8
HAVEN OF OUR DREAMS

A brochure, produced in 1991, depicts an attractive sketch of a building fronted by pillars and graceful archways. A hybrid of modern glasswork and traditional Islamic architecture, it is surrounded by gardens, and shows three figures approaching a sweep of steps to doorways where others are gathered. A car is parked outside. The title reads 'Women's Cultural Group Activity Centre'.

On the spread of pages inside is a floor plan for the ground level, with a legend that indicates its divisions of space: a large hall or multi-purpose room is its central and largest feature; to one side a kitchen, scullery, pantry, office and store. At the back of the building are toilets and a designated space for making wudhu. A facility where family members could prepare the bodies of loved ones for burial, to give them proper ghusl and to cover them in the kafan, is also represented in this blueprint – families living in urban flats do not often have proper spaces for this crucial religious practice. The text explains that this facility, so long a dream of the Women's Cultural Group, 'will soon become a reality'.

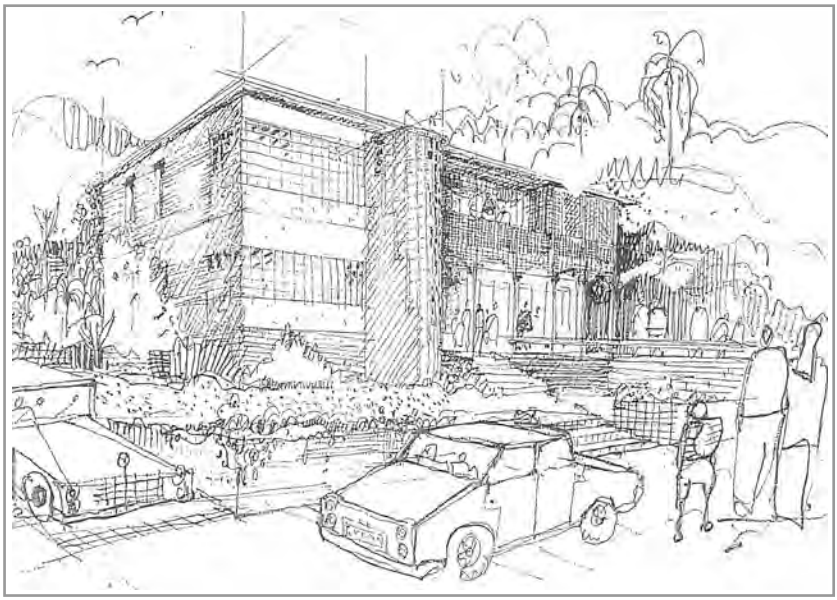
> For many years we in the Women's Cultural Group have dreamt…of a venue where women of all ages could meet to socialise, improve our talents and use them for the good of the community. We dreamed of pleasant surroundings where grandmothers, mothers and daughters could

> spend a few happy hours away from the stress and cares of a household; where the young could benefit from the experience of elders; and where elders could share in the vision and aspirations of the growing generations. Where together all could work for a happier, stronger Community.
>
> This haven of our dreams should be such where we could expand our minds, develop our physiques, give nimbleness to our fingers, where our daughters could exercise and work under the watchful eyes of grannies who would be there to impart Community values to them. The discipline that Dadimas and Nanimas can exercise is too valuable to forgo.

The brochure was not merely informational; it was a plea for community support, both financial and ideological. It appealed specifically to growing Muslim concerns: the discipline of daughters, the ideal of gendered spaces, the centrality of family, the importance of generational continuity. It offered the community a positive solution to the problem of changing values and social relations. Islamic guidance classes would be offered, along with cooking instruction for younger women. 'And not to forget the grannies, they will have their own Granny Club where once a week they will get together for an interesting lecture or programme.'

A space had already been acquired with the help of members of the Orient Old Boys Club and it only remained for the building to be 'restored, renovated and equipped'. Yet the story of optimism and grand schemes portrayed in this narrative was, in reality, more complicated. The ideal of such an activity centre for women had indeed been a vision of many years, even decades – but had already been scaled down by the time this pamphlet was produced and the appeal to conservative community-based concerns was an indication of a new political climate.

The story of the Women's Cultural Group's quest for institutional space reveals how the world around them was changing in a variety of ways. The centre that would finally come into existence would not be the grand facility that its designers had originally imagined and plans for a ghusl, gym, swimming pool, crèche and regular educational programmes would be abandoned. With the end of apartheid and the rush of global investment, recreational spaces and opportunities for self-development were opening up for women. At the same time, conservative elements within the Muslim community wanted to exert



An artist's impression of the planned Women's Cultural Group Activity Centre.

more control over girls and women, pushing gender relations against the directions championed by the original modernist, liberal orientation of the Group. Local politics certainly played a role in circumscribing their vision and reach. The centre that was finally established would be fully adequate for co-ordinating many of the tasks that were becoming more central in their work – the Educational Trust, fundraising luncheons, and meetings. But the loss of the original dream meant a curtailing of the Group's potential impact as a community resource and intellectual influence.

Early reveries

By the end of the 1970s, success with *Indian Delights* had laid the basis for financial security for the Women's Cultural Group. Just as importantly, Group members now found themselves equipped with experiences and skills that contributed both to their collective levels of confidence and a new, professionalised sense of themselves and their mission. Fixed in the limelight of culinary expertise, and having proved their philanthropic efficacy in valued domains of

community life, more and more women were joining the Group. Their membership was growing and so were their aspirations. The Group began to work towards the idea of establishing a special, centralised space of their own. They dreamed of building a publicly located base where they could hold meetings, fundraising events, cooking classes, lectures and a range of other activities.

