

A STUDY OF DURBAN'S BACKYARD

CURRIE'S FOUNTAIN

The Warwick Junction Precinct, including Currie's Fountain, is an area of unique diversity and historical importance. Careful planning to preserve its character and its memories will add greatly to Durban's meaning and attraction.

If cities could be compared to homes

– with an entrance, and entertainment, eating, sleeping and bathing areas – then they would also have a backyard. And like most backyards, although integral to the home, it's the space where the washing or the broken, unused or 'not-so-sure-what-to-do-with stuff' is housed. In the South African context, it is also the space where the servants are housed. It's the space that usually receives the least attention from the residents and the space visitors rarely see. And yet the backyard is often associated with fond memories. This is the space that served as a burial ground for the family pet(s). Here was the tree house; here the kids learned to ride their bicycles or make stuff in Dad's workshop; or perhaps the toddler spent time with the servant in the *kaya* or the tenant in the outbuilding.

If cities had backyards, then what is referred to as Warwick Junction is Durban's backyard. The 'not-so-sure-what-to-do-with stuff' like bus and taxi ranks, train station, an assortment of markets, beer halls and all the other 'non-European' activities – all ended up in the Warwick Junction. And like other backyards, many ex-residents and the general public have fond memories associated with the area.

Often referred to as the Warwick Triangle, the Market area or Warwick Junction, I prefer to refer to it as the Warwick Junction Precinct (WJP) that encompasses a much larger area around the market and the Warwick Triangle. This backyard is integral to the 'home' as

evidenced by Durban's brochures, plans and projections. The city estimates that up to 500 000 commuters pass through this area each day as they arrive at and depart from the city. For the other citizens of Durban, it's a place you pass through – and only if you have to – with your windows shut and doors locked, and your wits about you. It is not a place you spend time in, let alone take friends and visitors. To those who don't have to use a train, taxi or bus, Warwick Junction is a crazy, congested mix of taxis, buses, commuters and informal traders – and is best avoided. And because of this fleeting pass through – on the ground or overhead via the Eliat viaduct – most residents are unaware of the rich diversity, life and heritage of WJP.

This is a very old 'backyard', with many ex-residents who have come and gone. It is a treasure chest waiting to be discovered by the many who are unfamiliar with its contents but also to be rediscovered by those who are familiar with the area. The many 'servants' – the 'non-European' community that lived, worked, played, worshipped and schooled in the area and are now resident elsewhere – have fond memories of this 'backyard', because this was their home.

My research in the precinct, rummaging around the 'backyard', led me to numerous individuals and their memories. Sadly, the history of the area, its people, places and events have not been documented, apart from

a few newspaper articles, and recent books by authors Phyllis Naidoo and Aziz Hassim, which start to tell the stories.

