

Understand Cape Town

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The World Design Capital for 2014 is in the process of reshaping itself, tackling weighty issues along the way.

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From the Khoekhoen and San peoples to Zille and de Lille, Cape Town's history is rich in characters and events.

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One city, many cultures – Cape Town is a rich Creole melting pot of different people and lifestyles.

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A stone castle, graceful Cape Dutch, florid Victoriana and art-deco towers are all part of the architectural mix.

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Shaped over millions of years, the Cape's dramatic environment is carpeted by the richest floral kingdom in the world.

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The forces that created a 350-year-old industry and how it is tackling the working practices that blighted the past.

Cape Town Today

'Live design, transform life' is the slogan that helped Cape Town win its bid for World Design Capital 2014. Ventures such as the MyCiTi bus routes and Creative Cape Town are already having a positive impact. However, the vast majority of Capetonians live in poverty on the Cape Flats, a world away from the multimillion-rand villas of Camps Bay or the protected environment of Table Mountain National Park, so the debate over priorities continues. Accusations of racism still dog a metropolis that aspires to be multicultural.

Best on Film

Black Butterflies (www.blackbutterflies.nl) Dutch biopic about the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonkers (a powerful performance by Carice van Houten) set in Cape Town in the 1950s and '60s.

Sea Point Days (www.seapointdays.co.za) Documentary by Francois Verster focusing on the suburb and its promenade as a multicultural crossroads.

Visa/Vie (www.visaviemovie.com) Charming comedy that sets its French heroine the challenge of finding a Capetonian husband in one weekend so she can avoid deportation.

Best in Print

A City Imagined (ed Stephen Watson) Top-class selection of original essays by local writers revealing different aspects of the Mother City.

Reports From Before Daybreak (Brent Meersman) Cape Town is the principal setting for this impressive novel about the turbulent, violent decade before democracy and its damaging effect on people of all races.

Refuge (Andrew Brown) Shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2009, this thriller includes characters ripped from local headlines including Russian mobsters and Nigerian immigrants.

District Controversies

In December 2011, the city rolled out proposals to rebuild District Six and invited public comment. 'I'm fearful for the planning of the area' said Rashid Fataar, founder of Future Cape Town (www.futurecapetown.com), whose father was evicted from the demolished inner city suburb but who has given up on the slow-moving application process to reclaim a home there. 'There's none of the broader debate about what District Six could be.'

Differences of opinion also occurred between representatives of the District Six Museum, and the public-private partnership that is working to create the innovative incubation/science park area called The Fringe, adjacent to District Six. Some of the museum staff and trustees are concerned that important historical elements of the area will be lost as it gentrifies.

The city is also going through a spate of road and suburb renaming. So far Nelson Mandela, Helen Suzman and Christiaan Barnard have found their democracy-friendly monikers attached to major highways, while up for renaming at the time of research are 27 other roads that have apartheid/colonial connections such as Hendrik Verwoerd Dr. The Name Your Hood (www.nameyourhood.co.za) campaign, supported by the city and provincial government, has plans to roll the process out from downtown and surroundings to Gugulethu. Quite soon you may see new inner city suburb names such as The Loop, Little Camissa and Green Mile appearing on maps.

Verbal & Physical Battles

A Twitter brawl broke out in early 2012 between representatives of the black community, including the Afroblues singer Simphiwe Dana, and the Western Cape Premier Helen Zille over whether Cape Town is racist.