Graduation address by Flo Bird
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This is a most exciting evening for all of us here. Certainly it is for me and I am deeply grateful for the honour being done me by my University, especially as over the years we have not always seen eye to eye on property developments in Parktown.

But for all of you being capped tonight it is memorable, not only for you but also for your family members who must be very proud and eager to see sons, daughters, sisters or brothers and loved ones mounting the stage. I think especially of those graduands because this is the first step in your professional careers. It is a great moment when your studies and hard work are rewarded, when you can write the letters after your names become alumni of the University of the Witwatersrand. Congratulations and welcome.

Although I am being honoured for my work in heritage and conservation, the theme of my talk this evening is really one of righteous wrath and protest. Let us begin by taking a step back in time.

I am sure you will all agree that Wits University, our University, is very special for many reasons and since heritage is my topic I want to remind you of its origins.

Wits started at a protest meeting in the Town Hall when Johannesburg learned that the money left by mining magnate Sir Otto Beit (which had come from the gold mines of the Witwatersrand) had been given to Cape Town to found UCT. Completely outraged the Mayor of Johannesburg summoned the mayors of all the Reef Towns declared that Johannesburg would give Milner Park as the site and together with the towns of the Reef they would found a People’s University.

It was a great beginning and Wits has a proud tradition of righteous wrath and protest, and I hope that they will always play a part on this campus and that it is a heritage you will take forward in life in spirit if not always in action.

I note that many of you graduands have specialised in Engineering and the Built Environment and since the heritage of the built environment has been my concern for the last 40 years I am hopeful of persuading you to conserve as well as develop that environment.

When discussing HERITAGE it is essential to distinguish between history and heritage: history allows little choice but a good deal of interpretation, but with heritage we choose what we want to acknowledge as our heritage and what we wish to honour and remember. That power of selection is critical and historians tend to see heritage as undisciplined, a cream caramel version of what really happened.

Actually the power of choice is supposed to be what distinguishes humanity from the beasts and I would remind historians that history is written by the victors, so putting such emphasis on a dispassionate analysis of facts may be academic humbug.

Recognising one’s Heritage brings with it a sense of identity and I associate myself very strongly not just with Wits, but with the City of Johannesburg itself.

I was very lucky indeed as a little girl to spend Saturday mornings with my father walking around the streets of the city. He was a geologist so the wonderful rock pediments on which the grander buildings were erected often massive blocks of granite, rough-hewn to indicate their foundations in the very soil of South Africa always drew his attention. Since I was never very tall this was also my
abiding view of the buildings. Sometimes we could peer through massive iron railings into bank vaults to watch men counting the pounds, shillings and pence – this was long before it became Rands and cents.

We would visit B Owen Jones to buy chemicals for his laboratory and then to Cooke, Troughton and Sims for scientific instruments. The highlight would be the Johannesburg Public Library where at last I would see the building rising above us as we climbed the many steps, then the stairs with paintings by Thomas Baines ranged up the walls until we reached the Museum. There were lots to see but we always paid our respects to the doors of David Livingstone’s house in Zanzibar. I knew Livingstone as the man who fought slavery. It was years before I discovered he had been a Christian missionary and a Medical doctor. Selection in that case came from my father and I was delighted many years later to find when I visited Malawi the identical perspective.

So I love Johannesburg. It is my City and while I always enjoy visiting other Cities this is the one that grips and excites me. Hence my willingness to do battle for the heritage that enthalls me. I'm often asked what drives me, and ensures that for the last 40 years I have been passionate about my city.

I must confess while love sustains me, it is rage and wrath that actually sets me off, in a way that I think is constructive. In Joburg you can guarantee that some Philistine developer will demolish the old buildings without any thought for retaining the character and the landmarks we cherish. The lifespan of a building in the City centre used to be fifteen years. We all feel rage in our city, it is a tumultuous place of diversity, change and uncertainty. I would encourage you all to find a positive outlet for your rage - if not in heritage at least in the service of the best interests of your profession.

In my early experience, the worst offenders were not private property developers. They were first the apartheid government which decided to break the Liberal English heart of Parktown, expropriated more than 67 private homes demolishing everything first for the Hospital and Nurses homes which are certainly the ugliest and most offensive examples of totalitarian architecture, followed by the Johannesburg College of Education. The original intention had been to build Goudstad Teacher Training College there. Another two blocks of houses along Junction Avenue were expropriated for the Technikon. Recently both these have become part of the University with the Education campus and Wits Junction so perhaps all’s well that ends well.

The City Council joined the spree of destruction expropriating 22 houses for the Pieter Roos Park which they pretended would serve Hillbrow. The final straw in Parktown was their acquiring properties for the Motorway M6.

