

INTD 3114

Environmental Racism & Social Memory

Stories from *Africville* and District Six

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In cases of environmental racism, how societies acknowledge, remember, and forget the past is crucial to how environmental racism manifests in their contemporary situation. The full acknowledgement of racist histories engenders a sense of unity between racial groups and can create a positive, collective social memory. A shared social memory which incorporates both dominant and subordinate discourses can challenge contemporary oppressions and act to unify segregated communities. Alternatively, societies that fail to acknowledge their racist pasts create defense mechanisms of forgetting which perpetuate environmental racism in their presents. In essence, the full acknowledgement of environmentally racist histories through the reconciliation of opposing discourses is critical to the mitigation of both the ongoing environmental racism and the process of forgetting in contemporary societies. This paper will examine the case studies of Africville in Halifax, and District Six in Cape Town, South Africa to evaluate this relationship between acknowledgement, remembering, and forgetting. Specifically, the differences between Africville and District Six will be used to illustrate the importance of social memory and acknowledgement in owning the past and reconciling with racist histories.

Section 1: Environmental Racism

At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others.

Edward Said, 1994

Narrowly defined, environmental racism is the disproportionate placing of industrial facilities and other physical structures that diminish the environmental quality of a space based on the ethnicity of the local population (Ruiters, 2001, p.95). This unequal access to environmental quality and over-exposure to health hazards, whether intentional or unintentional, adversely impacts the community in question. More broadly, environmental racism stems from structural racism which is embedded in the legal processes, language, and social structures of a community (Ruiters, 2001, p.95). Although environmental racism is often characterized narrowly as hostile and intentional

discriminatory acts, Pulido in *Rethinking Environmental Racism*, argues that this depiction fails to acknowledge the range of socio-spatial processes which perpetuate inequalities through less overt means (2000, p.13). She further argues that racism is often viewed as more finite than is realistic, and that this is problematic as it limits one's realization of the full depth and extent of racism in society (Pulido, 2000, p.33). Thus, racism can manifest in a variety of forms and intersections and subsequently affect space in complex and nuanced ways. For instance, the inverse of positioning environmentally damaging facilities near marginal communities is the relocation of said marginal communities to locations already lacking environmental quality. Therefore, an understanding of environmental racism that incorporates this broader perspective can be utilized to detect both overt and covert racist acts and incorporate this understanding into policies reflective of environmental justice.

Case Study: Africville

Africville was founded in 1848 by descendents of the black Loyalists and Maroons (Allen, 2003, p.18). Over the course of Africville's history, community members faced the expropriation of land for use by the Nova Scotia Railway Company, and the positioning of a dump within Africville bounds and an incinerator 50 yards outside of the border. Furthermore, the community lacked basic services such as garbage collection, water and sewage facilities, police patrols or fire protection, and access to proper heating (Nelson, 2008, p.12). Residents were often denied building permits to renovate their homes and repeated requests to the city for the aforementioned services were unsuccessful. During the 1950's, with minimal input from Africville residents, the city of Halifax solidified plans to transfer residents from the community and demolish all homes and buildings. They based this decision on the dominant perception that Africville was dangerous, backward, and a 'slum' (Nelson, 2008, p.13).

The Housing Committee, which was formed in 1957, was responsible for "redeveloping substandard areas", and clearing lands associated with this practice (HRM, Archives, 1942). In 1958,

the Housing Committee changed its name to the Redevelopment Committee to convey the centrality of redevelopment as a committee goal (HRM Archives, 1963). Then, in 1964, the Africville Sub-Committee was established to work in consultation with the Redevelopment Committee to implement the expropriation of Africville. By the late 1960's the land was completely expropriated and sat unused until 1988 when a municipal park was established (Nelson, 2008, p.13). Residents found it difficult to contest the relocation as most had received rights to their land through an informal process of family ownership which was deemed illegitimate by the city's standards. Moreover, residents lacked formal leadership or political representation, as well as access to legal mechanisms employed by the municipality which severely limited their ability to resist the expropriation (Nelson, 2008, p.13).

