Narrating Athlone; Urban History on the Cape Flats

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Master's dissertation submitted in order to obtain the academic degree of Master of Science in de ingenieurswetenschappen: architectuur

Department of Architecture and Urban Planning
Chair: Prof. dr. ir. Arnold Janssens
Faculty of Engineering and Architecture
Academic year 2017-2018
NARRATING ATHLONE
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Louise Huba, August 2018
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ABSTRACT

Athlone, a suburb in the Cape Metropolitan area, lays on the edge of the formerly black areas with the historical white areas. Due to the different histories which unfolded on and around this in-between space, the name Athlone became a notion covering various and sometimes conflicting narratives. This dissertation is an attempt to define, clarify and test different renderings against their historic background. Athlone is subsequently framed as an area of Political Resistance, Economic Growth, Residential Segregation and a Disappearing Landscape. In some cases, a narrative gave direction to a certain urban development. Other times, the intervention in the physical landscape reinforced a specific perception on the area. This retroactive relation between the physical state of Athlone and the way it is framed, makes it worth examining these narratives. By means of different archival material, the roots of the various histories are investigated to give the notions context and nuance.
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PREFACE

Various histories which take place in Athlone have been written, as it was the home to important cultural and political changes within the South African society in the 1980’s. The existing literature about events taking place in Athlone, have all framed the area in a specific way, as a background of these events. The authors started with a specific goal in mind, being it the conservation of a specific type of building or telling the history of the student movement within Athlone. Prominent persons I interviewed in and about Athlone gave the same impression. Most of them seemed to have a very clear vision of what Athlone is, and how its history should be told.

At first, an effort was made to construct an urban history within the framework of ‘Athlone as a place of Culture’. It opened the door to an interesting literature about the relation of music, film, the notion of race and an oppressive regime. This gaze was put aside, half way the field work, as it obstructed the further development of the dissertation.

Without any memory of Athlone myself, it was easier to start from scratch. This is not an attempt to describe the history of Athlone, but merely a collection of dominant narratives which had an impact on the physical state of the area. The dissertation unfolds in three parts, ordered by the dominance of the narrative and not by chronology. Although it was not intended to be like this, the order in which the (hi)stories will unfold are parallel to how I got to know the area during the four months of field research.

‘A Story Told’, the first part tells the story of Athlone as it is told by two post-apartheid memorials, commemorating the victims in a struggle against an oppressive regime. Although the purely physical impact of the memorials on the area might be marginal, the claim they make on the narrative of Athlone is explicit. The authors own experience of the area do barely play a role in this part as this is the dominant narrative

‘The Making of’ contains the majority of text and research. Two texts both compose this part. In the first text ‘Business as (un)usual’ newspapers are the primary source. The articles of the 1960’s-1980’s are mainly taking from the Cape Times and The Argus, established newspapers based in Cape Town. These articles can be found in the National library, as well as part of their photographic collection. From the ‘90s articles are stored in the Central Library of Cape Town. In the Athlone Library clippings are stored of the ‘Athlone news’, which is a Cape Town based newspaper as well, part of ‘the independent’. Going back to the beginning of the twentieth century, state documents reveal the history of
establishing a community in Athlone. ‘Building the Cape Flats’ is based on historical maps stored in the geographical institute and the University of Cape Town, documents stored in the National Archive of South Africa and cadastral records stored by the Chief Survey General.

‘On the Sideline’ cannot be read as one coherent text and is rather a collection of visual tools in a search of Athlone’s forgotten narratives. As in the ‘side notes’, I gave myself more freedom to reflect on certain aspects of the area. Two underlying structures which were important in the development of Athlone but were pushed to the side of the other narratives. These acknowledge the borders which were created mentally and physically, but do not pay attention to how these borders work in a different way as they were intended. As the first approach was ‘Athlone as a place of culture’ this part will have, next to the maps and pictures, two short texts on the construction and crossing of borders within the music and film production and link this back. This part is mainly based on interviews and walking through the area. Moreover do aerial photographs starting from 1940 play a role to give some historical footing to the start of a new narrative.
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LET’S TALK ABOUT ATHLONE

Athlone is not a place which can be captured in one image. Endless roads, fenced off houses, a fast food shop in the night, memorials commemorating the martyrs of the struggle, Mosques, the football stadium, a dramatic view on Table mountain, Braai on the streets, - Images posted by people living in Athlone, about Athlone. This is not more than a few blinks of the reality in today’s Athlone.

Athlone, together with twenty three other suburbs, forms the area known as the Cape Flats. It lays in the most North-Western corner, at the edge with the Centre of Cape Town, the Northern – and Southern Suburbs. The Cape Flats received its name from its topographical characteristics, a flat area laying in between the Cape Peninsula mountain chain and the cliffs of the Hottentots Holland in the east.

This area, in between the rich inner city and the impoverished periphery, is diverse. South of Kromboom road are peaceful suburbs with well looking fenced off houses where you do not see many people on the street. In the north of Klipfontein there is Kewtown and Bokmakierie. Areas with council houses, where you see less cars, more people sitting on the streets and children playing on little squares. Some gardens have empty swimming pools, others are the home of ‘backyard dwellers’. Mosques, Churches and Temples are seen throughout the area.

Klipfontein and Belgravia road form two main connection lines between Cape Town and the rest of the Cape Flats, stretching to the South and East. The railway line cuts Athlone off from the Southern suburbs as well as connect it with the City Centre. Along Klipfontein there are several places to hop from one shared taxi to another, the main ones in the central business district of Athlone and Gatesville.

Saturday morning Old Klipfontein is full of people purchasing and vending goods. But in the early afternoon the area becomes almost desolated. Despite the urban renewal project, meant to stimulate Athlone’s economy, business are slowing down. The cinema’s and Jazz clubs are long gone, in the Central Business District many shops are empty. But this does not stop people from the city centre, coming to Athlone just to grab something to eat.

The last 10 years the skyline of Athlone changed twice. While in 2008 a landmark in form of a stadium was built, two years later a symbol of Athlone disappeared. The Two Athlone Ladies, the cooling towers of a powers station which were standing quietly on the edge, were taken down. Athlone stadium fancies up the skyline, but stands empty. A silent witness of the broken promise to bring the Football world cup to the Cape Flats.

This could be an image of today’s Athlone. Places which seems dull in the first place are full of meaning.
Four maps published between 1893 and 2018 show a completely different situation of Athlone and its relation to the rest of the Cape Metropolitan area. Obviously, Athlone did change substantially the last century situation. On top of that do these maps explicitly show a change in attitude towards the area.

The contemporary map of the MyCity bus lines ignores the existence of Athlone completely. Athlone is not served by this public transportation company, commuters rely on the rail network, golden arrow city busses and the informal taxi industry. The policy makers lack of concern with Athlone’s commuters is in sharp contrast with the interest politicians had in making the area part of the ‘Memory project’. This is examined briefly in Part I ‘A Story Told’. Two memorials, the ‘Trojan Horse’- and the ‘Coline Williams/Robert Waterwitch’ Memorial, reveal their history without detour. They commemorate five youth, victims of the struggle against apartheid. The student protests and the connection to the ANC is, in parallel, the dominant narrative in the history of Athlone.

Thirty years ago, Athlone was represented as ‘the hearth of the peninsula’. The promotional map of 1987 renders it as ‘the’ place to invest. The article, published in the Cape argus, stated ‘The largest buying power of the Cape Peninsula can be found on the flats’. In the years before 1950, press and policy makers seemed to have little interest in the area. This changed in the late 1960s, when the Group Area was reshaping Athlone and its population increased substantially. From then on, Cape Townrian press published articles almost as an ode to the economic prosperity of the area. Till today, Athlone is futured as an economic centre on the Cape Flats. The part ‘Business as (Un)Usual’ seeks the reasons and motives behind the idea of Athlone as a place of Economic Growth.

Fifty years later a small map, published by the Cape Times in 1950, gives a completely different image. Athlone is represented as the centre of the Coloured Group Area, on the intersection of a major railway line and an important road. This narrative of the area is a consequence of the Group Area Act of 1950. When the National Party came to power in 1948 with the policy of ‘separateness’ (Apartheid), it installed a system meant to ensure a segregated development of different ‘race groups’. The Group Area Act is seen as the corner stone of the Apartheids urban policies and had an immense and lasting influence on the layout of South African cities today. The Act created the legal framework for varying levels of government to establish particular neighbourhoods as ‘Group Areas’, where only people of a particular race were able to reside. Those not belonging to the rightful group were labelled as ‘disqualified’ and were no longer allowed to own or occupy property. This caused expropriations and massive forced removals, mostly from inner city neighbourhoods, which were marketed for whites only, to places on the periphery of the city. Athlone was demarcated in 1957 as a Coloured area. Ryland, an area within Athlone, was allocated to Indians. This has a lasting impact on the demographics today. Therefore the Cape Flats is sometimes referred to as “apartheids dumping ground”.

The Group Area Act was unmistakably a big influence on the development of Athlone. Nonetheless, Athlone was already developing before the Act. Therefore in ‘Building the Cape Flats’ Athlone is futured as a place of Residential Segregation, starting from the early twentieth century.

Starting from the colonial past, the Cape Flats are seen as ‘a windswept, sandy terrain’. 
On maps of the Cape Peninsula, dating from the nineteenth century, the area seems left out of the drawing. For long nothing more than a few scattered farmsteads appeared on maps. The interest and development of the European settlements happened around these ‘sand flats’. The idea of a rough terrain has endured and not much notice is given. Part III ‘On the Sideline’ links this openness of land to a possibility of movement.

(Re)Defining Boundaries

Driving down Jan Smuts, at the robot to the intersection with Turf-hall, I see a sign that says “Athlone” to the left. And two kilometres or so behind me, at the intersection of Jan Smuts with Klipfontein, a sign says “Athlone” to the right. Do bits of Athlone stretch endlessly in both directions? - Gabebo Baderoon, Athlone in Mind

As Athlone is not to be captured in one image, so it is not to be contained in a defined border. What is called Athlone today is not the same as what it meant 50 years ago. Legal borders, postcodes and wards are of no use as they split neighbourhoods in halves. They have no connection to how Athlone is experienced as an area.

The pieces of the Athlone puzzle which compose this work focus on the area defined by the N2 Highway in the North, the Cape Flats line in the East, M7 Highway in the West and the Turfhall Road in the South. It corresponds with a physical experience of Athlone as a whole. The boundaries, thus, are structures which are very present in the build environment, railway lines and highways, which are not easy to cross, at least not in a legal way. Limiting Athlone to the area within the strong physical borders might be seen as giving in and acknowledging apartheid’s planning tools. On the other hand, ignoring the dividing effect of railways and highways would also be foolish.

These boundaries cut off Bonteheuwel, an area important in the Athlone school protests. It excludes Hanoverpark, which in its name already bears the memory of the forced removals in Cape Town, particularly from District six. It also denies the existence of Manenberg’s connection to Athlone through Jazz. Therefore, the bordering area’s will not be left in the dark, and will play a part in different parts of the work.

The notion of which parts compose Athlone will depend on the narrative told. In ‘Business as (Un)usual’ the area will extend slightly as newspapers in the apartheid era refer to Athlone as the large continuous Coloured Group Area, including Bonteheuwel, Manenberg and Hanoverpark. Rylands, in the very centre of all this, is not included in the apartheid-definition of Athlone.
PART I
A STORY TOLD
“Some of the pupils in the crowd estimated at about 5000 who bocked the streets of Athlone today in a protest march against the coloured educational system. At Gatesville shopping centre the marchers were dispersed by about 100 riot police.”

Author: Dana le Roux
22 April 1980
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
A STORY TOLD

NARRATIVE: WE OUGHT TO REMEMBER

“Help us to remember the sacrifices individuals and communities have made for our freedom.” – Trojan Horse Memorial

On the corner of Thornton and Kromboom Road the Trojan Horse Memorial reminds passers-by it is on this intersection three Athlonian Youth lost their lives in an ambush orchestrated by Apartheid police forces on October 15th, 1985. That day, a railway delivery truck, driven by security force members disguised as Transport Service employees, slowly drove up and down Thornton Road. On the back of the vehicle, a security task force was hiding in wooden crates. At the corner of Thornton and ST Simons Road a group of protesters and curious onlookers had gathered. During the state of emergency, declared on 21 July 1985, trucks got stoned regularly in the Cape Flats. What was anticipated happened. As soon as stones where hitting the truck, the armed men emerged from their hiding place and without warning fired into the crowd, indiscriminately of age or gender. Michael Miranda (11), Shaun Magmoeed (15) and Johnathan Claasen (21) were killed and thirteen other children and two adults were injured. In crossroads, a black township, a similar attack was executed the day following the Trojan Horse ambush. Back then the operation was called ‘Ghost vehicle’ by the Police, costing five lives in total. International journalists were present during the protests in Athlone. A crew of the CBS was able to document the trap orchestrated by the Security Force. The images were shown around the world, according to the CBS themselves it was “an event that would do more damage to the South African regime’s international image than all the other coverage combined.”

A second memorial stands on a small square in the Central Business District, bordered by the Magistrates Court, the Kismet cinema and Klipfontein road. On this place the bodies of Robert Waterwitch and Colin Williams were found on July 23rd 1989. Both were twenty years old and members of Umkhonto weSizwe, the underground wing of the ANC. Back then the Authorities claimed Waterwitch and Williams died in their own limpet mine explosion which was planned as part of an anti-voter registration campaign. At their funeral pamphlets were handed out stating that their deaths were unlikely to have been caused by their own carelessness as declared by the police. After the Truth and Reconciliation
Commission it became clear Waterwitch and Williams were killed by the Apartheid police force. Yet, till today the exact circumstances of their death are unclear.

