

The Cape Town Environmental Centre: Past, Present, and Future



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Table of Contents

An Introduction	3
The Cape Town Environmental Centre: 1993 to the present.....	5
A Complex Situation.....	8
The CTEC through the Voices of its Users	9
Edward Tilanus.....	9
Marie-Lou Roux.....	11
Liz Wheeler.....	12
Joanna Marx.....	13
Kevin Winter.....	14
Roland Langley.....	16
Liz McDaid.....	17
Karen Shippey.....	19
And in Conclusion	20
Acknowledgments	20
Appendices	23
Appendix 1.....	23
Appendix 2.....	24
Appendix 3.....	25
Appendix 4.....	26
Reference List	27

The Cape Town Environmental Centre: Past, Present, and Future

An Introduction

Just north of the suburb of Observatory in Cape Town, inside the sprawling grounds of the Valkenberg Hospital complex, there is a small building that faces the dramatic uplift of Devil's Peak. On maps, it exists as a tiny green-roofed square, somewhere between the parallels of the Black and Liesbeek Rivers. To the onlooker, the simple structure appears insignificant. There is a line of beech trees at its back, a gravelly parking area, and before it, a stretch of bare grass. The building itself is made up of a series of interconnecting rooms: a reception area leads to a function hall and a board room, an office adjoins, and on the south side there is a small kitchen. The rooms are basic, the building is functional, and the surrounding plot of land appears fairly non-descript. But for the NGOs and volunteer groups who have been using it since 1993, this modest space represents The Cape Town Environmental Centre – an important base for environmental groups, and a space that has facilitated open discussion and innovation for almost two decades. Most importantly, this is a building whose continued existence symbolises the combined efforts of a group of organisations who, for the past seventeen years, have worked to make it their own.

In March 1993, an enthusiastic contributor to an environmental newsletter wrote this of The Cape Town Environmental Centre (CTEC): “This is a very exciting venture, offering a ‘home’ to environmental groups and a venue for the pursuit of ‘green’ interests and issues.”¹ The notion of having a ‘home’ becomes particularly poignant when one considers the pre-democratic election context of South Africa at the time – a period when environmental protection was at the bottom of a pile of political and social priorities, and considered the hobby of an elite few.² Indeed, 24 June 1993 – the date of the Centre’s formal inception and less than one year before South Africa’s first democratic elections – was an unlikely and uncertain time for environmental volunteering in South Africa.³

The years between then and now have been marked by the uncertainty that accompanies political change, but the Centre has nevertheless enjoyed continuous and enthusiastic usage. The latest records state that the Centre is used between 10 and 12 times each month by various organisations.⁴ The Cape Town Environmental Centre Association (CTECA), established to represent user organisations, currently lists ten paying members: CapTrust, the Friends of Liesbeek River, the Friends of Rondebosch Common, Coalition for Environmental Justice Western Cape, City Wide Forum, Ensure Viable Environment, the Trail Club, the Society for Creative Anachronism, the International Association for Impact Assessment, and not least, the committee of

¹ CapTrust newsletter, Number 10, March 1993

² Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

³ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁴ Shippey, K., Letter to Mr M. Callaghan, 25 October 2009

the Two Rivers Urban Park initiative.⁵ 'TRUP' is the acronym of this ambitious City-run project, which envisions the establishment of an urban park stretching southwards from the Black and Liesbeek River confluence area to incorporate a dynamic urban-natural space (see Appendix 1).⁶ TRUP has as its core mandate the protection of heritage and the natural environment within the demarcated area,⁷ and the Centre, being a site of environmental evolution, falls neatly within this vision and conveniently, is situated on TRUP land.

The territory that stretches around the Centre is rich in a history that spans over three hundred years. Aside from its archaeological value (well-documented in a baseline study conducted for TRUP by the City, 2002), or the heritage status of the many old buildings scattered across the landscape, the land around and between the Black and Liesbeek Rivers holds historical significance dating back to Jan Van Riebeeck's time. Encapsulated within his series of diaries is evidence of some of the first recorded land disputes in this country, several of which have marked this environment – referred to broadly as the Liesbeek Valley - as the site of battle.

On the 20th of February 1657, five years after Van Riebeeck had dropped anchor in Table Bay, he wrote in his diary:

Harry and the fat chief, with some of their principal men, seeing us looking about and hearing us say we intended building houses here and there...asked us where they were to go should we build houses there and cultivate the land. This they saw was our intention, for they were encamped at the spot where some of the freemen had selected their sites. We answered that they might live under our protection...They were satisfied with that, but it was evident that it was not entirely to their liking.⁸

At this time, Van Riebeeck was stationed in the Liesbeek Valley, and the "freemen", we may assume, are the freeburgher farmers who first chose land and established many of the Cape's historical farmsteads, thus initiating the process of division and privatisation. The valley was a prosperous place for settlers. Indeed, Van Riebeeck refers to the abundance of fish caught in the Salt River catchment, and successful buck-hunting in the surrounds.⁹ In time, fences were erected, fortifications were built, and homes were established.¹⁰ But it is also clear from the extract above that this was a shared space: tribal people and Khoi herders had long been settled in the area, utilising the river environment and grasslands for grazing. The inevitable clash came in 1659 with the forced removal of the resident Khoi, who rebelled - a resistance which saw the start of the First Khoi-Settler War, from May 1659 until April of 1660. It was the first of a succession of flare-ups between indigenous locals and settlers, triggered invariably by disputes over land.¹¹

⁵ Shippey, K., Letter to Mr M. Callaghan, 25 October 2009

⁶ TRUP public pamphlet, City of Cape Town, no date provided

⁷ TRUP public pamphlet, City of Cape Town, no date provided

⁸ Thom, H.B., (ed.), 1954, 89

⁹ Thom, H.B., (ed.), 1954, 55

¹⁰ Sleight, D., talk given at CapTrust AGM, 27 October 2007

¹¹ Sleight, D., talk given at CapTrust AGM, 27 October 2007

Space has a basic, yet inestimable value to people. Space grounds us; it grants us a sense of place. But coupled with ownership, it tends to result in tension. The point of the above analogy is to emphasise that frequently when different groups share land, the very notion of 'sharing' falls away. Differences relating to ownership and to the value accorded to land - both material and symbolic - become inevitable. History tells us that most often, division and loss ensue. Over three hundred years later, the Liesbeek Valley bears testimony to the sustained pattern of division: a medley of commercial, municipal, and provincial plots has converted the area into a chequerboard of differentiated land use. And the Centre, on its seemingly insignificant plot of land, has not been left unaffected.

In 1997 Mervyn Henderson, former chair of the CTECA, wrote in his Chairman's Report, "News items in local newspapers have indicated that the province is considering the sale of some of its land. This may or may not include the land on which the centre is situated."¹² In the last thirteen years since this seemingly innocuous notice, the situation has amounted to an ownership tussle between Province and City over Centre land. Coupled with the Centre's insecurity of tenure, and the proposed development of a Valkenberg Hospital parking lot across the plot, this has put the building on shaky ground, so to speak.

There are those who argue – often rightly – that change is good, and that adaptation is a test of survival. However, it would be a great pity to see this building summarily flattened and turned into tar because of an ignorance of its value to users, or of the unusual history contained within its walls.

