight for the rights of Blacks presented us with an exciting challenge in Kimberley. The house has no architectural merit, yet its historical relevance was clear - could it qualify for declaration and, almost more important, what use could be found for the building? This paper outlines what we regard as an exciting initiative on the part of the groups concerned in finding an appropriate use for a building with historical significance to one of the "other" sectors of the community.

A house in Angel Street

Angel street is close to the western edge of the modern business centre of Kimberley. It used to border the vast non-white residential area known as the 'Malay Camp', now wiped off the face of the city by modern development. We have few records of the Malay Camp, and indeed this is an area well worth investigation as an historical project while here are yet people who remember it. It is close to a major North-South artery and relatively close to the Black taxi rank, an area of modest houses, mostly dating to the first few decades of the century, interspersed with some very recent multiple family developments. No 32 in Angel Street is an equally modest house with a Pillared front stoep, largely hidden by a modern wall, and a front facade with two windows and the original door (with a charming idiosyncrasy of having a vertical post slot rather than a horizontal one!). It stands on a medium sized plot with a modern double garage plus servant's quarters in one corner. The house probably dates to the first two decades of the century; at the time that it was

identified it was being rented out as was in a poor state of repair.

In December 1989 Mr Ashley Lilie, then Northern Cape Regional Representative of the National Monuments Council, wrote to the McGregor Museum pointing out that he had ascertained that the house had belonged to Sol Plaatje and that, as such, it seemed suitable for declaration. However some use would have to be found for the house and the museum was asked whether it would be interested in setting up a satellite display in the house relating to Sol Plaatje and his life. Thus began the saga of No 32 Angel Street, now known generally to Kimberley as the Sol Plaatje House.

Who was this man?

Solomen Tshekisho Plaatje was born on Boskop Farm in the Boshof District in 1875 while his parents were en route to the Berlin Mission station at Pniel on the Vaal Rier near Barkley West. He attended the school at Pniel for about six years, this being his only formal education. In 1894 he went to Kimberley, where he worked in the post office and continued with his studies. He moved to Mafeking where he became a court interpreter and a magistrate's clerk; he vividly recounted his experience during the famous siege in his Boer War Diary: an African at Mafeking. By this time he had at his command eight languages and a working knowledge of several more. He became obsessed with the problems of rendering Setswana into a written language and expended much of his energies in trying to convince 'the experts' that this could be achieved through a phonetic system.

In about 1904 he convinced his friend Chief Siles Molema to finance the first Tswana-English newspaper, which he edited. He later established a similar venture in Kimberley, but it was an uphill struggle to keep it going.

Plaatje's political career burgeoned in 1912 when he became general correspondence secretary of the newly formed African National Congress. He strenuously contested the 1913 Land Act and was a member of a delegation to England to petition against it, his fight later taking him to America and Canada. He returned to Kimberley in 1921, when he established the Brotherhood society, the aim of which was to bring about racial harmony. In 1927 he joined a delegation to Pretoria to appeal against the further erosion of the rights of the Blacks. A report produced by him after a visit to the Congo had, as one of its results, the opening up of more avenues of employment for Blacks on the railways. In recognition of his efforts on the part of his people a Plaatje Jubilee Fund was launched and the money raised by public subscription was used to purchase, for 265 pounds, the house at 32 Angel Street. The house was presented to him in 1927. He had been renting it for some time and lived there until his death (in Johannesburg) in 1932; after his death his widow continued to live there until her death in 1942.

The other side to this remarkable man was his contribution to literature. Plaatje wrote three books during his stay in London: Native Life in South Africa before and since the European War and the Boer rebellion, Sechuana Proverbs, with literal translations (a bilingual publication) and A Sechuana reader. He wrote numerous newspaper articles in English, Afrikaans and the vernacular languages and, most remarkable, translated four of Shakespeare's Plays into Setswana. Unfortunately two of these manuscripts have been lost and have never been published. Then in 1930 the Lovedale Press published his historical novel, Mhudi, the first English novel by a Black writer in South Africa. The foregoing should be enough to illustrate some of the facets of this remarkable man. With minimal education he achieved an impressive literary success, and his love for his people inspired his fight for freedom and equal rights through negotiation and the power of the pen. It was quite clear that we had, in Kimber-

ley, a personality who deserved to be commemorated in some way - and the preservation of 32 Angel Street seemed to be most appropriate.

