

Transforming our townscapes: the Pietermaritzburg experience

by Robert F. Haswell

GIVEN that statues and memorials occupy, and often dominate, the public places in our towns and cities, they constitute part of a comprehensive challenge: how to transform our townscapes – the buildings, public places, place and street names – such that all South Africans feel more at home in them, take more pride in their upkeep, and have more of a sense that they contribute to nation-building?

The city of Pietermaritzburg has taken several positive steps towards making its townscape more reflective of the city's rich and multi-ethnic history and demography, and it is instructive therefore to review and critique the Pietermaritzburg experience, and to identify what still needs to be done.

Succinctly, the site was chosen, named and laid out by Afrikaner Voortrekkers in 1838, with an extensive grid plan focusing

characteristically on a large central church or market square.¹ However, Afrikaner hegemony was short-lived, with the British taking over in 1843 and proclaiming the place as the capital of the Colony of Natal in 1856. The plots were too large, the houses “slimly built and inconveniently small for persons who come to them with English notions and habits”.² The name of the place was soon abbreviated to Maritzburg, and many of the Afrikaans street names were either anglicised, such as *Kerk* to *Church*, or changed entirely, such as *Nel* to *Commercial*. Others, such as *Loop* (walk) and *Boom* (tree), survived intact, but lost their meaning. So complete was the British makeover that Alan Paton wrote, “I did not realise when I was a boy that my home was a Voortrekker city. Nor did I have any idea that the street names were Dutch.”³

Every capital (in the British Empire, at least!) warranted a Town Hall, a Legislative Assembly Building, and a statue of Queen Victoria. The statue of Queen Victoria was the first of these to be erected, in 1887, at the time of the Golden Jubilee of the queen. The Legislative Buildings followed two years later, providing a suitable colonial backdrop to the statue. The last of the three to be built was the Town Hall, an imposing edifice erected in 1893, not in the centre of the large town square, but on the corner site containing the Afrikaner Raadsaal (Council Meeting Hall), which had been built between 1838 and 1843, and which had now to be demolished. However, in 1898, a short five years after its opening, the Town Hall burnt down, in somewhat suspicious circumstances. Undeterred, a larger and more ornate Town Hall rose Phoenix-like from the ashes, while equally suspiciously a nearby mosque and an “Arab” store burnt down. A number of architecturally important government buildings, such as the Post Office, Police and Railway Stations and several schools, along with many fine commercial and residential red brick buildings ensured that the city was recognised as one of the finest repositories of Victorian buildings in the British Empire.

However, the formation of the Union of South Africa, and the later establishment of the National Monuments Commission, ushered in an era of biased heritage proclamations. In fact, the first item to be proclaimed in Pietermaritzburg was a tree, in the shade of which the Volksraad, according to a single source, decided to submit to the British Commissioner in 1842. This tree had to be de-proclaimed when doubt was cast on

the authenticity of the source, and no documentary proof was found. Several other dubious Voortrekker relics were proclaimed, and a number of plaque site-markers recalling Voortrekker buildings no longer standing were put up. In 1947, two plaques were affixed to the entrance walls of the Pietermaritzburg City Hall, pointing out that this was the site of the Voortrekker Raadsaal, but it was only in 1969 that the City Hall itself, which with its 47-metre-high clock tower is undoubtedly the city’s main landmark, was belatedly proclaimed a national monument. “It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the city’s most prominent building was well-nigh invisible, for 22 years, to those who viewed South African history from a Cape-Dutch perspective”.⁴ Even the Church of the Vow was given a pseudo Cape-Dutch makeover.⁵

Not surprisingly then, central Pietermaritzburg’s historic statues and memorials reflect and commemorate only the city’s Afrikaner and British heritage, by means of statues of Piet Retief and Gert Maritz, and Queen Victoria and Theophilus Shepstone respectively. In similar vein, the city’s war memorials, as impressive as they are, do justice only to the white victors. One has to look very closely indeed, to become aware of the fact that local “natives” fought alongside their white counterparts: one of the four figures on the Anglo-Zulu War memorial, which stands at the corner of Church and Chief Albert Luthuli streets, is that of a native scout; while the four-panelled memorial to the “Langalibalele Rebellion”, which stands in The Carbineer’s Garden, adjacent to the City Hall, contains the inscription “To Elijah Kambule and Katana, Loyal



Gert Maritz



Piet Retief

Natives who died in a cause not their own”, on one of the panels.