THE ROCS PROJECT

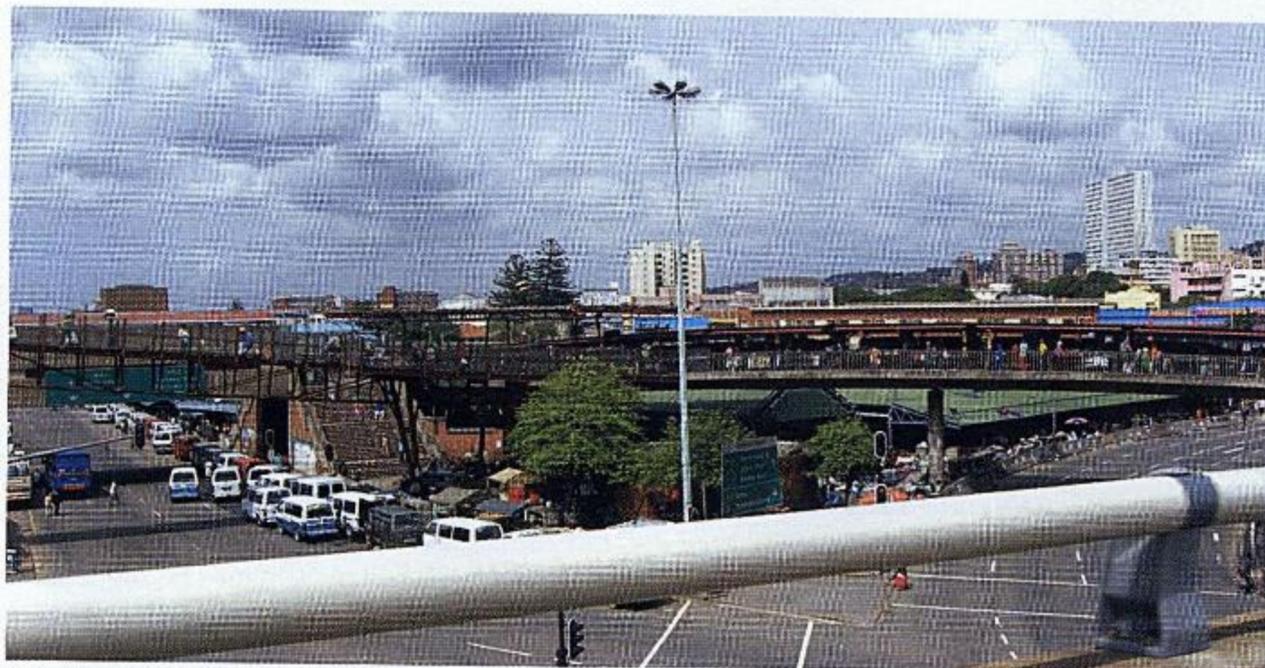
Because of this lack of documented information and the nostalgia associated with this 'backyard', a heritage research project was conceptualised which entails the involvement of a range of academic departments within Durban University of Technology (DUT), which is one of the educational institutions in the precinct. With such a diverse and vibrant precinct, literally on the doorstep of a tertiary institution – it seems not only appropriate, but logical, that the university 'adopt' the precinct as a research area. A range of student projects, staff research and community engagement projects could all be focused on it. This collective search for information and community engagement projects will be focused on a defined precinct: Research of Currie's and Surrounds, or the ROCS project. DUT has formed a partnership with South African History Online (SAHO), as the drivers of the research project that will require and depend on participation by the public. Much of the information is oral, in people's memories, and in family albums and memorabilia.

Everyone seems to remember and talk fondly of Currie's Fountain. Because of its long and varied history and subsequent iconic status, Currie's Fountain is used as the rallying point

By: Leonard Rosenberg, Head of Physical Planning
Department, Durban University of Technology



STRUGGLE SITES



*If cities had backyards,
then what is referred to as
Warwick Junction is Durban's
backyard.*

around which its story and that of the precinct are 'extracted' from the public.

The ROCS project precinct boundaries were determined by the stories of a community. A neighbourhood on the edge of the CBD, with schools, houses, cinemas, shops, markets, mosques, churches, temples and sporting facilities in the form of Currie's Fountain. The precinct is thus more than a **junction** of transport modes – it is a neighbourhood.