The Cape Town Environmental Centre: 1993 to the present

Above the doorway of the main room in The Environmental Centre, there hangs a plaque which informs readers that they are entering the Chris Dare Hall. Behind this simple dedication lies the key to the Centre's history, because the woman in question is credited as the driving force behind its establishment.

Dr. Christine Dare was the kind of woman who had a reputation for being daunting but undaunted. She was renowned for her involvement in many things, and for a tendency towards driven, high-handed leadership that frequently left her open to criticism. But she was also someone whom her contemporaries could not deny their admiration. Tim Jobson of the Friends of the Rondebosch Common remembers that at meetings in the early 90s, "Chris would pull out a bottle of sherry and sort of say, 'Well, let's get this meeting started!'"¹³ Dare began her career in South Africa as a doctor, achieving the position in the 90s of Acting Medical Superintendent of Valkenberg Hospital.¹⁴ But throughout, she had environmental concerns. Dare held membership of the Cape Bird Club Conservation Committee, and was Chair of both the Friends of the Liesbeek (FoL) and the Friends of Rondebosch Common. By founding the Green Doctors initiative, which sought a solution to the abundance of medical waste generated by hospitals, she found a way to fuse her medical and

¹² Henderson, M., Chairman's Report, July 1997

¹³ Personal communication with Tim Jobson, 23 June 2010

¹⁴ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

environmental interests.¹⁵ She was founder too of the Friends of Valkenberg Hospital, a small group of hospital patients who undertook tree-planting and recycling activities as part of their rehabilitation.¹⁶ Centre users also associate this woman with the Chris Dare Hedge – a length of indigenous shrubbery planted by Dare along the border of the CTEC property. For a long time it stood as a symbol of the energy of this remarkable woman, until the hedge was cut down in a regrettable act of short-sightedness.¹⁷

But it was when Dare first noticed the unused old Valkenberg Dispensary that a broader environmental project was set in motion. Her volunteering had put her in contact with Edward Tilanus - a co-member of Friends of the Liesbeek and a stoic environmentalist in his own right - and the two developed a mutual interest in the potential use of the building. The FoL was only in its second year when Dare suggested they use the vacant dispensary as a meeting place. Simultaneously, Edward moved into an unoccupied house next door with the hospital's permission, taking up the role of voluntary caretaker. Soon afterwards he approached Paul Gray, then-Chairman of CapTrust – a well-funded and primary environmental support network at the time – for assistance with the CTEC. What resulted was a serendipitous partnership between the FoL and CapTrust that saw the first meeting of the CTEC interim steering committee being initiated on the 24th of June 1993.¹⁸

Following negotiations with UCT, the landlords at the time,¹⁹ a lease was agreed upon, offering the new users tenure for five years.²⁰ Once this was secure, CapTrust outlined the particular purpose of the building, which was “to provide a facility for meetings, educational and functional events, primarily for CapTrust members and secondly for other environmentally based organisations.”²¹ The mandate of the building was thus formalised early on. What followed was a period of intensive spring-cleaning that strengthened the sense of ownership felt by users. From the outset it was clear that there was work to be done: the building was over sixty years old, and the rooms inside were unsuited to the activities of users. A central wall was knocked down to create the more spacious main hall, and the front foyer area was opened up by removing some dry walling. The main hall was kitted out with tables and chairs, whiteboards for demonstration, and the floors of the foyer and boardroom were sanded and sealed. Blinds were fitted to the windows that line the long wall in the hall, and the interior was painted and repainted several times. Kitchen and toilet facilities were upgraded, and the outside walls and roof repainted (see Appendix 2 for a floor plan and Appendix 3 for a full list of improvements made).²² Furthermore, the well-loved former key holder Belinda Grewe is fondly remembered for her

¹⁵ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

¹⁶ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

¹⁷ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

¹⁸ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

¹⁹ CapTrust Newsletter Number 10, March 1993

²⁰ CapTrust Newsletter Number 12, November 1993

²¹ CapTrust Newsletter Number 12: The Cape Town Environmental Centre, November 1993

²² Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

enthusiastic maintenance of an indigenous garden and pond on the west side of the Centre.²³ Karen Shippey, who is the current Centre Manager, estimates that maintenance costs over the years have in fact amounted to over R100 000 – money sourced exclusively through the tireless fundraising and personal donations of users.²⁴

A symbolically stable period of the Centre's history was reached in 1996, with the establishment of The Cape Town Environmental Centre Association (CTECA), comprising seven member group representatives, with Mervyn Henderson as its first Chairman.²⁵ Until then the Centre had operated under the auspices of CapTrust.²⁶ Chris Dare passed away in 1996²⁷ – tirelessly participating in meetings held at her bedside until she died²⁸ - and the Centre had thus lost its founder. However, with the development of a constitution (see Appendix 4), and Edward's formal appointment as Centre Manager,²⁹ came a greater sense of formality and a growing appreciation of the Centre's value to users: "Thanks to its central position," CapTrust wrote, "its accessibility by rail and road and ample parking provision, the centre has proved to be an invaluable boon to NGOs from all over Cape Town, including the Cape Flats, as a venue for meetings, workshops and other functions."³⁰ It was then that the CTEC entered into a kind of golden age. This small building, nestled in the Valkenberg complex, became the site of environmental decision-making, planning, and a good deal of old-fashioned lobbying too.

Marie-Lou Roux, conservationist and member of CapTrust, recalls the virulent opposition to South Africa's bid in 1997 for the Olympics: "When we fought the Olympic Games, we fought it tooth and nail because they didn't want to do EIAs [Environmental Impact Assessments]."³¹ The Centre provided the meeting place for these opposition groups, and how much can be attributed to their persistent lobbying may be debatable, but the Olympic bid failed. Within its functional space, the first policies designed to incorporate Table Mountain in a national park were pioneered by the ANC Environmental Desk in the early days of their leadership; and later, the building became the site of the National Biofuels Strategy consultation meetings in 2006. CTEC was also the base for the energetic weekly gatherings that spurred the development of the Green Party in South Africa, bringing together party members like Edward Tilanus, insistent environmentalist Glenn Ashton, and renowned anti-nuclear veteran Mike Kantey. But perhaps the event which is most deeply embedded in the collective memory of its users is the set of preparatory meetings held for delegates at the Centre prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2001. "That's history-making stuff!" Liz Wheeler of the FoL exclaims, "All the delegates who were going up to the World Summit used to meet there. The organisations did

²³ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

²⁴ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

²⁵ Henderson, M., Chairman's Report, July 1997

²⁶ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

²⁷ Henderson, M., Chairman's Report, July 1997

²⁸ Personal communication with Tim Jobson, 23 June 2010

²⁹ CTEC Board Meeting, 5 August 1996

³⁰ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

³¹ Personal communication with Marie-Lou Roux, 16 March 2010

posters too. So people all brought their things in, working there, plucking away at the last minute."³²

The Centre is clearly much more than a blip on the landscape: it holds a dynamic history between its walls. As Liz McDaid, one of the champions behind TRUP, puts it: "It's not like [the Centre] was just used for five people to have a meeting." Springing from its shaky pre-democratic beginnings, the Centre and its users have managed admirably to maintain an environmental imperative, and to carry it through into the 21st Century – an effort that has challenged its share of problems.