One has to travel some 10 kilometres from the City Hall to George-town, to see a memorial to the African contingent – the Edendale Corps – who died alongside the British soldiers at Isandlwana.

How then did the powers that came to be set about making this historic cityscape more reflective of its other than Voortrekker and British history?

In 1986, every building and monument in the central area was documented, such that the architectural and historic importance of buildings of



Elijah Kambule and Katana: “loyal natives” who “perished in a good cause not their own”



The Georgetown Memorial to the fallen of the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War



Selby Msimang's grave in the Georgetown Cemetery

different eras, and reflective of other than European endeavours, was recognised, and deemed worthy of conservation. Thus, North and South Indian temples, barracks and humble gabled dwellings, with their palm and loquat trees, along with several mosques, were recognised as just as important as the Voortrekker and Colonial contributions. Unfortunately, a planned second volume covering the buildings of the outer city was not undertaken. The occasion, in 1988, of the city's 150th birth year, prompted the city and the University of Natal to publish *Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988, A New Portrait of an African City*.⁶ Then in 1992, the Gandhi Memorial Committee – with Dr “Chota” Motala in the chair, and Mr Dasarath Bundhoo as the driving force – applied for permission to erect a Gandhi statue in the city's main street and directly in front of the Colonial Building, which formerly housed the officials whom Gandhi peppered with letters and petitions. The Council approved, and the statue was unveiled by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Nelson Mandela in attendance, on 6 June, 1993 – the centenary of his eviction

from a train at the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station. Plaques in the main station building, and a plinth marking where Gandhi was actually evicted from the train,⁷ have become a must-see for Indian visitors to the city.

On 25 April 1997, the City of Pietermaritzburg conferred the Freedom of the City upon President Mandela, on the basis not just of his enormous contribution to our country but because of his strong



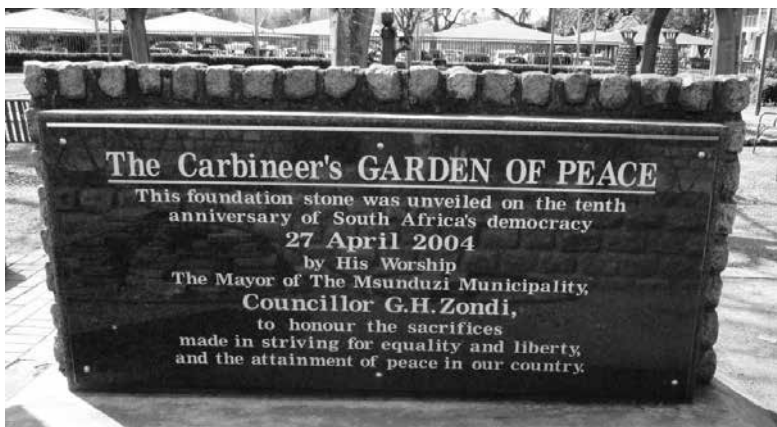
Gandhi statue in Church Street.

associations with the city. On the same day and on behalf of the city, Mandela conferred the Freedom of the City posthumously upon the Mahatma in a ceremony held on the platform of the railway station. In so doing an

infamous event was transformed into a celebration of who this young barrister became.⁸ At the same ceremony the City also conferred Civic Honours on men and women from the various communities which make up the city.⁹ Then in February, 2000, the City conferred honours on a further seven people and, posthumously, recognised Bishop John Colenso, Rolfe Dhlomo, Selby and Richard Msimang, and Alan Paton.¹⁰

With Mandela's assistance other sites of importance have been identified, such as his arrest site, which has now become a landmark and tourism centre, the magistrate's court in which he was remanded for trial in Johannesburg, shortly after his arrest, and the small hall in Imbali in which the All In Africa Conference was held in March 1961, and in which Mandela delivered his last speech as a free person prior to his 27 years of incarceration.¹¹

Next, the Carbineer's Garden, located alongside the City Hall was enlarged and, at the request of the Carbineers, renamed "The Carbineer's Garden of Peace". An African sculptor was commissioned to produce a piece



