



Uncontained

Opening the Community Arts Project archive

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The Zeenatul Islam Mosque

Lionel Davis

As a child growing up in District Six, I loved drawing. The street, the walls and my school books gave me joy as I drew figures remembered from comic books and Western movies. When I left school, I stopped drawing.

It was now 1979. Under the notorious Group Areas Act of 1950, the whole of District Six had been declared white in 1966. In the 1970s all 'non-white' residents were forcefully uprooted and scattered far and wide on the outskirts of Cape Town. I had left this vibrant community in 1963 when I was arrested by the security police. I subsequently served a seven-year sentence as a political prisoner on Robben Island (1964-1971). On my release, I was escorted to Manenberg to my mother's new home, where I was placed under house arrest for five years (1971-1976). I was not allowed to come to central Cape Town, which meant not going anywhere near District Six and its environs.

Now, after all these years, I was standing in the playground of my youth, and I was horrified! My former home at 101 Canterbury Street was a barren patch of clay. I was witnessing for the first time forced removals in action. Bulldozers, like demented demons, were voraciously gobbling up the remnants of what was once a stable community. The churches, where those classified as 'Bantu' worshipped, were the first to be hastily erased.

By 1979 I was attending art classes at CAP and very keen to capture fragments of what was still standing. My sketchbook already held a few rudimentary sketches of now demolished buildings and one of the old Moravian Church on Moravian Hill. The Zeenatul Islam Mosque was my next challenge. Not used to drawing in public, I plucked up courage once more. I sat down amongst the ruins on the corner of Roger and Reform Streets to capture two sides of the mosque and the buildings lying in its shadow. District Six was

now a ghost town with few inhabitants still walking about. The mood was sombre. To some passing by, I was just another invader come to further vilify a sacred place, their home.

I had no camera and had to rely on a slow-moving pencil to record what was fast disappearing.

The mosque and churches in District Six were the cornerstones of the religious and spiritual lives of its inhabitants. These places of worship now stood as lonely sentinels after the mass destruction that had taken place. Growing up in District Six, I roamed the streets, passing the many places of worship, never dreaming that one day their congregants would be scattered by a foul wind all over the Cape Flats and elsewhere.

As Christian and Muslim children, we were in and out of each other's homes. With great respect, we learned so much about each other's religious practices. At certain times of the day, I would hear the melodic voice of the *bilal* reciting verses from the Koran, floating in the air over our roofs and into our homes, calling the devotees to prayer. We would then for a moment stop our raucous behaviour. It was as if calm had descended over our neighbourhood.

All religious festivities were enjoyed by the children. Christmas and *Labarang* were times for joining our friends in wishing our neighbours merry Christmas or saying *slamat*. With lots of delicacies to eat, we stuffed our bellies, our pockets bulging with pennies collected. These traditions were part of the social fabric sewn into our lives. We lived so closely together. We belonged to the same sports clubs, played soccer, rugby, cricket, dominoes and much more. We danced, we sang, we enjoyed life. Romance bloomed between Muslim and Christian couples and families intermarried.

When I now look at the linocut I made of the mosque from the original pencil drawing, I think of the holy places that have survived the tragedy of forced removals in the 1970s. The buildings that once housed so many and the quality of life that we shared may be gone forever, but will live on in our memories. And may we never forget the millions in South Africa who sacrificed so much for the right to live peacefully in the land of our birth. May we never again experience the ruthlessness of forced removals.



The Zeenatul Islam Mosque

Lionel Davis, *The Zeenatul Islam Mosque, District Six*, 1963. Linocut. 35 x 47.7 cm