It was at that point that a small group of very middle class people decided to make a stand. It took twenty years, but we halted the M6 and its successor A6. So when you visit Mike’s Kitchen today you are trampling on the road scheme which was designed to criss-cross the city. In Parktown it demolished old houses, but further along its route it took school playing fields, golf courses and every green space because undeveloped land was relatively cheap.

Heritage buildings were threatened not only by monstrous road schemes, but even more so by the Group Areas Act. All but one home in Ferreirasdorp were bulldozed, making way for the detestable John Vorster Square. Two houses survived in Sophiatown together with one Church and a children’s Orphanage. In Fietas 67 families refused to budge so dotted around Pageview are the remains of their semi-detached homes.

At last the tide was turned when two old buildings in Diagonal Street were saved and Saxonia Mansions and Nathanson’s Building were declared National Monuments, allowing the pioneering
Indian community to remain. So do visit Tin Pan Bazaar, Starlite Fashions and Limbada Books. They have been there for generations and bring back memories to those who knew the Starlite Cinema or were seeking books NOT approved by the Apartheid regime.

A very hard lesson I have learned is that conservation is not sustainable without development. It started in the City Centre where buildings were saved through the granting of additional rights for office space in mansard roof space above. We saved Anstey’s by surrendering all the other fine buildings on that block – Anchor Mansions and Africa House still lie heavily on my conscience because we have a totally insignificant retail development in their place. Similarly the magnificent Twentieth Century Cinema one of the architectural masterpieces of the 1930’s was replaced by a single storey of very indifferent shopping.

But the two greatest failures today lie in the mining sector. George Harrison Park which is the site of the Discoverer’s claims and the original stopes which were mined following the dip of the Main Reef. These are being invaded by Zama Zamas and there seems no way of protecting the site which is isolated except for the encroachment of working from Durban Roodepoort Deep. They promised protection and grand plans in order to get their licence, but nothing has been done and Durban Roodepoort Deep is getting away with destroying our first National Monument.

Langlaagte Deep is an equally sad story. A mining village which was hidden from view by the mineral line and a blue-gum plantation, is now an informal settlement with shacks going up almost daily. The owner has applied to have the site de-proclaimed and it is difficult to argue against it. What was once a progressive community which sheltered struggle heroes and rejected racism is now a community living on freebies. They don’t pay rent, light or water and sadly there is little evidence of any sense of community or self-worth. The residents don’t respect the heritage buildings, don’t seek to clean the public areas and allow mountains of refuse to pile up all around so that walking amongst the rats is a hazard I certainly don’t enjoy.

Ours is not a wealthy first world society where buildings can be kept and sustained as museums which would happen in Australia or the USA. Our heritage buildings and sites need to work and they need imaginative property developers to do so. 44 Stanley Avenue is a delightful example as are the many office blocks in town which are being converted to flats.

The writing was on the wall when Markham’s was saved not by the Minister administering the Heritage legislation, but by a very hard-nosed politician who responded to the public outcry and granted special development rights and easements for a new building alongside it. More recently after 6 years and 11 months of fighting, wrangling and negotiating we have reached agreement with Imperial the transgressors who obliterated the Rand Steam Laundries, smashing and crushing buildings then removing even the rubble from the site. We may have achieved a great victory, but civil society has accepted a compromise. Imperial will reconstruct the buildings which bounded Napier Road and they will also be allowed to develop the rest of the site for Motor car outlets and workshops. Like much of our city we will have heritage with commercialism.

Heritage may not always be historically significant, but it is what we choose to honour. I read that the Belgians want potato fries to be recognized as their contribution to world heritage. I rather hope we can do a little better.

So in exercising choice I have selected as the most important heritage site in Johannesburg Constitution Hill. Starting as a prison in 1893 it held not just the criminals, but also those who opposed the unjust laws of the land from the Poll tax of the Transvaal Boer Republic, through the Asiatic Registration Act which saw MK Gandhi incarcerated twice in Section 4, pacifists during the
First World War who were held without being charged, the strikers against cruel labour laws in the next decades, trade unionists, and then the thousands upon thousands of Pass Offenders. In 1956 it held the 156 accused of Treason, yes the famous Treason Trialists, and as repression increased many more were held without trial and without access to legal advice. Finally it was chosen as the site of the Constitutional Court. It expresses what Judge Albie Sacks described as “Out of the Horror comes the Hope”.

Cities are wonderful places because they offer such variety, but in a South African City that variety has a bitter twist to it. There are First World War memorials scattered around the City divided by the regiments in which they served, the theatre of war where they died, or the suburbs where the volunteers had lived, but most noticeably by race. Only at the Cenotaph in the heart of the city do those divisions fall away where we see all South Africans honored with the appropriate level of equality.

