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# Where the struggle found a home

Even a bomb could not destroy the spirit of Community House – now it helps shape our future, writes Helga Jansen

**B**uildings, it is said, can take on the pain, fear and triumphs of the people who live in them. Community House in Salt River bears testimony to a particular moment in the history of our city and our country that symbolises the high points and dark moments in the struggle against apartheid.

While it may have started life as a hostel for Afrikaner "dames", Community House rose from genteel beginnings to become a symbol for all who opposed the repression. Who can forget the thousands of striking workers of the 1980s who came to Community House for a safe haven to strategise and plan?

Their strikes, their failures and victories, form part of the history of South Africa's progressive trade unionism.

Community House was established as a centre of community action and spirit. It witnessed the passionate oration of Archbishop Tutu in the hall which came to be known as the Ashley Kriel Hall, named after the young ANC activist gunned down ruthlessly on the killing fields of the Cape Flats in the 1980s.

That hall echoed with Tutu's words as he spoke of liberation theology and countered the biblical justification for apartheid ideology fed

to us by the state.

It echoed with the campaign for a non-racial Labour Relations Act, which mobilised thousands of workers in the Western Cape. Its enactment into law continues to be the cornerstone of non-racial labour legislation.

As we celebrate another Heritage Day, it is time for the heritage in our midst to be recognised and conserved.

We must remember the time of strikes, of marches, of secret meetings and public displays of critical opposition. We must mark the idealism of our past and our passion for a world we continue to desire.

By celebrating the heritage of Community House, we enable Capetonians to publicly acknowledge the people and events that have shaped and continue to shape our country.

A large imposing building, Community House is framed by tall palm trees, and stands in the centre of Salt Rivers' now ghostly garment district. It was during the 1980s surge of civic activities, school boycotts, consumer boycotts and trade union activities that the need for consolidated action among liberation organisations emerged.

Community House re-invented itself in the 1980s from its hostel for

ladies into offices for progressive trade unions and non-government organisations, and housed (as it continues to do to this day) a largest collection of trade union archival material at the Trade Union Library.

In the late 1970s the apartheid government passed a law which made it difficult for progressive organisations to access donor funds, leaving many organisations without rent or money for staff salaries. The regime had a systematic campaign to restrict the activities of liberation movements.

Progressive organisations were evicted from their offices, denied leases through petty building laws, or their offices were raided and staff arrested. Local authorities made it difficult to hire halls and often demanded exorbitant fees or written descriptions of the nature of meetings.

Political meetings were often denied access to municipal halls or government school spaces.

The idea of Community House was born as progressive organisations realised that despite their ideological differences a unified front was necessary if the struggle against apartheid was to have an

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impact on communities.

Through the strong advocacy and support of the Social Change Assistance Trust and the Western Province Council of Churches, Community House was purchased for the princely sum of R750 000. The money donated by the Norwegian government, through its church structures, was made available through lobbying by the Norwegian Consulate General, Bjarne Lindstrom, and SA Council of Churches general secretary, Beyers Naudé.

On a late winter's day in August 1987, Dr Allan Boesak officially opened Community House and eight days later a powerful bomb, planted by unknown forces, ripped through the building. Its structure was so secure that the stairway in which the bomb was planted protected the inner walls of the building.

Anecdotally, the building was insured through Sasria, a government riot insurance scheme. To date the identities of the bombers remain a mystery, but it was widely believed to be the work of Special

Branch agents. The irony of that bombing, one of many targeting centres of activism, is that under Sasria, the very government that was suspected of planting the bomb, had to pay for the damage it wrecked.

**T**he lack of structural damage to Community House is perhaps a fitting metaphor for those dark days when liberation leaders were arrested and organisations came close to collapse.

Through this period the democratic movement continued to plant the seeds of freedom in working-class communities, in middle-class homes, in segregated schools, on shop-floors and Sunday church services. At the centre was Community House, a symbol of community action.

It was where struggle T-shirts and posters were designed and pamphlets printed by the Community Arts Project. It was where civic organisations met in meeting rooms and halls to plan stayaways and con-

sumer boycotts. It was also where young people came to get a political education outside of school; where parents of detainees came together to share grief and mobilise to free their children from apartheid prisons.

Community House also became a place of conscientisation for ordinary shop-stewards and civic leaders who learnt to read Marx and Engels, Biko and Guevara. They travelled from all points of the city to debate, learn and plan for the end of a system which declared them less than human.

Some of the first tenants of the building were the United Democratic Front (UDF), Cosatu, its affiliates and the Western Province Council of Churches.

In 1994 the ANC election campaign offices were housed at Community House. Many among the front ranks of post-1994 government office bearers and ministers had at one point or another walked these halls before their ascent to Parliament. Jay Naidoo, Alec Irwin,

Trevor Manuel, Cheryl Carolus and Christmas Tinto were some whose contribution has become part of the symbol of Community House.

And now? Community House has again re-invented itself, but its community spirit remains. After an absence of almost a decade, Cosatu has taken its place among the community of social activists housed there. Workers World Media Productions is building a chain of community and labour voices through the continent.

The Ogani Solidarity Forum has taken offices in Community House and reflects the changing social structure of a city that is becoming multi-cultural in the truest sense of the word. The Labour Research Service continues to provide a high standard of labour research after 20 years and is a respected commentator on labour and economic trends. The Ashley Kriel Hall still hosts trade union workshops and meetings and in recent times film festivals, weddings and family celebrations.

As we celebrate another year of

South African heritage, we should pause and remember the ordinary people, places and experiences which tell our stories and shape the way we see ourselves. Community House bears witness to a period of our history in which the contributions of ordinary people gave shape to our present and continue to determine our future.

Buildings like Community House stand to remind us of a time when our passion for freedom was not tainted with our greed for money and power. Like Diakonia House, Luthuli House, Sached House and the other hives of liberation activity, Community House deserves a place in the annals of our collective history.

The space, like the philosophies of Steve Biko and Ernesto "Che" Guevara who were both murdered 30 years ago, remains central to the world we envisioned more than a decade ago. Their legacies have become iconic in our consciousness and continue to help us strive to build the world we desire.