From the city of Halifax's perspective, the expropriation was one facet in a larger program of redevelopment throughout the city. Africville was situated on particularly strategic land that could be used for industrial expansion in the context of growing competition between the port of Halifax and that of the St. Lawrence River (Nelson, 2008, p.58). In the city council commissioned report *A Redevelopment Study of Halifax, Nova Scotia*, Gordon Stephenson states that Africville is a "little frequented part of the City" which could be characterized as an "encampment" or "shack-town" and in which the conditions are "deplorable" (Stephenson, 1957). He further states that residents will inevitably have to be relocated as the land they occupy will be needed for city development (Stephenson, 1957). Reasons given over the course of the relocation included the clearance of land for the A. Murray McKay bridge project, and the integration of Africville community members into the downtown Halifax area (Allen, 2003, p.19).

In this way, Africville became a contested space pressured by the highly political and opposing interests of the stakeholders involved, namely, the Halifax City Council and the residents of Africville. By depicting a community of approximately 80 families and 400 residents as "little frequented", the Halifax City Council was able to position Africville as an 'other' apart from Halifax

and use this representation as leverage to garner support for the expropriation process (Allen, 2003, p.18).

Furthermore, the Halifax City Council denied the legitimacy of the informal property networks utilized by the Africville residents and in this way drew upon dualisms of the informal and formal, and the irrational and rational to portray the Africville residents as irrational and backward. This negative characterization was used to bolster the argument for expropriation and further the implementation of environmentally racist policies. In essence, residents of Africville faced discrimination through two processes: first, through the positioning of industrial facilities and wastelands in their communities; and second, through the relocation of citizens to lands already lacking environmental quality.

Case Study: District Six – Cape Town

In 1867 the City of Cape Town established the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town, now commonly referred to as District Six. District Six was located in central Cape Town in a strategic area near the port and Table Mountain. A diverse range of backgrounds were represented in District Six including artists, immigrants, freed slaves and laborers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (District Six Museum, 2008). However, in 1950 the South African government passed the Group Areas Act which decreed it illegal for mixed races to live in one community. This policy was based on the idea that interaction between races was the primary cause of local conflict. Subsequently, the rich cultural heritage and vibrant artistic and intellectual history of District Six was erased, and the community was instead portrayed as a slum; dangerous and criminal (Sites of Conscious, 2008). In 1964, 'coloureds' were relocated from District Six based on the Group Areas Act and in 1966 the community was declared 'whites only'. The South African government forcibly removed the remaining 70,000 residents between 1968 and 1981 and by 1982 the entire community was bulldozed and destroyed under the pretense of redevelopment (District Six Museum, 2008).

The South African government maintained that the functions of the Group Areas Act were: first, to avoid inter-racial conflict through the segregation of communities; and second, to redevelop areas deemed slums through a process of clearance rather than the rehabilitation of existing structures. This process was seen to be in the best interests of South African urban development under the Apartheid regime. However, local residents claimed that this practice sought to clear strategic lands for use by whites and ban non-whites from living in more developed areas. They argued that it amounted to the unfair targeting of ethnic minorities and to an overt racism perpetrated by the South African Government and the elite, white ruling class.

Apartheid in South Africa was a legalized system of racial segregation with white dominance at its core. Apartheid policies systematically institutionalized racism in every aspect of political, economic and social life in South Africa between 1948 and 1990 (Stanford Education, 2008). The ramifications of the Apartheid system and its extensive racist policies are still being felt by marginalized groups in contemporary South Africa (Stanford Education, 2008). It is within this context of an overarching racist discourse that the Group Areas Act can be properly understood. Although from the perspective of the City of Cape Town the Group Areas Act and subsequent destruction of District Six is depicted as beneficial to the District Six residents, a critical analysis of this portrayal reveals this assertion to be false. The overarching sentiment behind the Apartheid era was one of racism and segregation (Stanford Education, 2008). It is unrealistic that in the case of the Group Areas Act the intended results would differ from those of this dominant racist narrative. Moreover, the relocation of the 70,000 District Six residents to environmentally marginal lands (such as the sandy Cape Flats region 25km outside of the city bounds) is an example of an inverse process of environmental racism. As opposed to diminishing environmental quality within a community, members of District Six were forcibly relocated to lands already lacking environmental quality.

