

I Live in Naturena - Why Don't You?

Jo Sandrock

Like most cities, Johannesburg has a railway line running through it. North of this impenetrable barrier are desirable suburbs and expensive shopping centres. Expensive, not because their goods cost more — butter, if you can afford it, is the same price anywhere — but because of the fountains and the marble. On the wrong side of the tracks, south of the railway line, are the mines and the suburbs where the white miners used to live. Then there is what came to be called the New South, more expensive houses, with two bathrooms and double garages, but cheaper because they were, after all, in the dreaded south.

Soweto, of course, is in the south too. Soweto is a phoney African-sounding word made up of the first two letters of the three words South West Townships, and was comfortably out of the way in the apartheid days ('Isn't it terrible how far they have to travel, and get up so early in the morning?' was a popular mantra). There's a big soccer stadium, Soccer City, and, glory of glories, Sun City prison. This is a huge complex with brilliant pink floodlights putting a dawn glow into the sky all night — the great Johannesburg Prison, always known by the name of the outrageously de luxe resort in a former bantustan.

And of course there were warders, white warders who, if they were senior enough, lived in the nearby lush New South suburb of Meredale. South of the prison — yes, even further south — was a cluster of rocky hills, the end of the Klipriviersberg, which was to become the suburb of Naturena. This

was the home of many of the white prison staff whose children went to the nearby Meredale primary school, or the high school in Mondeor, somewhat further away. A comfortable right-wing enclave.

In the mid-1980s our children had left home and we were ready to move ourselves. Where could we build a house? Here in Naturena was the ideal piece of ground — half rocky hillside and half flat enough for a small house and garden. In the fifteen years since we arrived the whole world has changed. Soon after we moved in it was reported that there was to be a coloured area established nearby. We attended the indignation meeting in the Meredale school hall. One after the other, residents rose to express their outrage and to suggest stronger and more expensive ways of delivering their protests to the powers that be in the local council. But either the report was a rumour or the council took heed — the township never materialised.

Soon the Group Areas Act was repealed and a trickle of black homeowners were to be seen maintaining Naturena's middle-class image, mowing the pavements and keeping themselves to themselves behind net curtains. But the right-wingers could not see that this was a mirror image of their own lives. They moved out, selling their houses, not to blacks — this would have been betrayal — but to whites who were starting off in family life. By this time it was 1990 and the 2nd of February, when the ANC was unbanned, had come and gone, so these new arrivals were not really interested in

whether they had black neighbours or not, so long as there weren't too many of them. But gradually they too moved on, went up in the world or found their surroundings uncongenial. More houses were built on the rocky hillsides, more children arrived, and we had a new school at the edge of the suburb. In 1996, when Naturena was about half-and-half, suddenly we were in the news. There was another protest meeting, this time against the projected removal of an informal settlement from a stretch of unsafe ground some kilometres away to a swampy piece of land in the valley below us. We collected money for legal fees, we barricaded the entrance roads to Naturena, and we read about ourselves in the newspapers. 'They've forgotten their roots,' said the premier of Gauteng grandly from his house in up-market Houghton. The enraged future occupiers of the area arrived in a bus, bearing placards and ready for a confrontation. When they saw where they were to be dumped they left: it seems they had been given to understand that they were to live near Southgate, the local shopping centre, near schools and transport, with plenty of jobs available — all a figment in the mind of some council bureaucrat. The irony was apparent to those of us — not many — who had attended the original meeting nearly ten years before. But now it was a breakthrough into the New South Africa. We were all in it together, right or wrong. The roots that the politician so sneeringly referred to were not out there in the Struggle, but right here in Naturena, and they belonged to us all. If 'they' had forgotten 'theirs', 'we' had forgotten 'ours'.

It was a watershed.

So how are we all now in Naturena? We have a reflection of the country's demography. 'Hello Unca Mike,' shout the little boys to my husband as he toils up the hill in his bicycle's lowest gear, speeding past him on their own five-speeds. We have to be careful as we drive round to our house because there's a flat bit of road at the top of the hill where the kids play soccer or cricket depending on the season. The teenagers mooch around in their posh clothes — they all go to Mondeor High School nowadays.

We have no high walls or electrified fences; we leave that to the rich north. Our crime rate has gone down and our house values have gone up — still lower than those in the north, but the community values are certainly higher. Now that virtually the whole suburb is built up, hardly a vacant stand to be seen, we do not have neighbourhood get-togethers so often, but the community spirit is still solidly there. It would not occur to any of us not to greet a stranger passing by, unheard of in my former life where a stranger was a stranger and undoubtedly suspect.

As I type I look out to the south where my view extends over the new low-cost housing to the horizon twenty kilometres away, no higher ground between me and Antarctica. Because of the hills, the houses all face different directions; the streets curve, no grid-pattern for us. Everybody should live in Naturena.