A Complex Situation

Since roughly 1997, the land upon which the CTEC is built has been at the heart of an ownership tussle between Province and City, calling up again those complex themes of politics, land, division and ownership that have so transformed the Liesbeek Valley landscape since Van Riebeeck's time. Karen Shippey puts it in a nutshell:

Essentially, this piece of land sits within the hospital. Hospital is provincial. What happened was the Province wanted to build a new clinic in Khayelitsha. The City had a piece of land out there. So they did a land swap, because at that point TRUP [a City-run initiative] was already happening, so the idea of having the Enviro Centre as some kind of visitors' centre was already on the table.³³

However, an oversight has since caused a major disruption to the process. As Liz McDaid explains, "Eventually the moment came when they hadn't actually done the property deeds and the Khayelitsha hospital was being built. And [so] it's still [Province's] land because the land swap hasn't gone through yet."³⁴ This has not only made the issue of ownership a nebulous one, but has also left the Centre at the mercy of the Province-owned hospital's ever-changing development imperative.

Eviction notices have plagued users since the early days of the Centre's existence, and users have frequently been labelled disparagingly as 'squatters'.³⁵ But Edward Tilanus insists that the occupation of the vacant dispensary was initiated "completely with the knowledge of the hospital and their blessing";³⁶ indeed, there are various references made in CTECA reports to the use of the Centre by the Occupational Therapy Section of Valkenberg Hospital,³⁷ hinting at a history of association. Furthermore, Karen Shippey notes that the agreement in 1993 that saw Centre land transferred from its former UCT landlords to CapTrust was "understood to carry legal weight."³⁸ In fact, so confident were users at the time of the legality of their new lease, that they informed the Provincial Administration of the Western Cape (PAWC) Property Development of the change in ownership.³⁹ However, no acknowledgement was ever

³² Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

³³ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

³⁴ Personal communication with Liz McDaid, 16 April 2010

³⁵ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

³⁶ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

³⁷ Shippey, K., Letter to Mr M. Callaghan, 25 October 2009

³⁸ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

³⁹ Detail found in "History of CTECA" document, 2003, no author acknowledged

received – one of a list of problems that have contributed to the perceived informality of the Centre’s occupancy.

Although users have undertaken to pay maintenance costs since the inception of the CTEC, leaving them under-funded much of the time, the CTECA, and CapTrust before it, have operated rent-free.⁴⁰ Coupled with insecurity of tenure, this has only created the sense of informal occupancy in the minds of authority. Karen Shippey argues that lack of communication, and therefore of information, is a large part of the problem too: “The officials have no direct history, or knowledge. It’s kind of like an institutional loss of knowledge has occurred.”⁴¹ Compounding all of this is the unfortunately common perception that volunteer groups are disorganised, ineffective, and elitist.

What is usually afforded less attention is the significant contribution made by volunteers to civil society. This will be a focus of the section to come – one structured around the anecdotes and dialogues of some of the characters who have peppered the Centre’s history. What will emerge too is the central value of space – in both the symbolic and practical sense – to civil society organisations. Finally, and importantly, there are the proactive visions put forward by many for the future of the Centre itself, ideas that encourage us to believe that The Cape Town Environmental Centre can continue to exist as “an affordable and centrally located meeting space for civic bodies that play a vital role in our democracy.”⁴²

The CTEC through the Voices of its Users

Edward Tilanus: Centre Manager, the Friends of the Liesbeek, and TRUP

It seems fitting to begin with Edward Tilanus, who, as the on-site Centre Manager for the first ten years of its existence, and dedicated maintenance man throughout, has developed a closer bond with the CTEC than many others. Although he now lives off site, Edward still spends a good deal of time at the Centre; in exchange for occasional handy-man services, he uses an adjacent room for band practice. “Noisy as all hell,” Karen Shippey laughs.

Having lived in Observatory since the late 70s, Edward remembers the extensive wetland environment that once spread around the Black and Liesbeek Rivers, before ad hoc development, dumping and drainage turned the formerly navigable system into a series of threatened riverine pockets. His interest in wetland birds and rivers developed into a membership of the Cape Bird Club and the Friends of the Liesbeek. Later, Edward was to become the Chair of the Wildlife Society (WESSA), the vice-chair of CapTrust, the first candidate for The Green Party, and a WSSD delegate - a track record which defines him as the “stalwart conservationist”⁴³ of CapTrust’s estimation. But it becomes clear that Edward’s current efforts lie largely with TRUP.

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

⁴¹ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

⁴² Shippey, K., Letter to Mr M. Callaghan, 25 October 2009

⁴³ Details found in the presentation of the CapTrust Award to the CTECA, 2003, no author acknowledged

He recalls that the initiative owes its beginnings to a group of environmentalists – the FoL prominent among them - who, in the 70s, clashed with the City over its insensitive environmental policies in the Liesbeek area:

We kept on saying to them this thing must be dealt with as an integrated whole. So it was our pressure from the various NGOs that showed the City that this was actually a very nice opportunity.⁴⁴

The result was a proactive partnership between the City Planning Department and a humble collection of volunteers who together dreamed up the notion of an urban park. What makes this all relevant is how clearly Edward aligns his interest in TRUP with his vision for the CTEC.

At its heart, Edward believes, TRUP's current objective is "just to fight the piecemeal sale of land."⁴⁵ The Centre's predicament – threatened by sale of state land to private investors – epitomises this concern, and for seventeen years, Edward has resisted unnecessary change. "I've just stuck it out with this one, and I think it has a chance of actually surviving. And it's a wonderful legacy for the City."⁴⁶ TRUP has become synonymous with much of the terminology that environmentalists hold dear: public involvement, education, and sustainability, and Edward is optimistic that its policies can be aligned particularly well with the Centre's future.

"If it can be kept into the future," Edward argues, "it's just a point of wonderful environmental education. Because all the city issues that impact on the environment are here."⁴⁷ He describes the coming-together of environmental factors in the Liesbeek area – waterways, wildlife, urban conservation – and how the Centre might act as a central space of public education "right here, right next to universities, right in the urban areas."⁴⁸ Also high up on the list is the possibility of turning the Centre into a showcase for sustainable living:

We've looked at using alternative power in this area so it becomes a demonstration plant for how the City could operate much more efficiently. The green lung idea, the alien vegetation, alien birds, on-site retention of water. It just doesn't stop. Every single environmental problem you can think of. And that's part of our vision that we try to convert this whole area into a sustainable model using sustainable technology.⁴⁹

Strategically-speaking, Edward argues, the Centre offers a political foothold on the proposed western side of the urban park. He is hopeful too that if its position within TRUP is secured, it will become easier to procure funding, ensuring the long-term existence of the Centre. "I would be opposed to vacating this little building," Edward ends off, somewhat introspectively, "It isn't a thing of the past. It's a thing to go into the future. It's become more and more valuable as time goes on, rather than less."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

⁴⁶ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

⁴⁷ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

⁴⁸ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

⁴⁹ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

⁵⁰ Personal communication with Edward Tilanus, 23 March 2010

Marie-Lou Roux: CapTrust

Marie-Lou Roux represents what one might call the 'old guard' of environmentalists - a true champion of the cause, stoic in nature, unwavering in resolve. Working with the Still Bay Conservation Trust 25 years ago, she spent a determined seven years as the quintessential activist, fighting the thoughtless construction of a large waterslide in the delicate Still Bay river mouth.⁵¹ Colleagues fondly call her an environmental 'fiend'; indeed Karen Shippey remembers Marie-Lou, interrupting the proceedings at a government meeting by standing up, wagging her finger and admonishing the speaker loudly.⁵² But to the visitor, this woman appears reserved, peering out from behind a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, which she puts on to wade through 32 years' worth of Cape Environmental Trust (CapTrust) documentation, all neatly filed.

