

Immortalising Sharpeville

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THERE are minutes that can define a country's history. For South Africa, it was 90 seconds in Sharpeville on March 21, 1960.

An estimated 1000 rounds of ammunition was fired into the thousands-strong throng of protestors who had converged on the local police state to offer themselves up for arrest for not carrying pass books. When the smoke had cleared and the screams become echoes reverberated off the houses and dusty streets, 69 people lay dead and another 180 were injured – many of them shot in the back.

The actual number of people who died due to the actions of that day – either directly from injuries sustained in the massacre or from police brutality and apartheid-era politics – are understood to be significantly higher and while the massacre is world-famous, very little is known about what actually happened on that fateful day.

“It is a story that remains to be explored and shared with the community,” Executive Mayor of the Sedibeng District Municipality, Mahole Simon Mofokeng says.

March 21, 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of that watershed day 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.

In 1966 the United Nations General Assembly declared March 21 the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and since 1994 South Africa has marked the date as Human Rights Day. Former president Nelson Mandela chose Sharpeville as the location for signing into law the South African Constitution on December 10, 1996.

“The heritage node of Sharpeville is a highly significant site, being the place where one of the most seminal events in South African history took place. Five decades may have passed, but the shadows of that dark past have not receded and those who died in the massacre cannot be forgotten,” says the Executive Mayor.

However, the Sharpeville Human Rights Precinct, meant as a place of remembrance for people, friends, family and neighbours who died in the massacre, fails to do justice to the sacrifices made the golden anniversary provides the incentive to overhaul the “unwelcoming atmosphere”. The precinct, with its memorial garden hosting 69 pillars as an evocative reminder of the iconic event, had opened in March 2001.

“Next year South Africa plays host to the world's soccer showpiece and an essential element in travelling to another country incorporates embracing the history and experiences of that land,



whether social and engaging such as the Cape wine lands and the national parks or dark and foreboding like Sharpeville,” he says.

Consequently, Sedibeng is investing significant sums into the Heritage Precinct development that involves upgrading the exhibition centre and memorial, developing Constitution Walk and refurbishing the Sharpeville Hall and the old police station into an exhibition and healing centre.

The heritage hub embraces the memorial site, museum, old police station, community hall, library, churches and Phelindaba cemetery where the victims are buried. The sports hub includes the George Thabe soccer stadium, the adjacent open fields and the swimming pool, while a recreational hub will include selected properties on the edge of the Sharpeville Dam like the beer hall and the Heineken brewery.

The stadium honours the soccer legend best remembered for his leadership as chairman and founder of the National Professional Soccer League.

Other components of the precinct include support infrastructure such as a drop-off zone, retail facilities for arts, crafts and eateries, landscaping, signage and public art.

One consideration aims to integrate the Sharpeville Memorial with the exhibition centre, transforming the gateway via cladding inserted with memory text and objects. This will offer meaning to the imposing façade.

“Including the police station in the development plans means there are opportunities to extend the Sharpeville narrative through exhibitions and other interventions, since the building is an integral part of the history. There is also a general need to upgrade the urban environment, while public art and signage will welcome and inform visitors to the precinct,” says the Executive Mayor.

On the cards are plans to convert the police station into a mixed-use precinct that houses a museum and a centre for a host of non-government organisations. The façade will be restored and an image of the station as it was viewed by the Sharpeville residents of 1960 will be displayed.

Mofokeng believes the Sharpeville development will be the catalyst for a quality urban environment encouraging household and business investment; create linkages and routes to improve access to the historic area and develop the heritage assets as a local community resource that also provides an authentic outdoor educational experience capturing the history and significance of Sharpeville.

Yet, says Mofokeng, research shows Sharpeville and neighbouring communities such as Boipatong and Sebokeng, can become major sources for leisure and activity facilities that are critical if Sharpeville evolves into the desirable and well-balanced heritage, tourism and leisure destination.



The land bordering the Sharpeville Dam has the potential to become the Sedibeng leisure node, while the brewery has value as an icon of a bygone era.

“South Africa cannot hide from its past, but by embracing that history and allowing the voices of the past to speak to the generations of the future, the lessons can be taught as one cathartic step towards healing,” he concludes.

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