As written on the memorials, the dominant history describes Athlone as “the site of intense political resistance to apartheid”. Memorials are never constructed or placed on a specific spot ‘accidentally’ and history does not write itself. Moreover, as stated by Sabine Marschall in ‘Landscape of Memory’, memorials to victims of liberation movements seem to ‘give an answer’ on who liberated the country. The two memorials in Athlone were part of the “Memory Project” in 2005. This was initiated by a former ANC mayor. “Both the ANC and the PAC have pointed to the death in enhancing their public profile and legitimating their claims on sacrifices made in their contribution to the freedom struggle”.

**FIXING HISTORY IN PLACE**

At the end of Apartheid, the country was left with a commemorative landscape dominated by ‘the’ history of a White ruling class. As heritage is presumed to signal empowerment and memorials are tools to grand visibility to selected narratives, the previously marginalised black majority should be represented too in the memorial landscape of the ‘rainbow nation’. Nonetheless, it was only by 2000, when Cape Town came under ANC rule, the first state-initiated memorials remembering victims of Apartheid violence were erected. Nomandia Mfeketo who became major in 2000 stated “Cape Town, unlike other provinces, hasn’t had a proper memorial of the past... As the local authority, we have a constitutional responsibility to build these memorials. We need to deal with more than just service and build communities out of our experiences.” Thus, the two first memorials were the Trojan Horse Memorial and a memorial built on the site were the ‘Guguletu Seven’ were killed by police-men in 1986. A modest budget was made available and Tyrone Appollis, an artist from Athlone, was appointed to create a public memorial for his neighbourhood.

However, the first visual tribute devoted to the victims of the Trojan Horse Massacre was made the day after the ambush. “Remember the Trojan Horse Massacre,” was painted on the prefabricated concrete wall on the site of the killing. The letters were in the colours of the African National Congress, leaving no doubt of its clear political and anti-apartheid message. Nevertheless, the state authorities did not bother or dare to remove the silent protests. For long the graffiti was the only physical reminder, as the families of the victims were too poor to afford tombstones for the graves. The spontaneous memorial became a landmark in the community. The first post-apartheid memorial for the Trojan Horse Massacre was a plaque unveiled in 1995, on October 15th, by the justice minister Abdullah Mohamed Omar. The state endorsed the memorial although it was the Thornhill Residents’ Association who funded it.

Waterwitch and Williams had to wait till 2005 before they got a visual commemoration. Their narrative has a more direct link with the ANC, partly because they were members of Umkhonto weSizwe. In 2004 the Central Business District of Athlone was about to get a ‘facelift’. Part of the plan was to demolish the public toilets, the place where the bodies of Waterwitch and Williams were found. The site had already been marked by the Department of Culture and sport as being “one of the significant sites marking the sacrifices that
Robert Waterwitch and Coline Williams

Post-apartheid monuments are prone to vandalism, be it be radical 'whites', theft of useful components or a simple lack of understanding. This has an impact on the design of the memorials and the materials used. The memorial of Robert and Collin fell victim to theft, just 3 years after it had been installed. The statue was later found in a scrapyard, where it was meant to be sold for its copper. To prevent this, other memorials are sometimes made out of materials which resemble copper but are less valuable.

The Trojan Horse Memorial

The graffiti, which is still on the wall, is now protected by the latest monument. Also the design of the Trojan Horse memorial is with an eye on vandalism. The board is elevated and metal stacks protect the original graffiti.
Islam and Protest within Athlone

Above: Late ’70s/ Early ’80: Massive Friday prayer as a form of protest, organised by the Qibla movement. The established Muslim organizations did not support this action. According to them they should remain apolitical. They called up not to attend this prayer.

Left under: September 1969: Funeral of Imam Abdullah Haron, attended by 300,000 people. The Imam is seen as an anti-apartheid martyr.

Right under: March 1985: Clerics of religions march together to Pollsmoor prison to demand the release of Nelson Mandela.

Source: Archive Muslim View
the freedom fighter paid to end apartheid" and therefore the department was strongly opposed to the plans for private development. The family of the two declared that “the land is not negotiable for us... Robbie Waterwitch and Coline Williams will not be erased by the greed of a developer. We want that the site is developed as a place of memory.” But not only the family was in favour of a public commemoration of the two struggle heroes, the Major stated she had known Coline, as they had been in prison together. After the turmoil the City Council made a larger budget available.

It was a year later, in 2005, that three memorials were unveiled in remembrance of the victims of the Apartheid’s regime. Two were in Athlone, Waterwitch and William memorial and a new Trojan Horse memorial. The third was a redevelopment of a site in commemoration of the Guguletu Seven. The two memorials which were created in 2000 were demolished as they were replaced, despite protests from the community. Different memorials highlight other memories or interpretations of the past and therefore obstruct the construction of one official history. As visualisation in the form of memorials marginalises the other memories of a place or event, monuments can be representational battlegrounds between different parties who all have their story. The contemporary Trojan Horse memorial was designed ACG architects in collaboration with the Human Rights Centre. They consulted with the family of the victims but were constantly struggling with City officials who wanted to have their say.

Western Cape Premier Ebrahim Rasool stated “The Trojan Horse massacre was one of the biggest tragedies of the city and it rallied the whole of Cape Town and the Western Cape to stand up and say that what had happened was wrong.” The hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is a significant source of knowledge about South Africa’s past, became a direct inspiration for the largest share of post-apartheid memorials. Therefore most memorials are based on Oral history. The Trojan Horse memorial is different in the respect that it is largely based on the knowledge gathered from the filmed footage. By many this is regarded as a more legitimate source than the testimonies of victims. The silhouette displayed on the Iron board is the same as the one screened on countless television screens in October of 1985. Precisely because the massacre was so well documented, it gave a very strong image to the struggle against apartheid and it is not hard to understand this was one of the first places which should get a memorial.

In both memorials the narrative of the ANC is prominent. In the case of the Trojan Horse Memorial a shift comes to the front in which the commemoration first happened spontaneously by members of the community. But during the 30 years following the ambush and the construction of four memorials the influence of local politicians grew.

**SIDE NOTES: THE RIGHT TO REMEMBER**

While the Athlone area is often regarded as an important constituent in the boycott process, its importance is often only expressed through the ‘high profile’ events, which are well documented. In the established press an image was constantly constructed of Athlone as a place of riots. Archival material of the Cape Times shows images of burning tires, vehicles used as barricades and fully armed police patrolling the streets. In this narrative Athlone was a place of militant students engaged in courageous street battles with the security forces. The two memorials reinforce this narrative of a violent and a politicised
struggle for freedom.

The official history constructed around memorials inevitably simplifies diverse and personal memories. Cultural and political leaders can have a stake in this as an endeavour for social unity and political agendas. These official ‘interpretations of the past’ tend to marginalize memories which do not correspond with the history on the socle. Stating Athlone was “the site of intense political resistance” thus undervalues the importance of the pressure exercised on the Apartheid regime by unions, residents associations, cultural and religious organisations. Several civic organisations, such as the Thornhill Resident’s Association, where involved, initiating rent boycotts as a form of protest against the living conditions in the ‘Coloured’ and ‘Indian’ areas. South African Council of Sports, based in Athlone, organised and promoted ‘non-racial sport for a non-racial society’. MAPP, Music Action for People’s Power was a grassroots movement which saw music as a vehicle for liberation. Besides, the two struggle heroes Waterwitch and Williams were not only politically active. Robert was known as a musician in the community and Coline was a drama student at the Joseph Stone.

Focussing on the School boycott of 1985 alone, there cannot be spoke of an ideological unity either. It was a mixture of organisations with different political affiliations. The Athlone Student action Committee (ASAC), as an example, had a rather socialist stand and therefore more insulated but still the most influential SAC because of its grassroots and concern of problems on individual schools. It saw the school boycott as “part of a broader and singular struggle for socialism”. According to the ASAC “the students’ struggle alone could never topple the state, yet alone lead the struggle for socialism...” and as such “workers and Students march forward to Liberation”\(^\text{13}\). When the state of emergency was enforced and all outdoor meeting were banned by the end of September 1985, the ASAC held meetings in Cine 400, a local cinema and club in Gatesville. For their part, Mosque communities held political Friday prayers and MAPP organised concerts when meetings were banned.\(^\text{14}\)

The Cape Flats is supposed to be a place without memory, a place where people live who did not belong in the city. They were disconnected with the memory of what was before the removal. On a place which was without the right to history, memorials form an important break. Athlone got two memorials and with it the right to remember.

Surely, these memorials remember what happened in 1985, in a struggle against a system which took away a right to a history before. Nevertheless, the images of the Trojan Horse Massacre leaded towards an increasing international support for the end of calculated apartheid state violence, they reduce this ‘calculated violence’ to extreme events. Structural violence and suppression, lived every day as part of the basic conditions of ‘normal’ life, are not visibly commemorated.\(^\text{15}\) The struggle was not only a racial one, but also one about class differences, in which parts of the society had to fight to keep alive. The events in 1985 exploded partly because of the living situations which had worsened due to economic recession in the whole country.

The memorials acknowledge an existence during apartheid, a memory of apartheid and visualise a break with it. The memory of Athlone before 1985 or 1957, the year the area was designated as a Coloured Group Area, is left out in this very punctual, selective way of remembering. Moreover the idea of commemorating and trauma talks about suffering in the past, while many still suffer today.\(^\text{16}\)
22 April 1980 - The Cape Argus

“Pupils flee tear gas fired by police on to a field behind the Gatesville shopping Centre in Klipfontein Road, Rylands. The Marchers were dispersed by riot police carrying batons”

Author unknown
22 April 1980
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
PART II
THE MAKING OF
The next five maps give a brief overview of the development of Athlone from 1940-2010. The two texts ‘Business as (Un)usual’ and ‘Building the Flats’ tell this history in more detail, told from two different perspectives.
1960

Development Langa

1962 - Opening of the N2 highway

Development Bridgetown and Silvertown, Council Housing

1958 - Construction of the Power Station and the 'Athalone ladies' (cooling towers)

Private development in Rylands, starting in 1928

1957 - The first carriageway of the new Klipfontein road opened. The Cape Flats line was now crossed by a road-over-rail bridge.

1972 - Opening Athlone Stadium

The Central Business District on the map

1980

Development M5 highway

Acceleration Housing Development

Council housing, on the edge; Bonteheuwel, Manenberg, Hanoverpark
1990

- Gatesville market on the map
- 1994-2007: Start reconstruction of Athlone Stadium
- Athlone Industria fully developed, planned since 1973
- 1987: Construction Jan Smuts Drive. Property in the Central Business District is expropriated

2010

- 2010: The two Ladies of Athlone, two cooling towers have been demolished, Athlone loses a landmark.
- Vanguard Mall developed after the first plans were made public in 1987
- 2007: Widening Klipfontein Road
- Belgravia on the map as a major road
BUSINESS AS (UN)USUAL

NARRATIVE: THE ECONOMIC HUB OF THE CAPE FLATS

Today, Athlone still has its busy moments, but not what it used to be. On a Saturday morning Old Klipfontein is full of people, buying and selling. But after two o’clock the same day, the area is almost desolated. When talking to people who run a family business for generations, one can easily imagine Athlone as a thriving. One of my interviewees, an older lady running a hardware store, gets sad when she thinks about how the Central Business District used to be. During the ‘60s and ‘70s Athlone had been branded as the economic centre for the Coloured community of the Cape Peninsula. Cinemas and Bars brought the place to life day and night.

Starting from the early 1980s, coinciding with an economic recession and oil crisis the Central Business District seems to be caught in a downward spiral. Today, the cinema’s and Jazz clubs are long gone and many buildings are vacant. In Athlone’s CBD they point the finger at the newer Gatesville market, built in the late ‘80s. Over there, street vendors complain about the development of yet bigger and newer shopping centres which are developing all over the Cape Flats. They fear they will soon have to close won there shop, if the situation stays the same. Shop keepers and shoppers alike seem to agree on one point, safety is a big issue.

Different analysis have been made and solutions have been brought to the front. But none of them seems to get to the core of the problem. That the Group Area Act left its mark on the economic situation, is a fact. But how it had its influence, is another question. Moreover was the image of Athlone fit in the larger political and economic climate of South Africa and as a consequence the urban development was shaped accordingly.

The next text examines the different factors which shaped the economic environment of Athlone. The main source of information are newspapers clippings of the ‘Cape Times’ and ‘The Argus’ starting from the 1960’s. Both are written in English and not funded by the government. They take a rather liberal and sometimes provocative stand, as this sells.
Left: Belgravia road stretches from Klipfontein Road to Hanoverpark in the South. The whole length of the road is filled with different kinds of shops.

Left under: Fishmongers park their ‘bakkies’ in front of the Cemetery, while a constant flow of Taxi-busses is bringing people to the nearby Gatesville market.

Right: The rather car-oriented nature of the businesses outside the CBD or Gatesville market.
Safety is generated by the people living and working in the most busy district. A typical sight of Cape Town is the informal guarding system on car parks, where people with fluorescent jackets watch over your car for a few coins. In Gatesville, they play a bigger role in the overall safety. When talking to one of the marketeers in Gatesville, on ‘informal guard’ passes by and gets some fruits and vegetables. “The guy sleeps next to the stalls” The marketeer explains. “We take care of them, they keep an eye out in return.”

