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121

CITY COUNCIL OF JOHANNESBURG

NON-EUROPEAN AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

S O W E T O.

The crigin of the vast Bantu town known as Soweto (South Western Townships) goes back to the beginning of 1930.

At that time the Johannesburg City Council had only two fairly small Bantu townships for the residential accommodation of families in Johannesburg - one at Eastern Native Township, housing about 600 families and a larger one at Western Native Township with about 2,000 families.

There was no room for expansion at either place and no open land sufficiently large in the city where a new township could be laid out.

So the decision was taken in 1930 to go right out of town and some 2,500 acres was bought from a mining company at the remarkably low cost of R16 per acre.

The first contract placed was for 500 brick houses at a figure of R186 each in 1930.

At that time the Bantu population of the city living in municipal houses and hostels was 24,871. (In 1927 when I joined the Department it was 13,910.) Today it is 711,000.

At the time of starting Soweto we had a staff of 18 Europeans and 150 Bantu. Now there are 434 Europeans and 3,089 Bantu.

The development of Orlando, which was the first suburb of Soweto and which was named after the late Mr. Edwin Orlando Leake, the then Chairman of the Council's "Native Affairs Committee", proceeded steadily until by 1935 it became necessary to expand further. Fortunately there was an ample hinterland - this had been one of the factors influencing its choice, the other being the existence of a direct railway line to the city - and more and more land was bought over the years until the whole enormous complex now comprising 26 sq. miles (16,623 acres), and embracing 23 suburbs, was acquired.

The original layout of Orlando was based on a national prize winning design and was the "last word" in

modern town planning. It marked, I think, the first serious attempt to break away from the traditional grid iron pattern and consisted of a number of small central "squares" with main roads radiating away like the spokes of a wagon wheel. It was, and still is, a good layout, albeit deficient in open spaces for recreation; nevertheless much was **learnt** from this first layout plan and all later schemes were developed from it.

At the time of the outbreak of the second World War in 1939 there were 5,891 houses in Orlando, with a population of 30,000 and during the five long years of the War, the position in this regard only remained static. In all other respects, however, this period saw a dynamic change in the number and outlook of the Bantu population.

With the tremendously increased tempo of industrial development, brought about by War-time needs, very many new factories employing tens of thousands of Bantu workers came into being and, since these people had no other place to live, they crowded into the few houses which were all that was available.

At the end of the war in 1945, it was common to find two and often three families crowded together in one house, and at that time most houses were only of two or three rooms.

It is important to remember that at that time there was no real prohibition on the influx of Bantu into cities and in consequence Johannesburg and other large centres were the Mecca of every Bantu unskilled worker in the country. They poured into the cities with the result that the Bantu population of Johannesburg increased by 69% over the decade 1936 - 46, as compared with an increase of 29% for Europeans for the same period.

Ultimately sheer pressure of numbers forced the people out. Owners of houses revolted against their sub-tenants and these formed themselves into huge squatter camps. It was in this way that one of the most unsavoury episodes in the city's history began. What started out as an indirect result of overcrowding rapidly developed into a movement threatening the health and safety of the whole city.

Thousand upon thousands of Bantu families banded together under the leadership of men who rose overnight and took forcible possession of municipal land in Orlando, Pimville, Dube and Newclare and at Alexandra where they erected the most wretched shanties often so closely crowded together that one could not pass between them.

There was of course no sanitation so the conditions which arose can be imagined. The people made free use of water taps in the nearest houses and all municipal amenities were very soon overtaxed to breaking point.

Clinics were so overcrowded that the doctors were endeavouring to see a patient every few minutes, schools were flooded out, playing fields designed for the normal population were being used by three times that number and perhaps most serious of all, transport services were swamped.

Apart from the health hazards which these squatter camps created, the type of leader who rose and seized control was nearly always a man who lived beyond the law. They were in fact gangsters who preyed on the ignorance, credulity and latent violence of the Bantu public who lived in these squatter camps.

Things went from bad to worse until finally the rule of law was openly flaunted. The leaders set up illegal courts where savage punishments were inflicted. People had their hands tied together with wire and were severely flogged. Their huts were burnt and heavy fines were inflicted by the leaders for some alleged offence, and woe betide the person who could not pay.

The authorities were seriously embarrassed; apart from the special measures which had to be taken to deal with the sanitary and health problems there was no effective law to deal with the persons who were organising these movements for their own advantage. These disabilities took time to remedy and it was not until the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act (52 of 1951) was passed that this dangerous phase in the city's life was finally brought to an end, but before that was achieved much trouble was experienced.

When the largest squatter camp was cleared in 1947 there were no less than 60,000 Bantu living there, who had

to be re-settled under emergency conditions at Moreka. As was expected the leaders did all they could to thwart and hinder the authorities.

They had lost their importance and their illegal revenue. Moreka Emergency Camp was laid out along normal Bantu township lines, shops were built and an Advisory Board elected.

The small lawless element continued to make trouble and in August 1947 sparked off an attack on some municipally-built shops let to lawful Bantu traders. The latent tensions burst out and a serious riot took place during which three European policemen were murdered.

The only redeeming feature of this riot was the outstanding loyalty and courage shown by the Council's Bantu policemen stationed there. These men, few in number, remained steadfast in their devotion to duty. They rescued, sheltered and protected other European policemen who had been cut off and attacked.