Section 2: Social Memory & Forgetting

Gone, Buried

Covered by the dust of defeat - or so the conquerors believed. But there is nothing that can be hidden from the mind. Nothing that memory cannot reach or touch or call back.

Don Mattera, 1987

Africville & District Six: A Comparative Review

The Africville and District Six case studies presented are similar in many respects. However, they are dissimilar in ways that illustrate the importance of how societies acknowledge, remember, and forget past injustices. These differences of approach can be used to understand societal processes of reconciling racist histories and the importance of collectively coming to terms with the past.

Africville and District Six share a common history of environmental racism and community displacement. Both communities were located on marginal lands and were neglected by their respective city authorities. Neither community had adequate access to water and sewage facilities, fire protection or other basic services. Residents were not allowed to fully participate in the larger cities surrounding their communities and were situated as a peripheral ‘other’ apart from the core. Moreover, the community demographics were similar as both contained laborers and immigrants predominantly from ethnic minority backgrounds (Allen, 2003, p.18; District Six Museum, 2008). The timeline of creation and destruction between the communities also runs parallel. Both communities were formally established within twenty years of one another and were slated for expropriation and relocation during the late 1960’s. Finally, both communities were relocated through systems of environmental racism from their original locations and were placed in locations far from the city centers lacking in environmental quality and resources. This inverse process of environmental racism is the key to the connection between Africville and District Six.

Approaches to Acknowledging

The term 'acknowledge' is defined as "to admit the truth or fact of; confess" (Landau, 1976, p.6). This is significant in the context of Africville because the acknowledgement of the 'truth' differs based on which discourse it is informed by: the dominant or subordinate discourse. In Africville the dominant discourse corresponded to the powerful 'white story' and was a narrative bolstered by the institutionalization of racism in Nova Scotian society through the mainstream media, law, and education systems. This white dominant discourse positioned Africville residents as an 'other' outside of the civilized portion of Halifax society (Nelson, 2008, p.54).

Furthermore, the dominant discourse claims that the expropriation was anti-racist in nature and maintains that the ultimate goal was the social integration of the Africville residents. City officials consistently portray the failure of the social integration process as an unfortunate outcome of a well intentioned program that for bureaucratic and resource related reasons was ultimately unsuccessful (Nelson, 2008, p.26). A hapless mistake, but a mistake none the less; in no way informed by systemic institutionalized racism. In this way, the City of Halifax has failed to acknowledge any responsibility in the environmental racism inflicted on the residents of Africville. To look at the case from the perspective of the subordinate discourse yields different results. Former residents and their children, other community members who act in solidarity, and a growing number of prominent academics and journalists argue that this conceptualization of Africville is naïve and fails to address the historic and contemporary affects of institutionalized racism in Halifax Society (Nelson, 2008, p.26; Allen, 2003, p.18; CBC, 2008). District Six illustrates an alternative approach to acknowledgment than that utilized in Halifax. On February 2, 1990, in Frederik de Klerk's opening address to the South African Parliament, he lifted the ban on the African National Congress, Pan-Africanist Congress, and the South African Communist Party and stated the government's commitment to repealing discriminatory laws (Waldmeir, 1987, p.127). Furthermore, he expressed the government's firm decision to unconditionally release Nelson Mandela from Victor Verster

Prison (Waldmeir, 1997, p.127). This speech - now commonly referred to as the 'unbanning speech' - was a turning point in South African history. Moreover, this speech marked the formal acknowledgement by the South African government of the discrimination present in its laws and governing system and was an overt statement of the government's intent to end this discrimination and racism. In regards to District Six specifically, the African National Congress is working in conjuncture with the District Six Beneficiary and Redevelopment Trust to oversee the process of land restitution in which former residents are allowed to return to District Six and are allocated land and accommodation (District Six Museum, 2008). This and a statement of apology given by city officials represents an overt internalization of responsibility for the discrimination and racism present in the Apartheid policies and in the relocation of District Six specifically. These differing approaches to acknowledgement have directly affected each community's means to reconciling with the past.