The guards of the ‘City Improvement District’ in old Klipfontein road and even the police station at the edge of the CBD do not succeed in providing a better feeling of safety than in Gatesville market.
Left: On the way to the Gatesville market
Right: Shop in the middle of Silvertown
Fear shapes the Architecture:
The gangs in Bokmakierie and Kewtown cause a feeling of unsafety in the other areas of Athlone. This shapes the architecture of houses and shops alike. All shops have some kind of barrier as protection. The most desolate ones have a fence between the shopkeeper and the costumer. Others have a closed door, you can only enter when you have an appropriate look. In the Gatesville and on Old Klipfontein road shops have open doors.

Above: Family business in the CBD
Left: ‘Nantes Tuck shop’ in Silvertown
Right: Marketeers in Gatesville Market
Right under: Street Vendor in the CBD
500 000 become aware of their potential
- Cape Argus - 30/11/1973

“Athlone, the area with the largest concentration of Coloured people in South Africa, is undergoing an economic awakening. This big complex of housing estates and high-density sub-economic townships is flexing its economic muscles in the wind of change which is sweeping the Cape Flats and making bid to win support for its own commercial enterprises and business houses. Athlone, which is the centre of commercial activity on the Cape Flats has its business centre and shopping belt concentrated into one district near its ‘gateway’”

Author: Dana le Roux
27 November 1973
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
1. THE COLOURED CAPITAL

1960s-1970s: A promising future for Athlone’s Business District

“A Saturday morning there is like Saturday morning nowhere else, with throngs of shoppers and the air filled with hustle and bustle and the cries of ever present hawkers”.1 - Aly Khan, ‘Athlone seeks publicity injection’, Cape Times, 26/11/1987

The Cape Times and Cape Argus, two established newspaper in Cape Town, rendered Athlone as a place “filled with hustle and bustle”, as “the centre of commercial activity” and “The strongest buying power in the Peninsula on the Cape Flats”.2 The late 1960’s and early 1970’s were, not by incident, the heydays of forced removals as a result of the Group Area Act. In 1973 Athlone had the largest concentration of Coloured people in South Africa and was “undergoing an economic awakening”.3 On the total of two million Coloured citizens, half a million lived in the Greater Athlone area. It was anticipated this would soon increase to over 1.75 million. By the 1970’s, houses were “being erected faster than anywhere else in the country”. Although the expansive growth of Athlone’s population was to a large extend caused by the forced removals, this was not explicitly mentioned in the Cape Townian press. It was commonly represented as a result of immigration from rural areas and a high birth rate of the ‘Non-European’ parts of society.

Economist love growth, with the anticipated population increase in mind, Athlone was depicted as a place of developing business opportunities. This predicted growth triggered some daring statements. “Athlone, the hub of the Cape Flats, will be a self-sufficient municipality in 10 years’ time”.4 It was envisioned that Athlone would become the “Coloured Capital” of South Africa.

The size business district was rather limited in the first half of the 20th century. Nonetheless it was well located on the edge of the white areas and the flats, on the crossing of the Cape Flats Line and Klipfontein Road and in “a good position to intercept the potential trade from rail and bus commuters.” The N2 was not yet built and the Klipfontein was an important corridor to connect the Flats with the City centre. At first it were mainly the people living in Athlone itself, but as the Cape Flats developed and more people lived there, the “potential” soon included the commuters from “further afield” on the flats. A good consumer base was being built.

Not only businesses were believed to come to maturity, Industry and manufacturing deserved a place in the ‘Coloured Capital’ too. “More and more manufacturers are moving to the Cape Flats, and for a simple reason: They find it a great advantage to be near their labour pool.”5 In 1970 an area in between Rylands – Indian Group Area- and Manenberg -Coloured- was developed as an Industrial site. This was part of the general trend seen in Cape Town, more businesses where leaving the central areas and moved to the periphery, where they had some advantages over the central, older areas of town. Like the industrial site in Parow, Athlone Industria was situated “close enough to non-European housing areas”.6 Thanks to this strategy employees would only have to take a short commute to reach their job. As stated in the Cape Argus, employers would benefit as well because “ the wor-
ker is more willing and productive when he has only a short distance to commute. And the employer has a choice of the best available manpower in the area.” The promotion of the industrial areas is unmistakably directed towards entrepreneurs, living in other areas. The development could have been described as “creating job opportunities”, a narrative well known. This would be directed to the people living in Athlone. But, the articles are bolder and these same people become the subject of the promotion instead. Notwithstanding the new development being situated “right in the middle of a great reservoir of a good type of labour”, also known as “Coloured Group Area”, the new development was multi-racial, “any businessman may set up a factory, regardless of his skin colour”. In the Cape Times this was further explained as “there is no bar on White entrepreneurs buying land there”.

In 1971, a similar development takes place on the border between the Coloured area of Athlone and the Indian Group Area Rylands. This site was only open to Coloured and Malay. The Coloured Development Corporation, closely involved in this development, agreed to assist “any bona fide Coloured business man to acquire land as long as there are serious intentions and ability to develop the particular stand in mind.”

But the people of Athlone were luckily not only described as ‘the good kind of labour’ or a ‘potential consumer’. Other articles were full of praise of the Athlonian entrepreneur. Since 1969 a yearly trade fair was organised by the Muslim Assembly to promote “Athlone as a business and cultural centre”. As reported in the Cape Times this was the ‘first time in the history of South Africa that Non-Europeans organized a trade fair’. The revenue of the nine day event went to the social welfare programme of the assembly. To be able to call Athlone ‘the home of South Africa’s coloured people’ being the ‘labour pool’ and a ‘strong buying power’ does not suffice. In 1973 the Argus stated. “The committee visualises much larger shopping areas more entertainment and more recreation facilities to cater for the tens of thousands of people who are pouring into the Cape Flats with the takeover of the Coloured areas close to the city.” Several plans where on the drawing board. Money was made available for an Olympic sized swimming pool. Athlone had two soccer stadiums the Vygieskraal and Athlone stadium, built with delay, but still standing there. According to the Cape Argus the first indoor ice rink in Africa was built in 1982 with private money. Athlone was ready to become the “Coloured Capital” of South Africa.
Thousands attend Fair – Cape Times – 05/02/1974

The grounds at the corner of Jan Smuts Drive and Klipfontein Road in Athlone were turned into a big pleasure park at the weekend when thousands of people turned up to attend the opening of the Athlone Fair ’74.

Author: Unknown
January 1974
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
Superama makes a profit at last – The Argus – 17/01/1970

“The Coloured Development Corporation’s R700 000 supermarket at Athlone is now running at profit. The Superama was established just over two years ago, one of the main objects being to provide management training for Coloured personnel... The corporation’s own senior staff took over the management and set about introducing new control and distribution systems... To give the Coloured staff of the supermarket more direct responsibility than in the past under the White top management.”

“Superama the Coloured Development Commitee’s own supermarket in Athlone and one of the most popular shops in the whole Athlone complex.”

Author: Unknown
18 May 1972
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
2. ATHLONE’S INDEPENDENCE
1981 - Political Dreams and Expropriation in the CBD

“.. I’m prepared to let them have my front garden for widening the road. My front wall’s been knocked down by wild drivers in any case. But sell my house? They can come with their bulldozers but here I stay.” Charlotte Heber, living in Athlone for 57 years, 1981

Throughout the ‘70s there were already indications a renewal of Athlone’s CBD was on the way. The overall economic climate in South Africa changed in the first years of the 1980s. So did the image of Athlone’s future. “Clogged, narrow access roads, crime, zoning restrictions and hopelessly inadequate parking facilities.”

To name a few of the presumed causes of slowing business. The problems were not unnoticed by the City Council of Cape Town. With a report, published in 1979 Athlone ‘A Reassessment of Schemes Relating to the Athlone City Sub-Centre’ different scenarios were explored to “revamp” the CBD. In 1981 the urban endeavours of the City Council were halted by uproar in the peninsula. To realise their plans, 42 Athlonian families, possibly up to 150, were faced with the treat of expropriation. With the memories of forced removals fresh in mind, these plans did no go down well.

In 1973, the Coloured Community Development Committee expressed the hope that eventually “Athlone and its environs will be self-sufficient commercially.” However, the report showed that “only 30.7 per cent of the retail purchasing power is spent in the Athlone area itself” and as a consequence most “of the disposable income is spent outside the Coloured areas.” This would was seen as harmful for the growth potential of Athlone’s CBD and thereof the area “must be made more attractive”. It is doubtful this idea was rooted in a sincere concern with the Athlonian Businessmen or rather a concern with Coloured people going into White areas. Central to the proposed plan was “a major supermarket which appears to be desired by the majority of the Coloured and Black population in the area.”

The lack of a major chain troubled the City Council, as it would obviously attract the “coloured population” to shopping centres in white areas such as Claremont. ‘Superama’, the largest shop in the centre, was “not functioning as the drawcard that it was intended to be, because of the lack of parking and its limited size”.

The Superama was founded by the 49/51 – rule. This rules implied not more than 49 percent of an investment could be owned by a “disqualified person”. In Athlone this meant at least 51 percent of a new business should be owned by members of the Coloured community. The absence of a “major drawcard” was blamed on the fact that white entrepreneurs were not willing to invest their capital and Coloured entrepreneurs experienced difficulties in raising capital. Coloured consumers going to White areas and the “Coloured Capital” in need of “White investments”. Despite the growing population, the Councils dream of an independent Athlone seemed far away.

In April 1981 the Department of Community Development took action. Letters were sent, informing the residents of Athlone the CBD had not developed ‘in such a way that would best serve the community’. With a view to furthering ‘slum clearance’ and ‘urban renewal’, a large area of central Athlone, between Aden and Boyd Avenues, had been declared frozen. No further development by individual landowner was allowed for a period of ten
years. Thereby, expropriation notices were sent to forty-seven families, their properties were to be used in the first phase of redevelopment. Eventually, up to 150 families could be affected if the Council wanted to go forward with the complete plan. Residents had 60 days to submit claims for a reimbursement.

Urban renewal and Slum clearance were all too often used by the authorities as a legitimisation to demolish certain neighbourhoods, of which the most famous example is District Six. In June 1981 a team of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning from the University of Cape Town examined whether the Slum Act or Urban renewal act were used in the correct way in this area. Using photographs as a tool to document the area, the team came to the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of the properties was not to be defined as a slum or the area as being in decay. Therefore the Slum Act was not applied in a rightful way. The verdict of the University was simple “freezing and expropriation are related simply to commercial expansion.”

As to be expected, the families threatened with loss of property did “not want to move just so that some business man can make money more easily.” 20 Many grew up in the area, some having spent over 60 years there, and few others had moved or built houses recently. “Why did the City council pass my building plans at all?” asked one of the residents. According to the Community Development Board the owners were allowed to remain in their homes as tenants of the Department until the buildings would be demolished. Out of protest it was decided that residents would not submit reimbursement claims of their properties to the Community Development Board. They asked “the rezoning be withdrawn immediately and unconditionally” 21 The inhabitants were organised in the Gleemore Cape Flats Civic Association and many meeting were held, gathering relatively big crowds of people. In 1982, a year after the letters were sent, the case was brought to court. Eventually the expropriation order was withdrawn and the properties unfrozen. It was believed to be the first time this section of the Community Development Act was challenged in court. 22

A proposal to rezone the area instead of expropriating it, came from the community and the Athlone Business Professional Association. This would allow the owners to convert their houses or sell their properties and would be in line with the principles of the free-market system “supposedly a corner stone of the authorities’ attitude”. 23 This raised the question “Why was the department seen fit to enter the development field when it was their task was to lighten the load of persons having to sell through race removals? 24” Why has the government interfered with the free capitalist market forces? 25 According to the Athlone Business and Professional Association the crux of the problem was the development of a “magnet” supermarket complex in the area. When the Department of Community Development stepped in the development and invested money in the urban process it was legally bound to have a stake in the deal. In other words they could not finance anything on anybody else’s property. By means of expropriation they would have been able to start their own projects, according to their vision of what would “serve the community best”. This can be interpreted as building the required facilities as soon as possible, in order that the Coloured shoppers do not have to go to the White areas. Nonetheless the report of 1979, which was the trigger of the expropriation, stated the development should “retain the character of Athlone and encourag the initiative and entreprise of the Coloured people themselves.” 26
A Slum in Athlone

The legal tools used to implement the plan for extension in terms of different sections of the Community Development Act of 1966. This act replaced Group Areas Development Act of 1955 and was part of the administrative machinery needed for effecting the purpose of the Group Areas Act of 1950. Section 15(2)(e) empowers the Community Development Board to freeze an area “in furtherance of a slum clearance or urban renewal scheme”

What was understood under “Slum” had been described in the Slum Act “slum dwelling is one which is dangerous to health, unsafe, excessively overcrowded or inadequately serviced”. Medical officer of Health can inform the relevant authorities; prevent or remedy a nuisance or to meet the purpose of the Act, vis, the provision of “suitable” housing or land for residential purposes.

Urban renewal, a concept too often loosely used in the Apartheid context was officially defined as “the use of public authority power (particular expropriation) to assemble land in blighted or deteriorating area which then sold (usually at a written-down value) to private individuals or developers, hope investment will arrest or reverts that blight and stimulate further investment: expropriation as a tool to attract private investment.”

Source:
Hawker add to the atmosphere – Herald -04/08/1984

Athlone wouldn’t be the same without its hawkers. The kerbside Hawkers of Athlone are a sore point for many businessmen, but despite this, they have their regular customers. They actually give Athlone some of its atmosphere. One can buy fruits and vegetables at reasonable prices and, for crooks, they help established shopkeepers by acting as unpaid watchdogs.