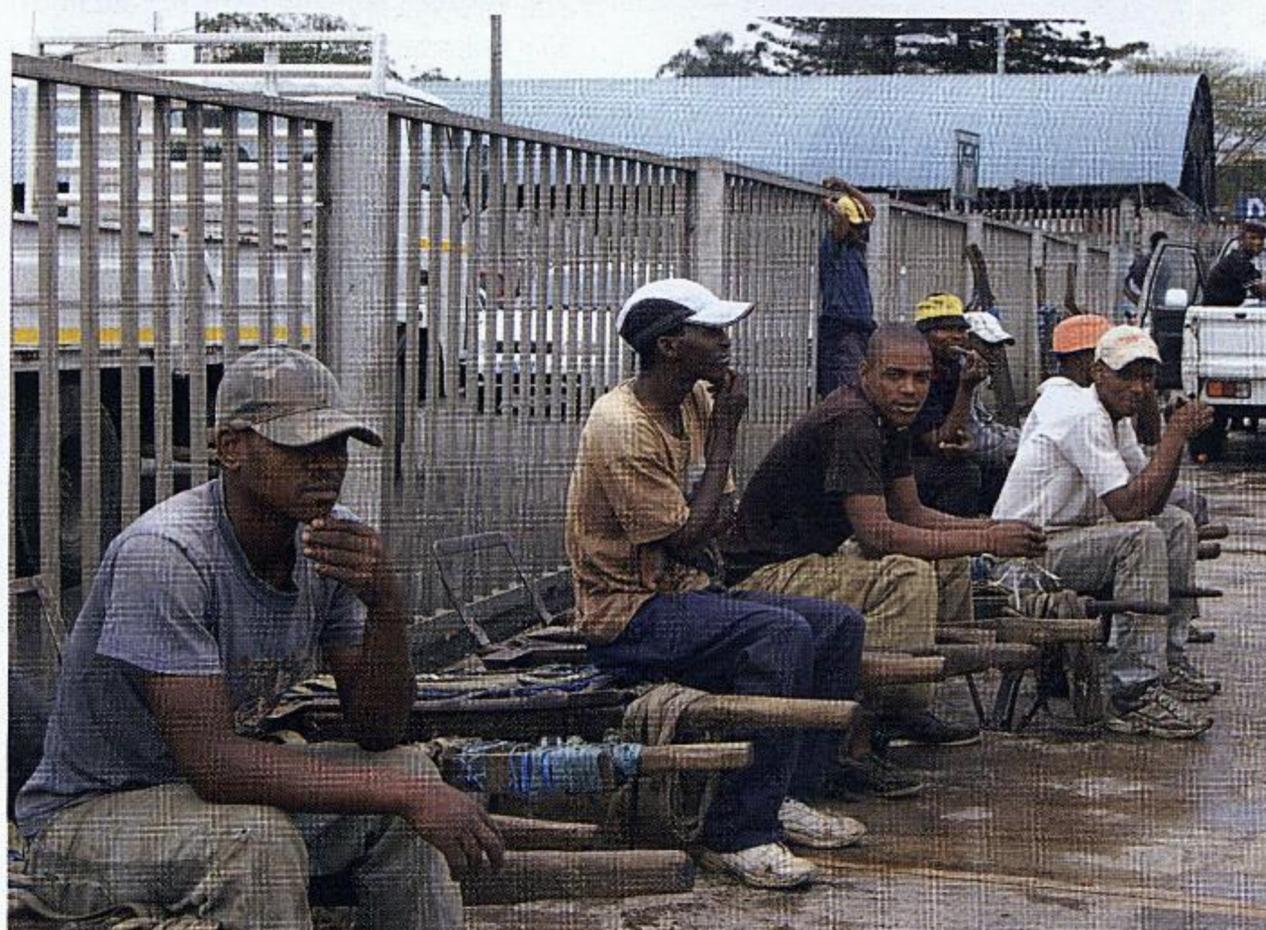
BACKYARD TREASURES

The spatial development of WJP was shaped to a large extent by the numerous acts and legislation of segregation that impacted not only on this area but on areas throughout the country. The locations of bus and taxi ranks, train station, markets and commercial areas were determined by laws enforcing segregation. Large residential areas in Wills and Mansfield roads areas were declared for 'European' occupation, and 'non-European' residents had to vacate to their respective racially segregated townships of Chatsworth, Sydenham and KwaMashu.

Ironically these laws may have contributed to the rich mix of activities and land uses in the precinct that make it so unique. The ROCS project boundary, with Warwick Junction at its centre, is 1.5 to 2 kilometres in diameter, and within this relatively small space a wide variety of services and amenities can be found: national garden, horse-racing track, golf course, university, stadium (Currie's Fountain), hospital, clinics, medical centres, a fire station, schools, two police stations, two mosques, churches, cathedral, temple, a cemetery divided into Christian, Muslim and Jewish sections, major train station, major bus and taxi ranks, informal traders (the largest in Durban), traditional medicine market, fruit and vegetable markets, a fishmarket, women's hostel, a range of residential types, cinemas, service station, bus depots and parks.

CHARACTER

This is the area where the renowned old tailors are to be found. This is where 'bunny chow' is said to have originated and is still found at many local eating houses. You are bound



This combination of diverse activity and land use with dense heritage has the potential to rejuvenate and develop an already unique precinct in the city.

to find the legendary 'Durban poison', or if traditional medicine is your requirement, a large traditional medicine market is near the fruit and vegetable markets. There are barbers, hairdressers and phones on the pavement. Loose cigarettes, music, clothing, underwear, farming implements, Primus stoves and cooked meat are sold side by side between bus and taxi ranks. This is the home of Ajmeri Arcade, Grey Street Mosque and the Victoria Street Market, where curios, spices, jewellery and clothing can be found. KFC, Chicken Lickin', surgeries, lawyers, moneylenders and shebeens all co-exist, capitalising on the hordes of commuters that pass by daily. The call to prayer from the Grey Street Mosque or the sounds of protesters singing and chanting as they march from Currie's Fountain to the City Hall, mingle among all the sounds of the precinct.