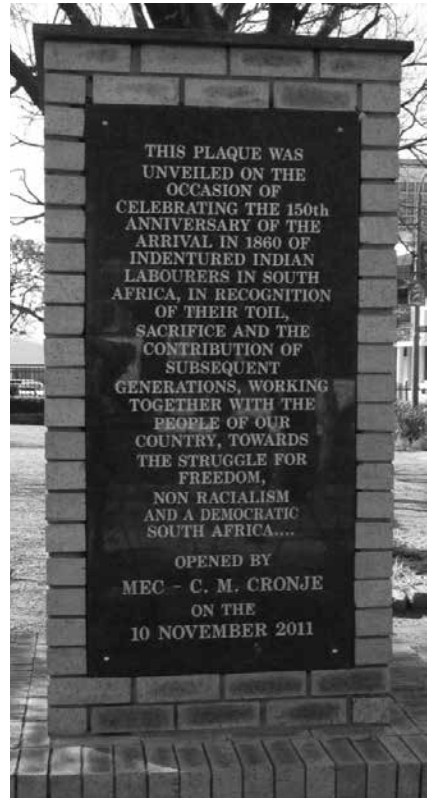
Memorial stone in the Carbineer's Garden of Peace

reflective of different people coming together to establish peace. Thus a garden which previously recalled only conflict is now dedicated to the attainment of justice and peace. Recently a statue of Josiah Gumede, president of the ANC in 1927, was erected in the Gardens. At the time of writing, this statue had not yet been officially unveiled and there is no indication of whom the statue represents. According to Mr Phumlani Gumede of the Pietermaritzburg Tourism Hub (who identified the statue), Josiah Gumede will be followed by other figures, including Alan Paton and Moses Mabhida. There is also a recently erected memorial commemorating 150 years since the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in Natal.

After the enlarging of the Carbineer's Garden, the Council embarked on



Statue of Josiah Gumede in the Carbineer's Garden



Memorial stone commemorating the arrival of indentured Indians in Natal

the contentious process of changing of street names,¹² and were fortunate to have Professor Colin Gardner chairing and leading the committee. It was decided to honour men and women from different backgrounds who had close connections to the city and who had distinguished themselves by standing out from the crowd in the cause of freedom. Thus, today one gets off the N3 and drives into the city from Durban along Alan Paton Avenue, which merges into Chief Albert Luthuli Road and crosses Jabu Ndlovu, Langalibalele and Hoosen Haffajee, and then later becomes Peter Brown Road. The City Council also saw fit to rename two of its administrative office buildings.¹³

In April 2008, the Natal Society Library, which had been enlarged and upgraded, was named the Bessie Head Library, after the noted literary figure who was born in the city.

The City Hall is no longer simply the largest load-bearing brick building in the southern hemisphere, or merely where the Comrades Marathon starts, but is now recognised as an iconic landmark – the only building in the world in which Gandhi, Luthuli and Mandela have spoken. There is probably no better city in the world in which to walk in the footsteps of Gandhi and Mandela, but trails and informative brochures are needed.

Clearly, much more remains to be done, or these first steps will become merely cosmetic. It is insufficient merely to proclaim the retention of offensive memorials, on the grounds that “they are all part of our history”, or simply to propose that they should all be moved into a colonial and apartheid Jurassic park. The simplistic “You can’t erase history” needs to be

replaced by the more complex and nuanced statement, “We must erase the whitewash interpretation of our history, and replace it with a more balanced interpretation, which yields more ethnic and more gender-sensitive public places.” Instead of excusing and idolising disreputable figures on the grounds that “they were merely products of their time”, we should be recognising those who stood against oppression and injustice, because they were courageously and commendably ahead of their time.

For example, much has happened in and around Pietermaritzburg since 1988, and a more comprehensive and up-to-date history needs to be compiled and written. Other buildings, such as the house at 433 Boom Street, where Mandela and Walter Sisulu regularly sojourned (Sisulu called it his first home in Natal), need to be identified and conserved. Similarly, the sites where prominent leaders, such as Skumbuzo Ngwenya Mbatha, Chief Mhlabunzima Maphumulo and



The new name of the city’s library, with the old coat-of-arms of Pietermaritzburg above the name

the Reverend Victor Africander, were assassinated await identification. Georgetown, where Richard and Selby Msimang were born and reared, and where Albert Luthuli was educated, is crying out for attention and recognition as an important crucible in the long struggle for freedom. The transformation of the city's Old Prison in Burger Street, from a place of punishment into a place of learning, is to be commended in this regard.

I would therefore propose the urgent initiation of a city-wide process of rewriting and reinterpreting the history of Pietermaritzburg, from the bottom up. Local historians, teachers, ministers, men and women, the aged and the youth need to be brought together, perhaps under the umbrella of the Ward Committees which should be operative. Oral and written history must be taken into account, in an attempt to come to terms with our deeply troubled yet heroic past. Stories, events and people which enrich our understanding and acceptance of both the mistakes and sacrifices of our past, must find expression in new memorials. Another Civic awards ceremony is surely warranted, with communities invited to nominate worthy recipients. Let the people decide, and let public subscription provide the finance. Few cities have such a troubled past as we do, but even fewer have risen above their past to build an acceptable future.