Perhaps it may be of historical interest to quote the opening paragraph of the memo submitted by the Council to the Commission of Enquiry set up by the Government to enquire into this riot. Under the heading "Fundamental Causes" the Council said:

"In the submission of the Council the fundamental cause of the riot is the attitude of mind produced in the urban Native population by the series of squatter movements which have occurred in Johannesburg since 1944 and which may best be summarised as one of contempt for authority and for constitutional methods in favour of direct action, however illegal and violent, coupled with growing political and national consciousness of the urban Native population."

The Council realised that thousands of houses had to be built for its Bantu population and contracts were placed for 10,730 houses between 1940 and 1947. Of this, however, less than 2,000 had actually been built by the Contractors.

It was obvious that conventional methods were getting nowhere and this led to the birth of "site and service schemes" authorised by the Government as a breakthrough in the shortage of Bantu houses throughout the country.

Local authorities were empowered to buy land, install basic services such as water, sanitation, light and roads, and let plots to approved Bantu who were in local employment. They were then allowed to build temporary shacks on the rear of such sites and, when the whole scheme was occupied, the Government granted loans to the municipalities to build permanent houses for each family on the site, after which the temporary shack was demolished, the material sold to another family, a new area settled and in due course new houses built.

This policy, brilliant in conception, suffered one snag, there were not enough building artisans to cope with the fantastic demand, so the decision was taken by the Government to train and use Bantu workers for the task. There was much opposition to this proposal but the passage of the Native Building Workers Act in 1951 under which Bantu could be trained and used for skilled work in their own townships ended that.

Thereafter it was comparatively plain sailing. One site and service scheme after another was completed, with the tempo of building new houses constantly being stepped up.

At the peak in 1958 there were 53,041 sites occupied by Bantu families. Naturally this tremendously accelerated process of resettlement cost large sums of money. R60,540,989 has been spent on the provision of services alone, while capital expenditure on houses and public buildings has reached R27,595,727.

To make the maximum use of the Natives Building Workers Act the Council decided in January 1954, to set up its own special Housing Division solely responsible for building Bantu houses and for the training on the job of building artisans.

The Housing Division developed to the stage where 40 houses were being completely built every working day; it employed over 1,000 Bantu trained bricklayers who were laying an average of 1,000 bricks per day, together with hundreds of Bantu who had qualified as drainlayers, plumbers, carpenters, painters, glaziers, etc. Altogether 58,293 houses have been built in Soweto, and as far as I know this is one of the

largest, of its kind, if not the largest, housing schemes completed anywhere in the world.

These houses are nearly all four-roomed cottages, each standing in its own ground. It is fenced and provided with water, sewerage and electric light. The average rent is R5.80 per month.

An interesting addition to this story is that the late Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, after a visit to the Orlando Shelters, rehousing the last of the squatting families, organised a loan of R6 million from the Mining Companies for the building of 15,000 houses to accommodate these families.

These were all built in record time by the Housing Division and all that remains of the once notorious "Shantytown" is the Memorial Tower at Jabavu.

Practically all our available land has now been used up and to provide for future housing needs we are now experimenting with double storey buildings. Although building costs for these are higher there is really no alternative, as we cannot expand laterally, we must go up.

For those who want something different and better the Council can lease a plot on which the man has his own home built. These leases are for 30 years and some 2,500 individually built and privately owned houses have been provided. They range from fairly simple cottages to very elaborate houses valued at over R20,000.

The Bantu owner can obtain a building loan of up to R800 from the Council in approved circumstances and they pay a site rental of R3.25 per month plus a sum to redeem their bond over 30 years. The total monthly repayment usually works out at about R6.00.

In addition to the houses we have also built hostels to house men who do not have their families with them and 13,800 males are now so housed. They pay R2.00 per month for a bed and the hostels have all necessary public amenities provided.

Now that the need for houses has virtually been met (there is only one old township at Pimville still to be rebuilt during this year), the Department's efforts are being

mainly directed towards the provision of those public amenities which are so essential to complete a proper residential area.

To this end 120 schools with 72,000 pupils have been provided, five modern halls, 73 playing fields for adults, 37 children's playing fields with full equipment, a large swimming bath, three sports arenas with seating capacity of 20,000 at two of them, and a bowling green is under construction at Dube.

To encourage the residents every family has been given two fruit trees, planted by them in their front garden, and the Department follows a programme of planting 10,000 trees in the streets, parks and public spaces every year. This has transformed the appearance of a rather utilitarian town and is a factor always noticed by visitors.

Soweto constitutes the biggest urban Bantu concentration in the Republic with a resident population of 467,159 (including the Government townships of Meadowlands and Diepkloof which adjoin it), and is completely self-contained.

It has nearly 2,000 Bantu-owned shops, an hotel, its own beer gardens, bar lounges and bottle stores.

It is served by two direct electric railway lines and more than 150,000 Bantu workers travel in and out to their work in the city every day. Monthly season tickets cost between R1.73 and R2.50.

This vast city is administered by the Council's Non-European Affairs Department through a system of Superintendencies in each suburb, with a European official in charge.

Each suburb elects its own local Advisory Board of 6 members annually and these Boards, in addition to local monthly meetings, also meet all together every month under the Chairmanship of the Manager of the Department, while periodic joint meetings are also held with the Non-European Affairs Committee of the City Council.

It is fairly safe to say that the training in civic affairs, public administration and finance which has been so gained over a period of 25 years and more, has resulted

in the emergence of a responsible class of Bantu leader in Soweto, who is probably better equipped to understand our democratic system of Government than his counterparts in any other part of Africa.

W. J. P. CARR,  
M A N A G E R.

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