Author: Peter Sternford
December 1979
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
3. ECONOMIC REHAB

1980s – 2000s: A feeling of unsafety and a wish for modernity

“There might be untidier places in South Africa, or even in the Cape, but it doesn’t seem so when one passes by the Athlone “market” at the end of a busy day – particularly a Friday or Saturday.”

Not long after the plans of the City Council were obstructed, a rather negative image of the Athlone CBD started to appear in the established newspapers. In the 1960’s and 1970’s Athlone was always depicted as a place of possibilities. It was in the 1980’s newspapers started to refer to Athlone’s Central Business District as a place people would rather avoid, due to the high crime rates. An image was depicted of slowing businesses and chaos created by street vendors. Reflections on the overall economic climate of South Africa and its potential influence on the economy within Athlone were never made. Moreover, the cinemas, which interviewees referred to as “bringing people to the area”, were closing one by one. Nevertheless, the City Council worked diligently to erase what they presumed to be the cause of Athlone’s stagnating economy.

Although the City Council realised the street vendors should be given a place within the economic system of the Greater Athlone area, the chaos they created was seen as one of the obstacles for the proclaimed economic growth. In the early 1980’s the Athlone and District management committee were in favour of installing a specific site for hawkers and Fishmongers as “The hawkers provide life and colour to the centre and contribute to its ‘atmosphere’.” A site in the North of Klipfontein road was seen as appropriate. As most larger businesses were on the other side of the road, street vendors tried to start doing business there, causing irritation to established shop owners. In 1987 this got to a climax when police forces raided street vendors and took possession of their goods. This harsh interference took place just two years after the uprising, when Athlone was patrolled by police and police raids were frequent. Therefore this action might well have fitted into the overall attitude change towards Athlone. The Small Business Development Corporation reacted with “disappointment at the disruption of hawking activities” in the raid. Moreover, the Corporation argued, could the taking in possession of goods be a serious blow to the trader, endangering their livelihood. This harsh stand against street vendors contradict the attitude of the City taken in ‘Athlone as reassessment scheme report’ of 1979. “A hawker is also a businessman, who might have an own shop later, funded with own means instead of subsidies”.

In interviews shop owners expressed the fear they had lost and will lose part of their income to newer and bigger developments, in areas which are easier to reach by car. By 1980’s the old established shops got into competition with a new image of prosperity and modernity. Although Belgravia road was hardly mentioned before, attention turned to this areas with a potential for larger business complexes. “Driving down Belgravia Road is like moving through a huge open-air shopping complex ... this combination of business and pleasure makes Belgravia Road one of the most sought after areas on the Cape Flats” Its length, stretching from Klipfontein Hanoverpark transformed it in an economic axis rather than a centre. It was said the same year, this axis would soon overtake the Athlone CBD as the place for business. Apart from the easier access for car owners
another assumed advantage the new development had over the Athlone CBD was the greater feeling of safety. In the words of Mr Abrahams, former owner of Wembley’s Roadhouse. “we don’t have a problem with loiterers ...People can come here and shop here without fear of being hassled by layabouts. And that means a lot to most people”

Years later, in 2004 the City Council carried out plans to ‘revamp’ the CBD, largely based on the study of 1979. In 2007 the CBD became part of a City Improvement District and nowadays safety guards and CCTV cameras keep an eye out. Measures were taken to enhance the safety, street vendors were allocated to certain areas, to give a modern and clean look to the area and the area was made more pleasant for pedestrians. Despite all the effort, the situation in the CBD stayed but a shadow of what it used to be. The culture scene, the bars, cinemas and hotels did not return, neither did “that certain buzz which made it more than just a place of business, but also a meeting point for neighbours and family”.33
‘unpleasant incident which included the throwing of vegetables and fruit.’ - Council spokesmen Mr Ted Doman, ‘New Plan to create more street-trade opportunities’, Argus, 19/02/1987

In 1987 police clashed with street vendors and took their belongings in posesion. This event gave birth to a series of pictures where Cape Townian Police seemingly arrests a bunch of fruits and vegetables crates.

Author: Peter Sternford
February 1987
Source: Archive Muslim View,
Athlone based newspaper
The old Athlone Stadium

Author: Unknown
Date Unknown
Source: Archive Muslim View, Athlone based newspaper
4. PROMISING THE WORLD

1990s-2000s: Athlone Stadium and becoming a World City

By 2007 the skyline of Athlone had changed again. Along Klipfontein road, in the middle of Kewtown the Athlone stadium received an upgrade in the prospect of being Cape Town’s stadium in the FIFA 2010 World Cup. After the end of Apartheid, Cape Town had the endeavours to become a world class city to attract multinationals and especially their capital. By entering this competition with other big metropolises, the city was forced to become more visible and attractive to private sector global investors. Hosting the FIFA World Cup would boost the city’s image, a well-known rhetoric.

No official international match took place in Athlone so far. The stadium is standing unfinished and empty for most of the time in a field of fenced off, unused parking space. A resident of Rylands referred to it as “a white elephant”. According to her the old stadium was used more often than the new one, due to the high maintenance costs of this new structure. Local football clubs can no longer afford to rent the stadium.

The Athlone stadium has been on the map since 1972. During the apartheid era, it was the home of non-racial soccer and other sporting codes. The stadium was the hub of non-established sport and political rallies there often put a public face on the struggle. The initial plan to “upgrade the Athlone stadium into a soccer venue of international standards” was launched by the Cape Town City Council in 1994. This was, as claimed by the council, to respond to the needs of local soccer teams, as no stadium of decent format was available in the city.

The FIFA World Cup was brought up for the first time four years after the plan of reconstruction was launched. It was believed the improvement of the stadium would “boost South Africa’s bid to host the 2006 Soccer World Cup.” These ambitions did not end with soccer, also the 2008 Olympic Games became a part of the city’s international endeavours. The Cape Flats would become the home of “one of the best sport stadiums in the world”. Starting from 2001 the discourse claiming the stadium would secure the bid to host the 2010 World Cup was mentioned more often.

The choice for the Athlone stadium as the venue in Cape Town to host the big international football matches was by all means an interesting political gesture. Or strategic political move. Either way it would have send an integrative message due to its location at the urban interface between former ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ neighbourhoods. Moreover, it was a logical choice as the Cape Flats are home to a large share of Cape Town’s football fans. According to the Athlone News, the community “overwhelmingly supported” the plan for commercial development on the land next to the stadium. This development would increase the security and investments in the area. Moreover, as stated by Gert Barn, the municipality sport and recreation manager, the stadium would become an important trigger for further development of the Klipfontein Corridor. The strategic location of the main stadium in Athlone would “re-engineer the way they [the community] use public transport centred around the Klipfontein Corridor.” Haußermann and Siebel, two German sociologist, argue that big events, such as the FIFA world Cup, can accelerate urban projects which were already planned by the host city. They introduced the term ‘festivalisation’ as an interpretation of event driven urban development strategies.
Initially, the City Council of Cape Town tried to find a private partner to “design, implement plans and to build the new stadium” and “manage the stadium on a profitable basis”\(^{40}\). In 1995 the press stated the “Preliminary analyses indicate the stadium could be self-financing, although an initial capital input would be required from the city.”\(^{41}\) Nonetheless, six years later newspapers reported this was the first stadium build entirely with public money. This contradict the common policies in the post-apartheid South Africa, where privatisation of basic services is the rule.

First critique came in 2000. The consultancy of the community primarily focused on those running a business in Athlone. It was only their recommendations which were taken into account. The community around the stadium worried about the impact the large parking space would have on the sport facilities in Kewtown. Mr Bam reassured the Athlone community once again that the city council was “committed to more integrated development that will benefit the municipality and the community.” The critique of the community proved to be justified. Sport fields meant for the children of the neighbourhood had to move to the fields next to the Vygeskraal stadium, on the south side of Klipfontein road. Furthermore would the Klipfontein road be extended from six to ten lanes, to be able to accommodate the expected flow to the stadium.\(^{42}\) Nowadays, some development in the area is halted because the organisation or business is not able to provide the required parking space, while on the other side of the road there is an abundance of free parking spaces.\(^{43}\)

Moreover, these event driven urban development strategies can be a strategy tapping funding from higher governmental levels and municipalities can overcome their traditionally limited scope of action.\(^{44}\) In 2000, a political dispute broke out about the financing of the stadium between the ANC, represented in the Cape Town Council and the New National Party, in the Cape Municipality Council. According to Mr Mowzer, from the CTC the CMC promised to finance R29 million. According to Mr Mowzer the Cape Municipal council “is not interested in the economic development in Athlone.” According to him the stadium upgrade would have been the catalyst for urban renewal in the Bokmakierie and Belgravia areas. Morkel, responding there is no use investing if the project does not prove to be economically viable, referring to the stadium as becoming an white elephant.\(^{45}\) This dispute halted the construction works several times. A year later it was the South African Football Association who took the lead and was finding ways to secure funding. The city was only willing to fund the R66 million which was the initial budget estimate. In December 2000 the governance structures of the metropolitan area had changed, so did the political will to invest in the stadium.

In 2004 South Africa was nominated to host the 2010 World Cup. By 2005 R236 million had been spend on the construction of the stadium. “money well spent” according to Gert Bam. Many living in the vicinity of the stadium could not agree less. “It is most unrealistic to have such a beautiful stadium in an impoverished area. We were promised that surrounding areas would be upgraded, but to date there’s no sign of that happening.” Said Amelia Lakay, 64 and living in Kewtown “had the relevant role players driven through the area, they would have realised how much more should be done to justify the huge financial outlay for a football stadium.”\(^{46}\) This is a common trend in Cape Town, investment in low income townships is still minimal, certainly compared to the money flow towards commercial infrastructure.\(^{47}\) The critique was easily swept under the table by Gert Bam, the development of the Athlone stadium was prioritized by the City Council because it was “part of a bigger picture.”\(^{48}\)
Unfortunately, the expenses of the City, as it turned out, were far higher than the cost of the Athlone stadium alone. This boosterism linked to event driven urbanisation often results in the costs of constructing the stadiums substantially exceeding the initially allocated budget.49 “A billion television viewers don’t want to see shacks and poverty,” as one FIFA delegate made it clear, Kewtown was not a place the FIFA wanted to be associated with.50 Another old stadium, situated in between Signal hill and the Atlantic sea, seemed better placed to please the eyes of the world’s football fans. The redevelopment of the Green Point stadium started in 2007 and was finished just two years after. The unfolding of events contradicts with claims made by Mr Bam in 2005, stating the R236 million for the Athlone stadium was “money well spent”. To underline this he explained the FIFA’s technical team visited the stadium in November 2004 and was satisfied to see that the completed complex would be able to accommodate a World Cup event.51 The endeavours of becoming a FIFA host city started with a budget of for one stadium and ended paying for two stadiums, of which one is still unfinished.

Nowadays, the City of Cape Town does carry the burden of two empty stadiums. The maintaining cost of the Green Point Stadium far exceeds the revenues the city gets from it. The capacity and technological standard of the equipment in these buildings was designed to suit FIFA’s needs, but it is not fitted to be run under South African conditions of premier league soccer. In 2010 it was suggested by observers smaller cities would struggle to fill their stadiums ever again after the world cup. The reality shows even larger metropolitan areas, including Cape Town, who cannot attract enough public to make the stadiums profitable. Cape Town had enough problems; deficits in housing and difficulties in creating jobs close to home, as well as huge traffic problems. All of which can be traced to urban policies from the past, without even contemplating the costs required for the World Cup.

Cape Town is no different in the respect that most media attention went to the construction of new and revamped stadiums. More infrastructure has been build outside of the international spotlights. The ‘Bus Rapid Transit’ service was introduced to bring the visitors of the city from the City bowl to the airport and the northern suburbs, passing the Cape Flats, without stopping. The World Cup, similar to other Mega events, had a more direct influence on the urban sphere. While it is hard to doubt the positive effect of improving the existing sport and transport facilities, these investments were not always in line with overarching principles of spatial development.52 As the case with the MyCity bus, which shows similarities with the construction of the N2 during the apartheid.53 Both crossing the Cape Flats, without many points of connection. This is a common trend in Cape Town, investment in low income townships is still minimal, certainly compared to the money flow towards commercial infrastructure.54

But the world Cup did not only had a lasting influence on the infrastructure. Other means were also deployed for the promotion of South Africa. The ‘warmth of the reception by ordinary South Africans’ played also an important role in the image of Cape Town as an worthy tourist destination. On the site in Kewtown a so called “Public Viewing Area”55 was installed. These proved to be places of encounter between international supporters and locals in previous World cups. The, perhaps artificial, forums of encounter were not irrelevant in the promotion of the City. The housing blocks in Kewtown were given a facelift for this occasion. While the facades received a new layer of paint, the inhabitants took temporary shelter in blue shipping containers. These temporary homes appear once in a while in Cape Town, for similar operations. The distribution of the Public Viewing areas
can be read as an attempt to equality. Bellville in the North East was formerly a ‘white’ group area, the ‘black’ Philippi in the South East and the centrally located Coloured Athlone. Moreover, as the “Public Viewing Areas” do partly escape the strict policing of the FIFA committee, the City council has more decision rights and these places proved to be an important new terrain of event driven urban policy. Apart from the possible symbolic choice, the distribution played a role in equalising traffic flows and alleviating congestion in the City Bowl.