Currently the volunteer secretary, Marie-Lou has witnessed 24 years of CapTrust's history - an organisation founded in 1978 by Graeme Binckes with roughly 30 000 members,⁵³ as a supportive body designed specifically for local environmental groups. Aside from this function, CapTrust is recognised too for environmental action. "We've had some little successes," Marie-Lou says modestly. In 1992 it memorably lobbied against the mining of Lake St Lucia,⁵⁴ and more recently, successfully threatened the government with court action over worrying amendments made to the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA).⁵⁵ But it is CapTrust's niche concern for the local volunteer group that drove a particular interest in the CTEC in 1993, when it became the steward of the building and its users. It has since maintained a strong link with the Centre, utilising the space on a monthly basis for committee meetings. After joining CapTrust in 1986 as a member of the struggling Still Bay Trust, Marie-Lou has developed a sense of compassion for environmental volunteers:

What you must realise, is that each organisation has its own small area that it works on. So these little organisations, either they do the Liesbeek, or they do Silvermine, or they do this or the other. They do inestimably valuable work. But it's not work that is showcased all the time.⁵⁶

Written into CapTrust's mandate is its unique appreciation of the local NGO: "It is those living in an area who are most aware of its problems and most interested in finding appropriate solutions," it argues "The local organisation provides the immediate means of educating and advising individuals and gives them a collective voice."⁵⁷ With this approach, CapTrust has attracted a mix of local heritage and environmental conservation groups, not least of which have been certain members of

⁵¹ Personal communication with Marie-Lou Roux, 16 March 2010

⁵² Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

⁵³ The Cape Environmental Trust info sheet, 1992, no author acknowledged

⁵⁴ CapTrust Newsletter Number 3, September 1989

⁵⁵ Personal communication with Marie-Lou Roux, 16 March 2010

⁵⁶ Personal communication with Marie-Lou Roux, 16 March 2010

⁵⁷ The Cape Environmental Trust, A Brief Memorandum of the Aims and Work of CapTrust, Info Sheet 1, November 1986

the CTECA – the Friends of the Liesbeek, the Friends of Rondebosch Common, and the Friends of Mostert's Mill.

Perhaps it is her own history as a volunteer, or her work with CapTrust that has aligned Marie-Lou with the struggle to maintain the CTEC. Either way, she insists that volunteer groups “develop to answer a need.”⁵⁸ And she is adamant about the importance of the space: “One musn't be negative in saying it's dying down. One must say it needs all the help it can get. The Enviro Centre, R250 a year for the free use of the venue is negligible, and that helps the organisations a great deal. It helps them keep afloat; it helps them do their work.”⁵⁹

Liz Wheeler: the Friends of the Liesbeek

In a house in Rondebosch, seated behind a desk scattered with papers and maps, Liz Wheeler is piecing together in her mind the early beginnings of the Friends of the Liesbeek (FoL). She pinpoints it in 1982, the year of the ambitious Greening of the City Report in which “the first six out of thirteen environmental issues mentioned referred to rivers or wetlands.”⁶⁰ This was a small triumph for local environmentalists, culminating nine years later in the City-led Liesbeek River Trail initiative. At a project gathering, Di Wilson – acknowledged as one of the brains behind Table Mountain National Park – stood up boldly and suggested the establishment of a Friends group for the Liesbeek. Soon after, on the 28th of November 1991, came the formation of the FoL. Liz recalls: “Frank van der Velde, who was the mayor at the time, I remember him saying, ‘That’s on the right track.’”⁶¹ This early history was to set the precedent for a symbiotic relationship between the City and volunteers like Liz.

Liz has lived all her life in Rondebosch; she is familiar with its dynamic mix of universities and suburbia, intertwined with riverine environments. Living in such an urban-natural space has informed an enlightened approach: “I am passionate about the environment and I believe the environment is where you *live*. So I believe in urban conservation very strongly.”⁶² Nursing a lifelong interest in the river, it follows that in 1991 she joined the FoL, an organisation whose purpose is “To create an awareness of the Liesbeek and so rehabilitate, enhance, and conserve it and its environs.”⁶³

The FoL began in 1991 with a steering committee comprising Edward Tilanus, Dave Wheeler, Benita Bezuidenhout, and Peter Price.⁶⁴ Its first activities were river walks and clean-ups, but today, the organisation focuses more broadly on public awareness and education about river environments. It has an expanding website, roughly 150 members, and uses the Centre with great frequency. Indeed for the FoL, the Centre is a lifeline, for it provides a meeting space set within the context of the organisation's concern.

⁵⁸ Personal communication with Marie-Lou Roux, 16 March 2010

⁵⁹ Personal communication with Marie-Lou Roux, 16 March 2010

⁶⁰ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

⁶¹ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

⁶² Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

⁶³ CoCT, City of Cape Town Environmental Resource Directory, 2008/2009, 38-39

⁶⁴ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

But what makes this volunteer group remarkable is the extent to which it has developed a mutually beneficial partnership with the City. The FoL has adopted an unflinching, 'take-it-or-leave-it' approach to volunteerism that has allowed it to operate confidently on the same level as the government departments with which it deals. Kevin Winter, Chair of FoL, writes matter-of-factly on the website, "In summary, it feels like we have made progress but perhaps not always at the pace that either members or public might wish. That is the nature of volunteer organisations!"⁶⁵ Liz is similarly outspoken about the volunteer groups of the CTEC:

The hospital says out you go, and that we're disorganised. And that's a lot of the problem with the environment. That's why I think a lot of people are dismissive of the environmental lobby. We *are* disorganised because we do have so much to do. It's not cut and dried.⁶⁶

There is a confident quality to FoL that makes a strong case for the potential of volunteer organisations. And in partnership with government, much can be accomplished: FoL's primary effort, the Liesbeek Maintenance Project – a large-scale river rehabilitation scheme – is run with the knowledge and support of the municipality. Similarly Liz explains, "We give input into all city by-laws, waste management, all that type of related legislation and policy."⁶⁷

The scope of their activities makes the Friends of the Liesbeek and volunteers like Liz far from irrelevant. The key, she maintains, is to stand apart but in partnership with government: "You see they see us as loners, but they see us as *active* loners. We *do* something. We are supporting them."⁶⁸

Joanna Marx: CapTrust and the Friends of Mostert's Mill

On the way to town, just past UCT on the M3, the elegant column of an exquisitely conserved 18th Century windmill rises up against the skyline. Capetonians recognise it as the historical Mostert's Mill. But what few know is that the efforts of a small group of volunteers who call themselves the Friends of Mostert's Mill (FoMM) is the driving force behind the maintenance of this prominent landmark. Joanna Marx, enthusiastic heritage buff, has been with the FoMM since its inception in 1993.

