Double Vision: Landscapes of Memory in Port Elizabeth, South Africa
Goodenough College, London, 5-12 June 2015

Exhibition hosted by the Mellon Fellowship in Cities and Humanities at LSE Cities

Credits:
Conceptualisation, archival research and contemporary photographs by Yusuf Agherdien
Archival photographs by Ron Belling, used with the generous permission of the Belling family
Curated by Naomi Roux
Additional archival material from Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, Port Elizabeth Main Library, and Latief Abrahams; additional contemporary photography by Mahir Pandie
Aerial photography courtesy of the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, South Africa
Maps by Alexandra Gomes
Publicity and event organisation by Emma Rees
Special thanks to Goodenough College for the exhibition venue
Graphics designed by Atelier Works
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Double Vision
Naomi Roux

I have been passing this thing for years without seeing it, but now that it’s made itself visible it insists on being acknowledged every time.¹

The neighbourhood of South End in Port Elizabeth, South Africa was declared a “white” area under the 1950 Group Areas Act, one of several pieces of apartheid legislation which sought to racially segregate every aspect of South African life. Between 1965 and 1975, the residents of this diverse suburb were systematically removed to far-flung townships as part of the apartheid state’s project of “separate development”. By 1980 almost all South End’s buildings and streets had been erased, replaced with highway overpasses and gated residential complexes or simply left as open land. Although the country held its first democratic elections in 1994, the effects of forced removals and enforced segregation continue to reverberate into the present.

Double Vision is compiled by Yusuf Agherdien, who was moved with his family as a teenager to the newly constructed “Northern Areas” of Port Elizabeth from South End in 1973. These photographs are a deeply autobiographical project of remembrance and recovery. The project of documenting and archiving South End’s past has been, in many regards, Agherdien’s life’s work: he was a founding trustee of the South End Museum, a community museum which opened in 2001, and has authored and contributed to a number of books on the area’s history while developing an extensive personal archive.

The exhibition’s starting point is a set of photographs by the late Ron Belling, taken in 1965-1970 on the cusp of South End’s destruction. Agherdien enters into conversation with these images, tracing Belling’s routes to replicate the original point of view. The landscape of memory visible to Agherdien bears little resemblance to the contemporary neighbourhood, and the exhibition stems from the desire to make the remembered city visible in the present, via a careful, embodied process of seeking out traces of what was once here. In a half-built new residential complex, for example, Agherdien uses the remaining kerbs to identify the position of a long-vanished lampost, and a curve in the paving to mark a remembered bus stop. From these cues, he points out the location of the house in which he grew up, and the site of a shop that sold the best fish and chips in South End. In the process, the barren construction site becomes a powerful landscape of memory at the same time as it obliterates these markers of the past. These images, then, are both documents of loss and of recovery.

While the story of South End falls into a very specific historical and geographic context, this exhibition explores methodologies for accessing the past in sites of erasure and displacement, processes which take place continually in cities everywhere in the world. The marks and remnants of South End are not monumental and are not designated as “heritage” in any official sense. Without knowledge of how they came to be there, they remain unintelligible objects. James Holston notes that “cities are full of stories in time, some sedimented and catalogued; others spoorlike, vestigial and dispersed... Their registry is never wholly legible because each foray into the palimpsest of city surfaces reveals only traces of these relations”.² Double Vision is an exploration of one potential means of making these traces partially legible, using a combination of visual, oral history and autobiographical methods to decode a past that might otherwise remain accessible only to those who actively carry its memory.

¹ Ivan Vladislavic, Portrait With Keys: Joburg and What-What (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2006), 163
Time and time again I find myself wandering around the now redeveloped South End. Scratching, sifting, thinking, recalling, photographing sections of old streets, buildings or foundations in the last fragmented open spaces of what is now left of the neighbourhood. The memories of the old South End come flooding back, suddenly tripping over a piece of concrete foundation that was once an entrance to a building.

With Ron Belling’s photographs of South End, I tried to stand in his footsteps, even when doing this evoked feelings of sadness, hurt, or nostalgia. I wanted to see, feel and try to understand why he had taken these photographs and why he had not taken more photographs. It was as if he knew South End would be no more.

I was fortunate to have been born in the same house where my father and my grandfather were born. 10 Armstrong Street was not just a family home. It was a house, motel, religious school. When I told my kids about the old days in South End, they could not understand what I was talking about. I took them to where our family house once stood but they could not visualise it, now part of a garage in some affluent development. I had to leave my children with a vision, a ‘double vision’ of the cosmopolitan area where I grew up.

South End was a way of life. It was the rainbow nation that we are striving for today, we already had it fifty years ago before the Group Areas Act threw it all away. South End was the place to live, I tell you! There were once rumours that a name change would take place: the street layout was completely obliterated, as if the authorities of the day wanted to erase all of it. But they could not erase the memories.

Opposite page: Under the 1950 Group Areas Act and other apartheid legislation, South African cities were strictly and brutally segregated by race. In Port Elizabeth, as in many other cities and towns, the city centre was declared “white”. Residents from diverse suburbs like South End, North End and Fairview were moved to the outlying newly built “Northern Areas” if they were classified as “Coloured” or “Malay”, to Malabar Park if they were Indian, Kabega Park if they were Chinese, while residents classified as black were moved to townships on the city’s periphery such as New Brighton and Kwazakele.

