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CAPE ARGUS

Jg..... Nr..... P. 6 Dat. 7 NOV 1997

A centre for those organisations involved in social change

It began as a ACVV (Afrikaner Christelike Vroue Vereeniging) *meisies hostel* – a hostel for girls. It then became a somewhat messy repair workshop for Jaguar cars.

Then, in 1985, it was bought for R750 000 by a structure to be formed by the Social Change Assistance Trust (Scat) and the Western Province Council of Churches (WPCC) to fulfil a dream that anti-apartheid organisations and trade unions could have at least one place in Cape Town where they could hold meetings and have offices without the security police being able to intimidate property owners, local authorities and churches to deny them these facilities.

There were considerable tensions at the time in Cape Town between the different groupings and it was hoped that the building would also help reduce differ-

ences, by enabling groups to meet and share offices.

With the critical support of Norway, Denmark and the South African Council of Churches, that dream became a reality in August 1987 when, without press publicity, the building – labelled as Community House – was opened by one of the patrons of the United Democratic Front, Dr Allan Boesak.

The multi-million rand renovation of the building was a first in Cape Town, and possibly South Africa, in that every single contract with the builders and the sub-contractors had to be approved by the trade unions. Anyone not approved by the unions was rejected, even if their quotes were lower.

TREFWOORDE

1. Afrikaanse

2. Kaapstad

3. Sentrus

4. Gemeenskap
sentrus

5. NGO

6. Organisasie

7. Sosiale

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8. Nofuge

9. Nieu gemeen-

9. Skappe

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INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

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When the contractors, Julius Cohen, learnt that the first tenant, Cosatu, would be housed in the building during the construction work, they feared the worst, but in fact there were no serious labour problems. Moreover, the builders and architect were surprised to discover that usually the firms with the lowest quotes were also those that had reasonable relationships with the unions.

The joy with which

the building was opened was shattered eight days later when the building was hit at 3.03 am on August 29 by the biggest bomb blast outside a military base in Cape Town.

Of course, the police never found the culprits. Although most people had a very good idea who was responsible, the police tried to put the blame on Azapo because of its opposition to the UDF.

Strangely, no one has yet disclosed who bombed Community House 10 years ago, nor has anyone applied for amnesty in connection with the blast – which means some securocrats of the past are still criminally and civilly liable.

Fortunately, however, Scat had taken the trouble to insure the building under Sasria, the government-backed "riot" insurance scheme to insure property against "terrorism", something which was not done with buildings like Cosatu House and Khotso House in Johannesburg, which were also bombed.

The apartheid government, therefore, had to pay for the extensive repairs to Community House.

Once the repairs were completed, and the building was fully occupied, it became a focus of anti-apartheid and social change organisation in Cape Town.

In the first years there was intense surveillance by the police and frequently confrontation between the security police and the people using Community

House to promote a democratic South Africa.

But after the unbanning of the ANC, the SA Communist Party and the PAC in 1990 this began to change.

Indeed, in 1994, the ANC based some of its Western Cape election organisation at Community House, and the South African Communist Party leased offices there.

Before he became President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, twice visited the building – once for lunch, to discuss ANC matters as the organisation's

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leader. And before his assassination, the SACP secretary-general, Chris Hani, regularly came to Community House, where he was interviewed by the chairperson of building's management committee, Barry Streek, who was then a political writer for the Cape Times.

After 1994, the challenges facing non-government organisations in transforming themselves from being anti-apartheid organisations into independent agencies for social change was reflected at Community House, and as a result, there have been changes within the building.

The original dream, however, remains the same: the building serves the needs of organisations involved in social change and serves as a venue for people to meet.

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