Approaches to Remembering

The term social memory refers to the collective memories shared by a society. These memories are not static. They shift and evolve over time and when connected to different spaces. Social memory is often referred to as historical memory to emphasize this focus on the long-term and transformative process of societal remembering (Fraser, 2008, p.287). In addition, social memory is functional; it can be interpreted, reviewed, commodified and employed in a variety of manners to meet a host of social, economic, political and personal means (Connerton, 1989, p.15; Huyssen, 2003, p.28). In Africville and District Six one approach to societal remembering has been the establishment of monumental spaces. In 1988, the City of Halifax proclaimed the Africville land as a public park and built a sun-dial monument on the former site of the Seaview Baptist church (Nelson, 2008, P.141). Figure A is a picture of the sun-dial monument.

The monument is inscribed:

*Seaview Memorial Park
Land deeded 1848-1968*

*Dedicated in loving memory of
the first black settlers and all
former residents of the community
of Campbell Road, Africville and all
members of the Seaview United
Baptist Church.*

*First Black Settlers
William Brown
John Brown Thomas Brown*

*'To lose your wealth is much
To lose your health is more
To lose your life is such a loss
That nothing can restore' (Nelson, 2008, p.142).*

In 1989, the District Six Memory Plaque was erected at the Moravian Church in District Six, Cape Town. Figure B is a picture of the plaque and its inscription.

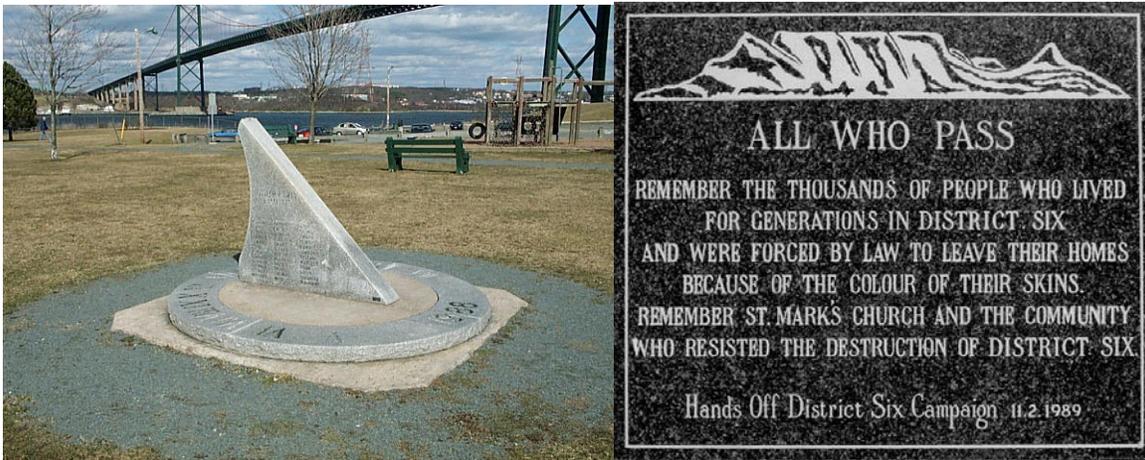


Figure A: Africville Sun-dial Monument **Figure B: District Six Memorial Plaque**

The primary difference between the aforementioned monuments is the tone of their inscriptions. The District Six plaque uses considerably stronger and more direct language than the Africville monument. For instance, the District Six plaque refers to the “thousands of people [...] who were forced to leave their homes because of the colour of their skins.” Furthermore, it refers to

the “community who resisted the destruction of District Six.” Words like ‘forced’, ‘resisted’, and ‘destruction’ betray a strong emotion and depict an overt approach to remembering. In juxtaposition to the District Six plaque, the language used in the inscription on Africville’s monument can only be viewed as vague, weak, and uninformative. There is no reference in the Africville monument inscription that refers to the forced relocation of the former residents, or to the destruction of their homes. The inscription instead takes a covert approach to remembering through references to black settlers and attempts to give the impression of a positive, tolerant past. Most notably, the inscription avoids acknowledgement and responsibility. Indeed, the only real hint to Africville’s relocation is found in the third line: ‘1848-1969’ which states the concluding date of Africville but not the cause of its destruction. The differences present in the structure and language of the monumental spaces in Africville and District Six are illustrative of the vastly different approaches the respective communities have taken to remembering. Essentially, monumental space in District Six is overt and acknowledges racism, while that of Africville is covert and fails in this acknowledgement.

