

Save Woodstock

THIS letter is prompted by what we consider to be a narrow public response from Cape Town's Mayco member, in the light of the current urban and housing crisis that the city is facing.

ENCA's documentary programme, *Checkpoint*, recently looked at the eviction of some of the last remaining tenants from Gympie Street in Woodstock.

These evictions have added to a tipping point, which will see this suburb (along with some of its neighbours) becoming predominantly affluent. Belinda Walker effectively stated – on our behalf – that there was nothing we could do about this, as “market forces” ruled the day.

We Capetonians should be asking a number of questions: What is life like for these dislocated communities? What is the impact on the character of our city of allowing this unchecked “economic cleansing”?

What does this abdication from a socially responsible way of dealing with the housing needs of our citizens say about us as a society?

Some of the ex-Gympie Street residents interviewed had lived their entire lives in this street, within about 3km of the city centre.

They described an intricate web of relationships that bound and defined the character of this neighbourhood.

Over the past 250 years, schools, mosques, churches, and shops have grown up around this community web. Now they are to be relocated to Symphony Way Temporary Relocation Area in Delft, Cape Town, more commonly known as Blikkiesdorp (Tin Can City).

Blikkiesdorp was built in 2007 by the City of Cape Town and consists of row upon row of corrugated iron, 18m² structures.

Both residents and the media have compared Blikkiesdorp to concentration camps.

Situated 30km from the city centre, there is clearly no way that the community can continue to use those schools, shops, mosques and churches – which will become defunct, wasted.

The psychological impact of having no access to an entire network of facilities that once defined and orientated one's life must be enormous.

The capitulation to “market forces” reinforces the marginalisation of poorer communities, disabling their access to jobs, resources and opportunities.

The irony of the situation is that as Woodstock becomes more affluent, so its vibrant and complex character that is part of the attraction to home buyers in the first place, will fade as it takes on the more singular characteristics of the southern suburbs.

More to the point: What about the ethics of allowing the perpetuation of an apartheid-style legacy of spatial separation in economically stratified settlement patterns?

Why is there “no programme in place (other than the reconstruction of District Six) to actively deal with allowing the poor to share access to urban resources and opportunities while at the same time, integrate the post-apartheid racially divided Cape Town”. (Mammon, 2003)

In this ever more complex world that we live in, where robust solutions are needed, how can we not engage boldly with how to integrate our city in an equitable, rich manner?

How, one must ask, does this destruction of what is historically one of the main residential areas for working-class people close to the city fit with Alderman Nielsen's positive state of play speech (“City to start big housing push”, Cape Times, Insight October 6)?

Nicola Irving

Architecture + Urban Forum
Cape Town