

THE HOUSE OF OUR DREAMS: A STORY UNFOLDING

In the aftermath of the violent attacks against foreign nationals in the inner city and densely populated communities of Yeoville, Bertrams, Berea, Hillbrow and Troyeville, the Sophiatown team decided to establish a more permanent psycho-social support service for these areas, and earnestly began looking for a home. Time was of the essence as the people who had been displaced during the attacks gradually began drifting back into their communities, and much emotional and practical support was needed by large numbers. We already had the "Suitcase" room at the Observatory Girls Primary School, from which we had started running a therapeutic programme for refugee children before the violence. As our search became more urgent we noticed the houses around the school property and eventually asked the school principal, then Gerda van der Westhuizen, if we could not rent one of these houses from the school. She pointed to one house, not very appealing on first sight, and yes, we could have it, if and when she could find the heart to put out the current tenant who had not paid rent in years. She did not have the heart, and we found our premises in Bertrams which we have come to treasure deeply, as they bring together art, gender activism, and psychological healing in one amazing community centre. Then when we nearly had forgotten about the first dream, it came back to us- the then acting principal called us and offered us the same unappealing house, rent-free in return for renovating it.

The house had been empty and deserted for some time, a refuge from the arm of the law for the young sex workers who still frequent the street. I have always been fascinated by old ruins and deserted homes, but I needed the young and masculine support of my colleague Thabo for the first entry. It was horrible: walls not only bubbling with water from a burst geyser, but also conveying a profound sense of the misery of the lives last lived here. Broken furniture lay strewn around, electrical wires hung unconnected, every tap had been removed for illegal recycling, and downstairs in a basement that even at the best of times must have been a rather odd place, the ceiling had collapsed and a wide crack surrounded the natural rock that had at some time (and probably with much love) been allowed to stay. It was a House of Nightmares. And yet, Thabo and I looked at each other, and agreed: there was a magic here and we would do our best to release it!

And so the work began. Cliff and James with the support of Jonathan, who had already transformed our Westdene centre from a rather dark and gloomy office into a peppermint green and fresh working and healing space, had to use all their creativity, innovativeness and skill to gradually turn the House of Nightmares into a habitable space. The wooden shacks at the back and the front of the house were pulled down and carted away. The walls were repaired with great care, the wooden floors sanded, the ceilings re-constructed or pulled back into shape once the pools of water had been cleared. The roof was fixed and painted, and the lino floor

covering in the kitchen, which tenaciously hung on to its oily grime was painstakingly scraped off, inch by inch, to reveal the beautiful wooden floor underneath. The outside of the house and the inside was painted white.

Finally it was done- and ready for use. We had two German volunteers who needed a place to stay and Thotho, our community worker, was appointed resident caretaker. The house was beautiful and one day, standing outside in the still-wild and unkempt garden, Thabo marvelled at the transformation and said quietly “this is it- the house of our dreams”. And thus it became known as the House of Dreams around which we spun our vision of a place in which children from the crowded inner city slums could dream of a future full of possibilities; in which desperate women, displaced by the violence of war, disease, and abuse could reclaim their identity and the continuity of self beyond trauma, loss and deprivation; and in which we ourselves as a group of people committed to healing and social justice could renew our energies and find the courage to continue with the work of “doing hope”.

Still the House of Dreams was empty. It needed furniture and basic appliances before the voices of people could give the now smooth white walls new stories to tell. The week before the volunteers and Thotho were to move in, we sent out an email, asking for donations of all kinds- and they came within a day or two. By the end of the week the place was furnished with all the basic requirements- chairs, tables, beds, a stove, a fridge. Much more than that we did not need- we wanted the space to be free for children to roam around without fear of reprimand.

And so the House of our Dreams came to life. By the end of the year it hosted the first holiday programme with 40 odd children running through the garden and climbing through the hole in the fence to the school field and playground to which we had full access. Since then it has been home not only to Thotho and the volunteers, but a healing and encounter space for various groups: bereaved children and teenagers, grandmothers caring for orphaned children, foreign and South African women exploring the common ground of their experience, students looking for support with their homework, staff meetings, strategic planning workshops and much more. By the end of 2011 the back garden had been transformed into a permaculture project which now feeds two families and is extending into the adjacent school field where school children too are now learning about the wonder (and the hard work) of making things grow.

Much more still needs to be done. The house needs to be maintained, given fresh lashings of paint from time to time, and the outside rooms are still waiting for their chance to be fully transformed. All of this would not be possible without the enthusiastic support of Mrs Lizzie Tjeane, the current principal of Observatory Girls Primary, her staff and the school governing body. By agreement we have the house rent-free for as long as we maintain and improve it, and can account for the money we have put into it. It is an agreement based on trust that allows

dreams to awaken, to flourish, to become real in the lives of people who had been forced to bury them.

But this is only the first chapter in the unfolding of the story of the House of Dreams. Another perhaps even deeper narrative is emerging from the house and weaving itself into the present. It is this story that is wanting to be heard, tentatively for now, but hopefully with time, its voice will rise and join the call for a struggle for freedom that needs to be heard as loudly as it did then, fifty or sixty or more years ago.

