

'Celebrating Sophiatown' exhibition on Heritage Day

24 September 2010

Speech by the Executive Mayor of the City of Johannesburg, Councillor Amos Masondo, on the occasion of 'Celebrating Sophiatown' exhibition on Heritage Day, Sophiatown - Johannesburg

Programme Director

Chairperson of the Board of the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre, Mr Isaac Meletse

Members of the Board of the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre

Steven Sack, Director Arts, Culture and Heritage, City of Joburg

Ms Natasha Erlank, Director of CCLA

Former and current Residents of Sophiatown

All elected public representatives

Fellow Councillors (Ward Councillor, Steve Kotze

PR Councillor, Cathy Seaforth)

Leaders of various organisations of Civil Society

Comrades and Friends

Ladies and gentlemen

Programme Director, I would like to thank the hosts of this event, The Trevor Huddleston CR Memorial Centre, for inviting me to this Opening of 'Celebrating Sophiatown' exhibition on Heritage Day.

The purpose of Heritage Day is to remember our past and celebrate our journey into freedom. Our past assists us to understand our present and our present provides us with a sound basis to forecast on our future.

'Celebrating Sophiatown' is the first milestone of the Neighbourhood History Project about Sophiatown (old and new Sophiatown). This is a participatory project, involving residents and it seeks to create an understanding and an appreciation across different cultural and historic experiences through story telling. It is a project that brings connectivity of the old and new through shared spaces and memories.

The role of the City is to ensure that our heritage is protected and promoted, so that when we celebrate our heritage, there are places and buildings, books and publications, that represents that past and help us to recall and learn from those memories.

It is time for us to reflect on what has happened in the past 16 years, especially in ensuring that symbolic reparations are achieved through the recognition of the historic contributions of individuals and communities to Johannesburg.

Over the past few years the City of Johannesburg has undertaken a number of interventions designed to promote and protect our heritage. This has been done in consultation with community groups and heritage associations. Some of the achievements to date include the following:

1. Acquiring and securing Chancellor House and obtaining funds to redevelop this important site where former President Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo had their legal offices in the 1950s.
2. The refurbishment of the Workers Museum in Newtown in partnership with Khanya College. This Museum was reopened to the public earlier this year and tells the story of migrant labour in Johannesburg.
3. We were able to purchase the Dr Xuma House in Sophiatown and we are in the process of restoring the house and producing exhibitions and programmes in partnership with the Trevor Huddleston Trust.

And that is why we are gathered here today at the Dr Xuma House on Heritage Day. We are here to see the progress that has been made in developing this important site of memory and to share with all of you the stories that make up this history.

This is a very special place and part of a history of extraordinary times and remarkable people.

Programme Director, perhaps it is appropriate to also acknowledge that this year marks 150 years since the first Indians arrived from India as indentured labourers. Some of you seated here today, are part of and have transcended this history. Indeed, some of you may be descendents of those who came as slaves from Malaysia and elsewhere. South Africa is in many ways a rich tapestry of people who have grown into one over time. We have a responsibility to learn and build unity from our rich diversity.

Heritage can only be protected if there is a sustainable partnership between Government and civil society. We are pleased that there are various civil society organizations that continue to work with us in this important work.

On this note, I would like to thank the Huddleston Centre, who have been working with the youth and elders since 2005 to capture and share the history of Sophiatown prior to 1995. Through this process, the youth have been empowered with skills in heritage and have been able to gain access to opportunities in arts, heritage and cultural industries.

A further one hundred elders and over one hundred youth from Soweto and Sophiatown have been involved. It is also encouraging that this is being reinforced by efforts to reach out to the youth in Lenasia and interventions are being considered regarding Eldorado Park.

We also acknowledge our other partners, the Centre for Culture and Languages in Africa (CCLA) at the University of Johannesburg for their work on capacity building programs for the community. And the third year students at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, who together with residents continue to share ideas on potential urban development for the area.

The City of Johannesburg has also submitted nominations for the declaration of 20 sites to Provincial Heritage Authority. Sites submitted include the Orlando East Hall, the Desmond Tutu House and the Herman Charles Bosman House in Bellevue.

We have submitted 5 nominations for National proclamation. These are the notorious : Pass Office in Albert Street where all black people had to appear to obtain the 'dompas', the Ghandi House in Troyeville, where Mahatma Ghandi lived, Chancellor House in the City, Regina Mundi and Vilakazi Precinct in Soweto.

The Directorate of Arts, Culture and Heritage, in the City of Johannesburg also advises and assists various community organizations who have an interest in matters of heritage. These include the Friends of Kloofendal , the Friends of Melville Koppies, the Friends of the Mandela Interpretation centre in Alex, the June 16 Foundation and others.

Programme Director, we are also looking forward to installing plaques in Alexandra Township at 16 locations which will recognize individuals, communities and events of historical importance. This has been undertaken following a rigorous process of consultation and research with members of the Alex community.

We are intensifying our work in Soweto and we will be looking at ways of strengthening the good work already undertaken.

I thank you for your attendance here today and wish you all a day of personal recollections and story telling.

Thank you.