HERITAGE

Underneath this vibrancy of institutions, facilities and activities lies a rich history of places, people and events in danger of being lost. Currie's Fountain, the grand old lady of the precinct is not so grand anymore and has lost its shine but must be the most historically charged site in Durban, given its long and varied history of water source, sports, cultural events, political activism and resistance.

This sports field's name dates back to 1879 when Councillor HW Currie successfully sank an artesian well below the Botanic Gardens, which became Durban's first reliable water source – with the water piped to the city for seven years. This waterworks was named Currie's Fountain and although the waterworks and tower are long gone, the name remained when the area became a sports ground. Situated in the marshy Western Vlei of Flats as this area was known, it formally became a sports facility for the Indian community in 1925. It is claimed to be the oldest black sports ground in South Africa.

This simple, waterlogged public space is listed as one of the major sites of protest and resistance in Philip Harrison's 2004 book, *Top Sites in South Africa: Struggle*. A photograph taken at 'Currie's' – as it is affectionately known – indicates that protest meetings started as early as 1913. The 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign organised by the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) and the rallies against the Group Areas Act in 1950 are some of the events that Professor Fatima Meer remembers, when, as a young activist, she shared a platform with Dr Monty Naicker and Alan Paton.

Veteran activists Phyllis Naidoo and Professor B Khoapa recall the pro-FRELIMO rally in 1974 and the subsequent arrests of Black Consciousness leaders Steve Biko, Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper. Rafs Mayet, a freelance photographer who grew up in the area and frequented Currie's and subsequently photographed many events in the 1980s and 1990s, remembers the COSATU affiliates AGMs, SAYCO youth rallies, MAWU rallies, the first SACP rally in KZN in 30 years, SACOS, UDF and some IFP rallies. The ANC Women's League was relaunched and Umkhonto we Sizwe had a rally at Currie's after organisations were unbanned and exiles returned to the country. The many past and present leaders who addressed the crowds at this venue, that Rafs witnessed, included Archie Gumede, Alec Erwin, Govan Mbeki, Joe Slovo, 'Mam Flo' Mkhize, Chris Hani, Murphy Morobe, Mosiuoa Lekota, Jay Naidoo, Adelaide Tambo, Willies Mchunu, Lawrence Zondi and Betty Shabazz, the wife of Malcolm X.

It is thus no wonder that Currie's Fountain is mentioned in a speech at the funeral of Moses Mabhida in Maputo in 1986, by the then exiled ANC president Oliver Tambo. The mention by such a revered leader – at such an important gathering of exiled comrades, who converged from all parts of the world – indicates the level of 'struggle credentials' to which Currie's had been elevated by the 1980s.

The sports fraternity and supporters remember a string of sporting events that Currie's hosted since its inception in 1925. It was the scene for the first soccer team from India competing against the SA Indians in 1934, and a host of provincial cricket matches which included the famous Basil D'Oliveira in the mid 1960s. It also saw the Sam China Cup tournaments in the late 1940s, the interracial soccer matches, the floodlit matches at night, the Coca Cola Cup Finals and the fights that broke out among the supporters. Capacity crowds made up of a mixture of supporters, vendors, police and their dogs, businessmen, politicians, officials, beauty queens, sponsors and the feared 'Dutchenes' gang. Hailed as the 'Mecca' of non-racial sport, Currie's was the home of the Federation League and hosted teams such as Aces United, Verulam Suburbs, Manning Rangers, Maritzburg City, Bluebells, Berea and Cape Town Spurs. In the 1960s court cases were held to determine the fate of a few Coloured and white players, together with Indian soccer officials who had transgressed

the Group Areas Act because they had played soccer together.

This same venue hosted numerous athletic events including many inter-school sports occasions. Boxing matches, beauty pageants, cultural events and music festivals attracted crowds not only from all parts of the country, but also Swaziland and Lesotho.