Some months ago Thotho shared with his colleagues that a middle-aged man had come to the house, asking if he could have a look around as he had lived there in the early sixties before going into exile. He did not leave his name and the incident was soon forgotten. Then last week we received a call from the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation, informing us that 154 Regent Street has been declared a national heritage site. We were dumbfounded. Our wonderful House of Dreams suddenly revealed a story that we may have sensed when we first fell for it, but could never have imagined.

We were told that the Bernstein family had lived in the house until they were forced to flee the country with their four children in 1963. Within a day or two we had the basic elements of the story pieced together. Very briefly, Hilda and Rusty Bernstein became active members of the South African Communist Party in the 1940s and joined the struggle against racism. In 1943 Hilda Bernstein became the only member of the Communist Party to be elected to the city council of Johannesburg by an all-white electorate. Both Hilda and Rusty were arrested many times- the first time in 1946 when they were charged with aiding an illegal strike. She was also a founder member of the Federation of South African Women and one of the organizers of the famous march to Pretoria which is still commemorated on 9 August each year. Rusty Bernstein was actively involved in the planning of the Congress of the People in 1954 and is credited, among others, with drafting the Freedom Charter. In 1956 he was arrested and charged with treason, and following the four- year long Treason Trial acquitted together with his co-accused. In 1960 both Rusty and Hilda were detained again after the Sharpeville massacre . In 1963 Rusty was among the ANC leaders arrested at Liliesleaf Farm and held in solitary confinement for 90 days. At the end of the Rivonia Trial he was the only one found not guilty and released, but immediately re-arrested before released on bail. Hilda managed to escape arrest by going into hiding. They then decided to flee the country and made their way to England, where they were subsequently joined by their children. Thirty-one year later Hilda and Rusty returned to South Africa for four months in 1994 for the first democratic election. After Rusty's death in 2002, Hilda moved to Cape Town where she died in 2006.

Hidden behind, between and beyond this skeleton of the chronology of an activist family the human experience is often left to the imagination. What happened in the house in 154 Regent

Street between the years 1948 and 1963? Children were born, grew up, went to the school on the next corner, played in the garden, tasted the sour lemons from the tree in front of the house. If the walls could speak what would they tell us about the joy of a new born baby, the agony of choosing between family and country, the conversations over dinner, the fear of the next raid, the heavy-handed knock on the front door, the worry about little ones left alone in the dark of the night? What tears were shed and for what or whom? Who witnessed the endless drafting and re-drafting of a paper that has become the cornerstone of the transformation of our country? Who made the coffee and put out the milk bottles while the adults pored over a vision that extended way beyond the garden fence? What legacies were seeded in the hearts of children, and how did their mother and father reconcile the very important task of kissing better a bruised knee with the equally important task of transforming the world?

Just over two weeks ago, we managed to make contact with Toni Strasburg, and Keith and Frances Bernstein, as well as Barbara Harmel who too spend much of her childhood in the house in Regent Street. A brief exchange of emails provided a glimpse of the memories the walls cherish in their silence and the lemon tree whispers into the wind. And the glimpses converge on a house loved, dreamt about, dreamt in:

“When I first came to England, after my parents went into exile, I was 13 and extremely unhappy at being uprooted and transplanted into a cold grey place. To cheer myself up I would have long travels in my mind around the garden at 154 Regent Street, re-living childhood games, the corners of the garden where they were played, which flowers, trees and bushes grew where, it was one of the most comforting things I had” (Frances Bernstein)

Toni Strassburg made a film about her family called “Memory of Dreams” and remembers seeing the house a few years ago, and being shocked by how it had disintegrated. *“Only the lemon tree was still there producing the most wonderful lemons”.*

What happened to the house on 154 Regent Street after the Bernstein family went into exile is not clear. At some point it must have been sold to the school. The house we first came across in 2010 told us of the misery and depression of the last family who occupied it. Children lived in it too, and suffered, dreamt their own dreams, but had no one to make it happen for them. And in the communities that now surround the House of Dreams the call for freedom needs to be heard again. Poverty, overcrowding, xenophobia, displacement, exploitation, violence and despair mark the streets of Yeoville as much as its much-acclaimed vibrance, resilience and colourful national, cultural and multi-lingual diversity. And in this land which prides itself on one of the best legal frameworks for the care, education and protection of children, the state and civil society is failing miserably in their mandate to make freedom happen for the next generation.

Perhaps No. 154 Regent Street has found its dream again, rooted in history and the experience of one family, and reminding us that, for the sake of our children, and theirs, the struggle for freedom is never over:

South Africa

*(including Yeoville, Betrams,
Troyeville and the CBD)*

Belongs to all who live in it

*The rights of the people
Shall be the same
Regardless of race, colour, gender,
Sexual orientation, health status,
Or the country of their origin*

*All shall be equal before the law
and the human rights of all
shall be protected
at all times*

*There shall be work and security
And the dignity of income
For all*

*Education shall be free, compulsory, universal
And equal for all children
No child shall suffer exclusion
Or substandard conditions of learning*

*There shall be houses and comfort
Medical and social care for all
And no one shall go hungry*

*The wounds of the past shall be
Acknowledged and healed
Through compassion, solidarity and
The reconstruction of hope*

*There shall be peace and friendship
And love*

*And children shall be treasure on which we
Build a future in which all are free*

*(of hunger, hardship, homelessness,
Fear, abuse, violence, displacement,
And ignorance)*

*Because South Africa
belongs to all who live in it.*

