

Cape Town Stories

Apartheid - its effects and its ending



Gordon Gaddes

BOOK SAMPLE

These pages are the chapter recounting the history and development of Langa Township and what life is like there today.

If you would like to know more about the book or purchase it

Price £14.00 inc.postage, please contact Gordon Gaddes at

gordon.gaddes@btinternet.com

All proceeds from the sale of the book are donated to UK Langa Township Pre-School Trust.

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Langa Township

Langa Township is a suburb of Cape Town, lying 15 kilometres to the south-east of the centre of Cape Town, almost adjacent to the international airport. It is bounded in the south by the N2 motorway, by the M7 in the east, the M17 in the west and the railway to Cape Town in the north. There is only one vehicular entrance to Langa, off the N2 via Bhunga Way, thought to have been planned long ago to enable it to be 'shut down' in times of trouble. Over the M17 to the north-west is the delightful garden village of Pinelands.

Langa stretches across part of the area to the south-east of central Cape Town known as the Cape Flats, which includes other townships such as Nyanga, Gugulethu, Khayelitsha and Mitchell's Plain. A township in South African terms is a settlement largely occupied by non-white people: black, coloured and Indian. Especially during the apartheid period, separate townships were developed and designated for the different ethnic groups. For example Langa and Khayelitsha were designated for Black Africans whilst Mitchell's Plain and Ocean View were for coloured people.

The nearest 'township' to the centre of Cape Town, Langa is the second oldest in Western Cape Province, the oldest being Ndabeni (formerly Uitvlugt), established in 1901 after an outbreak of bubonic plague in central Cape Town led to 5,000 people being moved there from dwellings in the docks area, which were viewed to be congested slums. Langa was established in 1918, when Africans, again being identified as a health risk, were moved there following the flu epidemic, which was having disastrous effects throughout the world. There was more development there from 1927 onwards, following the 1923 Urban Areas Act, which declared urban areas to be 'white' and required African men in cities to carry passes. All of this shows clearly that the antecedents of the apartheid system were emerging well before 1948, when the formal apartheid period started with the National Party government.

Earlier, in 1922, land had been granted for the establishment of a formal township. It was designed, along with Pinelands and Maitland, as a garden

village. However, if we look at Langa and Pinelands today, the notion of two similar garden villages ended on the drawing board. Pinelands became a village of thatched houses, whilst Langa had single-sex dormitories, observation towers and unscalable fences and was said to look more like a prison. To make the point further, these days, leafy Pinelands, with a mixed-race population of 14,000 has a population density of 6,300 per square mile, whilst the somewhat arid Langa, which is 99% Xhosa, has a population of 52,000 with a density of 44,000 per square mile. Pinelands and Langa are next to each other!

It seems that the 'garden village' design was adapted to suit what were referred to as 'African requirements' and focused on black urban workers and temporary migrants rather than permanent residents. To this end the 1924 railway sidings connected the new township to Cape Town, and the migrant workers would march up Lerotholi Avenue to the administration block to be processed, which included dipping and medical examination and the allocation of beds. Accommodation was in the main barracks, four U-shaped quadrants arranged around the central eating house. The barracks were for 2,032 single men and included eighty-four dormitories in blocks of twenty-one, each block having its own ablution and toilet facilities. Each dormitory had twenty-four bunks in double tiers and was serviced by two electric light points and one combustion stove. This first development was followed by others, including one- and two-room units, a spinsters' quarter, the North Barracks for 840 single men, a hospital, married quarters and sports ground, all completed by 1934. Another major development between 1944 and 1948 was the Old Flats, eight four-storey blocks with ablution and toilet facilities on each floor, providing for 1,296 men. The final major Second World War development was the Zones, a series of small row hostels.

Since then there have been two developments, the first being the informal settlements, stretching out into unused areas and filling niches here and there. These are made up of shacks, often of only one room, and constructed in corrugated iron, plastic, tarpaulin, wooden planks and plasterboard. There are narrow alleyways between these lines of shacks. All have electricity and many have TVs, although most are lit up by oil lamps and cooking is on charcoal-fired stoves. Water is from communal standpipes and toilets are communal also. Refuse tends to litter these areas and drainage is rudimentary. Each little building is a home, looked after as well as possible, and may house up to six people. The people we met were intrigued to see us but welcoming and dignified, and they seem to have an



Old and new in Langa

inner strength in the face of what we would see to be suffering and great poverty.

The second development has been the effort to upgrade the existing houses and the hostels and, in recent years, to replace the informal settlements with permanent housing and better urban infrastructure.

Knowing this background, in February 2014 we drove 20 kilometres from our rented apartment in Fish Hoek, above the Jaeger Walk overlooking False Bay. Our mission was to visit Langa Township to continue our work to understand and to support pre-schools in the area. At the back of our minds was the Cape Town Stories book project, and what I would be writing about the Langa Township. How can one adequately relate to and describe such a township and do it justice, how can one begin to understand what life can be like there?

We joined the N2, and left at Junction 12. We drove over a bridge along the only road access to Langa and down a gentle slope into Bungha Way with the township ahead of us on either side of the road.