In an article titled 'A Heritage and Arena for Struggle and Development', Professor B Khoapa states: 'Currie's Fountain was historically not just a sports venue but also a community facility for people to gather and address issues that were important in the political life of black people, especially in reaction to the effects of the Group Areas Act.' He recalls how the slogan 'Sport for all' was advocated at Currie's and how 'it continued to welcome all citizens to its grounds and facilities and thus became an arena for struggle not only against unfair sport but also against many of the other racial laws that were devastating our communities.'

REDEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS FOR WARWICK JUNCTION.

The area has always been considered important in planning initiatives especially being the transport hub of the city with all the major bus and taxi ranks located around a major train station. Current planning initiatives by the city for WJP indicate that a more holistic approach to its redevelopment is to be followed. Bus and taxi ranks are to be rationalised, traffic diverted, overhead flyovers introduced, pedestrian concourses created, markets incorporated and connections to the ranks and trading zones made.

Lacking, however, is the realisation of two things: first, of the great diversity of activities and character, and second, of the rich heritage in the precinct. Planning initiatives don't seem to acknowledge or exploit the variegation and the 'soul' of the area. The area's heritage does not seem to be considered or viewed as a potential design generator in the planning initiatives. The focus is largely on transport routes, ranks and making walkways for pedestrians.

Durban, unlike other major cities in South Africa, has not capitalised on its rich heritage, particularly with regard to struggle and resistance sites and heritage routes within the city.

This combination of diverse activity and land use with dense heritage has the potential to rejuvenate and develop an already unique precinct in the city, recalling and celebrating its



Rodney Choromanski

history since its early days in the 1800s to the present, all within a one kilometre radius. It calls loudly for the development of a Heritage Route.

The precinct already has established tourist attractions like the Grey Street Complex, Grey Street Mosque, Madressa Arcade and Victoria Street Market on the eastern edge.

The Botanic Gardens, in the north-western corner, are another established tourist attraction. Currie's Fountain is located in between these magnets and has the potential to become another major attraction that could help develop a Heritage Route. This would connect the Grey Street Complex, through the traditional medicine markets, morning market and informal trade markets to Currie's Fountain, ending at the Botanic Gardens. Numerous places and/or buildings of historical significance can be complimentary to the route. iTrump Centre in the Willis Road area, Scala Building and Cinema, Beatrice Street, Sastri College, and the fire station are some of those.

Harrison draws on a phrase by Rusty Bernstein and argues that we need to preserve 'memory against forgetting' and one way of doing this is by visiting and celebrating these sites. Furthermore, '...where necessary, we need to restore and develop these sites as precious markers of a painful, but ultimately triumphant, story.' (Harrison 2004:5) Currie's is one of the important sites that has earned the right to be a marker where this preservation of 'memory against forgetting' can happen. ■

This combination of diverse activity and land use with dense heritage has the potential to rejuvenate and develop an already unique precinct in the city.

REFERENCES

- The Daily News*. Don Africana Library and Documentation Centre.
Harrison, P (2004). *South Africa's Top Sites: Struggle*. Spearhead, Kenilworth.
History, picture and references to Currie's Fountain, *File on HW Currie*, 581. Local History Museum.
Jackson, A (2003). *Facts About Durban*. FAD Publishers, Dalbridge.
Kearney, B (nd). *A revised listing of important places and buildings in Durban*. *The Leader*. Don Africana Library and Documentation Centre.
Maps and drawings. City Engineers Department.
The Mayor's Minute: Durban July 1871 - July 1889. 352.09684 may (sic). Don Africana Library.
McIntyre, J. *Currie's Fountain*. *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa* (1971). Cape Town: Nason Limited, 530.
Morrison, I (1997). *Durban: a Pictorial History*. Cape Town: Struik Publishers.
The Natal Mercury. Don Africana Library and Documentation Centre.
The Post. Don Africana Library and Documentation Centre.
Rosenberg, L et al (2007). *Wellspring of Hope: The Legacy of a Sports Field*. Durban University of Technology, Durban.
Photographs. Various: City Engineers Department, Documentation Centre, The Local History Museum, Barrie Bierman Library: UKZN, Campbell Collection.
Russel, G (1899). *Old Durban*. P Davis & Sons, Durban.
They Built a City (1982). City Engineers Department.
'Water Supply, An historical review' (Thurs 15 Dec 1921). *The Natal Mercury*. Local History Museum.