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**The Fringe: Draft Framework**

***District Six Museum comments for public discussion***

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1. **INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS**

District Six Museum has had an uncomfortable relationship with the idea and the objectives of the development of the East City precinct since the rather random shift and then powerful marketing of this part of the City as the Fringe Innovation District. Apart from the unsustainable idea to promote one part of the city as a design and innovative centre the reasons for this discomfort are mainly political and social. Our comments are not specifically a response to the text of the Fringe draft document but primarily a response to the reading in the context of our experience with the purveyors of the Fringe concept. This uncomfortable engagement emerges after the positive experience we enjoyed with the development of the East City Precinct as an inclusive cultural hub respectful of difference that shared much of our vision of a Cultural Heritage Precinct (CHP) as referred to in our District Six Conservation Management Plan (CMP). Our experience has been that many of the stated sentiments and ideas reflected in the draft document are not reflected in the lived experience we have had with the vigorous and hi-tech lobbying of the idea of the Fringe as a design and innovation hub.

Despite the many valuable references to the heritage of District Six and recognition that important sites like Harrington Square (the Holy Trinity Church site) and Beinkenstadt Bookshop, for example are District Six Sites, the Fringe Innovation District is then modelled to obliterate this memory by amongst many other things celebrating Charly’s Bakery as innovation and the Fugard Theatre as if there is no connection to the District Six Museum – as if the concept of a world class theatre emerged as a separate development to the District Six Homecoming Centre. Fugard himself suggested the importance of experiencing theatre in the context of remembering the ghosts of District Six, when he opened the Fugard Theatre. These divisive actions speak a lot louder than the many beautiful sentiments about public spaces, green spaces and experimental spaces. The dominant trajectory of most development in the city seems to be towards gentrification and marginalisation underpinned by an extremely unequal society – a legacy of Apartheid laws of dispossession. The Fringe development appears to be travelling in a similar trajectory by the marginalisation of the important role that the District Six Museum has played as an innovative and inclusive space for curators, designers, expressive artists and edgy experimentation when few were prepared to risk this level of collaboration and public participation. The ground breaking role that the museum played as a ‘design laboratory’ and ‘incubator’ for reimagining Museums, memorialisation and design is not recognised in any way.

The idea to define this part of District Six as the Fringe, and to include the CPUT campus and not the area of return, smacks of Apartheid thinking: a Bantustan approach to the mapping of spaces. Key sites that should become important spaces for innovation and design are located in the area that is being cut off from the city centre symbolically and geographically: the Lydia Williams Centre of Memory (formerly the home of the innovative design hub the Community Arts Project); The Zonnebloem Arts Centre (a key space for the development of primary design and innovation skills and knowledge); and the Moravian Church Hall and Guest house has been used over the years for several Young Curators’ Projects in partnership with young photographers, visual and performance artists from Malmo and Stockholm in Sweden. None of the potential for design and innovation is explored here. The untested and unproven track records of businesses in the former ‘Jewish’ Quarter have, however, been given flight and purpose. To all intents and purposes, the Fringe innovation District seems to be more about elevating the profiles of businessmen in the area and less about developing innovative spaces of design and innovation that is comfortable with its tragic past and that is therefore capable of catalysing healing of the woundedness of this City. It cannot be ‘business at all costs’.

On a positive note a collaboration of this nature, if it can translate the fundamental concerns and notions of reimaging community could very well be an exemplary model for how we can use design as a way of bridging differences, healing the past, building awareness, changing perceptions, influencing the future, critiquing spaces & identities as well as for creating economic opportunities.

**The Fringe: a political discomfort**

It is a political discomfort in the sense that our work with the memory of forced removals in the City of Cape Town has fuelled a powerful need to reverse the legacies of the Group Areas Act and to create a ‘city for people and not races’[[1]](#footnote-1). Crucial to this project is the need to avoid the naming and mapping of a city that entrenches the historical divides of the recent past. Central to the development of the Fringe, seems to be a need to pander to the ‘fears’ of a section of Cape Town with the economic power to fuel development but who need to be made to feel comfortable that they can do this on their terms. In Cape Town this has often resulted in the gated communities and shopping malls that are seen as development. There has been no goodwill on the part of those who were the beneficiaries of apartheid to share schools or public spaces and this seems to be the case with the Fringe as well.

**The Fringe: a social discomfort**

It is a social discomfort in the sense that the culture, beliefs, everyday practices and rituals of people who were forcibly removed remains marginalised in the city and are often only given visibility as a curiosity or for tourism. Socially Cape Town public and privatised spaces continue to reflect a deeply divided city and many of the initiatives marketed as the Fringe mirror this.