Approaches to Forgetting

Forgetting is defined as the inability to recall something that was previously known and as a neglect or loss of interest in something (Landau, 1976, p.251). Both of these definitions are apt to describe the active process of forgetting that occurred and still currently occurs in Halifax regarding Africville. This process is active because the remembered discourse does not become dominant and the ‘truth’ passively; indeed, the forgetting of racist histories and environmental injustices requires considerable work and the either intended or unintended collusion of actors at all levels of society. Forgetting in this context of racism and injustice can be understood as ‘erasure’, and specifically in the cases of Africville and District Six: ‘white erasure’ (Nelson, 2009, p.149). This process often entails careful legislation that protects the dominant discourse and thus discredits dissenting voices and any racism they claim. These voices are seen as irrational and are thus unable to fully understand legislative and governmental processes or participate in formal planning processes. This leads to the

further entrenchment of racism in city institutions and to the continued discrimination of marginal groups as locals do not have access meaningful participation city processes. The case of Africville is illustrative of this socially and culturally destructive process of forgetting.

The concepts of acknowledgement and forgetting are closely linked. As earlier outlined, the city of Halifax took a covert approach to acknowledgement that rejected responsibility and failed to address the racism institutionalized in the city's policies. This stance directly led to the inculcation of an innocent, well-intentioned sentiment in all of the city's language and legislation relating to Africville. The process of forgetting occurred as a reaction to the initial lack of meaningful acknowledgement to the racist acts committed. In order to reconcile contemporary consciousness and action with the historical record (as described by the dominant discourse and by the language of the acknowledgement), the city of Halifax has perpetrated the original racism by attempting to forget or erase it. For instance, the city has resurfaced the land where Africville once stood without seeking input from former Africville residents and while simultaneously breaking promises to rebuild the Seaview Baptist Church (Nelson, 2008, p.13). This is a tangible example of active forgetting as the history and culture of Africville is meant to be erased along with its spatial presence and physical manifestation. Notably, this difficulty of reconciliation between acknowledgement and present action does not exist to the same degree in regards to District Six as there was an original acknowledgement of racism and an internalization of responsibility. It is important to note that this difference in forgetting has been directly informed by prior approaches to acknowledgement and remembering.

Acknowledgement and Social Memory: The Critical Catalysts

In Andreas Huyssen's book, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, he argues that memory is a fluid object subject to appropriation and politicization (Huyssen, 2003, p.32; Uli, 2005, p.137). He further argues that memory acts as a direct catalyst on the present, and that the nature of this interaction is informed by competing discourses (Huyssen, 2003, p.33). In other words, contemporary politics, societal structures, and relationships among distinct groups are

directly affected by the tangible form memory takes in contemporary society and to what degree it is politicized. This politicization stems from the tension between dominant and subordinate discourses. The polarization of these discourses creates a dualism between the dominant discourse or 'official story' of acceptable memories, and the subordinate discourse which calls for resistance to this story but is often portrayed as irrational (Fraser, 2008, p.287). Thus, the competing discourses and lack of consensus or acknowledgement directly affect the contemporary make-up of the society in question.

The importance of remembering is a central tenet within the mandate of the International Coalition of Sites of Consciousness. The coalition is a network of international historic sites which aim to remember past struggles for justice and to address their contemporary legacies (Sites of Consciousness, 2008). The coalition is built around the concept of how historic injustices are remembered has the potential to shape contemporary society. Notably, the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa is a registered historic Site of Consciousness within the coalition. District Six has endured racism and a forced relocation program strikingly similar to that implemented in Africville. However, there are differences between the communities' approaches to acknowledgement, remembering and forgetting that have shaped the contemporary state of each community.