So I am looking for the heritage sites of which we are all proud, which we enjoy and where we take our children and in my case our grandchildren. Zoo Lake seemed the one on which we are most likely to agree. It is an artificial body of water, plagued by ducks and geese which erode the banks, highly polluted by run-off from the streets, but it has the honour of being the place where Dr. Verwoerd demanded racial segregation and the City Council resisted.

So what does constitute an inclusive South African Heritage?

_We the people of South Africa_

_Recognise the injustices of our past_

_Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land_

_Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country: and_

_Believe that South Africa belongs to all those who live in it, united in our diversity._

These words from the preamble to our constitution sum up our shared heritage in the broadest terms and should guide us in choosing the physical sites and buildings we want protected by the National Heritage Resources Act. Certainly in Johannesburg we are fortunate in having outstanding examples of all these and I want to mention some with which you may not be familiar.

On one side of Newtown Junction, the large new shopping and office complex north of Museum Africa is a small and rather charming building which is in fact a Public Lavatory. The entrance is flanked by columns, rather grand and important. This leads into an impressive space lined with marble alcoves.

It is actually the Gents toilet, but for white men only. At the back is a small addition, very inferior in space and materials which served black men and women. They served all those who worked at the market so we find the injustice of racial and gender discrimination unashamedly demonstrated with this little temple to the manhood of white men.

Also in Newtown is another attractive, but more utilitarian building, good brick designed on an open courtyard. It used to be concealed by a huge water channel which fed the turbines of the Power station. When I first saw it I thought it rather a pretty building. Only when we found the concrete slabs on which the men slept and the ring in the wall by which men were secured in a punishment cell did we realise its true function. It was the Municipal Compound for migrant workers. No privacy, and no comfort; nowhere to store their possessions, louvres instead of windows ensuring the icy air
could enter all the time regardless s of summer or winter. It had been hidden from view for 80 years, but you can visit it now. This is The Workers Museum opposite SciBono.

In honouring those who suffered injustices and fought for freedom we have a range of special places to visit starting with Chancellor House, the offices of Tambo and Mandela in Fox Street right across the way from the office of the Chief Magistrate in the Magistrate’s Court. In Orlando East there is the tiny three roomed house of James Sofasonke Mpanza, the man who first led people in seizing land for housing. They created homes out of sacks, shelters from cardboard or any other material they could find. Poetically the yard of Mpanza’s house today is crowded with tin shacks, ensuring that visitors understand that the desperate need for land and housing remains.

There are blue plaques in various parts of the City. They mark the trail of the Soweto Uprising and a route in Vilakazi Street. Some in Observatory and Orchards mark the homes of Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, Bram and Mollie Fisher, Eli, Violet, Sheila and Mark Weinberg. Three buildings in Sophiatown spoke of forced Removals as does the church of St Albans in Ferreirasdorp.

There are plaques marking the homes of artists, authors, architects and sculptors. We celebrate architectural achievement marking Art Deco buildings in the city.

Perhaps where we are weakest is in the honouring those who have worked to build and develop our country. There is the Oppenheimer Tower in Soweto which honours Sir Ernest Oppenheimer for recognising the dire shortage of housing and making a large loan to the City Council to enable it build housing at a much greater pace.

As we remember the passing of Mandela just over a week ago we need to consider that the greatest nation builder of them all surely needs something a bit more inspiring than Sandton Square. I am advocating the Jabulani Stadium, on the slopes of a hill on which perches the new Soweto Theatre. Since it was built in the Fifties it has been the focus of many political meetings and in 1985 it was here that Zindzi Mandela spoke for her father who had been silenced for 33 years. (Not just the years he was imprisoned, but from September 1953 when he was banned.) It was his reply to the offer to set him free provided “he unconditionally rejected violence as a political instrument.”

Mr. Nelson Mandela replied “What freedom am I being offered while the organisation of the people remains banned? What freedom am I being offered when I may be arrested for a pass offence? What freedom am I being offered to live my life as a family with my dear wife who remains in banishment in Brandfort? What freedom am I being offered when my very South African citizenship is not respected?

He remained a prisoner for another 5 years.

Just a week after the anniversary of the death of Nelson Mandela, this is a good moment to remember that we owe our freedom to the courage of those who insisted on freedom as the birthright of all South Africans.

As you leave here tonight please pause for a moment as you take photographs and selfies on the steps of the Great Hall. Look back at the Corinthian columns and be proud that this is a heritage we share with generations past, including Madiba, and for many generations to come. Carry with you the outstanding heritage of the University of the Witwatersrand - righteous wrath and protest - the courage to defend your convictions.