At the crossroads of history: Street names as monuments in the South African cityscape

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Abstract

Place name changes are an ongoing process and a contentious and politicised issue in twenty-first-century South Africa, where the changes are often implemented as a form of redress and/or nation-building. This paper examines the practice of name-changing as it relates to street names in South Africa, with a special focus on Pretoria (Tshwane). Whereas street name changes may be used as a political statement, I offer an alternative pathway inspired by Karen Till's (2012) concept of the 'wounded city.' In particular, I address the question of whether or not the heritage value of street names is taken sufficiently into account when changes are implemented considering that street names act as containers of meaning; monuments to the intangible; and as visible reminders of a contested history that should not necessarily be obliterated from our townscapes.

Key words: South Africa; Pretoria; street names; name changes; townscape; heritage

'One person's landmark may be an object of indifference or hostility to another' (Tunbridge 1984:171).

'Subliminally, these old street signs said to the country's majority that this is not your street, this is not your town, this is not your park' (Motlanthe in *Mail & Guardian* 2008c).

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most evocative displays in the District Six Museum in Cape Town are the long banners of street signs suspended from the ceiling above the map of the District covering the floor. When former residents visit the museum they are encouraged to mark the places where they lived on the large map on the floor, the street names evoking memories of place and of the inhabitants' lives there before the forced removals (Christie 2009:38). The most astonishing aspect of this portion of the exhibit, however, is how these street signs even came to be at the museum. As recounted by Martin Hall (2000:172):

> This display ... represents all the ambiguities and contradictions in the violence of apartheid in its own particular history. Long assumed destroyed with the rest of the District's architectural fabric, the street signs had in fact been secretly collected and stored by one of the white demolition

workers employed by the state. Seeking relief from the burden of his history this man presented himself and his collection to the Museum shortly after it was opened, as an act of personal reparation.

Now the street signs hang in the Museum as monuments to a bygone era. The street sign exhibit in the District Museum illustrates, perhaps better than any other example, the important role that street names, and even their physical manifestation in the form of signs, play in shaping the lived experience of those who occupy a townscape. Street names, while essential for our physical orientation in space, also speak to emotional connections and to place memory that goes beyond the functional aspects of their use as locational markers. In short, they are an important part of any city's 'emotional geography' (Kearney & Bradley 2009:79).

In this paper I examine the issue of street name changes in the city of Pretoria against the background of the contested terrain of name changes in South Africa generally. I explore street name changes from practical, social and political perspectives and emphasise that, if street names are to be regarded as an important aspect of monumentalisation, existing street names should also be regarded as monuments and thus subjected to an integrated heritage approach when the case is made for changing them. Last, I draw on Till's (2012) concept of the 'wounded city' to advocate an alternative approach to street name and other changes in the city.

Name changes as redress in post-apartheid South Africa

One of the recommendations made in the final report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was that the re-naming or restoration of names, particularly indigenous language names to places on the landscape, was an act of symbolic reparation and restitution that could be made to victims of apartheid and colonialism (Du Plessis 2009:215). The redress that this affords rests in part on the authority that is inherent in the power to name and thus to emplace the worldview or interests of one group on the landscape over that of others (Orgeret 2010:310). Re-naming or the restoration of properly inscribed names to parts of this landscape is thus seen as a way to rectify the alienation from the land that widespread dispossession imposes; it introduces a new conversation to the landscape (Du Plessis 2009:216).

As is to be expected at any time of political change (Azaryahu 2011; Bodnar 2009), place name changes have proceeded apace across the country, some such as Pietersburg to Polokwane, Warmbad to BelaBela, and Nylstroom to Modimolle, happening fairly quickly and smoothly. Others such as Louis Trichardt to Makhado and back again (Thotse 2010) and that of Pretoria to Tshwane (Swanepoel 2009) proved more contentious, being the subject of widespread protests (in the newspapers and on the street), political disputes and successful legal action (Swanepoel 2009:100).