It is wrong for this township to be described solely in terms of the former infamous single quarters, the sprawling informal shacks of squatters and a vast taxi rank. Yes, there are such sights, and they are very moving, for example to visiting Europeans, but these are within and adjacent to permanent buildings in bricks and plastered blocks.

We are reminded that one of our Xhosa guides had said that Langa is socially diverse 'with an upper, middle and lower class'. The evidence of this is in the variety of housing of the people. The single-storey buildings vary from smallish ranch-style homes to semi-detached and terraced homes, and there are the hostels referred to above.

Most of the roads are for two-way traffic, they are tarmac-covered and have verges, paths and kerbs. Many of the roads are partly tree-lined but the verges are of very sparse grass, with sandy soil dominating. Although there is not much vehicular traffic, there are plenty of pedestrians about and the area seems to be buzzing. There is an air of neglect about most of these roads and paths, with weeds growing up alongside the kerbs and a scattering of refuse. The hostel areas are separated from each other by barren ground, hardened soil, littered with bits and pieces including the inevitable plastic bags.

Many of the houses, which look well cared for, have low fences and very small gardens. Lean-to buildings are seen in some properties and in niches alongside the roads, and are used for accommodation and for small business

activities. These businesses have garish and descriptive signs, crudely hand-painted, apart from a number of professional-looking signs, which are associated with a standard Coca-Cola advert. Some examples of signs include, describing exactly the building's function, 'Maribo's Hair Salon', 'African Gospel Church', 'Busy Corner', 'Langa Mini Builder', 'Siyak Hutina Educare Centre', 'Chip-Chop Tuck Shop', 'Grocer Hamper', 'Welding and burgla gate window', 'Tula's Hair Salon and Barber', and 'Kwa-Malume Cash Store'. Most of these small businesses are in temporary, home-made units in niches between buildings and along pavements. Once again planks, hardboard and corrugated iron are much used as building materials, often for single-room establishments, but there is the odd container scattered around for business, such as that of Soldiem Barber.

There are a few bigger stores, for example one for all sorts of goods including groceries and alcohol. This sort of store is heavily protected against theft and ransacking. A store I went into had iron bars at the window, barbed wire around the roof, and the cashier's area protected by a metal grid, whilst outdoors there was a heavy, vigilant security guard.

The question arises as to why all businesses are so small and makeshift. No better answer can be given than this quote from Martin Meredith:

Black townships in 'white' South Africa were kept as unattractive as possible. Few urban amenities were ever provided. Black businessmen were prevented by government restrictions from expanding their enterprises there. No African was allowed to carry on more than one business. Businesses were confined to 'daily essential necessities', like wood, coal, milk and vegetables. No banks or clothing stores or supermarkets were permitted. Restrictions were even placed on dry-cleaners, garages and petrol stations. Nor were Africans allowed to establish companies or partnerships in urban areas, or to construct their own buildings.

Two decades after the ending of the apartheid regime there now are encouraging signs of development in Langa Township. A joint initiative by the City of Cape Town and the Nu-Hold Group involves the modernisation of Langa Railway Station and the construction, alongside it, of a new and modern shopping centre, to be opened in 2015:¹ a large pedestrian retail development, with 'the first convenience shopping centre' in the township. Langa Station is used daily by 45,000 commuters linking to Khayelitsha and through Woodstock to the centre of Cape Town, a twenty-five-minute journey. The development of the station involves an overhead commuter

¹ NB: This was written prior to the Langa Junction shopping centre's opening and is updated below.

pedestrian bridge to the adjacent Epping industrial area, the upgrade of the station forecourt to include soft and hard paving landscaping, the extension of the pedestrian area and the inclusion of sites for formal stalls for local traders. The Nu-Hold Group initiative is alongside the station, sharing its forecourt, and will include twelve stores, two ATM facilities, and eight smaller spaces for entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises. Land also has been reserved for later development. This retail initiative will give local people, including commuters, more choice and save the time, cash and energy they have had to spend in shopping. Langa people have been travelling by minibus to a place like Athlone, eight kilometres away, quite difficult to access and very difficult to park in, or by train to town to shop.

There is another very important aspect to this large project: the creation of immediate work opportunities and long-term employment. There is training for bricklayers and other disciplines in the building trades, thereby employing local labour. Granbuild Contracts Manager Winslow Hare stated:

We are providing skills to the local community for plastering, bricklaying, scaffolding and ceiling installation ... Most sub-contractors will come from the local community. The specialist contractors dealing with plumbing, air conditioning and electrical will come onto the site and involve local contractors on those jobs. It is estimated that 100 jobs are being created during construction and that when finished the shopping centre will provide around 200 permanent jobs.

This is part of the transformation of Langa Township, a settlement which is relatively blessed by its proximity to Cape Town and by its location within a rail and road network. Langa Railway Station, built in 1924 to receive thousands of migrant labourers, ninety years later is becoming a hub for the economic and social transformation of the township. A marriage between the Cape Town Authority, the public sector metro line and the entrepreneurial Nu-Hold Group will help to transform Langa and the lives of many in and around the township.

