

What Syracuse might learn from South Africa

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By

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There is nothing like a visit to a foreign country to make you think of home.

More than 8,000 miles away, Cape Town, South Africa, is easily the farthest distance I've been from New York. It is a place of exquisite and dramatic beauty. The city of Cape Town is nestled between and around the sharp rise of Table Mountain and the undulating coastline of the continent's end upon which the unrelenting South Atlantic Ocean crashes its enormous waves against the shore. I've never seen anything like it. In all I've ever known or read about South Africa, no one speaks about such beautiful landscape.

Like many, much of what I know about South Africa comes from watching its history and legacy of apartheid unfold in my lifetime. I arrived in Cape Town on the day that Archbishop Desmond Tutu celebrated his 80th birthday — it was nothing short of a state holiday. This is a country where people carry copies of the Constitution in their pocket — a stunning document of which South Africans are rightfully proud.

I had the opportunity to visit Nelson Mandela's prison cell and to hear from former inmates what it meant to have President Mandela lead their country.

So what is it, exactly, that made me think of home? I could speak of the enormous disparities between the wealthy who live in the waterfront condos near the soccer stadium and the shantytown poverty of the townships and the de-facto segregation that still exists more than 15 years after segregation was abolished. But no — that is perhaps too sharp a contrast.

What really made me think of Syracuse was a visit to District Six — a community that prior to apartheid had been a place where blacks, coloreds, Indians, Muslims and even white Afrikaans had lived together quite peacefully. But in 1966 it was declared a "white" district and 60,000 people were forcibly removed in what looked like the worst urban renewal nightmare. District Six was never really redeveloped and the Cape Flats where blacks were moved to never had enough housing to accommodate them.

By the time apartheid was abolished and the first draft of the new constitution was in place in 1994, the great damage had already been done and what largely remains is a legacy of pain, broken families and a community trying to remember its history, one person and one memory at a time. This made me think of the 15th Ward.

Yes, the dynamics are very different. And yes, the scale of displacement is not the same — but the pain and heartbreak that exists generations later is the same here as it is on the other side of the world in South Africa.

The **District Six Museum**, located in a former Methodist church tells the story of this neighborhood — of



Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association

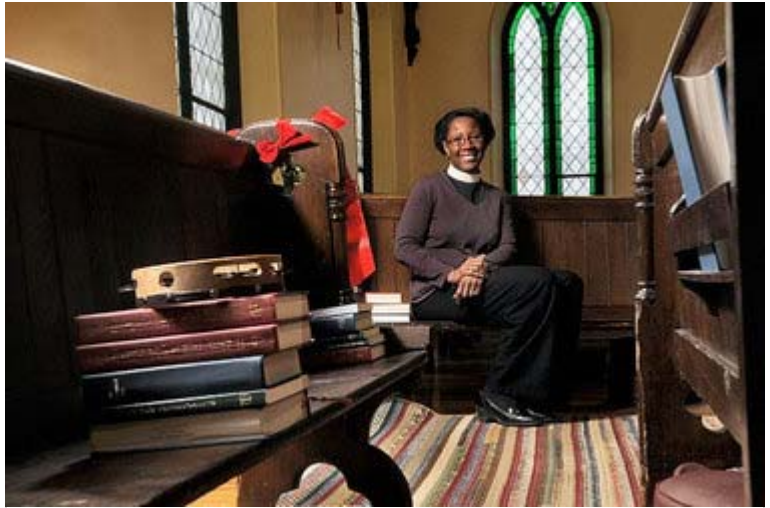
One of the landmarks of the 15th Ward was Schor's market at 604 Harrison St. This photo is from 1965. The market vanished under the I-81 southbound Harrison exit ramp.

displacement and return. A map of District Six is outlined on the floor of the museum. Former residents have come back to write comments on the map's street location where they once lived. Because the history is so recent, capturing the memories is still possible.

Over the past seven years I've seen similar efforts here as **Syracuse University and community members** work to record oral histories, copy photographs and other documents, and find ways to **tell the story** of what the 15th Ward had been prior to the **attempts at urban renewal**.

After experiencing Cape Town, I realize that the real strength of this collection will be known when the story can be told on site. How wonderful it would be if the historic **AME Zion Church at 711 E. Fayette St.** could provide that space.

Until then, I commend the website, **BlackSyracuse.org**, the home of the Black Syracuse Community History and Mapping Project. And though imperfect in the execution, I long for the day when, like South Africa, Syracusans can reclaim the extraordinary diversity of our city as a value we all hold dear.



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