

Replacing Terror with Hope

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TOWNSHIP police stations during apartheid were symbols of repression rather than places of hope and the Zwane Street building in Sharpeville has a particular bitterness for South African history.

It was the police station to which thousands of people marched peacefully on March 21, 1960 to offer themselves for arrest for not carrying pass books – and from which 69 of them lost their lives and hundreds of others were injured in a watershed day.

In healing the past and embracing the future, Sedibeng Municipal District is refurbishing the now-defunct buildings into a museum relating the story of apartheid “law and order” and a sanctuary from which relevant non-government organisations (NGOs) can operate.

Executive Mayor of the Sedibeng District Municipality, Mahole Simon Mofokeng, says following the closure of the Pretoria-based Police Museum, South Africa lacks space dedicated to relating how the police enforced “law and order” during apartheid.

“Although the old Sharpeville police station will not be a major exhibition space, this is an opportunity to convey some of the brutalities of a police force trained for war and also tell the story of a municipal blackjack system created so that black policemen could aid and abet their white counterparts in their acts of terror in township communities,” he/she says.

Sedibeng district was established in 2000 on the rich history of Evaton, Heidelberg, Sharpeville, Boipatong, Sebokeng, Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Vaal Oewers, Vaal Marina and Suikerbosrand.

March 21, 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of that defining moment in South Africa’s history. In condemning the events, the international community increasingly isolated the country to prompt South Africa’s departure from the Commonwealth of Nations the following year, while the government banned the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress.

Mofokeng says history records that the positioning of the Sharpeville police station was dictated by issues of control rather than policing to curb criminal activity. Located at the far western end of Seeiso Street, Sharpeville’s main arterial, the buildings had a clear view over the township.

As the first police station located directly in a township, the Executive Mayor says it was intended to “establish the image of the force as a friend and protector of law-abiding inhabitants”. However, after the massacre, it became symbolic of the site “where the police fired the shots heard around the world”.

Mofokeng says when the old Sharpeville police station stopped functioning the buildings “stood empty as ghostly reminders of the horrors of the apartheid era” for several years. The Victim Empowerment Programme accommodated some of the space for its offices and counselling before securing rooms in the new police station, while the police barracks currently operate as a temporary site for a new arts and craft centre.



The Executive Mayor of the Sedibeng District Municipality believes there is a strong argument for converting the police station into a central part of the Sharpeville tourism offering, thus commemorating the site's historical significance.

“The front façade, where the crowds gathered on that fateful day in 1960, must be restored such that the actual physical place where police shot into the protestors can be memorialised. Aerial and other photography taken on the day will evoke the crowd presence,” he/she says.

Restoration was also required on the relatively well-preserved detention cells to demonstrate police actions on Sharpeville citizens.

“Beyond performing commemorative functions, the old Sharpeville police station should be transformed from “a place that has witnessed horrendous acts of human rights abuse into one offering healing and hope for the future”. Accommodating relevant NGO offices in a mixed-use precinct was likely to achieve this goal, while creating a shaded outdoor public space displaying Saracens, buffels and other police and military vehicles on which children can play would “convert terror into joy”.

“This investment creates a new precinct to enhance Sharpeville and ensure the dead hole in the middle of the community is appropriately and meaningfully brought to life,” he concludes.

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