CIVIC STRUCTURES AND UNFULFILLED DESIRES

Cato Manor and the New Order

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We have a very good government but now the problem with our beloved government is that the promises which were made to us have not yet been met.

– Member of the Development Committee, Jamaica

In the striving for national development certain communities have come to symbolise the transition from the brutalities of apartheid to the achievement of social and economic development. Sophiatown represented the cultural resistance of the 1950s; Soweto the political struggles of the 1970s. Cato Manor, which is situated just over the ridge overlooking the central business area of Durban, represented both a cultural and political tradition and now has pride of place in the public face of Durban Metro development. Here is a community once vital and in some way prospering on the fringes of the old apartheid city boundaries, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, displaying a disorderly vitality which acted as a magnet to the urban poor. Because of its place in the iconography of the history of the urban dispossessed, of the presence of African people originally on the border of the old white city and now virtually at the centre, it attracted Presidential interest with the idea of operating as an exemplar of the new urban strategy of meeting the needs of the poor.

The social history of Cato Manor has been celebrated in the writings of Edwards who reveals the considerable diversity and social complexity of a community which the city planners under the period of segregation and apartheid found beyond their control until it was dispersed and destroyed in 1960 (Edwards 1989). Its history, however, has not been one of singular achievement, and its historians have been careful to record its crime, poverty, and community violence. The tensions between Indian landowners and African squatters, although not the spark for the incendiary 1949 riots, were a latent line of conflict which wreaked havoc on a highly interdependent community (Maharaj 1994:5). This violence, although connived at by the white authorities in the early stages, served as an indicator to the apartheid authorities that the untamed African plebeians ‘just over the ridge’ were a
danger to the white city. In 1958 Cato Manor was zoned as a white group area. This was undoubtedly an accelerator to resistance to the city and national authorities, whose fears peaked with the march on town in 1960 by the African working poor from Cato Manor to demand the release of their political leaders. By the 1960s the authorities were determined that such a centre for resistance should not stand and the Africans were moved to KwaMashu and Umlazi and Indians to Chatsworth (Edwards 1994:422).

The area of Cato Manor remained as a desolate sore just out of sight of the Durban city centre. Subsequent proclamations of sections of the land by the apartheid state as white or Indian (Khan and Maharaj 1998) were challenges to African claims and served to intensify conflictual thinking about the area. But with the gradual breakup of the apartheid system, particularly marked in the late 1980s, there was a movement of African squatters into the area marked with the ruins of old communities: old school buildings, rudimentary roads, and scattered bricks. Makhathini argues that these early residents were often refugees from violence and mutually apprehensive. He identifies phases in the rise of squatting: an initial hidden phase, followed by open squatting, and culminating in organisation and consolidation (1992:3-6). In this way, by stealth, growing confidence, and then open defiance of the authorities through land invasions, Cato Manor emerged as a large African settlement, one boundary abutting on the white suburb of Manor Gardens. The African presence, dispersed in a spectacular display of apartheid power, was reasserted by force of numbers. Indians who were also expelled, generally sought compensation in legal claims to land they had owned.

With the demise of apartheid and a hands-off policy by the newly emerging authorities, the population of Cato Manor grew exponentially. Following the historic 1994 election which marked the transition from white government to democratic government, the Cato Manor settlement amounted to the present estimated 80 000, and subsequent projections point to a population of 180 000.

Present-day Cato Manor is a small-scale society in flux, somewhat different from the urban poor of the great metropoles with a more settled population and culture, and characterised by a complexity of factors including transience, migration, urban commitment, and a mixture of resistance and acquiescence to the evolving urban order. The community presents a series of changing images ranging from unkempt and scarred rolling hills spread with shacks and rubbish spilling on to the Bellair Road that dissects the community, to a multi-faceted order with small starkly exposed huts dotted on the adjoining hills with the shacks in partial retreat. Although not conclusive, there is somewhat of a growing sense of order. Gradual progress is slowly displacing the view from within the community that the displaced have no permanence within the present, are meeting no justice in their demands, and are victims of the present neo-liberal strictures.