Even in cases where the name changes are contested, the names in question may be used interchangeably, not least because they were usually in existence long before the decision was made to change the official designation. Such parallel naming systems are the norm rather than the exception in multilingual countries such as South Africa. Such parallel names may be translated versions of the existing name, may refer back to a pre-colonial name for the locality, or may be neologisms (Jenkins 2007:86). What is at stake in most place-name disputes is thus the question of which name should be officially recognised and 'performed' (and

thus legitimised) in a variety of contexts such as on signposts, road and weather maps and so on (Hansen 2001:3; Swanepoel 2009:96). Street names, in contrast, are usually characterised by only one name (see below).

Broadly, street names can be regarded as being important in three respects. As locative devices, as instilling a sense of belonging on a personal level (in the form of the personal address), and as a form of commemorative marker that helps to shape a communal conversation on a town-, city- or country-wide scale.

Street names as locative devices

Names on any given landscape, rural or urban, are ubiquitous. Mountains, streams, rivers, farms, towns, streets, buildings, squares – everything is named and, more often than not, these names are officially designated and widely known amongst people who live in the vicinity. While these days some of us may simply be able to type the GPS co-ordinates into an electronic device, for thousands of years ordinary people have used names, usually in the form of an address or geographical marker, to navigate space and to identify place (Coetzee & Cooper 2007:450).

As noted above, whereas place names may be known by parallel names, streets usually only have one name. This is so mainly for practical reasons – as outlined in the South African National Standards for addresses, an address (in this case a street address) should allow for the 'unambiguous specification of a point of service delivery', in that it identifies the exact point at which a service can be provided. Such services entail not only mail delivery but also water and electricity, as well as address verification for banking and other legal reasons (Coetzee & Cooper 2007:449). Large-scale street name changes, however, can cause disorientation for those navigating the space if all changes are implemented at the same time. Thus, when the eThekwini municipality forged ahead with over 100 street name changes in Durban in 2008, they retained both the old and new street name signs for a certain length of time so as to facilitate navigation. Many of the new signs were vandalised in protest (Orgeret 2010:299; also see Tolsi 2008).

Street names instil a sense of belonging

As demonstrated by the case of the District Six Museum, street names also instil a sense of belonging. The address of an individual can be regarded as an extension of personal identity, particularly in countries such as South Africa where proof of residential address is required for many of the activities that citizens do every day, such as banking. The streetscape that people move through every day inspires an associative process through which people attach either positive or negative associations to place and street names (Guyot & Seethal 2007:3; Swanepoel 2009:99). Possibly one does not even have to have physically moved through the streets oneself: I have never been to Durban yet I still feel a pang of loss to hear that 'Musgrave Road' – which featured on the South African Monopoly® board when I was growing up – has been changed.

Street names as memorials

Although Swart (2008:112) has argued that street name changes do not meet with the same resistance encountered at changes to more formal memorials such as monuments, because they are not 'charged with the sacred' and 'appear mundane and meaningless', it is clear from the South African context that the

participants in street name change disputes are fully aware of the ideological load that streetscapes carry. Numerous scholars (Bodnar 2009; Swart 2008; Till 2012:7; Yeoh 1996) writing on street names and other monuments have noted that street names can be used to reflect and promote a particular view of history and thus can be used to reinforce the political status quo (Swart 2008:112; Yeoh 1996:298). Swart (2008:112) also notes that they play a role in introducing those values and ideas into 'the spheres of social communication' or, as Bodnar (2009:121) states, 'instructing people of the locality about a particular set of values, political order or cultural expression.' In this way, street names, like all symbols, relate the concrete to the abstract. Thus the act of naming is also a commemorative act, a form of monumentalisation physically manifested by signs.

It is for this reason that the vandalism of signboards has become an important means for people to display their distrust/dislike of the new government by defacing the names that signify the change (Swanepoel 2009:96; Tolsi 2008). For example, in July 2011, six men were arrested placing the name 'Clive Derby-Lewis Street' (the name of Chris Hani's assassin) over that of 'Nelson Mandela Boulevard' on a sign in Pretoria (Magome 2011a), and many of the new street name signs in Durban have been vandalised or stolen (Orgeret 2010:299). The vandalism of 'Tshwane' and other road signs was an important aspect of the rejection of the proposed Pretoria/Tshwane name change (Swanepoel 2009:96).