The search for a function

In March 1990 the Regional Committee of the National Monuments Council recommended the provisional declaration of 32 Angel Street as a monument. The Committee was very aware of the need to find an appropriate use for the house. The McGregor Museum was in no financial position to purchase, restore and maintain the house as a museum, even though the Board and Director supported the principle involved. Legal hassles slowed down the process and the asking price for the property began to creep up. A proposal to establish a Trust Fund within the Monuments Council was rejected and by the beginning of 1991 we seemed to have reached an impasse. In March 1991 the organiser of a successful educational bridging programme in Kimberley, Mrs Anne-Marie Gwilt, expressed interest in the property and the principles of preservation. Mrs Gwilt was concerned with trying to improve the standard of English of prospective Black pupils for open schools. She had seen an IBM based programme known as 'Writing to Read' operating very successfully in Johannesburg and had successfully applied to the IBM South Africa Project fund for sponsorship of the package. They donated the necessary hardware and software for a major literacy drive; the requirement however was for a secure, accessible location for the computers and tape recorders. In conjunction with the Regional Committee of the National Monuments Council and the McGregor Museum and Educational Trust was launched and funds sought to purchase No 32 Angel Street. Support for the project came from the Kimberley City Council and the local Black community. Major donations from the Anglo-American and De Beers Chairman's Fund and the local branch of the African National Council enabled the Trust to purchase the house and to

embark on restoration.

It was agreed that the two front rooms should be restored as best we could, while the other rooms should be adapted for the computers. The work was undertaken by a small contractor; the restored house was opened at a function in February 1992 and the first of the classes moved into the premises.

In the spirit of the man

The establishment of the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust ensured the survival of the house; declaration of the house as a National Monument - one of the first to honour a Black person - followed soon after restoration had been completed. But this is really only the beginning of the story and a long journey lies ahead of us.

In the long-term planning for the house the Museum is assured of the use of the front two rooms - those which have been restored - for display purposes. The plan is to use these two rooms for displays on Sol Plaatje and his achievements, and on the development of Black literature in southern Africa.

There are several main problems to be overcome in the planning of these displays. Very little material relating to Plaatje exists in South Africa. Copies of manuscripts and letters are housed at the University of the Witwatersrand but the majority of the relevant material is outside South Africa in London and elsewhere. So we have to create a display around non-existent material! In March the Museum was able to purchase an item which belonged to Plaatje - a copy of George Beet's book on the diamond fields. Items must exist and will, we hope, gradually turn up. The planning of the display will be done in conjunction with Dr T Couzens of the University of the Witwatersrand and Brian Willan, Plaatje's biographer, is taking a keen interest in the project. The main thrust of the displays will be to awaken interest in the contribution of the man and in the events of those fateful years.

Planning of the literary display will be done in conjunction with the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown; again the main purpose will be to emphasise the existence of Black literature in Africa. This part of the display will tie in with the use of the rest of the house.

The literacy programme is being run as the main function of the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust. The two front rooms of the house are being temporarily used for pre-primary classes on the principle that better results will accrue from starting with the programme as early as possible. The literary programme revolves around a mixture of computer based interactive programmes, word construction exercises and reading in conjunction with a tape recorded story.

The building is far too small to accommodate the full range of literacy programmes offered by Mrs Gwilt and plans have been drawn up for separate classrooms behind the house. The original house will then accommodate a library of Black authors as well as books to aid in the subjects offered by the educational centre in the broadest sense.

It is this link between the literacy programme and the needs of the students which made No 32 so suitable as a venue for the Educational Trust. For the house has been preserved as a memorial to one of the earliest Black writers in South Africa, a man who believed in the dignity of the people and his language. By combining a display relating to Sol Plaatje with programmes which provide literacy to the people of Kimberley, the spirit of the man will inspire the men and women of the future to master and use the power of the written word.

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