Another temporary urban policy during the World Cup was to ban unwanted urban activities. Informal traders were obliged to leave the newly proclaimed exclusionary zones around the stadiums and being policed to make sure they would not try to sell any product with direct reference to the World Cup. The bus system of the MyCity transforms one lane of main arterial roads into an exclusive BRT lane. Minibus taxis and other public transport are not allowed to use these lanes. With the introduction of this system, the informal taxi industry was opposed to this subsidised competition.

Athlone was left on the edge of the FIFA-triggered urban development, literally as well as figuratively. Therefore the negative effects of FIFA’s list of demands on the informal sector was perhaps less strong in this area. Today, taxis stop in front of the empty stadium. Little market stalls sell household items to the travellers who change taxis on this place. The MyCity does not serve Athlone. David, who lives next to the stadium does not understand the critiques of others. “It is beautiful to see when an event, such as the coon festival takes place and the stadium fills up with people. So many people coming to Athlone, I feel proud when I see this.”
The Athlone Stadium today

Author: Unknown
Date Unknown
Source: Archive District Six Museum
SIDE NOTES: THE BIGGER PICTURE

In contemporary planning policies Athlone is still referred to as an economic centre, a standing narrative since the 1970’s. The most prominent difference is that in the past the future of Athlone’s CBD looked very bright. Nowadays urban policies can only refer to this past. Many projects have been put forward to bring “new air” in the economy of the centre. Money and resources have flown in the area, but the situation seemed to worsen throughout the years.

Two major shifts can be observed. The changing relation between economics, urban policies and the dominant political ideology left different marks on the economic situation of Athlone. From the heydays of forced removals to a post-apartheid Cape Town other priorities were brought to the front. Beside this shift in the actual urban development and policies, the shift in how this reality was documented, perceived and narrated reveals itself. The overly positive tone half a century ago is linked with a strong believe in the possibility of a completely segregated Cape Town. The “Coloured Community” would get its own metropole. If Athlone would fail to become independent, so would the believe in the apartheid city.

The image of Athlone mirrors the overall political and economic climate. It’s future was bright as long as the wealth of the white South Africans could call themselves the most prosperous in the world. In the 1960’s till the beginning of the 1970’s South Africa was marked with high growth rates and the White part of society had the highest levels of consumerism, globally speaking. The oil-crisis was especially felt among the non-white part of society.\textsuperscript{58} In 1972 the introduction of the television was a fact, an evolution the National Party tried to procrastinated as long as possible. It was not long after this, the cinemas in Athlone started to lose business. The decline of the CBD was caused by an overall loss in purchasing power combined with the closure of the cinemas, the “magnets” in the area, to use the words of the Coloured Community Development Board.

Growth should be assured and Athlone was condemned to get a facelift. Although the history of the expropriation of 1981 did not leave a mark on the build environment of Athlone, it demonstrate the omnipresent nature of the state. More direct are the concerns with coloured people spending most of their income outside the Coloured Group Area. It is questionable this is caused by a genuine concern with the Athlonian businessmen or rather by a fear of two supposed communities mixing. “Perhaps the greatest asset that the centre possesses is the Coloured people themselves. It is difficult not to be impressed when wandering through the centre during peak shopping periods by the good humour and vigorous colourful life of the people.”\textsuperscript{59} The apartheid ideology shows itself, sometimes rather subtle, in the recommendations made for the revamp of the CBD. Statements as “The socio-economic characteristics of the local population should be discussed with the community” revealed a rather patronising view from the inner city towards the Cape Flats. “Planning should promote a state of unity an civic pride among the community ... Planning should foster community identification”\textsuperscript{60}

In the ‘80s the shopping fabric start to change and larger complexes start to serve car owners. This development was seen as a positive evolution by political, economic and media authorities. These very same powers seemed to wonder why the situation in the older business parts was still worsening.
With apartheid, the strong state was very visible and literally intervening in the most personal spaces of one’s home. When change came in 1994, the state took a rather neo-liberal stand, promoting privatisation. With the abolition of apartheid, local governments moved closer to the urban residents. For township dwellers this was the first opportunity to elect councillors in a democratic system. The restructuring of municipalities also made spatial planning more transparent. Meanwhile, megaevents often exceeds the scope of the legal instruments a local authority can deploy. For effectiveness, the build-up for any big event galvanises administrations and generally leads to a concentration of governance. As an effect, the re-empowerment of higher levels of government unfortunately undermines the possibility of citizen participation in the urban development.53

The narrative depicting Athlone as an economic centre gained momentum in the late 1960’s, simultaneously with the forced removals from inner city neighbourhoods. This is by no means coincidental. Policies as the Group Area Act might not been the only stimulants for the growth of the CBD but it did provide some kind of security and protected the centre from competition with larger “white owned” centres. On the other hand it was an artificially constructed centre, which got support from different government organisations with a clear political project. As stated in 1973 by the Cape Argus: “Today business enterprises are flourishing in Athlone under the policy of separate development. Some business undertakings have been launched with the financial backing of the Coloured Development Corporation. “Other supermarkets and shopping complexes are planned ... That will mean very few residents coming into the city to shop or work”62 Nowadays the old barriers are gone, at least in legal terms. Areas which used to be less accessible are not anymore, and Athlone’s CBD has to endure competition from other so called centres. Obviously, Athlone would never been the same “economic hub of the Cape Flats” without the Group Area Act. The paradox is that the idea of ‘Athlone’s independence’ was initiated by political and economic powers based beyond the borders of the area, in central Cape Town or Pretoria.
Klipfontein Road, Athlone, is a busy artery with modern shops and cinema’s

Author: Bell Mollen
31 July 1973
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
BUILDING THE CAPE FLATS

NARRATIVE: APARTHEID’S DUMPING GROUND

The common narrative of the Cape Flats features it as a place of crime and the lacking community. The area, described as Apartheid’s dumping ground by some, is all too often contrasted with the city’s beautiful, white suburbia and “spectacles of consumption”. The notion of Cape Flats as the dumping ground of the Apartheid regime seems to suggest Athlone’s history is exclusively connected to the forced removal from inner city neighbourhoods, a product of the Group Area Act. The most dominant narratives represent the Cape Flats as a place which is in sharp contrast to the old demolished neighbourhoods which are seen as places of community, belonging and safety. For many the Group Area Act is solely linked to those resettlements to yet to be developed townships in the periphery. But as the example of Athlone shows, also so called ‘disqualified’ people from those areas had to move. An older business woman, whose father was one of the first to settle in Athlone, confirms that Athlone was a racially mixed suburb. She remembers the many Jewish pharmacies and Indian shops which were scattered around Athlone’s small business centre. “Athlone was very diverse... All of them had to move out, it still makes me very sad” Various books describe the impact on communities and personal lives of the forced removals to the Cape Flats. Less is written about the small established communities on the Flats, which fell prey to forced removal as well.

The Group Area Act, obviously, had played a major role in the shaping of Athlone and its community. However, within the area there is a range of different housing typologies, from informal shack dwellings to fenced-off villas. Therefore Athlone cannot solely be described as the homogenous result of Apartheid policies and forced removals. The old centre of Athlone existed more than half a century before the National Party came to power in 1948. Athlone started as a racial mixed but economically segregated suburb, separating the better off from the working class by a river and a railway line. Later racially segregated housing schemes were established, they were denoted for Non-Europeans only. Kewtown, Silvertown and Bridgetown all predate the Group Areas. It was in 1957 that Athlone was designated for the Coloured group and Rylands became an Indian Group Area. With the forced removals in the ‘60s and ‘70s there is a new wave of building and influx of people. Through different phases, Athlone was the result of a combination of political motives, land speculation and people searching for better opportunities and lives.

Apart from information in literature covering different periods, the influence of the government becomes clear in different official documents consulted. The cadastral register of Cape Town reveals a shift in owners after 1957. Apart from maps and plans, the National Archive stores communications between several Departments and citizens regarding among other things Group Area Permits, applications to develop townships and complaints. These letters give detailed and personal information.
1. STARTING A WORKING CLASS SUBURB
1900-1930: Wood and Iron as the ‘pioneers’ of Athlone

It was only after the start of the twentieth century Athlone as we know it today started to develop. At the end of the nineteenth century there was not much more than a few farms in the area, referred to as Black River, named after the stream dividing the land with the established suburb of Rondebosch. By 1920s the blocks close to the railway station, in between Lawrence road and Grasmere street became sparsely populated. This settlement was instigated by several developments in the political and urban landscape of the Cape Peninsula. By the end of the nineteenth century the staggering population growth had led to the overcrowding and poor living conditions in the inner city. The construction of the Cape Flats Line in the early years of the twentieth century made it possible to escape those areas and still be linked with the ‘place of employment’. Around the same time, in 1897, Mombray, Rondebosch and Claremont passed building restrictions which required new buildings to have outer walls constructed out of brick or stone. On the other side of the river, in Athlone the cheaper wood-and-iron construction techniques were still permitted. It were these building restrictions in older areas, closer to the city centre, which triggered the growth of Athlone as a working class suburb. It is trough interventions like this one too the Cape Flats was shaped.

While most of the land in the Greater Athlone area was owned by a few families, the area where the station is nowadays had already been subdivided. In 1865 several lots were consolidated and divided in 56 smaller parcels commissioned by SA land and Co. The initial subdivision put in place a grid of major roads, but the subsequent speculative development created an ad hoc planning layout for the area. As further subdivisions of larger plots took place, more roads were laid out within the previous plots, creating a patchwork of seemingly random street patterns. Within the existing suburb two townships, Lawrence and Pliny, were developed in 1926 and 1931 respectively. This phenomena is not often seen and points to the rather speculative nature of this development. Some family names appear several times on different plots in the cadastral registry of cape town. This may indicate the families rented out some of their land and might not have lived in the area.

The first houses constructed in Athlone were in wood-and-Iron. This building technique was exported all over the British Empire in course of the nineteenth century. In 1904, twenty-three percent of the housing stock in the four colonies was built with the wood-and-iron technique, mainly used in the mining industry. The Victorian attitude towards corrugated iron was rather ambivalent. It was acknowledged for its obvious utility, but at the same time “looked upon with a critical eye and was spoken of derisively”. Furthermore building techniques were being viewed in hierarchical fashion, at least by the white census takers. Wood-and-iron was ranked lower than stone and brick and placed higher as wattle-and-daub. This was not solely a reflection of the economic class but had a correlation with race as well. Different building techniques were seen to fit different ‘racial’ groups in society. Obviously the highest ranked material was reserved for whites, followed by coloured and blacks. Some of the original buildings of Athlone still exist.
Their rather negative association, with poverty and the perception of it as an inferior construction technique, is still prevalent today. The residents of the houses carry the stigma of not being able to afford decent housing. The early phase of Athlone’s development was the product of subtle political moves interfering with a great deal of land speculation.

Although some carefully engineered measures, such as building regulations ruling out cheaper building materials, cannot be perceived as free of all racial segregating intents. As Cape Town’s upper class was predominantly white, the gross of the Non-Europeans could not afford own property in the artificially expensive areas. This economic segregation was a trigger for the later racial one. However, it was only after 1875 that segregation “gradually reached down into Cape Town’s lower classes and separated Africans, Coloured and Whites” and so lower class urban residential space became more segregated as well. Nonetheless, in the case of the older parts of Athlone, cadastral registry shows families names of varying origin.

The deed diagram already shows street pattern of present day Athlone represented in the subdivision. The deed also reveals the Cape Flats line was not yet build, but only a path way was running from North to South.

Source: Chief Survey General, Cape Town
First development of Kewtown

“Q-town [Kewtown] in Athlone, Cape Town, a war-time sub-economic housing development for the coloured (slum) population of the inner city areas.”

Author: Unknown
1941

Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
2. PLANNING ‘NATURAL’ SEGREGATION
1920-1950: Coloured housing in Bokmakierie and Q-town

Planned political segregation did not start with the election of the National Party in 1948, but already took off in the decades before. By the 1920s and 1930s residential segregation was as firmly rooted in all Cape Town Council housing as it was to become in the municipal area in the 1950s and 1960s. Residential segregation itself goes back to the colonial past of Cape Town, when the city was ruled by the British dominant class. South Africa did not differ much from the practices seen in the rest of the British empire and the USA. Racism was seen to be scientifically proven and therefore justified. A common belief among Whites was the assumption that a segregated society was the way society ought to be. Therefore, specifically for whites-only suburbs – such as Oranjezicht, Camps Bay and Milnerton – were being created since the 1890’s. When the outbreak of the plague in 1901 hit the city, African immigrants were blamed for the spreading of the disease. This resulted in the first forced removals to the Cape Flats. Ndabeni, the first “Blacks-only” location, was established. These ‘sanitation measures’ instigated the stigmatisation of people of colour, linking them to poverty and unhealthy living conditions. However, residential integration remained a feature of the older lower class areas such as District Six. Among the lower class Whites a substantial part was Afrikaans speaking who were immigrants from the countryside. Consequently, there was more at stake for the Afrikaner social worker, whose main motive was to pull the ‘poor white’ out of the ‘saamwonery’ in which they got stuck.

With the growth in population, the housing needs were increasing yearly. This came to a climax in 1918 by the Spanish influenza epidemic and the unhealthy situations in the overcrowded older neighbourhoods. The City council had to become more active in housing provision in order to alleviate the crisis. This episode triggered the state’s entry into the housing field, with the Public Health Act of 1919 and the Housing Act of 1920. The latter placed the onus of providing housing for those who could not afford it on the shoulders of the local authority. However, it was not designed as a legal instrument to force these authorities to provide housing for the poor. The Housing Act requested the City councils to provide an indication of the target group, in racial terms. But it did not obligate the authority to provide segregated housing. This differs from the apartheid legislation in the respect that it has a prevailing nature rather than making policies compulsory.