Above: Yusuf Agherdien, May 2013

Maps by Alexandra Gomes

Remembering South End
Yusuf Agherdien, April 2015
St Peter’s Church

This view across St Peter’s Anglican Church locates South End in relation to the city centre. The tall brick tower towards the right of both images is the Campanile, a monument constructed in 1920 to mark the centenary of the arrival of the 1820 British settlers in Port Elizabeth. On the left hand side of the contemporary image, the new South African flag marks the apex of the Donkin Reserve, a piece of open public land “gifted” by the city’s first colonial governor, Sir Rufane Donkin, to “the people of Port Elizabeth”. St Peter’s was once marked by a cross, known as the Fisherman’s Cross, which faced towards the harbour. After the church was deconsecrated and the removals were underway, the cross was moved to the grounds of its new Anglican church in the Northern Areas, where it remains in place today looking over the N2 highway.


Valley Road

“This is Valley Road, with the factory to the right. On the other side, those stores used to lead up to a little café. Further up the road is the entrance to Alabaster Street, which led up to Old Church Field. They demolished all these houses but they kept the buildings on the left, maybe because people were working there, it was a timberyard and hardware store. After the removals, people would still come back to work here, for a little while at least. Many people lost their businesses and their livelihoods after the removals. My dad for example was a tailor, and I remember he was very concerned that the move would ruin his business because he made suits for people working in town. In the Northern Areas it was very difficult for him to operate. The apartheid era didn’t just destroy people’s houses, it destroyed people’s lives.”

When Ron Belling took these photographs in 1970, it was on the cusp of South End’s demolition. The first removals began in 1968 and were mostly complete by 1973: the Agherdien family were among the last to leave. The Belling photographs are not just documents of ‘what once was’ but are also documents of the moment of destruction. In this photograph the empty shell of a house that belonged to the Nicholas family is visible up against the Valley Road hillside, after the family had moved away. The remains of the wall in the contemporary photograph is the back wall of a bakery, and several foundations and flooring slabs remain embedded in the open grass here.

Restaurants on Walmer Road

The process of retracing South End’s almost-vanished landmarks is slow, precise and embodied, reliant on the ability to place the body in the location of the remembered bus stop, or retracing a childhood route along the remains of the median. As Yusuf points out the edges of old kerbstones and orphaned stairs that lead nowhere, it is clear that multiple landscapes exist here at the same time: the contemporary landscape that has overwritten the older city, and the ghostly landscape of forty or fifty years ago that has to be conjured up through narrative, talking and walking.

“This is now a gated townhouse complex. When I visited here again the first time, in about 2012, I climbed the kerb in my car because I wanted to drive up the remains of the road and see what I could remember of what used to be Walmer Road. My path was blocked by this big gate and a construction site. There was a guy working on the roof of the new complex and I recognised him because he is also an ex-South Ender. I chatted to him and he let me in to have a look around, because I said I just want to walk down the street again. At that time the bus stop was actually still there although now they have built over it, and I recognised it all immediately – the post office was just there, and that means that CP Pillay’s must have been just over here. I can still see it... It really is like walking down memory lane.

The Kasbah, the Silver Lantern and CP Pillay’s Fish and Chips were all in this street. CP Pillay’s was the most famous for their fish and chips. It would come wrapped in white paper and you would run home with it as fast as you can, so it would still be hot when you eat it. Even now, thinking about that really makes your mouth water.”

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Large swathes of South End remained vacant for years after the removals and demolitions. Many of the photographs for this exhibition were taken during the construction of new residential complexes on this land, which have further eroded traces of places like Walmer Road on makes them extremely difficult to access. In one of these aside Yusuf was able to commence the construction team to salvage any objects that were excavated during the building, such as glass bottle, pieces of signage, and old coins – detritus of the suburbs’ previous life, now subsumed under the surface of the rapidly transforming city.

There where the tree stood, the one that has now died – the Francis family lived in the house there, on Frere Street. They were boat builders. At night, you could see the reflection of the light from the welding machines, flashing up in the trees. That tree on the right is now dying, maybe because of the construction happening here.

This viewpoint is no longer accessible: in 2013 when the contemporary image was taken, construction was just beginning on the new residential complex that now occupies this land. Today, it is completely fenced off, and the trees have disappeared.

"Many South Enders were soccer players or sportspeople. Those were such good days, in Victoria Park, or ‘Vee Pee’ as we used to call it. That was really where you met the community... On the day of a game we would walk up to the fields together to watch. There was never any contact with the white players, although our field was right across from their tennis courts and sometimes you would accidentally kick the ball onto the ‘white’ side of the field... They never attended to this part of it after the coloured teams left, it was just left vacant.”

The sports fields at Victoria Park were divided by race, with separate soccer fields and tennis courts for “white” players and for “coloured” players. (The term “coloured” is South African parlance for people of mixed-race descent, remaining in common use today.) When South End was declared a “white” neighbourhood, the “coloured” fields stopped being maintained, eventually disappearing into the long grass.

The high brick wall and electrified fence along Walmer Boulevard next to the mosque is in stark contrast to the open stoep (verandah) visible in Belling’s photograph, typical of South End’s original houses.

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