Great Cities: Johannesburg's apartheid purge of vibrant Sophiatown

By David Adler, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.07.16
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Editor's Note: From 1948 to 1994, South Africa enforced a system of apartheid, or "separateness." Under this system, people were divided based on their ethnic background. Whites were granted special privileges, while blacks and other ethnic groups were forced to live in separate neighborhoods.

In 1955, Sophiatown was one of the last areas of black home-ownership. The neighborhood was a thriving black suburb of Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa. Then bulldozers arrived to evict the residents, confirming the brutal suppression of apartheid.

The bulldozers arrived in Sophiatown at five o’clock on the morning of Feb. 9, 1955. Behind them in the darkness, police commanders lined up with piles of paper. The papers had lists of names and addresses, eviction notices, and assignments to new plots in the Meadowlands suburb.
Behind the commanders, an army of 2,000 police carried rifles and batons, ready to enforce the eviction and clear Sophiatown of its black residents. “Maak julle oop!” they shouted in Afrikaans, a language derived from Dutch that is spoken in South Africa. “Open up!”

By sunrise, 110 families had been forced to remove all belongings from their homes. They piled into police trucks and moved out to the Meadowlands, where hundreds of tiny government houses awaited them.

"We Won't Move"

Sophiatown was one of the last remaining areas of black home-ownership in Johannesburg. Five years earlier, the South African parliament had passed the Group Areas Act. This law sought to remove black South Africans from developed neighborhoods and establish apartheid in the cities. In Johannesburg, the act allowed the city’s government to relocate middle-class black residents to southern townships such as Soweto. These townships were where the majority of poor black residents already lived.

Sophiatown was the opposite of what parliament wanted for South Africa, said Don Mattera, a poet and former resident. “Sophiatown had the black people – meaning colored, Indians, blacks of all tribes – and the whites living together.”

And the suburb fought hard to preserve this community. For months, the African National Congress (ANC), an anti-apartheid political party, and 5,000 of its freedom volunteers had been organizing and leading marches through Sophiatown’s Freedom Square. “Asihambi! We are not leaving!” the people chanted. Throughout the town, across homes and churches and movie theaters, residents painted their protest: “We Won’t Move.”

But the march of apartheid was swift. Within 20 years, more than 3 million black South Africans around the country were forcibly removed from their homes and neighborhoods. Sophiatown was renamed Triomf, Afrikaans for “triumph” – the brutal triumph of apartheid in Johannesburg.

In Sophiatown, A Cultural All Its Own

Apartheid planning in Johannesburg was founded on a contradiction. On the one hand, the city’s industries, including mining, relied on a steady flow of black migrants as workers. On the other hand, the government tried to slow this inflow through “influx controls.” These were policies that imposed harsh restrictions on blacks getting ahead. They reserved high-skilled and high-paid jobs for white residents.

In 1923, the South African government passed a law proclaiming its cities as “white” and stripping black residents of ownership rights. Black residents were only allowed in the cities if a white employer gave them permission. As a result, many migrants were evicted from city neighborhoods. They were relocated to townships such as Soweto. As migration intensified, these townships became increasingly crowded.
But Professor Susan Parnell says not all neighborhoods were truly divided. “The focus on race should not mask the fact that Johannesburg was made of many people from many places,” Parnell explains. “What apartheid policies said and what apartheid policies did were always very different.”

Sophiatown, along with a handful of other townships to the north, was one such exception. The neighborhood was originally developed, in 1897, for wealthy white residents. Then the Johannesburg City Council decided to install a sewage disposal plant next door. The wealthy whites lost interest, leaving the developer with little choice but to offer land to black residents. Alongside their white neighbors, these residents constructed homes in a neighborhood that looked much like other Johannesburg suburbs.

**Clubs Host Music And Meetings**

By 1950, the pressures of apartheid planning had pushed thousands more into Sophiatown. Residents were forced to rent out backyard rooms and construct improvised dwellings to make room for more people.

Sophiatown was far from paradise, but it offered black residents a degree of control and safety that many state-owned territories lacked. And this sense of ownership created a culture all its own. The neighborhood was known for its Shebeens, or speakeasies. These were clubs where visitors could buy forbidden alcohol. The 1927 Liquor Act had prohibited Africans and Indians from entering bars – but that did little to stop the residents of Sophiatown. The clubs also hosted live music and local meetings, bringing together all kinds of people, including musicians, artists and activists.

For its lively culture, Sophiatown became known as the Chicago of South Africa. Residents enjoyed movies, dancing, American culture and jazz. “It was a place where people could express themselves more freely than in any other place,” said the South African writer Es-kia Mphahlele. People from different ethnic backgrounds lived side by side, in defiance of apartheid.

Politically, Sophiatown became a target. From Desmond Tutu to Nelson Mandela, its residents were among the loudest and most active in the struggle against apartheid. One area of the neighborhood, known as Freedom Square, was the site of frequent protests, speeches and ANC meetings. This was where Mandela called publicly on the ANC to take up arms against apartheid.

As a result of this political activity, the government began planning the eviction of Sophiatown’s black residents in the early 1950s, citing poor living conditions and violence. The ANC mobilized often against the eviction. However, there was little they could do to save the Chicago of South Africa.
A "New Apartheid"?

In February 2006 – on the 50th anniversary of the eviction – Mayor Amos Masondo changed the name of Triomf back to Sophiatown. He said that the name "evokes memories of ... a place where artists, writers and musicians flourished" in the face of "intolerance."

But in many ways, post-apartheid repairs such as this have been merely for appearances. "Apartheid is a distant memory for many people," says Professor Owen Crankshaw, a sociologist at the University of Cape Town. "But it persists in certain respects." Today, many black residents still live on the suburban edge of the cities, while many white residents live in private gated communities. Many view this lingering segregation as evidence of a "new apartheid."

The future of Johannesburg may depend, then, on how the city addresses these inequalities. "Ultimately, despite a lot of good effort, the question of transformation has not been addressed," says Benjamin Bradlow. He studies South African history at Brown University in the United States.

Bradlow wonders what Johannesburg will look like in the future. Will it maintain divisions between white and black residents, or will it try to create "a new social fabric" by bringing people together?
Quiz

1. Which of the following sentences from the article BEST expresses a central idea of the article?
   (A) “The focus on race should not mask the fact that Johannesburg was made of many people from many places,” Parnell explains.
   (B) Sophiatown was far from paradise, but it offered black residents a degree of control and safety that many state-owned territories lacked.
   (C) From Desmond Tutu to Nelson Mandela, its residents were among the loudest and most active in the struggle against apartheid.
   (D) “Ultimately, despite a lot of good effort, the question of transformation has not been addressed,” says Benjamin Bradlow.

2. Which paragraph in the section “In Sophiatown, A Culture All Its Own” BEST expresses a central idea of the article?

3. What effect did the Group Areas Act passed by the South African parliament have on Johannesburg?
   (A) It imposed restrictions on the kinds of jobs that black people were allowed to work.
   (B) It relaxed restrictions on black property ownership in certain areas.
   (C) It evicted black residents from the city and forced them to relocate to the suburbs.
   (D) It created the need for a steady flow of black migrant workers into the city.

4. According to the article, how are the effects of apartheid still felt in South Africa today?
   (A) Many black people still live largely apart from whites in the outlying suburbs of cities.
   (B) There are still laws restricting black people from taking certain kinds of employment.
   (C) There are still laws dictating which areas black people may and may not enter.
   (D) Poor black residents are still being forcibly displaced by wealthy white residents.
According to the article, how are the effects of apartheid still felt in South Africa today?