

To cap it all, a real community project

The Community Arts Project will be in the middle of things — in more ways than one — when District Six is redeveloped.

Justin Pearce reports

BEHIND the premises of the Community Arts Project (Cap) in Chapel Street, Cape Town, there's a high wall. Behind the wall is a highway. And behind the highway is South Africa's most famous urban desert, which is soon to become South Africa's most famous urban renewal project: District Six.

As Cap director Zayd Minty points out, the wall would be a great place for a mural painting of District Six as it used to be. A good mural is one that takes its location into account,

and a mural on that wall would be unmistakably in the right place, with the mountain backdrop, recognisable from old photographs of District Six, looming above the painting.

When the redevelopment of District Six gets under way, the converted church which has been Cap's home for 12 of its 17 years will be right in the middle of it. There's something appropriate about that — in the age of the reconstruction and development programme, Cap is shifting its priorities into line with the broader needs of development in the Western Cape. And a course in mural painting is one of the ways the project hopes to do that.

If arts education is to mesh properly with other development strategies, Minty says, you need to put the "community" back into community arts. In the past Cap functioned as an art school with affordable lessons — and the same students would

come back year after year, not always spreading their skills any further. Now Cap is looking at ways of promoting the arts in a way which will be of benefit to whole communities, rather than just those individuals who turn up for lessons each week, and murals have an obvious place in improving the look of a neighbourhood or workplace.

Minty and his colleagues at Cap are keen to see murals being properly executed rather than slapped onto any old wall. So the course takes students through the entire process of producing a mural: it looks at the history of murals from Baroque ceilings to socialist realism, and shows students how to assess a site and plan an appropriate design. The course also includes the financial nitty-gritty of art-making: drawing up a budget, selling ideas to clients.

A similar strand of realism is evident in Cap's drawing classes, which

are taught on the premise that drawing is the basis of design — be it architecture or clothing design. Accordingly, drawing is taught as a marketable skill rather than as a Sunday pastime. Students aiming for a design course at a university or technikon can use the Cap course as a way of building up a portfolio of work. At the Zenzele Community Centre in Langa, students doing the woodwork classes offered by the Department of Manpower can also enrol for a Cap drawing course; the added skill of design improves the students' chances of finding a job or selling their own woodwork.

Minty expresses the hope that "when the RDP is under way, people will be able to participate in the planning of community centres, parks and houses".

CAP's drama department is headed by Zimbabwean Simba Pemhenayi, whose experience

includes working with community theatre groups in Zimbabwe which achieved self-sufficiency by marketing their skills where they were needed. Cap, which receives frequent requests from non-governmental organisations to stage a play related to the organisation's work, is now reorienting its courses to meet this need and others.

Cap is providing short courses in drama, and directing interested participants towards other training institutions. From next year the project will be teaching teachers how to use drama in their classrooms.

"In the past people got trained — and then what?" Minty recalls. "Now we look at where people are coming from and where they are going back to."

●Anyone who is interested in participating in Cap's projects as a student or a volunteer helper at the centre, can telephone (021) 45-3689.