Joanna is fascinated by cultural landscapes. These, she explains, are simply the environment where "people have been at it."⁶⁹ Included in the Centre's environmental imperative is an aspect which many of us don't recognise: that the 'environment' incorporates the built environment too. Importantly, the Centre has provided a space for heritage and architectural groups to flourish alongside more traditional environmentalists. Joanna's passion for architecture and heritage, and an employment background with The National Monuments Council (now The South African Heritage Resource Agency - SAHRA), triggered her involvement with The Vernacular Architecture Society and CapTrust, with its mandate of protecting both built and

⁶⁵ Friends of the Liesbeek web page: <http://fol.org/za/agm-2010-report-from-the-chair/#more-113>) Accessed 24 May 2010

⁶⁶ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

⁶⁷ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

⁶⁸ Personal communication with Liz Wheeler, 19 March 2010

⁶⁹ Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

natural environments. But it is this woman's unusual passion for the history and grace of Cape Dutch windmills that connects her most strongly to the FoMM. Over several decades, dedicated volunteering for both the FoMM and CapTrust has woven her into the history of the CTEC.

Joanna is a practical woman. She comes from the same no-nonsense volunteering stock that sees gumbooted civilians tramping in rivers, driven by the satisfaction of 'getting the job done'. Yet she is not afraid to reflect intellectually and gently on the symbolic value of the CTEC:

Its importance lies in the fact that it has been an environmental centre for so long, and that people have *maintained* it, and put their own blood and guts into it. So they have invested in that building. It's not just the building itself.⁷⁰

Her own esoteric interests have allowed Joanna to empathise with and value the 'odd-bod' volunteer. She argues, "Government can't do it all. Certainly not. It's up to us. So you have all these odd-bods with talents and knowledge. Put them all together, and hey presto! You get action."⁷¹ As Marie-Lou argued, volunteer groupings are frequently undervalued for the institutional support they offer, and for taking up niche causes that would otherwise go unacknowledged. There is a point to be made here: that the CTEC accommodates a range of valuable 'odd-bods', the necessarily eccentric and dedicated characters who add interest – and value – to civil society. Without bases like the CTEC to facilitate the evolution of volunteerism, groups like these would not flourish. Sadly, some of the dynamism of civil society would then be lost. Joanna makes the point that the Centre draws together 'disparate' folk from diverse backgrounds and a multitude of interests; it is thus a dynamic point of interaction.⁷² This is evident in the Centre's varied history too.

For such disparate 'odd-bods', Joanna maintains that "a *place to meet* is important."⁷³ Again, the symbolic value of space and ownership comes to the fore. Chasing her thoughts down this path, Joanna says,

I think that's an important factor, that people themselves got together and fixed the place up. They've invested in it. And that's what makes it difficult to separate them. If you just give them a hall someplace, you're losing that.⁷⁴

Kevin Winter: the Friends of the Liesbeek

On the 23rd of May 2010, four kayakers pioneered across the Cape Peninsula, following the City's watercourses on a journey that would take 11 hours, finally delivering them along the Black River and into Table Bay.⁷⁵ The idea was to raise awareness about the waterways in our urban context, and so to try and close the gap between rivers and the communities that line their banks. The informal slogan for the

⁷⁰ Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

⁷¹ Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

⁷² Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

⁷³ Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

⁷⁴ Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

⁷⁵ Rory Williams, 30 May 2010: <http://www.men-about-town.co.za/> Accessed 1 June 2010

event was 'Take back our rivers' – the notion, too, behind one of Cape Town's oldest Friends groups, the Friends of the Liesbeek (FoL).

Kevin Winter, UCT lecturer and Chair of FoL, was one of the four intrepid "urban explorers",⁷⁶ and as the 'voice' of the expedition (having had five minutes with John Maytham on 567 Cape Talk!), he communicates a passion for activism around river environments. "We wanted to get across the idea that many people are doing things along these rivers that are worthwhile; we wanted to build up a conversation about the interest around rivers."⁷⁷ As Chair of FoL, Kevin knows the context well. For 19 years, FoL has had an organised history of action along the Liesbeek that has fostered political partnerships, as well as successful public involvement. But it is FoL's partnership with a large corporate which perhaps sets it apart from many other volunteer organisations.

In 2005, Kevin and Liz embarked upon a small-scale clean-up initiative that began with a few staff wading knee-deep in the Liesbeek, collecting litter every Saturday.⁷⁸ What resulted was the birth of the Liesbeek Maintenance Project. Kevin remembers, "We saw the success of it, and after a couple of months we started to recognise that we needed private funding."⁷⁹ What followed were negotiations with South African Breweries, who saw an opportunity for corporate social responsibility and provided funding for employment. For manpower, FoL partnered with The Men at the Side of the Road Project – an NGO concerned with the skills development of unemployed people. "The 'side of the road' is an important idea in the sense that it suggests that people are wanting to work," Kevin explains,

We started with this organisation, and we've looked for people who are interested in horticultural training. We've got at least two people right now who actually have graduated through the program and who are working for private horticulturalists or a nursery.⁸⁰

Incorporated in the training is the opportunity for employees to attend first aid, financial management, and informative health courses that contribute holistically to their development.⁸¹ Though, even with the logistical constraints imposed by volunteering, FoL has managed to make a social impact. But Kevin acknowledges that the Environmental Centre has been central to the success of FoL:

There's no doubt that that particular centre has been fundamental, and I've looked over the years as to where else we could actually meet, and that just fell apart. Where would we go to? All the other buildings that might be along the river – but those are sterile kinds of environments.⁸²

⁷⁶ Rory Williams, 30 May 2010: <http://www.men-about-town.co.za/> Accessed 1 June 2010

⁷⁷ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁷⁸ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁷⁹ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸⁰ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸¹ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸² Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

The organisation has structured its activities closely around the building, using it as a venue for guest speakers, for monthly meetings, and as the starting point for river walks. For FoL, the Centre's convenient situation in the heart of the river environment has allowed a kind of organic development that would be difficult to recreate elsewhere.

There is room for optimism, though. Kevin insists on the role that the Centre could play as the management headquarters for TRUP, or how well the space could function as a therapy centre for patients at Valkenberg Hospital.⁸³ "It's a place where schools can come to," he adds. "The environmental education opportunities are rich around that area – really fantastic."⁸⁴ His final sentiment captures the practical optimism that so characterises this man: "If we can improve relationships through this, if we can improve opportunities through this, well that's fantastic – we should be looking to that as a goal coming out of this situation."⁸⁵

Roland Langley: Ensure Viable Environment

Sitting in a sunny Jamaican café near his home in Woodstock, Roland Langley refers to himself "an ordinary activist." Something of an oxymoron, since activists are most likely to be some of the least ordinary among us. It is the very 'action' in their activism that sets them apart from the complacent majority. Like many others, Roland was catapulted into the world of active volunteerism when the long climb to democracy in South Africa reached its peak in 1994, transforming the political situation into one that favoured public participation as never before in this country's history.⁸⁶

The early 90s were an exciting time in South Africa. Liberal politics, coupled with the prioritising of social justice issues, changed the context dramatically. Organisations were unbanned, public awareness peaked, and volunteer groups and NGOs proliferated.⁸⁷ Entering the era with keen political concerns, as well as an interest in animal rights and the environment, Roland joined the recently unbanned Communist Party. But the allure of a newly formed ANC Environmental Desk proved too strong for this man, with his unusual alliance of environmental and political interests. "So then I joined the African National Congress," Roland explains, "I saw an opportunity there for us to influence legislation in the future. And then to my amazement I was suddenly chosen as Chairperson [of the Environmental Desk], and here I sit with the whole Province!"⁸⁸ Roland was there long enough to witness the development of policies that facilitated Table Mountain's incorporation in a national park, after a series of meetings that were held at the Centre.⁸⁹ It was to mark the beginning of his long association with the building. However, the politics proved tricky, as politics often do, and Roland left the ANC in 1998.