Street name changes in Pretoria

The proposal for large-scale street name changes in Pretoria was first presented towards the end of 2007, with the public consultation process continuing into 2008 and 2009. The ANC-dominated city council proposed that the names of at least 28 streets in downtown Pretoria and other areas should be changed. The reasons provided for this by the speaker of the Council, Khorombi Dau, varied from the need to 'create a new African capital reflecting a shared heritage, identity and destiny' to 'given the history of the past and how some of the streets were named, it is imperative to change some offensive names which still reflect a colonial and apartheid past.' Dau went on to say that the new names would be those of individuals 'who had contributed to the liberation struggle, the struggle for gender equality and cultural activists' (*Mail & Guardian* 2008b).

The streets identified for renaming are reflected in Table 1. Some of the names such as Pretorius, Prinsloo, Proes, Skinner, Van der Walt, Vermeulen and Walker were important figures in the founding and early settlement of the town (Preller 1938:58-59, 73-74; Punt 1955: 260-265). Others, such as Esselen and Mears date to Paul Kruger's time as president of the South African Republic (ZAR) (Andrews 1999).

The proposed street names changes elicited an immediate and hostile response from a variety of civil organisations and political parties. The Freedom Front +, for example, described it as 'an act of aggression against the Afrikaner community of Pretoria' (*Mail & Guardian* 2008b) and complained about a lack of consulation. An estimated 47 civil institutions eventually came together under the umbrella of Action Pretoria Street Names in order to oppose the changes. While some of these institutions were no doubt motivated by concerns over Afrikaner heritage and culture, others were no doubt more motivated by their political opposition to the ANC and, perhaps, the apparent high-handed way in which it had been decided which street names

should be changed, as it seems that public participation was only called for once the streets had already been identified.

The scale and process of public participation in connection with name changes is a contentious issue generally – in Pretoria, Durban and elsewhere (Kriel 2009:31). Albeit based on a small sample (n=29), Njomane's (2009) study indicates that while individuals may differ about the proposed place name change of Pretoria to Tshwane and the proposed street names, many people feel that there has been inadequate public consultation and information provided about the process. For many of Njomane's respondents, the decisions seem to have come out of nowhere as they first became aware of proposed changes when the announcement appeared in the newspaper (Njomane 2009:57).

When public consultation was instituted in Pretoria, it was not overly successful. The years 2008 and 2009 saw a series of public consultation meetings that were often characterised by acrimonious exchanges, once or twice even resulting in fisticuffs between Pretoria residents of differing races (Magome 2011b:1; *Mail & Guardian* 2008a). In addition to the issue of Afrikaner heritage, many of the objections to proposed name changes were also financial. It was estimated that the changing of 27 street names, many of them extremely long streets, would directly affect over 27,000 businesses and residents with an estimated cumulative price tag of over R800 million (Beyers 2008). Such costs accrued from the processes associated with new street name boards, title deed registration for new addresses, administrative charges, municipal service and rates accounts, changes to maps and GPS systems, postal and street guides, the advertising of new names and consultation costs. This is not to mention the costs that individual businesses would be likely to incur through having to change their stationery and other details (Beyers 2008).

Table 1: Street names identified for possible renaming in 2005/2006 (Kriel 2009:44).

Streets set out in the 1859 survey by A F Du Toit in today's CBD (Meiring 1955:150).
[St] Andries Street
Church Street
[Jacob] Maré Street
Pretorius Street
Prinsloo Street
Proes Street
Schoeman Street
Schubart Street
Skinner Street
Vermeulen Street
Van der Walt Street
Downtown [CBD] streets not named in the 1859 survey (Meiring 1955:150)
Paul Kruger Street
Potgieter Street
Mitchell Street
Other
Beatrix Street
Charles Street
DF Malan Drive
Duncan Street
Esselen Street
Hans Strijdom Drive
Hendrik Verwoerd Drive
General Louis Botha Drive
Mears Street
Michael Brink Street
Queen Wilhelmina Drive
Voortrekkers Road
Walker Street
Zambesi Drive

The acrimony that characterised this process was no doubt fed by the long on-going dispute about the city's name, which led to both sides making rather hyperbolic and confrontational statements. If one looks at the streets that were identified as having 'offensive' names as they represented a colonial and apartheid past, an undifferentiated approach on the part of the city council becomes evident. While some of the names, such as Hendrik Verwoerd, are clearly linked to apartheid and would probably have been easy to change, other names relating to the early history and establishment of the city appear to have been designated offensive merely because they relate to the time period of Pretoria's founding. Many of them in fact are the original names that appear on the first map drawn up by the surveyor, AF du Toit in 1859, as indicated in Table 1 (Meiring 1955:150).

