

How Alexandra was saved from extinction by its residents

It is indeed ironic that in year 2002 Alexandra celebrates 90 years of existence - when Umkhumbane, District Six, Dukathole and Sophiatown are no more, as a result of the forced removal policies of the National Party government.

Alexandra has not survived being destroyed because of sheer luck. The township survived because of the unity and determination of its residents to fight to the bitter end for their survival and indeed the liberation of South Africa.

The people of Alexandra had freehold rights on their homes before and during the time of the Alexandra Health Committee (AHC). This Committee governed Alexandra between 1912 and 1948. It was during this period that the people of Alexandra experienced participatory 'democracy' in managing their own affairs at the local level. The African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) each had its own head quarters in Alexandra during this time.

In 1948 the administration of Alexandra fell under the direct control of the Peri-Urban Board and it was from this date that property owners were dispossessed of their land as a result of the government expropriation proclamation. Forced removals were a threat from the 1960's. Between 1968 and 1977 there was a grand Apartheid plan to demolish all family housing and to replace it with huge migrant worker hostels.

The people of Alexandra elected representatives to engage the government on its plans to destroy the area. Dr. Sam Buti, the Dutch Reformed Church Minister, together with other community leaders such as Mr. Linda Twala, Mr. Taunyane, Mr. Magerman, the late Mr. Khoza - as well as many other local leaders joined forces to form the Alexandra Liaison Committee (ALC). The ALC's aim was to primarily oppose forced removals and to save Alexandra from extinction. "Initially the people of Alexandra thought we were joking and were at first suspicious that we can reverse the decision of Parliament when we formed the ALC.

"We then approached Dr. Piet Koornhof, then Minister of Co-operation and Development to ask him to reprove Alexandra and grant it full municipal powers," Buti recall's.

Buti explains further that what his committee was asking the then National Party government was to restore the township status prior to 1948 when Alexandra was administered by the Alexandra Health Committee (AHC). "It was after lengthy, tiring negotiations and pressure exerted by the people of Alexandra that led to Koornhof convincing his fellow members of the cabinet to rethink the situation of Alexandra," Buti explained.

On September 16, 1983, the Government Gazette announced officially that under section 2(1) of the Black Local Authorities Act, 1982, a town council was to be established in Alexandra to be known as the Town Council of Alexandra.

"a new chapter was being opened for the re-development of the area"

"When I received a telephone call from the media at about 8:50 p.m asking for my comment on the reprieve granted by Dr. Koornhof, I immediately prayed silently - thank God Alexandra is saved - the people outside were already celebrating, the atmosphere was festive and electrifying.

"Sadly however we had been forced to accept the full status of municipality without the legal standing to raise or access funding and therefore we could not develop the area. However, one women and two men hostels had been erected and completed for occupancy," Buti said.

The news of Alexandra being saved from extinction spread like fire across the globe - a new chapter was being opened for the proper re-development of the area, a challenge that the National Party government failed to measure up to by ignoring the development needs of the local community. It is a challenge that the democratic government of the African National Congress was to inherit and is meeting in re-developing Alexandra. To many, the Alexandra Renewal Project is the only remaining hope to restore Alexandrians' pride, and it honours those who fought tirelessly in ensuring the survival of the township as we know it today. To undo the slum image - by redeveloping it into a world class township. The redevelopment of Alexandra by Mbeki's led government is a befitting tribute to all those who made it possible for the township to be saved.



We had freehold rights to our homes but no free ride to liberation



Alexandra hostel which was intended to house migrant workers