In essence our Constitution calls on us "to recognise the injustices of our past, honour those who suffered for justice and freedom, respect those who have worked to build our country", and reminds us that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity". Surely our townscapes should do just that.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For details of the Voortrekker period of Pietermaritzburg's history, see Haswell, Robert. 1988. "Pieter Mauritz Burg: the genesis of a Voortrekker hoofdplaats" in Laband J. and R.F. Haswell (eds) *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988: A New Portrait of an African City*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and Shuter and Shooter. pp.24-25., and Haswell, R.F. and R.W. Brann. 1984. "Voortrekker Pieter Mauritz Burg." *Contree* 16: 16-19.
- 2 Mann, Robert James. 1859. *The Colony of Natal. An Account of the Characteristics and Capabilities of this British Dependency*. p.147.
- 3 Paton, Alan. 1980. *Towards the Mountain*. New York: Scribner. p. 4.
- 4 Haswell, Robert F. 1986. "The Conservation of South Africa's Built Heritage: A Multi-Ethnic Challenge." *Theoria* 67: 45-52
- 5 According to John Moreland, the Byrne Settler Agent, who lived in Pietermaritzburg from 1859, the renovations of the building in 1913 "have really gone too far to obliterate, instead of restoring the old pile, which like other buildings of the period, was remarkable rather for solidity than for beauty. The door, the elevation and superstructure of the gable was non-existent in the old building." (*The Natal Witness* 13 November 1913, p.5.) The present building is therefore a fabrication, designed to reinforce a mythical history, and hardly worthy of proclamation.
- 6 A feature of all the previous histories of Pietermaritzburg, "is that the emphasis is on the growth of the white community, and its achievements and potential, and that scant mention is made of the blacks, coloureds and Indians who are equally part of the city", Laband J., "Recasting the Portrait", in Laband, J. and R.F. Haswell, *Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988*, page xxiii. Laband goes on to say "... there is a consistently growing awareness that Pietermaritzburg is not just the city of the white settlers of the nineteenth century and their descendants, but of all the people who make their homes here and work for its prosperity. Consequently, the part played by the black people in the City's life will increasingly receive the just attention that has been denied it in so many works published in the past."
- 7 Based on the trains used by the Natal Government Railway, their average length, and the place where they came to rest at the stations, and noting that the First Class coach was always at the rear, the Pietermaritzburg

- municipality was, with the help of Bill Bizley and Bruno Martin, able to pinpoint the likely spot.
- 8 The granting of the freedom of the city to Mandela and Gandhi prompted a leader article in a Durban newspaper in which Pietermaritzburg was lauded: "Pietermaritzburg has taken the innovative step of linking a living legend with the spirit of a former political giant whose statue already graces its centre," *Daily News*, April 8, 1997, p.12.
 - 9 Detailed motivations are contained in the brochure "Special Council Meeting for the Purpose of Conferring Civic Honours, 25 April, 1997".
 - 10 "Special Council Meeting for the Purpose of Conferring Civic Honours, 22 February, 2000".
 - 11 A comprehensive and well-illustrated account of the conference appeared in DRUM, May, 1961, pp.8-12. Mandela's identification of his 1962 arrest site is described in Haswell, Rob, "Mandela's Shoes", in Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), Special Supplement, *Natal Witness*, December 5, 2013, p.12.
 - 12 For a detailed analysis of the public response to this, see Hilterman, T. and Koopman, A. 2003. "A high degree of wayward folly": An analysis of public response to a proposal to rename streets in central Pietermaritzburg. *Nomina Africana* 17(2): 1-36. See also Koopman, Adrian and Deane, John. 2005. "New names for old: Transformation in the streets of Pietermaritzburg." *Natalia* 35:85-90.
 - 13 The building previously known as 333 Church Street was renamed the A.S. Chetty Building after Appiah Saravanan Chetty (1929-2000), former leader of the United Democratic Front, city councillor, and a former Deputy Mayor, and the Symons Centre was renamed the Professor Nyembezi Centre, in honour of Cyril Lincoln Sibusiso Nyembezi (1919-2000), humanitarian, lexicographer and writer, whose best-known novel, fittingly, was titled *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* (The Gentleman from Pietermaritzburg). Both Chetty and Nyembezi were born and raised in the city.

PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs in this article were taken by Adrian Koopman.