

LIFESTYLE 

Hot Lunch

Flo Bird's fierce fight to protect Joburg heritage

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Flo Bird talks to Sunday Times about the heritage of the city Johannesburg and why she thinks that it has to be preserved

Image: Thapelo Morebudi


Flo Bird is a diminutive firecracker of a person. She may be small but her works are mighty.

She has notched up 80 years, and I am convinced that she has 80 more in her at least, because Flo is superpowered by a fierce love for Johannesburg.

She fuels the love by regular infusions of righteous anger when her beloved city is treated with disdain and indifference. It can't be too hard to stoke that fire given the constant affronts to Jozi and its heritage.

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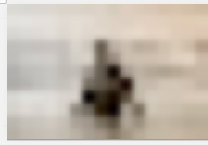
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But where others retreat to their mental and physical laagers to take solace in Netflix, solar panels, boreholes,

gated communities, suburban flight ever northwards, or wholesale decampment for the coastal regions, Flo leans into the task of preserving Joburg's heritage with her fellow quixotic tilters at the windmills of change — the Johannesburg Heritage Society Foundation.

She has long fought this good fight, taking on the governments of the time with gusto, saving most of the old suburbs of Parktown and Westcliff from an apartheid highway that showed the same disdain for the city's beautiful ridge as the apartheid visionaries who asserted their brutalist aesthetics with the general hospital.

She is still fighting.



History of Fietas is just disappearing

Spanning just 25 streets between the Braamfontein and Brixton cemeteries in Johannesburg, the Fietas neighbourhood is desperately trying to claw back ...

NEWS 2 years ago

I meet her for lunch at the Rand Club, where members have been hard at work bringing the old dame into the present tense through lashings of clever wallpaper and infusions of new blood into the membership rolls.

Downstairs they have opened a jazz club and the lunch is excellent. It makes you feel there is hope for the inner city if this space — freighted as it is with the complicated histories of the gold rush, the frontier and the hideous traumas of oppression and exclusion — can be somehow excavated from its past and given a new vibrant, stylish lease on life. The feeling of delight in being somewhere with provenance older than this season's LV clutch, is remarkably refreshing. As is Flo's energy.

She has lived her entire life within the same square kilometre in Parktown where she was born and raised.

An alumna of Parkview junior and Parktown girls, she became a teacher and raised three sons, and now has a gaggle of progeny. But her life's work has been taking up the idea of Joburg and never letting it go.

Her father, a geologist, would take her on excursions into the city centre where he would point out the rock face that undergirds all of Joburg. "I have loved it ever since."

In this time of extreme change, what counts as heritage, and why preserve it? Is it some elitist project harking back to a past that is open to interpretation and susceptible to value systems that may not be universally meaningful?

"What does heritage mean? Its' a difficult one because it's a hotly contested debate. We find it hard to get people to take us seriously, That's the trouble. But Joburg was not only built by Randlords or the mining houses it was built by everyone, by all of us. Just as the pyramid certainly wasn't built by the pharaoh — it was built by thousands and thousands of people — so Joburg was built by thousands and thousands of people. And all those stories need to be told and preserved."

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One blue plaque at a time, telling stories across town from the Herbert Baker mansions on the ridges to the miner's shacks in Turffontein and Crown Mines, Flo and her fellow heritage visionaries are honouring a past we can easily forget in our quotidian concerns.

"A city is built by a lot more than great architects and I do think it's terribly sad that we've got a useless council — they are only about themselves. I was just reading a little bit about Jane Jacobs the other day ... the lady who saved parts of New York from the freeway. So she was doing that when we were saving Joburg from the freeway, because the M6 was supposed to go through every single golf course and school playing field because it was cheap land.

"One of the ways to fight according to Jane Jacobs was to emphasise the history. One of the problems with heritage when we first started was that nobody was familiar with it in Joburg. Because it has always been accessible to rich people and nobody was allowed behind the walls and so that's when we started the heritage tours so that people would know the truth about their city. People really enjoy it."

She is everywhere, like a Joburg heritage rash. Probably not very pleasant for the people who catch her. She invites me to see the restoration work at the crematorium that was vandalised during lockdown. She explains that the work has been meticulous and thorough as they try to keep the names on the plaques and their ashes together as much as possible. It is an image that moves me to tears.

Flo is exercised by a lot of things. For example the toilets outside the doors to St Mary's Cathedral.

"Its disgusting, the biggest insult you can pay to a man, that the public can go and pee on his doorstep." The toilets were built by the apartheid government as a direct affront to Bishop Tutu because it was a place of sanctuary.

"I cannot get the council to remove them."

How do we preserve and hold on to the things that matter to us if we destroy and devalue the places where those things should be held sacred? How do we know what matters if the Joburg library has been shuttered for years? How do we understand the value of freedom and democracy if we cannot trace the road we travelled to get here?

Flo Bird's fight points the way: stay angry, stay engaged.