**The East City location of the District Six Museum: reversing the legacies of the Group Areas Act**

A perusal of the early documents of the Cape Town Partnership where it motivates primarily for the development of the East City Precinct includes a significant recognition of the role the Museum plays in the revitalisation of the cultural life of this part of the City. In some of the early walking tours to promote the potential of this part of the City known for its grime and in a presentation to the Design Indaba, the District Six Homecoming Centre (host to the innovative Magnet Theatre production ‘Onneste Bo’ and the British Council exhibition ‘Lines of Attitude’ as well as home of the Digital Arts Clubhouse (one of the first spaces after Media Worx and AMAC seen as a space for experimental digital arts by youth) are seen as inventive concepts and spaces to engage citizens of Cape Town across historical boundaries and in innovative ways.

**The Fringe Innovation District, the erasure of the District Six Museum and the expropriation of the Cultural Heritage Precinct.**

The area being reframed as the Fringe innovation district, where the Museum is located is at the nexus between the old District Six which was destroyed under apartheid, and the inner city. Oral and documentary accounts reveal a vibrant and organic connection between the residents of the old District and the inner city. Municipal planning boundaries do not define the narrative and experiential boundaries of people’s lives, and most people regarded the city bowl as an extension of their backyards, the same way that Table Mountain is used as a referential point.

After forced removals, many ties were severed. Practical reasons of roads and transport or the lack thereof, restricted peoples’ access to the city; emotional scars kept others away and over time the city experienced an exodus of black people for whom this area formed a crucial part of their lives. Coming to town became a matter of earning a living, leaving township homes at the crack of dawn to navigate difficult transport systems, and returning late in the evening. Social and cultural lives were altered and diminished.

Following a protracted struggle against apartheid, April 1994 heralds a new dawn for this country. The Land Restitution Act of 1995 created a framework for ALL South Africans to think about restitution. The dispersed District Six community becomes one of the the only communities in South Africa able to return to the actual land from which they were removed because it has remained vacant as a memorial and as result of the hard fought ‘Hands off District Six’ campaign.

The Museum serves as a facilitating space for the amplification of the voices of many who feel that they are not being heard and who remain on the margins of the City and in this sense, from 1990 becomes an important cultural hub in the East part of the City. The vacant District Six, however, becomes a contested space: prime land in the city with views of Table Mountain and Table Bay that in real estate terms is not affordable to ‘ordinary’ folk. At the same time that the possibility of return inspires the nation, a silent resentment seems to set in from many who feel that the government is giving away national assets to people who never owned the land. This nexus becomes a sought over space of cultural interpretation, and the discomfort that our city generally has with the notion of poor people owning spaces which they might not be able to maintain become a sore point. Returnees have begun to experience a sense that many people want their stories, want to interpret their stories outside the real and painful experiences of their lives, and the Museum in many ways is beginning to feel this too. An archive of trauma is pounced upon to be mined for the quaint and nostalgic value that they can offer, devoid of trauma. Heritage is seen as mere decoration; a fringe benefit. In other words, memory is only received without the pain and the people who hold these memories. Memory becomes disconnected from its source and reframed without awareness of the social and cultural consequences.

In this sense the Fringe completely erases memory and makes invisible an important memorial to the social injustice of Apartheid – The District Six Museum. Given our commitment to cultural restitution and the important possibilities for innovation with justice that intangible heritage plays in the development of a city that needs healing, this denigration of the work we do is a stark reminder of the past.

**The Fringe vs District Six as a National Heritage Site: a symbol of the 42 sites of forced removals along the foot of Table Mountain.**

The concept of the Fringe comes after the Museum makes the argument to national government for District Six to become a National Heritage Site, located geographically from the border of Walmer Estate to Buitenkant Street – including this intersect referred to as the Fringe but which is really at the core of the city’s memory and history; core not peripheral; central, not fringe. The research that resulted in the Urban Design Framework excludes important references to this initiative and renders it meaningless by omission. Many of the requests for our participation in the development of the Fringe failed to acknowledge the important role we play in reconstructing the memory of this part of the City through our internationally recognised work. We were never asked to participate in any significant way in the development of the Fringe but always asked to rubberstamp and provide a marketing space for an already concluded concept. Consultation has more often than not been about promoting an idea rather than calling for the deconstruction and critique so important to any notion of innovation and design.

Our experience is that the Fringe discussions were not able to hear this well enough, have not been able to hear that the construct of a Fringe to people whose lives have been defined by marginalisation and exclusion, is not an empowering one at all. Some recent tourist maps have even designated this area as being The Fringe, making it seem official and certain. However, there is so much uncertainty, so much discontent beneath the surface and some people have even described the creation of the Fringe as a re-displacement of people. To some people it feels like an act of silencing and touches on the core of the Museum’s methodology and valuing of people as being at the centre of its mission, and having contributed towards the creation of confident voices, we stand to lose some of this impetus if we are not able to protect this fragile space.

