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SONG LINES FOR DISTRICT SIX

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Has a city or a district planned on a drawing board and built in one go ever developed the kind of vibrant street life and community ambience such as existed in District Six, and that still exists in places like Greenwich Village, the left bank of Paris, and other districts which have evolved organically over time?

British new towns don't have it. Nor does Corbusier's Chandigarh, Niemeyer's Brasilia or Mitchell's Plain. Some social housing in the USA even had to be demolished because it was so dysfunctional. The conclusion is inescapable. We might know how to make museums but we don't know how to make cities.

The conclusion is inescapable. Any attempt to design the kind of place that evolves naturally through thousands of individual decisions is doomed to failure. Like the mad biologist's attempt to create a living human, it will turn out to be a soulless monster. So what are we to do with District Six which is both a symbol of resistance against forced removals and a reminder of a richer, more vibrant lifestyle?

Rebuild it exactly as it was, is one architect's suggestion. The same type of buildings, the same type of cobblestones. (It's the Warsaw solution; demolished by the Nazis, it was rebuilt identically by the Poles) The problem is that there is now a 1970s technical college in the middle of District Six and broad suburban-style roads.

A well-known modernist architect has a different view. One should not let nostalgia drive the redevelopment, he says. Start with urban planning. The 'bombastic' architecture and scale of the technikon, he admits, is a problem.

Urban planner Peter de Tolly is Director of Special Projects for the City of Cape Town. His office is in the civic-centre, Cape Town's monument to authoritarian control, centralised planning and vision of the state supreme. The view from his 18th floor window is a suitable one for any planner in the Howard Roark ('planner-as-God') role. Post-apartheid planners such as De Tolly now tend to interact with users and communities and they have developed flexible zoning

responsive to changing circumstances for special cases, such as the Waterfront. But is it fundamentally any different?

According to de Tolly there are 800 families scheduled to take up residence in District Six. 40 hectares is available for redevelopment and the eventual population might be somewhere around 20 000 people, depending on the density. He shows me a set of plans prepared by some well known urban planners Roelof Uytenbogaardt and David Dewar in 1991. These, he says, should be the starting point for any dialogue.

Uytenbogaardt's plans capture a lot of kinetic energy His Wertmuller Centre in the Cape Town suburb of Claremont, with its abandoned diagonal ramps and inner streets going nowhere, reminds me of a JG Ballard story about a place frozen in time. Something is missing, strangely. It is as if he has determined how people move and then locked them into the paths they would take if they were free to choose but what they have lost is the choice.

The plans link the technikon along a spine road into the city and there is a grid of new roads within which are car courts and housing clusters. It looks to me like a traditional master plan with a certain latitude for building types and layouts.

But isn't the ethos of District Six at odds with the very idea of centralised planning, I ask De Tolly. What guidance is there in the literature of town planning for a situation which seems to call for less rather than more planning?

A book like Christopher Alexander's humanistic *A Pattern Language* for instance,' upon which de Tolly goes to his bookshelf and pulls out a slim book by the same author called *A New Theory of Urban Design*. For the next two weeks I will be carrying this book with its revokutionary message around with me wherever I go.

The organic city, Alexander says, is created out an impulse towards wholeness. It grows piecemeal, bit by bit. The final result cannot be predicted but we can recognise wholeness by the fact that it is coherent and full of feeling (It has the power to move us to tears or to happiness.) He calls for a process in the making of urban places by which each new act of construction is related in a deep way, not to a master plan, but to what has gone before. If we wish to create a district with the qualities that we so fondly remember, we will therefore have to change the way we design our cities. This means

abandoning the notion of a master plan and designing incrementally, bit after bit, with the same attention to each part as we would give to the whole place - in the same manner, it seems to me, as when we speak or write music.

Anwah Nagia is one of the principal political figures in the struggle to prevent the apartheid-era redevelopment of District Six. From his house in Walmer Estate he fills me in on a history I have missed and describes what could be built.

'It will be an integrated development,' he says. 'We are not going to plan District Six on a piecemeal approach. There will be no private houses. People will be forced to rub shoulders with each other with other people who they may regard as belonging to a different class. If they don't like it,' he says. 'they can leave.'

There will be four models put to the community. Uytendogaardt and Dewar's plans, he says, were done without community participation and with different priorities. They will not be part of it.