The City Council was not extremely keen and ambitious in its housing schemes at the beginning of the 20th century. It was constantly trying not to displease the ratepayers and directed its Housing priorities accordingly. Therefore it said not to be willing to “house the man who does not pay his rent” , effecting in only those in steady employment qualifying for council housing. This led to the decision to first house its own municipal employees, who were only a fraction of those in need. Furthermore it explains why the City Council responded slowly on the housing need of citizens, who did not belong to the group of ratepayers. Pineland, established in 1919, was one of the earlier attempts to house the ‘labouring classes’. Inspired on the British ‘garden city’, Pineland was directed to a very specific group; white municipal employees. The garden city concept, with its ‘low density housing, advocacy of decentralisation and green-belt buffer zones’ was suitable for the implementation of residential segregation.
With the Central Government entering the housing field, there was much less reticence on the question of racial segregation as before. Official reports were not deterred to be full of references to the different standards of living and culture of various race groups and their varying needs.16 In 1925 the Council purchased a ‘site at Milner on the cape Flats, in easy access of the railway’. This would become Jametown and Gleemoor became among the major sites for the Assisted Housing Scheme in wood-and-iron during the 1920’s, which represented the systematisation of a previous ad hoc building system. As mentioned before, building techniques were not meaningless in a society in which racial divisions became more prevailing. Critique on the use of wood an iron was easily swept away by the City Council: “the iron on the roof and the wood compromising the ceiling and floors of a wood and iron cottage will last just as long as the wood and iron used in the construction of a brick house”17. It was clear the majority of the coloured working class was not too eager on the segregated housing policies as can be read in the establishment press and the ‘Council’s self-congratulatory reports’. It was the Central Housing Board which alerted the Council to the need to “push on vigorously with propaganda work” and did “a great deal of propaganda work by means of meetings held in various parts of the municipality”. Despite this obvious need to promote the new housing estates, the mayor declared the scheme would result ‘in happier conditions for those living on the state’ and ‘a feeling of pride and satisfaction in occupying what in time will be their own home.” 18

In 1927 the central government made a nationwide budget available to solve the country’s housing backlog. The lion share, £600 000, was given to Cape Town. The City Council once again gave preference to the construction of housing schemes for its own employees.19 Initially a Coloured housing scheme was planned in Oude Molen, causing uproar in the nearby white suburb. The inhabitants argued that “scattering the Non-Europeans from one end of the city to the other was not in the best interest of Cape Town... The city should be completely zoned... so that certain sections should be set apart as European areas, others as Non-European areas and areas where noxious trades might be established.”20 The scheme got build nonetheless. Other coloured housing schemes had to give in on the taxpayers wishes. In 1930 a Coloured housing scheme was planned in the vicinity of the white suburb of Rondebosch. Likewise, the plans were faced with protests from the Rondebosch and Mombray Ratepayers’ Association. To lead the conversation away from the race-question, the major problem was said to be the fact the Housing scheme was for sub-economic rent. As stated by the deputation of the association: “The Coloured man who owned his own house was respectable person. This could not be said of the sub-economic class of person.”21

The Bokmakierie township was born out of the fear of the White and wealthy ratepayers to have a Coloured sub-economic housing scheme “on less than a stone throw away from the best European residences in the Peninsula”. A site close to the working class suburb of Athlone and well ‘beyond the Cape Flats railway line’ was allocated to build the new township. Ultimately, it was said Bokmakierie was meant for the ‘better-class Coloured people’. Moreover, officials had the idea ‘the coloured people will of their own accord and quite naturally flock to these settlements where they can enjoy wholesome amenities of life and live under hygienic conditions.” The hope was projected Bokmakierie would become “a village for Coloured people” with “comfortable cottages and gardens... its own churches, a meeting hall, schools and cinemas.”22
White Ratepayer’s influence on Coloured Housing

In 1948 the Landsdowne and Crawford Ratepayers’ Association forwarded the following communication in regard to the matter of a Non-European housing scheme which was proposed in Belgravia and Thornton road.

“Our concern originates from the fact that the area involved adjoins a existing established high standard European residential area and the scheme would firstly militate against the development of one of the few areas in the peninsula available to the man of average means desirous of possessing his own home and secondly would ultimately cause extreme financial hardship to the present property owners in the area.”

“It is presumed that the above mentioned scheme is ancillary to the nearby proclaimed industrial area on land bordered by Blomvlei ad Turfhall roads, but while the advisability of a conveniently situated labour force for industrial purposes is conceded, it cannot be agreed that such a proposal should be permitted to the detriment of the existing property owners and the prospective European residential development of Lansdowne, especially in view of the fact that there exists in the nearby vicinity a densely populated Non-European area.”

“Adverting to the question of a labour force for the prospective Lansdowne Industries, it is appreciated that for the paying classes a Non-European economic housing scheme is to be established at Hermasburg, and probably near the Black River.”

Source: 4/2/1/1/642 file 1/3/7
Inside Bokmakierie - 1932

The patronizing attitude towards the tenants of the Bokmakierie ‘village’ can also be read in the caretaker’s report, which covers the period from 1932 –1934. Sharing rather personal information about the tenants with the City Council.

“I found It necessary to report three men (outsiders) to the police for creating a disturbance in the village. They were fined £1 or seven days.

“Mrs E Johnson has still made no attempt to clean her house. I have again written her about this matter.”

“J.D. Harricombe had some temporary work last week starting on a new job this coming week, and has promised to reduce his outstanding rent very considerably this week”

“C. Sampson has still got his uncle staying with him”

“I have already twice reported that the road gang does not clean the invert under the streets, consequently as soon as it rains the water clams in the gutters. Unable to flow it become stagnant. Please notify Roads&Drainage to instruct their gang to rectify the matters.”

Source: CDC 23 32/1/2019/23
National Archive of South Africa
By 1939 plans for the extension of the Athlone suburb were on the drawing board to release the City’s endeavours to ‘hasten’ segregation.23 By 1929, Sunnyside, a Coloured Housing scheme in the South of Gleemore, was well on the way. In the North of Gleemore an ‘elite’ township was envisioned. In 1939 Alickdale was developed, following modernist planning principles. In 1948, the remains of what used to be the Vygekraal Farm were annexed in favour of the Council of the City of Cape Town. On certain plots of land townships had started to develop, such as the Rosedale Township in the corner closest to the old areas of Athlone. Simultaneously the myth that residential segregation was coming about ‘naturally’, and that it was indeed the ‘natural’ way of life was fostered by the ruling classes. The City Council believed that the new housing schemes near Athlone would ultimately accommodate 50,000 people, roughly one third of the Coloured people in the Peninsula.24

“We cannot hope to transplant them all in one year. All we can do for the present is to stop their intrusion into European residential areas.”

The coloured housing schemes were constructed almost 20 years before the Group Area Act. The Cape Town City council, as has been seen, pursued a housing policy which, as far as racial bias went, was in keeping with the prevailing ethos. There was no question but that the ‘white race’ rightfully occupied the position of privilege and power. In the beginning of the century the Council kept the colour consciousness of its housing schemes to a suitably low profile as it did not desire to have a crudely racist image. This was before it was forced to publicly label its scheme either ‘Europeans only’ or ‘Non-Europeans only’ by a growing Afrikaner nationalism in the provincial and central governments. In 1939 a City Councillor said the segregation of the Coloured people could be brought about gradually “without any harsh treatment of those concerned and ultimately to their great advantage.”25 The Group Area Act of 1950 was not a major break in the Urban policies shaping Athlone, but an acceleration of the ‘Natural’ segregation. The Group Area Act, as proven, was not the first measure to limited property rights of Non-Europeans. Nevertheless it was only after the Nation Party took power segregationist measures became coherent and compulsory in nature.
Plans Kewtown

The Houses which had already been build had to make way for the new scheme that was planned: three housing schemes Q-Town (Kewtown), Bridgetown and Silvertown. This development, on the North side of Old Klipfontein, has a completely different spatial logic as the parts of Athlone on the South side, which has everything to do with how the land was developed in terms of land divisions.

Source: Archives cadastral registry
Chief Survey General, Cape Town, Plein Street

“This new Coloured township will not only give slum dwellers a new lease of life and present opportunities for their upliftment at present denied to them, but will hasten and assist the government’s policy of separate residential areas, a policy which, under the misnomer ‘segregation’, is now being referred to as if it were something new, although in fact it has been followed in practice whatever possible by Coloured and Europeans for many year.”

Cape Times, ‘Homes for 30,000 Coloureds, New town to arise on Cape Flats’, 23 March 1939.
B is a 1/4" round iron peg in cement beacon.
ERAL are fence standards in concrete.
I is a 3/4" pipe in concrete.
All other beacons are 1/4" round iron pegs in concrete.
3. BECOMING AN INDIAN AREA
1957: Mapping the effect of the Group Area Act on Ryland

After the National Party came to power in 1948 the last bit of reticence about racial segregation in Cape Town’s urban planning policies disappeared. The Group Area Act from 1950, seen as the cornerstone of the apartheid regime, was installed to eliminate racially mixed neighbourhoods. The urban landscape of Cape Town is still substantially shaped after the ideologies behind the Act. From 1950 onwards there was a strict control on interracial property transaction and the occupation of land in general. It was the first drastic rights infringements for the Indian and Coloured population. The act provided governments on different levels with the legal tools to install the so called ‘Group Areas’. As soon as a neighbourhood was demarcated to a certain group, the Act gave legal power for the demolition and expropriation of houses in ownership of a “disqualified person”.

In the Southern Suburbs and most of the city centre, the dispossessed Indians, Africans, Coloureds and Malays made way for Whites as the Group Areas Act made its presence felt. In 1957 Athlone was proclaimed a Coloured Group Area. Rylands, one of the neighbourhoods along Klipfontein, became an Indian Group Area. Whites, Coloured and Africans had to move out, Indians moved in. The biggest Indian Group area in the Peninsula was right in the centre of ‘the Coloured Metropole’.

To try to get a grasp on the effectiveness of the Group area within the Rylands area, extension n°1 is used as a case study. This group of blocks is the oldest part and approximately one sixth of the complete Ryland area. The first owner document testify the area was part of the bigger Zwartdam erf. In 1928 the property was subdivided in different lots. Five of them were purchased by Mr Taylor, subdivided again into 380 parcels and put up for sale in the same year. The two middle erfs were bought by Henry Hendricks and was only divided into smaller plots in 1952 and therefore left out of the case study.

The first 20 years the development of the area happened on a slow pace. Between 1928 and 1940 only 33 parcels were sold. By 1948 this increased to 159 plots. Coloured owners were by far the most dominant group and only 29 of the total were in Indian hands. As only the owners are documented, the obvious shortcoming of the cadastral registry is that possible tenants are not included in the research. Oral history can fill this gap, in ‘Speaking about building Rylands’ by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie is the result of several interviews. The history told corresponds with the cadastral registry documents. Older residents remember the area being sparsely populated with houses standing far apart and a lot of bushes around. There were very few Indians families and most coloureds were living in ‘shacks’ while Muslims tended to have brick homes. In 1905 the first mosque on the Cape Flats was founded, the Habibia Soofie Masjid. Later in 1943 the Habibia Koknie Educational Institute was established. It was the presence of these institutes which presumably played a role in the allocation of Rylands to Indians.26

By the end of 1955 a total of 250 plots were sold, a duplication compared to ten years before. The number of Indian owned properties increased in a similar fashion. It was in 1956, the year before Ryland was proclaimed an Indian area, that this trend changed slightly as it was mainly the Indian group which multiplied. That year alone 20 properties were transferred to Indian ownership compared to just 6 properties which went into the Hands of Coloured people. This may be explained by the prospect of Rylands soon falling
prey to the effect of the Group Area Act. As shown on the little map published in the Cape Times, there were already indications Rylands would become the main Indian area. It is not hard to suspect one might have anticipated this might soon be reality. Notwithstanding only ten percent of the Cape Indian population was living in Rylands at the time of the proclamation of Rylands.

As the Group Area kicked in, the cadastral registry document give a more realistic image of who lived where. Before the Group Registration Act of 1950, only names were recorded and in the seldom case the owner was a woman, her marital status was registered too. As most people in Cape Town are from mixed and varying decent, it is difficult to know which “Group” someone belonged to. From 1950 on the “Group” of the owner was written down in the cadastral documents. Only the labelling ‘Native’ occurred since a longer time. After Athlone and Ryland were demarcated as Coloured respectively Indian areas, every plot received a stamp, mentioning the Group Area to which it belonged. Simultaneously parcels owned by a “disqualified person” would, literally, get a stamp of ‘Affected Property’. This simplification of reality helped in the research of how many Indians were living in this part of Rylands. Moreover, the Group Area Act took control of who rented or occupied a property. Disqualified persons were not allowed to occupy any land nor premises in any group area to which a proclamation relates, except under the authority of a permit.

Although the application of a permit was investigated by the Community Development Board, in the end it were central authorities, seated in the than capital city, Pretoria, who had a final say in the provision of the permits. Whether or not following the recommendations made by the CDB. Nonetheless, when the authorities decided to decline an application the property was seen as illegally occupied. If any immovable property was acquired or held illegally without the correct permit, Section 20 of the Group Area Act empowered the Minister to force the owner to sell the property within a three months, or it could be sold at public auction. For the greater Athlone area alone, 250 of these “Groepsgebiede aansoeke”-documents are stored in the National Archive of South Africa. This bulk of the remaining paperwork is a silent witness of the bureaucratic and omnipresent Apartheid state.