On the other hand, the claim by parties such as the Freedom Front + that the street names were wholly an act of aggression aimed at the Afrikaner population of Pretoria, is equally overblown in the sense that many of the names are not more than 60 or 70 years old, that is, they themselves were the results of streets being renamed (Andrews 1999). For example:

- Queen Wilhemina Ave – named in 1947, previously Plantation Road.
- DF Malan- previously called Lorentz street – probably re-named post-1940.
- Jacob Maré – previously Maré Street, then Paul Maré, then Jacob Maré.
- Paul Kruger Street – previously called Mark [Market] Street, renamed in 1938.
- Hendrik Verwoerd Drive – previously 9th Avenue, renamed in 1987.
- Voortrekker Road – renamed in 1952 as part of the Van Riebeeck tercentenary celebrations.

Street name changes are thus an existing part of Pretoria's townscape. In fact, Preller (1938:72) lamented in *Old Pretoria* in 1938 that several historical street names had been changed, and complained that 'it seems needless also to translate old names, such as Kerk or Mark streets.'

In the final months of 2011, the mayor of Pretoria – Kgosientso Ramokgopa – vowed that the name changes of both the city (Pretoria to Tshwane) and of at least 21 streets would go ahead and would be finalised by the end of 2012 (Magome 2011b:1; see postscript). While Pretoria's streetscape, as reflected in its street names can certainly be described as non-representative, the newly proposed name changes are no less politically motivated. Looking at a present-day street plan, it is clear that the streets identified for renaming were in many cases singled out less for their 'offensive' nature than for the reason that they form the major arterial roads into and out of the city as well as the core of the CBD (*Mail & Guardian* 2008b). By renaming such streets, the ruling ANC party can further legitimise its rule by valorising the period of anti-apartheid struggle (Bodnar 2009:117), the scale ensuring that the impact of the changed names is concomitantly greater (Thotse 2010: 181). Such streets include: Church Street; Pretorius Street; Schoeman Street; Zambesi Drive; Skinner Street; and Van der Walt Street. During a ceremony at Freedom Park, the mayor stated that 'the municipality would build statues of liberation heroes that would be bigger than the statues now seen in the city' (Magome 2011b:1). Based on the process in Durban, it is more than likely that the list of those individuals who will be honoured will be dominated by the names of ANC members and thus ANC struggle icons (Marschall 2010:58).

As the case of the Durban street name changes demonstrates, the current process in most ANC-controlled municipal councils is open to abuse. Many of the decisions

have been made in council without adequate public participation. In addition, name changes are being used to highlight the ANC's role in the struggle. As a result, not all suggested name changes are motivated by the consideration of redress, but rather by one of political one-upmanship – as evidenced by the attempt to change the name of KwaMashu's (Kwazulu-Natal) Princess Magogo Stadium, to that of Dumisani Makhaye, an ANC politician (Kriel 2009:32). It was rumoured that many of Durban's new street names originated with the ANC's head office in Johannesburg (Orgeret 2010:307).

The question remains: what is the way forward for the city of Pretoria and its inhabitants? Street names determine the dominant text of townscape; and Pretoria's street names, particularly in the CBD and its two oldest suburbs, Arcadia and Sunnyside, clearly indicate a claim that the city was founded and built by a group of white men. But we all know that history is more 'messy' than that. Those men had families – mothers, wives and daughters – where is their contribution reflected? From its earliest establishment, Pretoria also had a black population initially composed of live-in servants, but from 1867 onwards, also of people residing at the School-plaats Mission (Friedman 1994:7) and later, Marabastad (Junod 1955:76-78) and Lady Selborne (Kgori-Masondo 2008). Those who lived in Pretoria when it was first founded, no doubt interacted with the black communities and leaders in the vicinity who would have had an impact on the community. How should we make their historical presence visible in the city's townscape or, for that matter, in its history books?