While officials in Cape Town and South Africa chose an overt approach to acknowledgement that claimed responsibility and ownership of the past and allowed the community to rebuild and be unified under one common discourse, Halifax city officials chose a more covert approach to acknowledgement which dismissed claims of racism and rejected city responsibility. This lack of meaningful acknowledgment has led to a division of discourses within Halifax and to the damaging process of active forgetting that has become the dominant approach. These divisions have fostered tensions within the community as former Africville residents continue to lobby for environmental justice and are consistently rebuked by city officials who argue they have already conceded enough given the city's innocence. However, systemic racism is still prevalent in Halifax and is illustrated by

the city's decisions regarding the management of the Africville land (Nelson, 2008, p.27). The city has banned protests, dismissed that any racism occurred, and systematically supports the white 'official story' which erases the city's racist past and present. In stark contrast to this, the District Six Beneficiary and Redevelopment Trust has been able to work cooperatively with the City of Cape Town to oversee a process of restitution. In 2003, the process of allowing former residents to return to District Six was formally started. The differences in these case studies are illustrative of the significant effects approaches to acknowledgement, memory, and forgetting can have on the unity and propensity for racism within contemporary societies.

Conclusion: Owning the Past and Moving Forward

Milan Kundera, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, says that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera, 1978, p.4). This quotation aptly describes the struggles of Africville and District Six residents to secure interaction with the systems of power which construct social memory, and to avoid the culturally destructive process of forgetting. These cases should be examined from an environmental racism perspective as Africville and District Six are examples of a broader conceptualization of the term that attempts to acknowledge the full extent and depth of environmental racism in society. In Cape Town, District Six residents have been able to actively create their collective memory through interaction with The District Six Museum. The museum offers them a space to "recover, explore and critically engage with the memories and understandings of their District Six and apartheid pasts, for the purpose of remaking the city of Cape Town [...] and challenging the distortions and half-truths which propped up the history of Cape Town and South Africa" (District Six Museum, 2008). Thus, this social memory is now acknowledged and shared by the city of Cape Town, and consequently, residents have been able to work cooperatively with the city and participate in decisions regarding the future of District Six. In this way, residents and city officials have been successful in reconciling racist pasts and unifying the community.

In contrast, the city of Halifax has been less successful in this respect in Africville; however, the process of memory and forgetting is not fixed or static and thus necessary acknowledgement and healing can still occur. Similarly to District Six, the community must continue to resist the dominant discourse which caused and currently perpetuates the process of forgetting. In order to be effective, this resistance must come not only from the former Africville residents but from the entire Halifax community, as all those who benefit from white privilege and racism are complacent in it, and thus have a responsibility to participate in its abolition.

In essence, environmental racism must no longer be thought of as someone else's problem. A concentrated resistance which utilizes open community dialogue can challenge dominant oppressions and eventually create a larger societal internalization of the existence of structural racism. As a result, the collective society can acknowledge the racist truths of the past and pressure city council to do likewise. Furthermore, in this context the defense of forgetting will be unnecessary as the distortive truth it is based on will be unraveled. Over time the ongoing racism that continues to marginalize former Africville residents in Halifax can be addressed and lessened. In this way, the overt acknowledgement of environmental racism can create a positive social memory that can defend against active forgetting and subsequently challenge contemporary oppressions that result in racist communities. Thus, the struggle of memory against forgetting must continue in Africville until Halifax as a community can reconcile with our racist past and unify under a shared social memory.

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**Appendix 1:
Social Conditions in Africville & District Six**

Africville



Figure 1.1 “Please boil the water before drinking and cooking” – Water conditions in Africville, Halifax during the 1960’s



Figure 1.2: Trucks unloading rubbish at the dump at the edge of Africville, 1960’s



