

https://dspace.org/

Reframing personal history in Sophiatown.

Naidoo, Yavini

2011-10-04
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/10475

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

ABSTRACT

A dominant way of remembering the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown recalls a vibrant cosmopolitan melting pot. At the same time the wider symbolic identity of Sophiatown as a site of resistance, as a fantasy 'sight 'of cultural vibrancy, and as an example of Apartheid's destructiveness also plays a role in a larger map and understanding of South African history, and speaks to other communities affected by similar circumstances. As Sophiatown increased in significance as a heritage site in new national, political and cultural narratives, an interest arose amongst various stakeholders to commemorate this space officially. However existing heritage practices reference only the history of forced removals. The walking tour through Sophiatown, with its very few remaining old structures, requires a cold defamiliarising of the existing landscape to engage with this 'mental construction' of a past that entirely removes this space from the lived experience of the present, as well as the last fifty years. Many of the Afrikaans residents from the Triomf incarnation still live in the area, and the last fifteen years have seen a dramatic shift from the Apartheid-engineered white working class suburb to a diverse postcolonial space with people from very different backgrounds and cultures now living next door to each other.

The aim of this research was to develop and apply different interactional contexts for residents within the fractured suburb of Sophiatown, with a view to exploring their conflicting relationships to the past, space and community through emotional mapping exercises and the creation of personal histories. My field research involved two distinct yet related activities that were undertaken simultaneously over a few years. The first part of this research, based on oral history practice, focused primarily on Afrikaans-speaking residents of the area. Developing markers from current neighbourhood practices, the second part of the research, essentially a study in community building, more broadly addressed the diverse residents of this heterogeneous suburb in a series of facilitated workshops that developed over four phases. The central question behind these interactions and meetings is whether they could provide a platform for negotiation over a troubled past by acknowledging and appreciating shared experiences, and whether they can begin to foster healing and community pride. The familiarity this sets up begins undoing the construction of 'the other', through which negotiation of neighbourhood concerns becomes possible.