These permits, the “Groepsgebiede aansoeke”-documents, stored in the National Archive of South Africa, reveal a part of the power exercised by the Department of Community Development. When owners of ‘the wrong group’ were not able to sell their property to a person of the rightful group, the Department intervened and would appoint itself as potential buyer. The price offered was never corresponding to the market value. As can be observed in the maps, the City Council was only a small player in the housing market in Rylands. In 1979 a bit over one fifth of the housing sites were owned by the ‘Nationale huingskommissie’.

The maps show the change in ownership did not take very long. By 1960, three years after the Group Area Act made its introduction in Ryland, the amount of Indian families living in the area had doubled simultaneously resulting in a major decline in the total of ‘disqualified persons’. That there was no significant population growth can be explained by the fact that most older residential areas were demarcated to a certain group after 1965 and forced removals from these areas accelerated in the 1970’s. In the 1960’s there was relatively little interest in buying or renting properties, since few people lived in the Indian Group Areas. Moreover, people had waited for their area of residence to be prescribed to them before they moved. Many thought it was hard to believe they would soon fall victim
The series of maps show the effect the Group Areas had on the development of Rylands and the people who were (forced to) live there. The important dates are 1948 when the national party came to power and 1957, when Rylands was declared for Indians only. The information on the previous ownership of every of these parcels is stored in the Office of the Chief Survey General. The map on the next page compromises the main information extracted from the three books of the cadastral registry.
to demarcation of the area they were living in and being ladled as a disqualified person.\textsuperscript{28}

As shown in the maps, by the late 1970s the gross of the parcels were already sold and owned by Indians, whereas in 1957 it was only a small minority. By 1975 300 of the 330 examined properties was in hands of an Indian person. Of the remaining plots, 19 were under the control of the Community Development Board.

Families who moved in those years were left with land which was expensive and scarce. In 1979, 13,000 Indians were living in Rylands with 3500 others yet to find accommodation needing an estimated 600 extra houses on a total of 1800 plots in the whole of Rylands.\textsuperscript{29} With the boom in population, triggered by the forced removals a housing shortage prevailed. To acquire or rent state sponsored land people had to place their names on waiting lists. The ranking of the list was decided by the Community Development Board and the City Council, a selection which was done on the basis of financially reliability, good references by Indians well reputed by these departments, and lack of a prison record or anti-government political involvement. The oral testimonies in ‘Speaking about building Rylands’ point out this system was prone to bribery and a preferential treatment of the rich. With the City Council offering little, those with less means battled to secure a council home.\textsuperscript{30} Those who rented on the private market often moved several times. Because there were so many other prospective lessees in a search for accommodation, landlords could hold tenants completely at their mercy, since they were so easily replaced.

By 1980’s the Group Area Act had completed its job in the Rylands Extension n°1. All ‘disqualified persons’ were removed and the area was now ‘purely Indian’. Whether the housing stock met the artificially created demand, is yet another question.
The Case of the Kismet Cinema

The Kismet cinema is well known in the area. The building which still bears its name, stands in old Klipfontein road, the hearth of ‘the coloured Metropole’, owned by an Indian entrepreneur. It has from the very beginning been in the hands of the Patel families, one of the front runners in shaping Rylands.

Since the 1968 the cinema was in an uncertain existence, threatened by the Group Area Act. Every year, sometimes 6 months, an application to the Department of Community Development in Pretoria had to be send. A permit is granted to him because the Gatesville business district was not yet developed and the owner’s name was on the waiting list since 1966 to obtain a piece of land in Rylands.

Whether the permit is granted or not depends on the attempts the owner made to sell the property. When they can prove they sincerely tried but did not manage, they can receive an extension. 1970 is the first year the Kleurling-Ontwikkeinskorporatie declares itself a potential buyer. Patel is not willing to sell his property for the proposed budget, which is below the market value he argues. At a certain moment (1972) the question is raised what will happen if Patel will not get the cinema site in Ryland’s. Two fases in the treatment of Patel can be distinguished. Till 1973 the Department argues Patel dependents on the income of the cinema and he provides a service to the community. Later letters state” they should put more pressure on him, in order so he will sell the property” this is all for his own good. As soon as the department realises Patel owns much more property, their stand is more harsh and he constantly gets referred to as ‘a millionaire’, meaning the clerk in function should not feel all too sorry for him. As a rule Indians entrepreneurs face more resistance from the Department than Whites to obtain a permit in a Coloured area. In 1976 the Department grants a two year permit ‘for the last time’. However in 1979, Patel is able to prove it is beyond his own .. he was not able to sell the cinema to someone of ‘the rightful group’. He receives another permit, on the name of his son.

Source; CDC 98 file: 32/1/4400/10
4. SHAPING THE COLOURED METROPOLE

During the late 1960s and 1970s the urban policies of the apartheid regime accelerated. In the beginning of the 1970’s estimates where made the population of Athlone and the areas around would increase from half a million residents to one and three quarters of a million people in ten years’ time “through massive housing schemes”. Contrary to the situation in Rylands, where most properties were privately owned, the Department of Community Development was playing a more important role in the other areas of Athlone. The proportion of the Coloured population of Cape Town housed by the council had increased from about 12 percent in 1952 to about 55 percent at the end of 1973. The built up area along Klipfontein road was expanding further south and east. The years before the plans were made for the new coloured townships of Manenberg, Hanoverpark and Bonteheuwel.

To give an answer on the self-created housing shortage the Department had a plan ready to transform the old golf course in Athlone in yet another residential area. Whereas the other planned areas were on the border of Athlone, this one would be in between Silvertown, Bridgetown and Bonteheuwel. The Department ‘needed’ the open land to resettle the residents of the Bloemhof flats and go on with the plans for the ‘redevelopment’ of District six as a white area. The land was property of the City Council, which refused to take part in the plans of the Department. The department had the legal power to expropriate the course. “We believe the people in Bloemhof should be allowed to stay, so we don’t have any alternative plans for them.” The Athlone and District Management Committee opposed the plan as well “The Department has given whites the bigger slice of land and now it has problems. It will have to de-proclaim certain white areas in order to settle these people. We don’t want the golf course used as Athlone is already overcrowded, and an extra 600 families will create serious problems in the area.” The main worry of the Committee was the prevailing lack of open space within Athlone.

While areas as District Six were being demolished under the disguise of the Slum Clearance Act, The older housing schemes, Bokmakierie and Kewtown, were falling into decay. A large share of those who were housed by the council had to live in conditions worse than the “slums” the Department was so eager to erase. The Department however was less keen on providing proper housing than to build new houses so they could go on with their plans for expropriation. One of the problems was the council’s refusal to canilase the Vygeskraal River which periodically flooded. In winter times people had to wade through puddles to reach their doorsteps. This was the place the City Council had earmarked as for the ‘better-class Coloured people’. In Kewtown residents avers that in the first years the City Council took their maintained job seriously, but by the 1970’s the area started to look more like a ‘slum’.

As a consequence of the massive housing shortage squatting became prevalent during the existence of the Group Area Act. In the established press the cause of the housing backlog was blamed on the those who ‘move in from outside Cape Town [and] are not able to provide own housing, so [they] have to share or illegal squatering’. The same newspaper wondered if the ‘Coloured housing problem’ was really that ‘critical’ that the City Council could ‘claim there was no alternative but to allow people to continue living
in their ramshackle and unhygienic shanties many cheek by jowl with good middle class homes’. The same article cheered that the few “slum ridden areas” in Cape Town are “taken care off... District six ... is being demolished as a first step in an urban renewal scheme.” Later the same year, 120 families on Hein Road, Athlone, had to make way for an industrial development. The City Council did not provide any aid. Faced with a list of 17000 Coloured families waiting for housing, there was not much hope for the Athlonian families to be housed by the Council anytime soon.

The private sector attempted to fill the gap made by the City Council and Department of Community Development. In 1980 a “50 house village in the centre of Kewtown” had been constructed by the ‘self-help organisation’ ‘Build A Better Society’ together with Mobil Oil as the main fundraiser. This was believed to be the first housing project in South Africa funded by a company for people other than its own staff. Mr PW Wilson, the chairman of Mobil Oil, called on more members of the private sector in overcoming the severe shortage of housing for black people. “Without the involvement of the private sector, progress in housing will be too slow to respond to the expectations of people.”

But it was not only out of charity that the private sector interfered to relieve the housing shortage in Athlone. While most attention went to the areas adjacent to the Klipfontein Road, at the same time in the South of Athlone it was private driven development which were shaping the area. Moreover many displaced did not want to move into ‘housing schemes such as Bonteheuwel’. The policy in sub-economic housing schemes was that rental was charged on a sliding scale according to income ‘so that a family could find itself in a sub-economic house, paying what is virtually an economic rental’. Several suburb like ‘townships’ which had been on the drawing board for quite some time were finally realised by private developers. This made Athlone one of the most active areas as far as property transactions were concerned.
Housing situation in Athlone

“Mrs. W. Brooks with her children outside her “home” in Third Ave, Athlone, which flanks one of the modern house in this “elite” Coloured suburb. Mrs Brooks has had her name down for a council house for two years but sees no prospect of being given one soon.”

Author: Dana Le Roux
August 1974
Source: Archive The Independent,
Special collection UCT
SITE NOTES: SPECULATION IN THE FLATS

Although Athlone already had a small established community before the ever present Apartheid system came in existence, the area is without doubt shaped by political motives. The power of the state and its influence is proven by the different documents shown. The image of forced removals brings the idea of direct aggression shaping Athlone. Not to be forgotten are the ‘state simplification’ in official documents and permits which can shape an image of the area in a radically different way. These differences could mean being allowed to live in the area or not. On the other hand it was not by state intervention alone that Athlone and its communities were shaped. The power of capital too was, by default, decisive.

Starting with the very first division of lots was a fact well before the railway line was built and therefore not responding on a factual housing demand. Followed by the street layout of the oldest area of Athlone which was outlined by a strive for a minimum loss in buildable surface. The first stages in the development of Athlone are initiated by economical forces and speculation rather than by straightforward political motives.

The property prices in Athlone inflated after the start of the forced removals from the older residential areas by the end of the 1960s. In the 1970’s, with the height of forced removals, Athlone’s real estate market became the most active of the Cape Peninsula resulting in a ‘strong competition for property, and especially vacant land’. Being a result of the Group Area Act, this high demand was artificially created by political endeavours. In Rylands seven percent of all privately owned properties was in the hands of one family. This was a total of 149 sites, of which only 6 were developed by 1979. Those who had bought properties in the Indian areas, before they were labelled ‘disqualified’, obtained them far cheaper than at the inflated prices of the 1970s. Some of these families shaped Athlone and Rylands to a significant extend. By providing the community with specialised shops, entertainment and places of worship, they still have a high esteem in the area.

Apart from the state and capital power from outside, there was the will from the middle class who took an important role in the shaping of Athlone. Although this was legally speaking the responsibility of the Community development board, Businesses, cultural venues, cinemas welfare centres, churches, mosques and churches were established by Athlonian.

With the abolishment of apartheid and the disappearance of the Group Area Act, property was no longer designated for certain group and the market became open to all. The politically inflated housing prices in Athlone and Rylands “imploded”. Meanwhile, previously with areas became the most sought after in the Peninsula. Property price started to increase in these areas which already benefited from lower prices because of lower demands. It may not come as a surprise the struggle was not exclusively directed against the ruling apartheid regime an sich. For some it also meant to acknowledge that part of the problems faced where inherent to a capitalist system as race and class in South Africa intersected in a very obvious way.
ON THE SIDE LINE

Physical borders and Apartheid’s scars

The apartheid city was designed to control the movement of its citizens. The crossing of Group Area borders was discouraged or even made impossible in various ways. Infrastructures, such as rail- and highways, large stretches of vacant land and industrial areas form barriers which still divide the city and the different communities. Nowadays they are referred to as ‘the urban scars of apartheid’. Besides, infrastructure is not only a barrier, the carefully designed lack of infrastructure is just as much a limitation of movement. Formerly white areas were and still are better connected than the areas on the Cape Flats. The development of the MyCity bus unfortunately reinforced this division.

The development of Athlone brought about various street layouts in the neighbourhood. The older estates and neighbourhoods, mostly privately initiated, have a rectangular grid. It is only with the development of Kewtown and Bridgetown another idea behind the street layout becomes prominent. Before the group area, a raster is the norm. Later street patterns are designed to limit the possible exits, granting more control over the influx in the neighbourhood.

The lack of overall planning combined with a desire for movement control resulted in Athlone being a group of disconnected neighbourhoods. Old intended barriers function differently today and post-apartheid infrastructure reinforcing segregation. Today old buffer zones allow alternative ways of moving through Athlone while personal boundaries are constructed out of fear and form a limitation of movement as well. What follows is an attempt to map and visualise several physical and mental borders within Athlone and is based on stories told by Athlonians and own observations.
Useful Barriers or dividing infrastructure

In the case of Athlone the heavy infrastructure does not follow the old lines of the Group Areas. The railway line is not a barrier between two different ‘Groups’, as defined in the Act of 1950. In the north of Kromboom road it separates the poorer, former coloured, working class areas from the a richer Coloured neighbourhood. On the wealthier, western side of the railway line signalisations warn this is part of the Lanroe neighbourhood watch. The area is cleaner than most other areas as its inhabitants are encouraged to take care. They follow the ‘broken window’ principle.; an area which looks dirty will lead to more crime, it is believed. (site van de neighbourhood watch) The CCTV Cameras are installed to keep supposed criminals at the other side of the railway line.