In the remaining pages I present what I would view as an alternative pathway that the inhabitants of Pretoria could take as the name-changing process goes forward. First, it should be acknowledged that Pretoria is, in Till's (2012:6) term, a 'wounded city' and second, street-name changes should be made on a case-by-case basis that is rooted in an understanding of the history and heritage of the city as a whole.

Pretoria as a 'Wounded City'

Writing about cities such as Cape Town (South Africa) and Bogatá (Columbia), Till (2012:6) defines 'wounded cities' as

> densely settled locales that have been harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement and individual and social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence ... these forms of violence often work over a period of many years – often decades – and continue to structure current social and spatial relations ...

By these measures – state-perpetrated violence, physical displacement, and social trauma that continue to shape social and spatial relations – Pretoria, like many cities in South Africa, can be characterised as a 'wounded city.' The mixed communities of Marabastad and Lady Selborne were subject to forced removals and segregation (Friedman 1994; Kgori-Masondo 2008), which removed many of Pretoria's non-white inhabitants from close proximity to the city's CBD area, and thus work and shopping opportunities. In addition they would have lost their sense of connectedness to areas that they and their families may have inhabited for some generations (Kgori-Masondo 2008:ii). This severing of connectedness was also signalled in street name changes. Thus in the Lady Selborne area, which became the white suburb of Suiderberg, street names such as Mokone, Mbathla and Maraba were re-named Belmont, Bergendal and Sonnapas (Kgori-Masondo 2008: 149).

In addition, since the end of apartheid, a series of social, economic and demographic processes have seen a pattern of what might be described as 'white flight'

from the central areas of the city to, particularly, the eastern suburbs of Pretoria (Lanegran 2000:275; Popke & Ballard 2004:102), reinforcing existing divisions and illustrating the ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa. Despite their withdrawal from many of these spaces, many white South Africans express overt emotional ties to the symbols of this history and past, such as that evinced in historical street names. Marschall (2010:1) has observed that this may be the case even if there is no specific identification with these symbols other than the fact that it expresses a combination of 'anxieties over disempowerment and alienation' (also see Tunbridge 1984:176).

Till (2012:5) motivates the concept of the 'wounded city' by reference to a notion of redress: once its inhabitants and administrators understand that their city has been damaged, more attention may be paid both to an ongoing sense of injury, and active measures to publicly address it. Thus, rather than memorialisation that 'attempt[s] to close off public discussion', the inhabitants might strive for memorialising efforts that 'keep open the process of historical reflection through dialogue, changing landscape forms and community capacity-building' (Till 2012:7). This is what Freedom Park is ostensibly designed to do on a national scale; yet visits to the monument are so hedged around with 'explanation' on the part of the guides that there is little if any opportunity for historical reflection and dialogue with the past. If Freedom Park is part of the national conversation, what about the conversation at city-level? At present, there are relatively few events that work to bring Pretoria residents from different walks of life together to 'celebrate the city.'

South Africa has an exceedingly complex and conflictual history, which tends to be obscured in a black-and-white polarising political rhetoric, presenting 'your' history and 'my' history, rather than 'our history.'

Perhaps it is this polarisation that led to the decision of the Tshwane Metro Council to declare that they would not participate in the celebrations of the 150th-anniversary of the city's founding (in November 2005), declaring that the celebrations were racially divisive and that 'it would rather celebrate the fifth anniversary of the City of Tshwane in December' (Iol 2005; also see Jenkins 2007:158). Street name changes thus form one part of an attempt to re-write the history of the city.

For myself, I have come to think of street names and their display as the visible manifestations of what Peires (2008:64) has termed the 'scars of history': 'History exists independently of the historian, the scars of history are visible in the present because the present is the consequence of the past …

To carry the metaphor further, it is worth noting that scars on the body represent wounds that have healed and the mark of the scar serves as a reminder of an experience that may once have been painful but now forms part of your life experience. While changing street names may satisfy a perceived need to 're-make' the city in another image, the practice of changing such names does not, in the end, erase that history. Rather than attempting to erase it, I would argue, street names should be used strategically to bring to the fore hidden aspects of the city's history so that the landscape speaks to a shared, rather than a divided past. This is in line with the process advocated by then president Kgalema Mothlanthe who called for a more 'organic, consultative process' to name changes that would 'build bridges between different sectors of the population' (*Mail & Guardian* 2008c).

