

Sophiatown in the 1950s



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sophiatown is a suburb in Johannesburg, South Africa. It is located on a Johannesburg ridge called Melville Koppies. Sophiatown is an example of how apartheid was bad for the native inhabitants and that it had to go. Before apartheid Sophiatown was established for Europeans, but as the city Johannesburg developed and a sewage dump nearby, the Europeans left and the land was then rented by the native people. The natives were allowed to settle in Sophiatown because it was near the sewage dump and the Europeans in the city didn't want the miners to settle within the city limits. Sophiatown shows how South Africa developed under apartheid. The apartheid caused multiracial communities in Sophiatown that developed to become multicultural. Sophiatown was the only place the people could rent themselves in Johannesburg that was not owned by the government. Apartheid was the ruling of Europeans in South Africa over the natives during 1948-1994. The Europeans found that South Africa had rich resources, especially gold, for mining and that they could use the labor of the natives to get it. They developed a government system, Nationalist Party, which kept the natives down to maintain the European authority which was known as Afrikaners. The population of South Africa migrated to the sites the Europeans were building to mine the resources but they were required to abide by discriminatory laws made by the Europeans. Sophiatown developed as Johannesburg did and helped to end apartheid.

Sophiatown was originally a farm outside of Johannesburg bought by Hermann Tobiansky. Tobiansky named the suburb after his wife Sophia, and the suburb was only for Europeans. However, when a sewage dump was built nearby the Europeans didn't want to settle there and the owner allowed

natives and other nationalities to settle there. During the beginning of the first world war natives moved to cities for the jobs in mining and factory work. During and after the first world war the Johannesburg City Council (JCC) passed slum clearance programs, which removed natives from the inner parts of Johannesburg. These people had nowhere to go so they moved to Sophiatown (SA History).

Because of the multiracial communities, the music culture of Sophiatown continued to develop in spite of the apartheid rule. During the 1920's the slums of Johannesburg were packed with hundreds of people that set up clubs like the Marabi where most of the indigenous jazz of South Africa developed. The specific styles in Johannesburg were known as Tsaba-Tsaba which was a working class form of dance music. However, during the 1930's when the JCC was clearing out the slums, people had to move to Sophiatown where shebeens and dance-parties were still held, but the South African Jazz was influenced by the American Jazz on the radio stations in the shanty town. Because of the American influence groups in Sophiatown would play American swing instead of the old Jazz from Johannesburg. The old Jazz came back and was combined with the new American swing to create Kwela which was basically penny whistling. The kwela culture in Sophiatown also developed different dance forms, one of which was phata-phata or touch touch. The kwela culture was part of the shady part of Sophiatown, people would gamble. Since the people were raided by the police, people would set up look outs and when the police were nearby the people would put up all evidence and they would play kwela as an excuse for a gathering. During the 1950's kwela culture had piano and saxophone added to the instrumentation

and it became Majuba. The name was eventually changed to Mbaqanga (SA History).

The culture of Sophiatown was greatly influenced by the theatres Odin and Balansky's. The Balansky's theatre played many movies from the United States. The gangs of Sophiatown patterned their behavior after the gangsters in the movies they saw. The Tsotsis gang based their dress patterns and language after "Street with No Name", they dressed in trench coats like in the movies and they used slang like "Remember guys, I'm de brains of dis outfit!" (SA history). Other gangs in Sophiatown were named after famous foreign parties like the Nazis and foreign gangsters like the American Vultures (Sophiatown)

The day to day living of Sophiatown was difficult and was based on any way that they could survive. Because the people were forced out of the city to Sophiatown, the people lived in close quarters and poor living conditions. In Sophiatown the natives were not required by the government to acquire a permit. The black land owners had to pay huge mortgage so they allowed others to settle in their backyards. The population grew exponentially because of this and people had to become tenants and subtenants on other people's backyards. Since they were usually poor, the people who migrated to Sophiatown had to build houses out of metal sheets and excess materials. Since all the adult males were working in the mines, the adolescents were unsupervised and could do whatever they wanted to do and joined gangs as well as common theft and murder. The women in Sophiatown had to find work as prostitutes or they worked as alcohol queens in shebeens. Shebeens were similar to speak-easies in the United States, they were places that

people could drink alcohol and talk about local problems. Shebeens were usually held in the queens' homes with bands playing for entertainment. Shebeens were risky business since police could raid and arrest anyone within the Shebeens and the methods for brewing alcohol were dangerous at the time. However, Shebeens weren't all bad they were places where politicians met and discussed ideas to people, and " they weren't all dirty dark rooms but were sometimes clean respectable places with imported furniture" (Hannerz).

The most important event in Sophiatown was the removal and destruction of Sophiatown. The head of the South African government was the Nationalist Party which controlled the JCC. Because the Nationalist Party was part of the apartheid, it passed laws to suppress the natives in Sophiatown and they rationalized this because Johannesburg was growing and the black neighborhoods were getting too close to the white suburbs. The removal of the residents of Sophiatown was organized by the Native Resettlement Board, which was a more localized part of the NP. The people were moved to Soweto where the NP established a housing system from a census about the population within the shanty town, but they didn't know about the housing that was being provided which was generally better than the current living quarters of the average person in Sophiatown. The people refused to leave and the slogan of the people was " ons dak nie.... ons phola hierso" which meant " we are not moving... We are staying" (SA history). The people rebelled and used guns and explosives to keep the government officials from forcing them out, but the government eventually won and forced thousands to move to the meadowlands of Soweto. The destruction of Sophiatown

continued from 1955-1960 during which the people were forced to move and their homes were bulldozed.

The removals in Sophiatown brought people's attention to the apartheid's unjust rule, because it was the only place the government didn't strictly regulate. After the removals political leaders made speeches specifically naming the incident to inspire people to rise against the apartheid rule. One of the people who made such speeches about Sophiatown was Nelson Mandela. As well as the revolts in Sophiatown, people in Soweto were revolting because they lost everything they owned when they moved and the land owners lost all sources of income (SA History).

Sophiatown was a suburb in Johannesburg during the rule of apartheid in South Africa. Sophiatown was the only place in Johannesburg that the government didn't own and exert its discriminatory rules over during the apartheid. However, after Johannesburg grew closer to Sophiatown the government decided to destroy it and relocate the entire population to Soweto. The results of the destruction of Sophiatown were revolts that occurred both in Johannesburg and in Soweto where the people were relocated to. The destruction of Sophiatown helped cause the end of apartheid and developed a specific culture of its own.