



Time to take back the streets

by Phoebe Barnard photographs by Lesley Shackleton

Cape Town is one of the world's most beautiful, sought-after places in which to live. At the same time, it's not known for its sense of community. People warn newcomers of this. "You won't see people very much socially - they're too busy, wrapped up in their lives," they say. "It's still very segregated." And, "People drive everywhere - it's hard to get around without a car."

Cars and community

Has our reliance on cars suppressed our 'community spirit'? Cars are undeniably useful - in an emergency, for weekly errands, sometimes for commuting. But they also isolate us in 'bubbles of prosperity' - separating us from our neighbours, both rich and poor. They are a divisive symbol of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Cars are an increasing liability in many other ways: rocketing fuel costs; daily traffic congestion; targets for thieves; pollution and carbon emissions.

How much do these factors stress our lives? If you work at a distant office and commute by car, the answer may increasingly be: a lot. As a suggestion, unless you are frail, try mothballing your car for at least two days a week. Get around on foot, by bicycle, train, bus, carpools with friends and neighbours, or minibus. You may surprise yourself. Once you work out a routine, you'll probably find there's more time to read, plan, chat, or rest. Especially if you can commute outside peak hours, the trains are increasingly safe, reliable, and much cheaper than driving. You



photograph by Alan Jackson

might enjoy learning more conversational Xhosa, new Afrikaans epithets, and re-tasting the sweet side of the 'Rainbow Nation'. Living well, and rebuilding a sense of community, is quite possible without 'costing the Earth' - degrading our environment for our own convenience.

Learn to savour simple pleasures. Talk to the people around you. Share weekend grocery trips or daily commutes with neighbours, friends and colleagues. Take risks and trust people - but be smart about it. Enjoy the friendships and insights that may blossom. Many people in the Far South, across the political and race spectrum, share an enormous sense of community, empathy, and environmental and social justice. They care sincerely, even passionately, about the future, society and our environment. Until we can reconnect with each other, though, our power to shape our futures will be limited.

Communities in our Sustainable South

What sort of community do we want? Communities


in the Far South can be a powerful model for how a community can live sustainably and equitably - even though our own food-producing capabilities are limited. Our area needs greater social equity, better quality of life for our marginalized neighbours, good public transport, environmental sustainability, safe recreation for our kids, affordable housing, local small-scale agriculture. It seems incredible, in this light, that so much effort need be spent defending the Peninsula against the erosion of all these by market-driven developments that further isolate communities and stress resources.

Given our divided history, community initiatives vary in focus. But they have three things in common. They grow from the positive vision of idealistic people; they address practical problems and they benefit the

public. They demonstrate 'the power of community'. Imaginative visions of the society we want are emerging everywhere at grassroots level on the South Peninsula. For example, Hout Bay civil society's debate about ways to overcome the apartheid divide and create a vibrant, diverse, sustainable community.

The Far South has many passionate, lively and committed people. This spirit is well reflected in Full Circle. We can get involved in many community initiatives: the Save our South campaign to counter inappropriate and unsustainable developments; the Mzantsi Carnival; volunteer action to protect people from xenophobic violence,

fires or abuse; the Emergency Control Centre; the NSRI; HOKISA (Homes for Kids in South Africa); the Masiphumelele housing initiative; alien-clearing and flora-conservation groups; our neighbourhood watch. Getting involved, like the simple step of giving up our isolation in our cars, will bring us closer together as a community.

We need to use every means possible to rekindle our sense of community. Cultural and biological diversity, natural scenic beauty, a shared but divisive history of political inequality, and a local culture of tolerance and respect, are all part of our shared story. These are all essential ingredients for 'reclaiming the streets' - proving the power of community over the creep of suburbanization, market-driven development, and the alienation that comes with them. The Far South peninsula is an exceptional place ... a magical place. Community is a powerful protector of that magic. 

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