⁸³ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸⁴ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸⁵ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸⁶ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸⁷ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010; and with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

⁸⁸ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁸⁹ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

“People told me, ‘Roland don’t disappear into the woodwork. Call a meeting with some former Desk people and see if you can’t start an organisation.’ So I called a meeting and that’s how EVE was born. Ensure Viable Environment. That’s the name they chose.”⁹⁰ Over the years, EVE has developed into a supportive organisation made up of specialists from many fields. It describes its mission as follows: “To educate and assist communities to identify and initiate projects towards ensuring ecological and economic sustainability.”⁹¹ The organisation – consisting of a collection of lawyers, educators, scientists, and energy experts – meets frequently at the Centre. “EVE has highly capacitated people,” Roland explains, “so we help other organisations.”⁹² Its project focus has resulted in its support of research into everything from climate change, to food security, to animal rights, to waste water and recycling. The NGO has gathered together a network of project initiators who, under the auspices of EVE, are given valuable access to the meeting space of the CTEC.⁹³ This form of usage correlates with Roland’s elegantly simple perception of the Centre: “The Centre, the way I perceive it, is used for organisations that don’t have the funds to rent a hall. This is the reason for the Centre; to help poorer organisations, to encourage more environmental activity.”⁹⁴

There remains an element of the staunch, new-democracy activist in Roland. If he could arrange a defence for the Centre, he would do it by “mobilising” users; he believes firmly that “the people have the power.”⁹⁵ These, unfortunately, are perceived as the distant catchphrases of a time gone by. But Roland says something which would resonate irrespective of the era. “The Centre,” he pauses, “it’s something that is part of our environmental development.”⁹⁶ For this organisation, and the host of environmentalists that it supports, the building has for 17 years provided a foundation for continued growth. Who knows what potential they might still reach?

Liz McDaid: TRUP

If Liz McDaid were the kind of person prone to boasting, she would have good grounds to do so. But because she wears modesty like a cloak – in the strange way that so many of society’s most valuable individuals do – one has to seek other sources in order to uncover her history.

Liz hails from an academic background in zoology and teaching, but armed with an interest in the broader environment, she spent three years as an environmental advisor to this country’s new democratic parliament.⁹⁷ As a result, her name is spread across papers on the Coastal Management Policy, and NEMA. But nursing a belief in the importance of ‘people power’ always, Liz also formed strong connections with a number of civil society organisations like Sustainable Energy Africa, Earthlife Africa,

⁹⁰ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁹¹ Email information shared by Roland Langley, 26 June 2010

⁹² Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁹³ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁹⁴ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁹⁵ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁹⁶ Personal communication with Roland Langley, 12 June 2010

⁹⁷ http://thegreenconnection.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8&Itemid=8 Accessed 3 July 2010

and WESSA.⁹⁸ A concern over sustainable energy issues in particular, coupled with a talent for communicating passionately and sensibly, has turned this woman into an impressive anti-nuclear spokeswoman.

Her dual spheres of experience make Liz what one might call a practical activist: she feels passionately about the value of civil activity, but also recognises the importance of building capacity in these circles to enable better negotiating power. "My role," she explains, "focuses on provision of environmental information and the application of this information to realise a strong and vibrant civil society sector."⁹⁹ Her heart lies with civil society, while her knowledge relates to politics, negotiation, and government. It is her zeal for building bridges between these two spheres that has drawn Liz into the role of Vice Chairperson of TRUP.

TRUP began as an initiative that paired City and civil society in a process that is still developing. It describes itself as "the outcome of a seven-year public participation process done in partnership with the landowners and stakeholders within the Park boundary."¹⁰⁰ Despite lengthy negotiations, which have been cause for scepticism, optimists point to the value of upholding such an unusually cohesive relationship between government and the civil sector. With public interest at its heart, the purpose of the Park is to "provide for recreational, educational, institutional, productive, economic and cultural uses and in this way become an important 'people's place.'"¹⁰¹ It is how the Centre features within this plan that has Liz particularly fired up.

"The initial vision," Liz recalls, "was that the Environment Centre was always going to be the headquarters [for TRUP] because it had always been the site of all the environmental meetings. It was the centre of the universe from that perspective: it was *the* environmental centre in the area."¹⁰² In former times, the Centre provided an office space for Earthlife Africa, and functioned as the base for the National Biofuels Strategy consultation meetings.¹⁰³ Intent on preserving this status, Liz recently suggested that the City take up the space for its nature conservation offices. And there is no doubt that TRUP is closely partnered with the Centre: it slots neatly into its broader vision. Liz articulates her ideas in greater detail than most:

I see the Environmental Centre as being a kind of showcase on the Liesbeek side. Because the idea in our heads was to have a bridge across the river, which would be opposite the bottom field where the Environmental Centre is. Then you would walk up from the river, and you could walk up to the Environment Centre, and it would have solar panels, and all sorts of examples of sustainable energy and renewable energy, and water, and sustainable development. As well as being a meeting place.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸http://thegreenconnection.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8&Itemid=8 Accessed 3 July 2010

⁹⁹http://thegreenconnection.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8&Itemid=8 Accessed 3 July 2010

¹⁰⁰ TRUP public pamphlet, City of Cape Town, no date provided

¹⁰¹ TRUP public pamphlet, City of Cape Town, no date provided

¹⁰² Personal communication with Liz McDaid, 16 April 2010

¹⁰³ Personal communication with Liz McDaid, 16 April 2010

¹⁰⁴ Personal communication with Liz McDaid, 16 April 2010

Within in her vision, it is important to recognise that the Centre is centralised in TRUP's vision; it is neither shifted to the sidelines, nor loosely written into the plan. In Liz's reckoning, the loss of this building would signal a turning point for the civilian groups who use it. She maintains firmly: "The understanding was that civil society was given this forever."¹⁰⁵

Karen Shippey: International Association for Impact Assessment and CTECA Centre Manager

Karen Shippey views her appointment as Centre Manager with a healthy dose of self-deprecation. "I keep the keys because we live in Observatory," she chuckles, "So I ended up being called the Centre Manager by default of geography!" Taking on the role in 2007,¹⁰⁶ she had big boots to fill: Edward Tilanus and Belinda Grewe before her had set an impressive precedent. But the truth is that Karen fills these shoes convincingly. Her cheery, bustling way is coupled with a well-articulated pragmatism that is necessary in the context of the Centre, with its various users and occasional inter-group politics. Karen's history with the building has made her particularly conscious of the role she needs to play.

As a UCT environmental science student in the 90s, Karen remembers first coming to the Centre as an enthusiastic researcher intent on understanding the inner workings of the NGO sector. She witnessed the efforts of those involved in the anti-Olympics negotiations, and remembers "lots of meetings, lots of people up in arms."¹⁰⁷ Later, she became a representative for the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), who made use of the Centre for committee meetings. The IAIA is regarded as a prestigious presence at the Centre, being the only international environmental body that has membership with the CTECA. Karen explains:

The basic premise of the IAIA is to bring together people who are interested in impact assessment. It started off here in about 1995, before we had formalised EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] regulations. We realised that there was a need for what was becoming a new industry to actually find a space where people could talk to each other across academia, industry, consultants, you name it. It's a very important body. I would say it's played a critical role in the development of EIA in this country.¹⁰⁸

This is no small accolade, and it is no insignificant fact that such a diverse and influential organisation chose the CTEC as a base for its development. But it is Karen's role as Centre Manager that has given her clearer insight into the politics of the space, and a very personal awareness of its value to users.