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It is now possible to update the above following my October 2015 visit. The shopping centre has been open for about six months. The two ATMs, the first in Langa, are a boon. Shoprite is making a wider variety of food available at better prices; for example, a loaf of bread is 30% cheaper than available hitherto. Shoprite attracts much custom and the car park was almost full on my visit. People are shopping here rather than trailing over to Athlone, which was expensive and time-consuming.

There are continuing signs of residential development. A major City of Cape Town Rand 151 million initiative, officially opened in 2015 by President Zuma, is the four-storey 463 residential unit apartment block development, complete with solar energy heating panels, on Bhunga Avenue next to the N2 highway.

It is in the context of these developments that decisions are being made that parts of Langa should be designated and preserved as national heritage sites. The area to be designated is the historic core of the settlement and the route taken by migrant labour from the railway station to the main barracks. The aim is to ensure that memories and values are preserved, as illustrated by government policies, settlement planning and the buildings and infrastructure. Major reactions from the people included the burning of passes in 1946, the anti-pass marches in 1960 and the 1976 student uprising. Illustrative of the ongoing historical perception of the struggle for freedom are names such as Washington Avenue (named after Booker T Washington, a nineteenth-century freed American slave), the Robert Sobukwe Memorial and Makana Square. Interestingly, after the apartheid period there can still be serious unrest at government policies, as shown by the recent serious riots relating to the intention to clear shack dwellers from the Joe Slovo area of Langa to make way for new housing development.

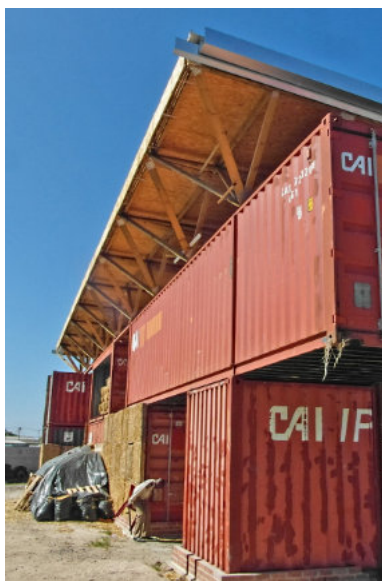
A simple statement about Langa as a place of high crime, with a high ratio of people with HIV/AIDS and with high unemployment, misleads us. There is dynamism, change for the better, a continuing upsurge of community work for the general good and signs of public investment and private enterprise.

The best example has developed in stages over the last fifteen years and it is the Guga S'thebe Arts and Cultural Centre, which is an important hub within Langa Township. It provides programmes in music, drama, visual art, photography and cultural clothing. It has a thriving pottery workshop, designing and firing ornamental pottery and tableware for both the local and

foreign markets. It has a standing exhibition of paintings, carvings and craft goods, with all the items for sale. It includes a business centre providing for IT training and other business skills development and also a range of equipment and services to support local small businesses.

The very exciting latest initiative has been the construction of the Guga S'thebe Theatre, a multinational project involving the local community, the Cape Town Department of Arts and Culture, the architects RWTH Aachen, PBSA Dusseldorf, Georgia Tech Atlanta and the University of Cape Town. The aim is to give better facilities to the community and visiting performers and lecturers. It is a double-decked structure, with a large open space in the centre, smaller rooms around the side and a recording studio and indoor and outdoor stages and changing rooms are to be added. The double-storey theatre structure, with a capacity of 200, was constructed using eleven shipping containers, recycled wooden crates, and the straw and clay used to regulate temperature in the container building. This innovative project, involving the skills of the architect and the engineer, foreign universities and firms, volunteers and local labour, is a proud effort to continue the transformation of Langa Township.

This story can end on a still more optimistic note following the exploits of Temba Bavuma, batting at Sahara Park to reach a match-saving century, the first by a black South African. Along with Malusi Siboto and Thami Tsolekile, all of them born in the same street in Langa, he is one of the seven black players in the national cricket team in the post-apartheid years. A product of the Langa Cricket Club, for which he played at the age of thirteen, Bavuma, with the other two stars, took part in the second annual cricket festival at the Club in December 2015, the publicity stating that 'we now celebrate these [and other local] players while we inspire the younger generation that will take over from them and who better to celebrate with than the community that brought them up?'



Innovative use of containers

Cape Town Stories is a personal journey by the author over the last five years, as he and his wife fell in love with Cape Town and warmed to all the shades of people in this rainbow nation. Each story is sparked by an experience and the main themes are apartheid, its genesis, its effects and its ending. In the face of popular, pessimistic perceptions about the future of South Africa, the author describes rainbow signs of progress in the struggle to improve the lot of the poorest South Africans and praises the resilience of the people he has met.

Gordon Gaddes is a Cambridge University Geography graduate and a London University graduate twice over, respectively in Economics and Economic History, and in Philosophy and Religion. Over forty-three years he had a career in education, further education, business and administration. He has led missions, researched and lectured in sixty-four countries. He has been a consultant for the International Trade Centre, UNIDO and the European Commission. In his retirement, as a volunteer, he supports charities locally for the homeless and abroad for pre-school children in Cape Town, and he is involved in church work. He writes and lectures and is undertaking doctorate research on altruism.