Kromboom road is elevated and crosses the railway line. The bridge is the border between former Coloured and White areas. In 1940 the road as well as the railway line were easily crossed. Desire lines testify the railway line did not have a fence and Kromboom road was not yet elevated.

Jan Smuts drive, running parallel to the railway line, was constructed in 1987 and breaks through a previously connected neighbourhood and separates them. Back than it was referred to as ‘natural development’, necessary to accommodate the increasing traffic flows.² It is worth noting the city planners did not bother to connect the streets of the older parts with the new drive way.
Visual manifestations of invisible walls

The Apartheid regime was not solely concerned about the creation of living in ‘separateness’. The construction of ‘otherness’ was inherent to the system as well. Therefore the infamous Department of Community Development, who was responsible for the deconstruction of racially mixed neighbourhoods, had as main task to do what its name suggests; the development of racially ‘separated’ communities. Every ‘group’ of people should not only have its own land, but should be able to develop their own culture within this space.

There were different radio stations for every mayor language group. On the so called ‘Bantu radio’ people were encouraged to sing in their own language. The pride in ‘their own culture’ also contributed a reinforced ‘separateness’. Music and Cinema were subjected to different censorship, as it was believed different ‘races’ were in a different stage of development; “civilization that we have reached... things which they cannot understand should not be shown to them and...there are some filters which can be exhibited much more safely to a white of fourteen years than to an adult Bantu”

This creation of ‘otherness’ manifested itself within the borders of Greater Athlone in several bizarre ways. So had Rylands High, the only Indian high school in the area, different organisation and better facilities. This is no surprise, given the fact that every ‘Group’ had a different kind of education. On top, the governmental authorities had made an effort to distinguish and isolate Ryland High students from other schools. These measures included prescribing a manifestly contrasting uniform. Every school in the area had a slightly different uniform, expressed in badges and ties. But where all coloured schools had grey trousers with black or blue skirts, in Rylands High the uniform was rust trousers and skirts with dark brown blazers.

As Rylands and Gatesville were not fully developed for a long time, the Indian population depended on a large extent on facilities of the Coloured Group Area within Athlone. This close proximity of the two ‘Groups’ led to ‘die sekretaris van Gemeenskapsbou’ in Pretoria being occupied with deciding what the audience within an Athlonian cinema should, literally, look like. The Regent Cinema in old Klipfontein road received a permission in 1960 to lease the venue once a week to the Indian Community, to enable them to screen Indian films. Although it was against the law to let Indians occupy a venue in the centre of the Coloured metropole, the ‘Departement van Kleurlingsake’ was in favour of the application. The strict physical separation was secondary to the construction of a distinct ‘Indian Identity’.
“The attempt to restrict Indians (and other population groups) to group areas is an attempt to isolate them not merely residentially, but also, in practice, socially, since a large amount of domestic level interaction occurs between neighbours. This social restriction is especially effective given the practice of domestic seclusion of women. The latter does not only entail that women maintain the house whilst men go out into the external world to support the household, but it also entails that women seldom venture from their houses and gardens alone, and that they restrict their social activity to interaction with neighbours and relatives. Thus, in an Indian-only suburb, the housewife’s choice of neighbours with whom she can interact is severely restricted.”


Buffer zones separated Indian Rylands from the surrounding Coloured areas in an almost ridiculous way. The “zones” are grass patches of a few meters wide which can easily be crossed and are rather alienating places today. If you believe the quote above, even this would suffice to separate certain communities.
Subdivision in land

“We had pride in our neighbourhood. It was an estate with avenues and sounded rather posh. But even the estate had its prejudices. First Avenue was the poshest and Eighth – best not visited. People would steal us we were told. We lived in Second Avenue.” — Ivan Johnson in ‘Jenga Man’.

Today borders are experienced in a different way, they are in function of economic status and fear. Vygieskraal is an area many see as the roots of a lot of problems. The line between ‘Belgravia estate’ and the Vygieskraal informal settlement exist longer than Athlone. The division line originates from deed diagrams from the 19th century. It used to be a line dividing two farms, now it is an economic and mental barrier.
Klipfontein, an economic border

The last century Klipfontein road has been widened several times. Nowadays the road has ten lanes and divides the north, which has the stigma of being a poorer and gang controlled, from the South with its rather suburb-like housing estates and business centres. What was once the backbone of the area now separates it in two half. Despite the physical distance, it is the psychological one which is dominant. Klipfontein is not too difficult to cross by foot, but many would rather not try, the north side scares them.

“We tried never to venture anywhere near “Die Blokke” as there was only one place worse and that was Bokmakierie – to the left and behind us across the road from Athlone. The name itself scared the shit out of us. It probably had decent enough people but we never bothered to find out.” – Ivan Johnson in ‘Jenga Man”

Within Kewtown people draw lines too. The block they know always seems better than the one on the other side of the street. “This side is ok, but on the other side gangs often clash. Yesterday a woman was shot on that square. Please do not walk there.” Fear of crime, to be robbed or worse, caught in a cross fire, is a stronger border today than the physical ones.
Buffers as connectors

Long rectangular blocks lay next to each other, in-between are the straight, seemingly endless, roads. Deciding to walk these roads takes courage, or the absence of a car.

The perpendicular way of moving, along the planned straight lines, is perforated on some places. The lack of overall planning combined with a desire for separated neighbourhoods left green spaces between them. The paradox is that the places designed for a controlled movement, create possibilities to bridge distances in alternative ways.

Driving along Klipfontein road, close to the Vygieskraal many people walking on paths in an open grass field. Most of them seem to live in the informal settlement, on the other side of the river. The vacant grass field, meant as a barrier between Athlone and Rylands, is never empty.

Most open terrains in Athlone are fenced off, limiting the possibility to cross the field. On some places, like the football field on the opposite side of the Vygieskraal Stadium the Fences are ‘altered’ and permit a degree of permeability.

The buffer between the ‘Indian’ and ‘Coloured’ area is walled off on some places by the back of the bordering houses. Therefore they cannot be crossed transversal but they are still used in a longitudinal way to shorten distances. Old buffer zones are now connecting the different neighbourhoods in an ‘informal’ way.

Today, the diagonal movement along desire lines has become a phenomena in the margins. Most pathways lead to informal settlements or poorer areas within Athlone. Those using the paths are mainly people who cannot afford a car. The paths gross Athlone diagonal and reduce the wideness of the area.
Paths as mainstream

The Younger generation, and newcomers in Athlone do not know anything else than the fully built, fenced off place. Athlone is now, "Younger people do not remember, this was all bush." But older residence easily recall the period when Athlone and the surrounding areas consisted of vast open fields. The desire lines had to make place for the development of houses and fences.

Looking at the map of 1944 Athlone looks like a collection of different islands connected through very few roads. However it is the paths through the bushes and sandy under-ground which form the main connection. These paths didn’t differ much from the so-called roads. Only a few of the later where paved, including (Kiplingen) road. Others, similar to the paths lines in the sand. The contrast however is that these lines, now called roads, can be found on maps and go an official status later on.

As Coloured and Indians were forced to move the Cape Flats in the 1970’s, Athlone’s exansion began. Plots were bought. Houses built and fences erected. The new stone structures occupy the grass fields and bushes had to make place for flower beds. The new paths which connected the different neighbourhoods are interrupted cut in pieces. Every crossing of the open fields is replaced by the movement across the planned lines of streets.

Movement is restricted and regulated by City plans and have to follow the perpendicular logic of the streets. Distances between the different neighbourhoods become longer.
Trapped in space

Limiting the possibility to move is certainly a key aspect of the apartheid regime. The strong narrative of the Cape Flats is the one the poor are “trapped in dangerous spaces” and are “unable to shape their environment”

When you hear children, not much older than 10, justify their “unwanted behaviour” by simply saying “Kewtown”, the idea of being trapped easily comes to mind. But as diverse as the houses, so are the people in Athlone. Shop keepers in Gatesville who are born in Morocco, but lived in Athlone for over 20 years, as a choice, tell a different story. Many others, who were born in Athlone, moved to many places in the City before they settled again, in Athlone. Yet others are part of communities, religious or sporting activities, in the centre of Cape Town.

That the disappearing of the paths is an indirect result of apartheid policies, is arguable. The Group Area worked as a trigger for the rapid development in Athlone, neglecting the natural values. The loss of an open view might as well have contributed to the frustration and feeling of ‘being contained’. This limiting of views and the senses which was a product of the all kinds of Apartheid measures, including the divided schooling system.

Vygieskraal, 1988
Source: Archive The Independent
Special Collections UCT
Landscape and Movement as Apartheid’s ‘victims’

As mentioned before, one of the urban legacies of Apartheid are “the scars”, which slice the city in parts. Looking closer at the metaphor of the scar, in essence a discontinuity in a tissue left after it was damaged. Looking at the primary borders of Athlone, the N2 and the railway line, it is difficult to talk about scars as the neighbourhoods and the transportation lines developed simultaneously. Considering Athlone and all its Urban Problems indeed as a scar, left by apartheid. The fields are gone and replaced by suburbs, having an impact on the plant and animal life, as well as on the human experience of the place. What then, would be the original tissue, the landscape, “sandy windswept dunes and bushes” which used to form the Cape Flats.

*Belthorn Estate 1962*
*Source: Athlone Public Library*
The landscape as the forgotten original tissue

For long the Cape Flats did not appear on maps of the Peninsula. The deep sand made it difficult to transverse the area stayed an empty spot on European maps for long. Later on, the area was the Britisch empire ‘colonized’ the Flats by planting foreign plant species in an attempt to stabilize the sand. The imagery of a windswept, sandy terrain within which only hardy plants survive has endured.

The ignorance about the landscape of the Cape Flats can also be seen on drawings, depicting the landscape around Cape Town. The stunning background of the side of the table mountain with Devils peak is never shown. The views mentioned are those of boats approaching table bay from the northern site or from the Voortrekkers road. Today the logo of the city is table mountain seen from ‘Table View’, a touristic beach resort. Nevertheless, the majority of Cape Townians have a completely different daily view on the mountain.

From 1962, Athlone had its own distinct landmark, the two Athlone ladies, the two cooling towers, which feature as a background of many pictures. Talking to some residents still feel sad thinking about the destruction of these towers in 2010. They became a symbol of the area in some of the works about Athlone. 10
Above:
Views of Cape Town and vicinity
Circa: 1818

Right:
Map of land allotted at the Cape of Good Hope giving the numbers of the plots and also the names of the owners.
Circa: 1660

Source: Special Collections UCT
EPILOGUE
ALTERNATIVE FACTS

The existing literature about Athlone is framed within specific narratives. Those concerned with the creation of certain aspects in the Athlonian community all have a strong sense of what Athlone’s past should look like. As a result most stakeholders did not see an added value in a dissertation on ‘the’ history of Athlone.

This is in contrast with the many, rather casual, conversations I had with the ‘normal’ man and woman on the street. Most of them reacted a bit confused on the idea of someone coming from Belgium, to write a history about their home and neighbourhood. I shared this feeling to a large extend.

Some were surprised that a history of Athlone could be written at all. ‘Athlone’ seemed to have disappeared from the map or at least from their minds. But eventually many reacted with enthusiasm and a feeling of proudness, ‘Yes, Athlone has a lot of history people should know about’.

Not being a stakeholder and without any memories of this district it was easier for me to write independently, not having any interest in the possible conclusions and outcomes of the research. This does not mean the work is ‘neutral’. The source material was stored outside Athlone, and most of the documents were owned and made by ‘non-Athlonians’, who had an influence on the area through political or economic power. This reinforces the fact that my dissertation is told from outsiders perspectives.

I found Athlone framed as a place of political struggle, economic prosperity, Apartheid’s dumping ground or as a specific landscape. An attempt was made to tell, question and nuance the different narratives in order to put them on equal footing. Their impact on the built environment was described, effects and side effects were highlighted and assessed.

Interventions in Athlone can no longer be framed within one narrow gaze, to reach only a fraction of those who could possibly benefit. The narratives which contradict with the selected narrative should be kept in mind and valued as well.

This work is, of course, not all-encompassing. There may be many more ways in which to tell and capture a history of Athlone. But the most prominent ones of them have been discussed above. Hopefully, it can contribute as a background for the development and testing of future narratives.
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PART III: ON THE SIDE LINE


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LIST OF FIGURES, MAPS, PLANS

All the annotated pictures can be found in the archives below

ARCHIVES

Athlone Public Library, Old Klipfontein Road, Athlone
Aerial photographs, Newspaper clippings: Athlone news

Central Library Cape Town
Newspaper clippings: The Cape Times, Athlone news

District Six Museum
Photographic archive, Newspaper clippings

EOAN Group, Klipfontein Road, Athlone
Photographic archive

Land Survey General, Plein Street, Cape Town
Cadastral registry, Deed diagrams, General plans

Muslim View, independent media, Hood Road, Athlone
Photographic archive, Newspapers

UWC Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archive

National Library in Cape Town, Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town
Newspaper clippings, Photographic archive The Cape Times

National Archive of South Africa, Roeland Street, Cape Town
Variety of Official documents

Nantes Community Park, Loeri Road, Athlone
Plans, Photographic collection: personal photographs

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Figure Abstract: Muslim View

ONLINE

Etienne du Plessis
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Instagram:

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All unannotated pictures, not mentioned above, are made by the author.
All maps, unless stated differently, are made by the author.

The maps are based on:
- available GIS information from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform,
Mowbray CT
- Field work
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CHAPTERS


DISSERTATION