The way Karen sees it, the confused Province-City land swap has left the Centre in a kind of limbo: "Nobody really knows who we belong to. So it's been trying to communicate to people, 'look, this is who we are, this is what we do, this is where we came from. All we really want to do is understand what you want from us.'"¹⁰⁹ But

¹⁰⁵ Personal communication with Liz McDaid, 16 April 2010

¹⁰⁶ Henderson, M. Chairperson's Report, November 2007

¹⁰⁷ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

¹⁰⁸ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

¹⁰⁹ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

Karen places her faith in two things: "We have our agreement with the hospital. We have our constitution,"¹¹⁰ she emphasises. Over the course of their occupancy, she argues, users have developed a sense of ownership, based on the expense of maintaining the building, and the frequency of use. During the 17-year existence of the CTEC, the continuing flux of organisations, people, and activities have created a solid sense of history within its walls. Measured against this, threats of eviction have offended volunteer groups, all of which are formalised and highly capacitated, with well-documented histories. "There was a suggestion that this was an extremely small group of privileged people who were using this facility," Karen argues, "Well firstly, no one else is using it, but it's also a particular portion of civil society that has played an important role in this area in the environment and the heritage. And to toss them out 'just because' doesn't really seem fair."¹¹¹

If anyone has mulled over the future potential of the Centre, it is its Centre Manager. Like many, Karen recognises the links with TRUP, arguing that "because TRUP is a formal member of the CTECA" this is the most direct route to formalising the Centre's place in the landscape. A partnership with the hospital has already been suggested, and Karen expands: "The organisations have even shown willing in running little environmental courses for the people who are here to try and increase value."¹¹² But as a pragmatist, Karen is aware that the Centre might also have to expand its vision. "If you introduce other aspects," she proposes, "you can revitalise it. There's no reason why it couldn't be expanded, why you couldn't have other kinds of groupings. There's no reason why this place couldn't be much more broadly used."¹¹³ She reaches a conclusion that seems familiar now. The Centre has a colourful history, and it has the potential to exist as a dynamic space for civil society well into the future. Of the building, Karen observes, "Somebody needs to take ownership and love and put some attention into it, and actively promote it. It needs a champion for it to be more than this."

And In Conclusion

Out of the politically 'dark mid-80s' in this country there emerged, for the first time in its history, a strong focus on civilian rights.¹¹⁴ These were the grand beginnings of public participation in South Africa, pitched against a backdrop of political riots, the slow rise to democracy, and a suddenly energetic concern over social justice issues. Naturally, environmental concerns came second in a country struggling to find its feet politically and then democratically. But with global trends tending for the first time towards effective environmental management in the late 80s, the ripple-like effect of the Rio Earth Summit in 1991,¹¹⁵ and a post-Apartheid society ripe for the rapid development of an active civil sector, environmental volunteerism nevertheless found a niche. Reflecting on the development of the civil sector in the 1990s, Kevin Winter says, "It was no coincidence, I don't think, that this started to happen in localised

¹¹⁰ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

¹¹¹ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

¹¹² Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

¹¹³ Personal communication with Karen Shippey, 17 June 2010

¹¹⁴ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

¹¹⁵ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

areas where people began to say, 'we've got to take control of these things, take back the waterways or take back our streets, take back our political rights' as it were."¹¹⁶

Environmental volunteerism is by nature, necessarily and unashamedly local. CapTrust applauds this: "It is the opinions of individuals, collectively expressed, that have the power to influence the authorities; in this way the local environmental organisation performs a most useful and necessary service to the community." It has been one purpose of this document to emphasise the valuable points made here. Joanna Marx draws attention to the exceptional people that the Centre has attracted over the years; the 'odd-bods' who, with little to motivate them, have contributed remarkably to society:

What I've been talking about is *entirely* voluntary. That is it. The people who meet are *always* voluntary. Nobody's got any money. We all get through on the smell of an oil rag, and we do what we consider to be necessary for the environment or heritage or whatever it is. Everything that needs to be done.¹¹⁷

There is no lack of evidence, either, for the success of NGO-government partnerships. One need only consider the established linkages between the CTECA and the City-led TRUP initiative, the strong network of support woven between organisations like FoL and the Municipality, or the oft-mentioned agreements between the Centre and the Provincial Valkenberg hospital. It is important to emphasise that the users of the CTEC have not been at odds with authority: relationships have been familiar and often, mutually supportive.

Themes of space and ownership have been threaded throughout this document too. It has been well documented how directly the continued maintenance of the building has contributed to a sense of ownership amongst users. Practically speaking, the centrality of the building and its accessibility, have contributed to its value as a meeting place. Karen Shippey argues that "I don't think that there are enough places for civic meetings." In this light, it has become a symbolic space too. Having a designated place to meet, to plan, simply to talk, and ultimately to develop, is the lifeblood of any civic organisation. The building has provided a supportive space for its users, and for a host of smaller, informal groups that otherwise would have no place to go. The sense of history and development contained within the walls of this small building has brought it to life: it has become a much more familiar space than the other 'sterile' environments of Kevin's reckoning. Therefore, the key point made in this paper is that the success of these volunteer organisations is intricately linked to the supportive base of the CTEC. Without this building, the groups who use it face the risk of becoming less effective. Hopefully, having emphasised the significant contribution made to civil society by these environmental volunteers, this should strike the reader as a potentially serious loss. Of the Centre, Kevin argues

It's an ideal. And sometimes in this world people want to knock ideals, say take second best. But I think when you see the argument of where we've come from, and the years of development that have gone into this, the argument pales into insignificance in terms of how we link the strength of the organisation and the actual physical buildings. I think that they go very well together. You don't want

¹¹⁶ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

¹¹⁷ Personal communication with Joanna Marx, 11 June 2010

to knock a substantive organisation that's strong and moving forward, has stood the test of time and has plans for the future. To actually cause a disruption to that process would be a naïve choice.¹¹⁸

As for the future visions presented for the Centre which have punctuated this paper, these have provided its foundation. Ultimately, its purpose has been to pose the challenging question: what might civil society *gain* by maintaining this space? Facing a potential loss of institutional memory, and the suppression of organisations that add such dynamism to civil society, here is a chance to watch as the CTEC - and environmental volunteering as we know it - enter a new and creative era of development.