**The significance of the District Six Museum as a Cultural Hub**

The District Six Museum has been located at the Methodist Church, 25A Buitenkant since 1994. Since 2003, the Museum has owned the historically and culturally significant Sacks Futeran complex of 5 buildings now known as the District Six Homecoming Centre that also has as its tenants, the Fugard Theatre. The Urban Design Framework document for the Fringe the Museum and the D6 Homecoming Centre are erased while it’s brainchild that metamorphoses into the Fugard is highlighted as an independent initiative. This is further entrenched by the idea of an adjacent Cultural Precinct as a strip from the City Hall, The Parade and the Castle. This, despite the internationally recognised cultural role of key District Sixers – Abdullah Ibrahim; Johaar Mosaval; Robert Sithole; Richard Rive; Alex Laguma; Lionel Davis; IB Tabata; Cissy Gool; Doctor Abduraghman; Benny Kies; Dullah Omar; amongst others as well as renowned cultural sites like the many bioscopes; the Seven Steps, Hanover Street; Harrington Square, District Six.

**In conclusion**

The District Six Museum has always welcomed development, innovation and environmental rehabilitation but not at the expense of the marginalised people of this city. Our challenge is to create a city from the ruins of Apartheid that embraces all its citizens and that does this in respectful and dignified ways. This requires patience and is more than marketing and public relations exercise. The concept of a design and innovation space has to be cognisant of the intangible heritage and not just the tangible objects of a Victorian or Dutch past. This draft document and the practice of implementing the idea of the Fringe fails in this respect. District Six Museum and the people of District Six are viewed through a narrow stereotypical and patronising  lens where the notion of design/art  and creative intellectual ability is still framed within class and race boundaries operating as invisible ceilings.

The location and work of the District Six Museum in this part of the city has enabled a number of things both in reality and symbolically, not least of which are the following:

* Easy access to the City for those who for many years were forced onto the margins of the city of Cape Town;
* Dignified visibility for those whose cultural life, stories, desires, tastes and memories were denigrated, rendered unimportant and made invisible through an intentional act of erasure;
* A safe space for people in the city CENTRE who were made to feel that they did not belong by law, by attitude and particularly through a process of naming: ‘Coloureds’; ‘Africans’; ‘Indians’; ‘Malays’; ‘Other Coloured’; were relegated to the fringes of the city because they were not ‘white’ under the guise of slum clearance and city improvement;
* The on-going reconstruction of the memory of a part of the city was demolished by Apartheid. Much of this memory is about District Six as both a clearly bounded area (in terms of the Grade 1 National Heritage Status this is defined as the area bounded by Buitenkant, Searle, Nelson Mandela Drive and Albert Road) as well as an unbounded space that includes memories of the Grand Parade, the Drill Hall; Darling Street; Adderley Street; Wale Street to the Bo-kaap;
* The restitution of land to people who were forcibly removed mainly as a result of the Group Areas Act from this area;
* The cultural restitution of the lost heritage of the city as a means to heal the wounds of the past and to learn valuable lessons for the future reimagining of community in Cape Town.

**We wish to insist on the following:**

* We cannot settle on the reframing of part of District Six as the Fringe Innovation District without clarifying stakeholders and partnerships in the area being redefined;
* Recognition that the District Six Museum Foundation is a  landowner (representative of an ex-resident community)  and that we have an important stake in decision making processes and demand the same kind of respect shown to other property owners. We will not settle for merely being consulted while other entities with far less experience of shedding light on innovative design possibilities is elevated to decision makers;
* The translation of the space of the East City through design should be sensitive and respectful to what was before not just on paper but in the lived experience;
* There should be a concerted effort by landowners, business, the city, young art communities, artists, designers and tertiary institutions to be mindful in their approach to recreating this as a public space that will reflect a participatory inclusion on all levels - socio-political and economic.
* That the notion of design is viewed in its broadest sense and that it does not compromise on the legacy of District Six. Design should rather be an opportunity to democratise places and spaces as creative platforms that will see design also as a tool for social consciousness and inclusivity.
* The establishment of a design and development component that does not display a hierarchical approach but rather manifests a collective understanding that will take into consideration the sharing of resources and work toward supporting a sustainable environment;
* That the legacy / cultural heritage of District Six can be referenced in contemporary design thinking that actively seeks to engage how we reimagine and influence the future;
* That the design aesthetic is not just an individual expression of vanity but rather a way of seeking design solutions that will benefit the returning community and general public at large to a kinder and socially healthier city.
1. From text on panel at entrance to the Museum at number 25A Buitenkant Street [↑](#footnote-ref-1)