Figure: 1.3: “For Use by White Persons”, District Six, 1960’s



Figure 1.4: Hopscotch in District Six, 1950’s



Figure 1.5: “Whites Only” in District Six, South Africa

**Appendix 2:
A Look at the District Six Museum, District Six, Cape Town**

District Six Museum



Figure 2.1: Community Made Map of District Six, District Six Museum, 2008



Figure 2.2: Overview of District Six Museum, 2008

**Appendix 3:
District Six Before & After the Demolition**

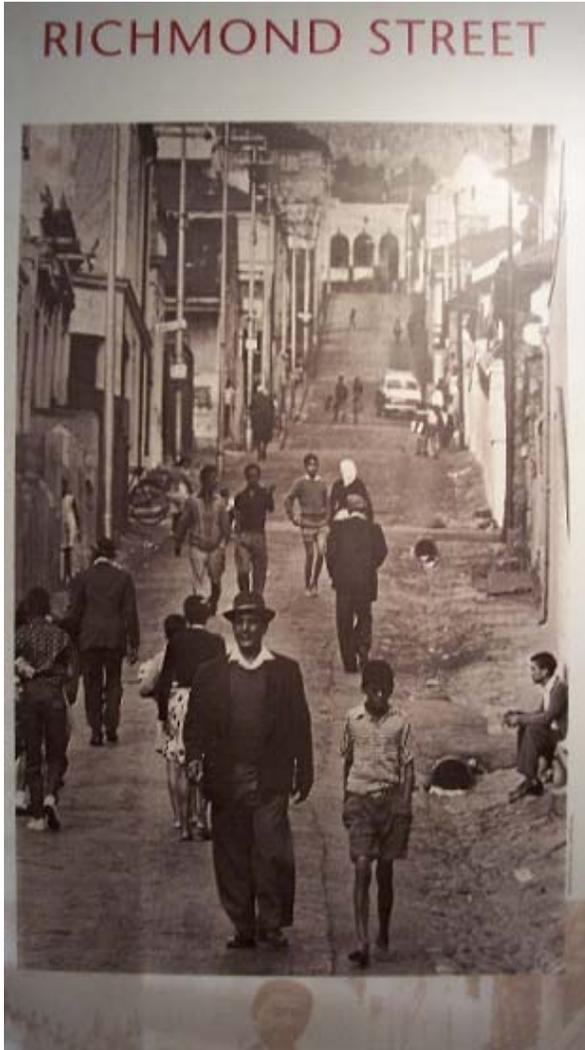


Figure 3.1: Richmond Street Before

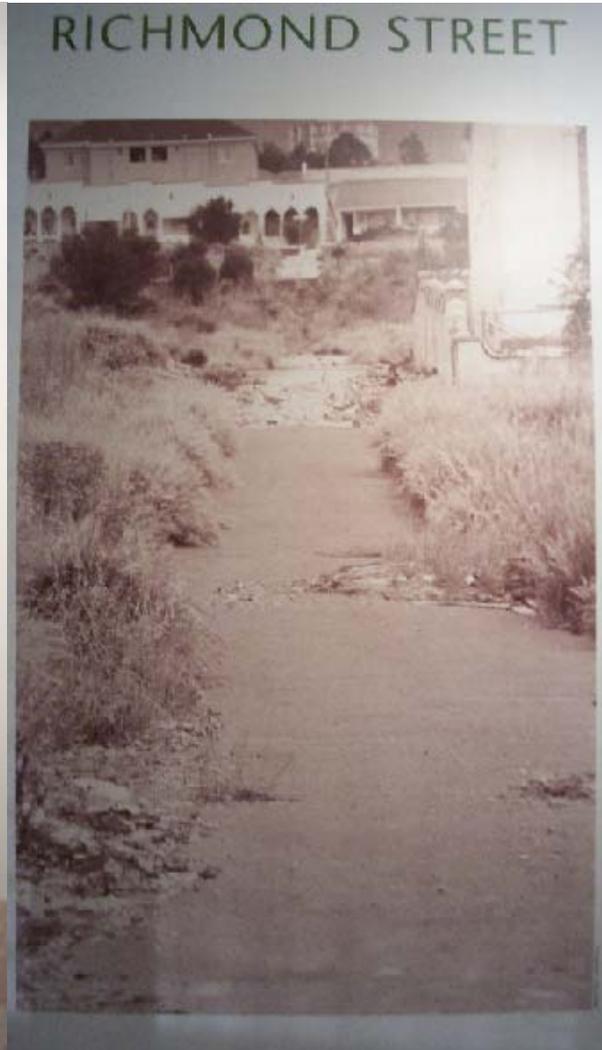


Figure 3.2: Richmond Street After