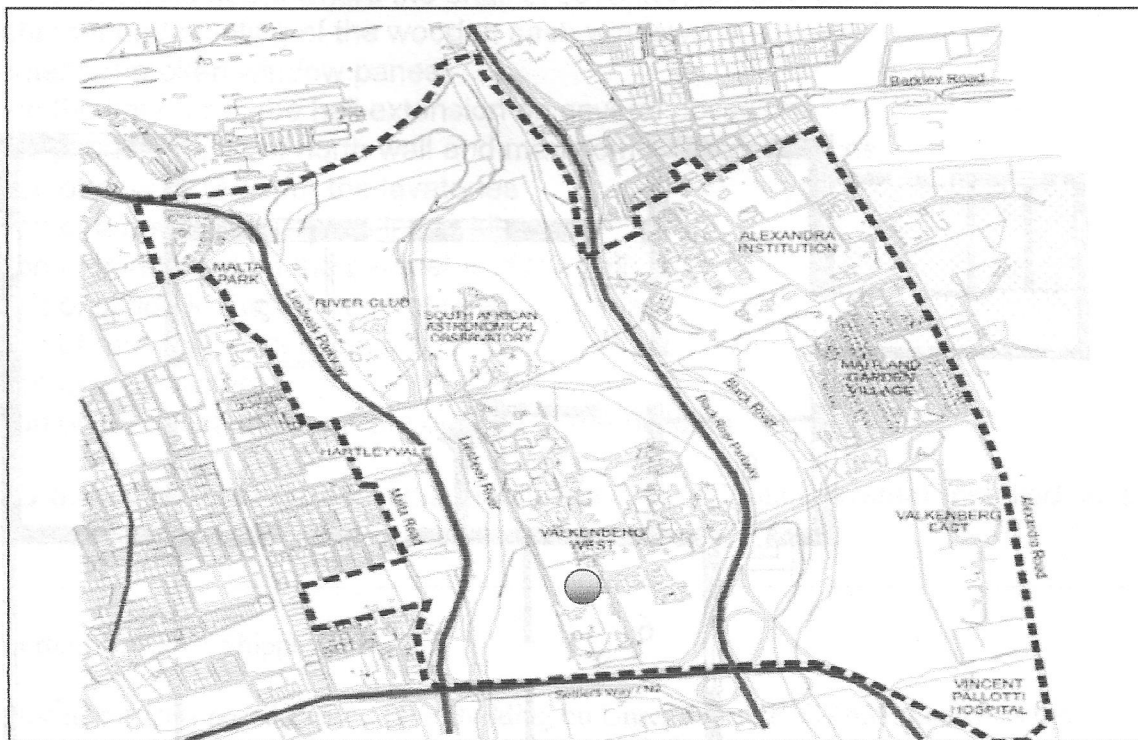
Acknowledgements

In 2009 CTECA committee suggested compiling this report to record the activities undertaken by the various members organisations and to highlight the important role that the centre had played in these activities. The report was commissioned by Kevin Winter and given financial support from Kevin Winter and Ed Tilanus.

¹¹⁸ Personal communication with Kevin Winter, 4 June 2010

Appendices

Appendix 1: Map showing the demarcated TRUP area, and the situation of the CTEC within this (Source: Two Rivers Urban Park Spatial Development Framework, CoCT)



Appendix 2: The basic floor plan of the CTEC

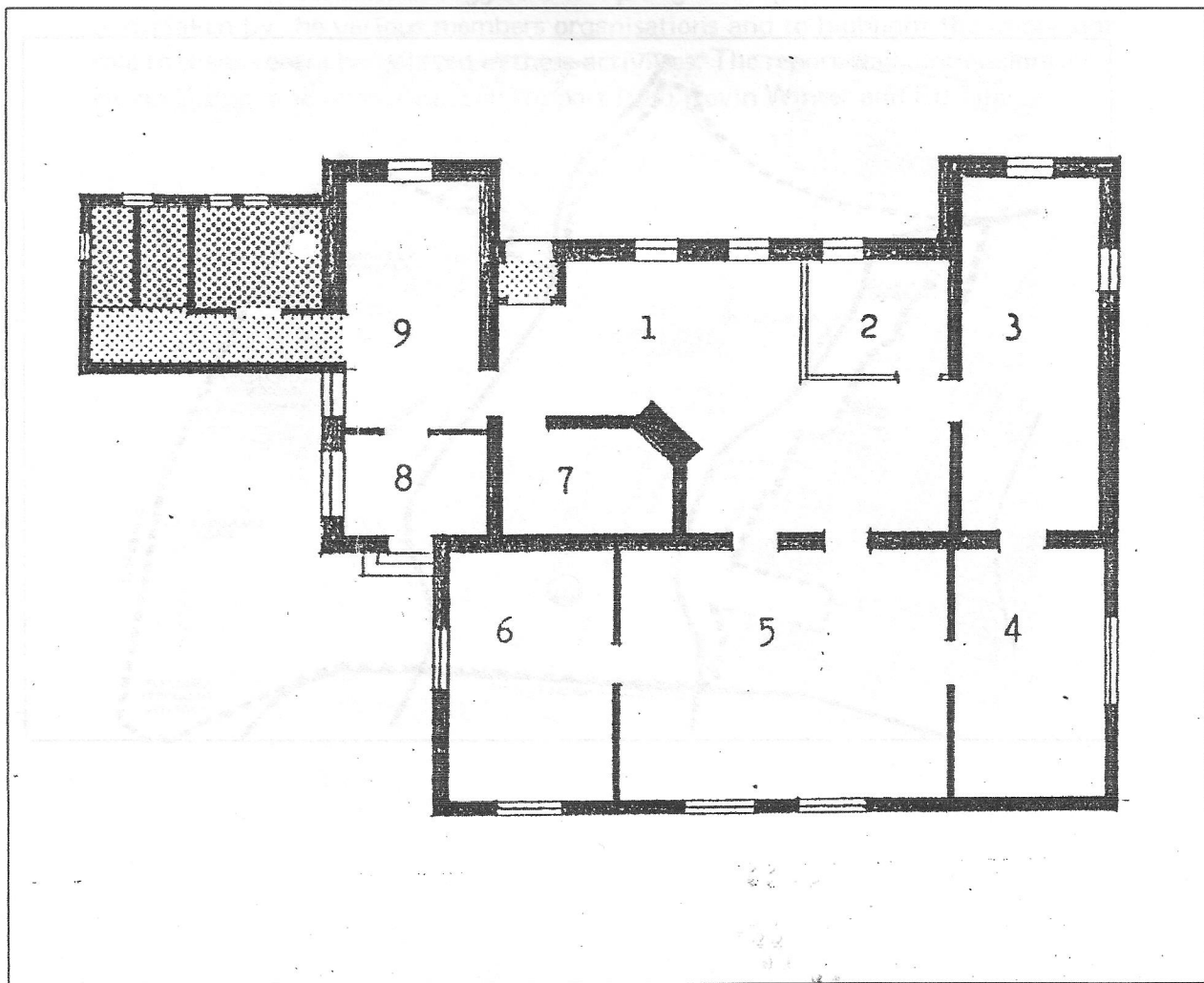


Diagram courtesy of Karen Shippey.

Appendix 3: A full list of maintenance improvements made to the building, at the expense of users

- Painting the exterior walls and roof
- Painting the interior walls and ceilings
- Painting the doors and steel windows
- Sanding of wood floors and application of a coating
- Repairs to wood floors
- Painting the concrete floors where the original covering had degraded
- Refurbishment and painting of the wooden sash windows
- Replacement of broken window panes
- Repairs to the flat roof of the hall extension on several occasions
- Repairs to plaster (inside of north wall and many other smaller places)
- Installation of new cisterns for the lavatories
- Installation of a new sink and tiles in the kitchen
- Installation of fibreboard on the perimeter of the hall
- Installation of blinds in the windows of several rooms
- Installation of new electrical fittings
- Installation of wall heaters
- Installation of security lighting on the outside of the building

In addition to the building, a garden was planted and an irrigation system installed. A seasonal pond was also constructed.

Information courtesy of Karen Shippey.

Sourced from document: "Proposed Lease of the Building on Unregistered Erf 26439, known as the Cape Town Environmental Centre (Previously the Old Valkenberg Dispensary)". No date or author provided.

Appendix 4: The CTECA Constitution

[...to follow]

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