Street names as heritage

> How can you have the longest street in this city named Church Street when you have the likes of Solomon Mahlangu and Ting-Ting Masango that you can name these streets after? (Mayor Kgosientso Ramokgopa quoted in Magoma 2011b:1)

This is how many of South Africa's towns grew in the areas north of the Orange River in the nineteenth century: first there came the 'church place' where families gathered for *nagmaal* (communion); then there came the church; which was followed by the trader in his wagon and, later, his store; after him, came the town (Preller 1938:50-51). That is how Pretoria grew from a collection of farmsteads to the city that it is today. There is no church on Church Square today, but the square and the street (Church) that leads from either side of it, are a reminder of the founding of the city.

By South African standards, Pretoria is an old city, which is why heritage values should be respected in the re-naming process and why, in some cases, historic aspects of the town's streetscape should be retained. This need not be counter-productive to making the city's landscape more representative. For example, the city council might take a policy decision to retain the names in the CBD area that appear in the 1859 map and to change the names of streets that do not appear on that map, such as Bosman, Paul Kruger, Mitchell and Potgieter Streets. Crucially, these streets should not be re-named after struggle icons but after historical individuals who were present in the first few decades of Pretoria's existence and who played an important role in the city. Other streets adjacent to this core area could also be re-named in this fashion. Beyond this, streets could be named after some of the important anti-apartheid figures who deserve to be remembered in our collective consciousness, in consultation with residents.

I would argue that an approach that brings to light the role of black and female actors in early Pretoria allows us room to reclaim the city in a new way. Of particular concern is the exclusion of female figures from much post-apartheid memorialisation (Miller 2011:297). Indeed, in Durban, the changes of over 100 street names included the names of only fifteen memorable women (Orgeret 2010:310). In Pretoria, new street names should be drawn from a time period co-terminous with the historical actors then present in the townscape. Through public consultation and information campaigns, the citizenry of Pretoria can begin to chart a more inclusive history of the city.

As for other streets that may be named after more recent figures, at the very least these should be of local significance to the city. This was an oft-expressed concern in Durban, where local historians felt sidelined (Kriel 2009:31; Orgeret 2010:313).

Conclusion

All monuments dating to a specific time and place are installed with specific objectives by their designers. Yet in a heterogeneous society such as South Africa, it is not likely that all those who view such monuments will attach the same meaning to them (Tunbridge 1984: 171). Add to this the passage of time, and the perception of monuments and memorial markers will greatly vary (Marschall 2010:9).

Large-scale street name changes showcasing names divorced from local contexts, will only serve to date the cityscape in time. As Bodnar (2009:122) notes with reference to Eastern Europe: 'what was once an official version of the past … [strikes today's reader] … as a relic of a dated political agenda.' While name changes that are related to a broader political change will undoubtedly

always be, to some extent, politically and ideologically motivated, and thus contested (Marschall 2010:7), they are often a necessary part of transformation and transitional justice (Swart 2008:106). This does not mean, however, that they shouldn't also be meaningful within the specificities of their context.

Postscript

This paper was written towards the end of 2011 when the street name changes in Pretoria were still being debated. By the time it is published, the street name changes will have been effected following a decision taken by the Tshwane Metro Council on 29 March 2012. Of the 11 streets in the CBD originally identified for renaming, 10 have now been changed. This means that only 6 of the 20 street names originally indicated on the 1859 survey map survive. Twenty-seven street names in total have been changed, primarily to the names of ANC, PAC, APLA and other struggle veterans and anti-apartheid activists. Six women are honoured. Only three names relate to individuals who lived at the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth century, only one of whom was a local chief. The decision over the changes was, as is to be expected, accompanied by political bickering and verbal exchanges between the representatives of the political parties on the Metro Council and threats to challenge the decision in court (Hlahla 2012:1).

Acknowledgements

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