He talks about using the current road networks but reinstating the roads now under rubble. His own preference is to keep cars to the perimeter.

About white resident's fears that property values would go down, he says, 'it just tells me that they haven't smelt the coffee, they haven't transformed themselves yet.'

He deflects the question of what the place is going to look like, but he says they will be considering all and any ideas that come up. He mentions 'the casbah' a lot.

Centralised or integrated planning is being looked on here to provide the kind of community interaction that one finds in cities or districts like the casbah or the medieval village that have developed organically over time. The ideas seem antithetical to each other. Christopher Alexander's solution is to abandon the idea of the master plan and design the city in much the same way as it would grow; increment by increment.

Abdulkadir Ahmed Said is a Somali filmmaker who works, when he is in Cape Town, from Kalk Bay.

My meeting with him is in a house in one of the narrow cobbled

streets - the kind that penalises the car user but is wonderful to live in. Here the compromise is made by the street rather than the pedestrian space. Negotiating one's way with a vehicle coming towards you in a street wide enough only for one vehicle is a collaborative and elegant manoeuvre which involves a certain degree of eye-contact. Conventional town planners would never design it that way.

Said tells me about the narrow-laned 1000 year-old pedestrian city or casbah in Zanzibar where he recently spent 3 months. The casbah (the word means 'to live together') is a labyrinth where the stranger remains a stranger and the occupants are all one family. immediately identifiable and the occupants are all one family. (In suburbia, by contrast, everyone is a stranger) It is like one big house, constantly under surveillance, where the intruder and the criminal are immediately detected.

But here is a strange thing. Because the houses have doors from one to another, there are many alternative routes in the casbah and these change according to the way relationships change, through the opening or closing of interleading doors. The casbahs in Zanzibar, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, Said says, are all identical, all multicultural. They have the same form and the same aesthetic. Like Christopher Alexander says, if the first increment contains all the relevant values, then the city will be whole. This is the opposite of the master plan approach.

Cities happen to us. They cannot be designed. The casbah with its intricate regulating system has no need for centralised control. All residents in it play some part in the way the whole is constituted. It is therefore a model for a participatory system. Centralised planning on the other hand always involves social engineering. Life's fine nuances and mystery are beyond our present understanding so any master plan has to be a subtraction from our humanity.

According to Said, it would be a mistake to think of the casbah as a 'primitive' place. 'You will find internet cafes, a workshop, library, an art gallery, restaurants, a bookshop. The city is a shop, a running conversation and a playground for children. It is a house with many rooms and many passages.'

I ask a psychologist friend whether this kind of interaction can be designed into a city. Her reply: 'taking steps to merge people and 'making it happen' is just another post modern form of colonialism'.

A sobering thought. A community process will ensure that the values and aspirations of the people who are going to live in District Six are incorporated in it, rather than it being imposed by others.

Peggy Delport is the curator of the District Six museum, the custodian, of the soul and history of District Six. 'It is an ephemeral and multi-layered space where the voices and memories have been converted into an aesthetic language which is constantly changing, constantly being added to.' She tells me that the memories and narratives given by people are nurtured and sustained through conversion into an aesthetic language which speaks on many levels. Could these be the song lines for a future District which will rise out of the rubble?

Architect/Planner Lucien le Grange talks to me while we walk along one of the original streets recovered from under the rubble. The grass had burned down the previous day revealing the cobble stones quite clearly.

His starting point, he says, would be the churches and mosques that remained in District Six which people have continued to use and the grid of original roads and pathways that remained under the rubble after the bulldozing. He would let the development be guided by the landscape and the grid of old roads rather than by any predefined masterplan. The roads, he says, are part of the history, the patina of the place. They have become an integral part of the memories of displaced residents.

The creation of a new and poetic language for our cities – the kind of work done by the District Six museum – is what will bring our urban landscapes back to life. This is not something that can be left to townplanners, architects or city administrators. The Aboriginals of Australia sing their landscape into existence and for thousands of years their 'dreamtime' has survived intact. To ceremonialise our landscape into mythic existence, for it to come alive within us, we need to find our place in it, as part of it, through the interaction of memory and legend with its actual buildings and streets.

Narrative structures of an old worldview, with its emphasis on control rather than participation, are coming to an end. There is a much bigger and far more exciting place for us to go to and it is the child rather than the adult that can take us there.