One indication that the Group was awakening to a new orientation for themselves was their acquisition of a postbox. At a committee meeting in January 1979, it was resolved that the Group would notify the public that its correspondence would no longer be sent to Sayani and Co., the business address of Zohra Moosa's husband, but should rather be directed to their own postal address in Westville. Members were instructed to destroy old letterheads, while other bureaucratic efficiencies were urged: all letters written in connection with the Group were now to be duplicated; and one of the two secretaries would attend every meeting.

The Group began applying its collective mind to the prospect of obtaining a formal centre and meeting space, and to the benefits that such an expansion represented. Since the Group's inception, meetings had been held in private homes. In the 1950s, the clustering of Group membership in neighbourhoods close to the central business district meant minimal travel for the majority of members. That only a few women drove cars in this period did not pose much of a practical problem: some women walked, while others were conveyed by male family members or formed lift clubs. In 1957, 'Fahmida' reported that 'the Durban Women's Cultural Group has decided to hold all its monthly meetings…at the Kajee Hall in future. Time 8pm. Most members will find this venue more suitable as it is centrally situated and in any case the membership is now too big to use private homes as was the habit in the past.'[1] With the Group Areas Act taking effect in the 1960s, Indian families were scattered outside the municipal centre. Members moved to Westville, Reservoir Hills and Clare Estate, dramatically expanding the distances between respective homes. By this time, however, more women drove cars and so could independently organise transport, though there were difficulties for some. Gori Patel, for example, an active early member, now lived in Mobeni Heights and did not drive. Widowed in the late 1980s, she found herself somewhat hesitant to continuously impose on her willing-but-busy daughter-in-law. Even though meetings were held monthly, not everyone could attend every meeting.

Within the pattern of daily life, evenings had long proved to be the most convenient time for members to meet. Nafisa Jeewa explained, 'It was after your daily chores, your husband was back from work, you had given him his dinner, so everybody was relaxed by then.' For women who held jobs in the formal economy – lawyer Zubeida Seedat, for example – evening meetings were the only option for regular participation.

Into the 1960s members again took turns to host monthly meetings, with two other members elected to assist the 'lady of the house'. The home environment allowed a sense of intimacy and informality to infuse the gathering – a meeting of friends as much as of associates. Many enjoyed the social ease of being a guest and welcomed the responsibility of hospitality as a chance to exercise their homemaking prowess. Yet the demands of hospitality could also create anxieties. Jeewa recounts that

> as the Group grew we found there was still a bit of a competition. If it was held in my home and I just served tea, right, and maybe Tennis biscuits or Marie biscuits, [and then next month] you had the meeting in your home but then you have samoosas and pies and a freshly baked chocolate cake, etc., right? So now I'm going to say, 'Oh my God, I just put Tennis biscuits on the table!' and I look at this and everybody would be digging into the food…Then, when it was time to have the next meeting and we said, 'Right, members, who's going to take the next turn?' and people were reluctant, because it was like a competition. And everybody couldn't afford everything. Some people don't mind digging a hole in their pocket, others do.

Shyness about 'measuring up' to perceived standards, either stylistic or economic, was not the only daunting prospect for the would-be hostess. When Nafisa Jeewa joined the Group, there were 'maybe just about twenty to twenty-five members in the Group at that stage – so it was easy to have a meeting in somebody's home'. But growing membership meant that this became more difficult. Zuleikha Mayat remembers: 'We had at one stage about a hundred members. I couldn't accommodate them in the home anymore. They all didn't turn up [every time], but when you had a big function and you wanted [all of them there], it was really very desperate.'

The desire for a formal, centralised space to hold meetings had been present almost from the outset of the Group's formation, concomitant with the same

impulses that had inspired its founding. A key motivation was the idea of creating a space in which women could come together to be in a social setting outside of the domain of family, somewhere that would enable more young women to be actively engaged and involved. Such a development would be a resource for women in their quest for personal development, the rationale being, according to Mayat, that

> if we had some outlet for the women, it would really expand their minds. Even physically they would be more active. So you could have a tennis court as some women were already playing tennis at the Moosas' tennis court…swimming [as] some of us had already started swimming lessons. So we thought, 'Let's get a centre of our own where we can do all these things privately.'

Privacy meant a space just for women and it meant two more specific things: firstly, a space that addressed customary concerns for gendered seclusion in order that more Muslim women (especially those who felt isolated) could be drawn out. Fatima Meer explained, in the Group's 35th anniversary brochure, that for Group members 'the social reality is that our lives are circumscribed by our ideology, our religion, our ritual, our neighbourhood; and the choice is usually between remaining family bound or stepping out and forming associations with those easily accessable to us'. The activity centre was envisioned by the Group to be an accessible and secure environment for the 'stepping out' of future generations of women. Secondly, a 'private' space would allow married women some independence from the social circles of patrilocal, extended family settings in which they lived, and, for unmarried women, a legitimate space away from parental households. Mayat explained that for her generation particularly, the pressures on married women to be involved in the same social set as one's mother-in-law and aunts could be quite intense:

> Women certainly needed [independent] space. We were all supposed to be little clones of our mothers-in-law in those days. Their friends were your friends. Their circle was your circle. Their activities were your activities. You were just fitted into that group. And when you tried to kick [over] the traces it caused unhappiness in the homes.

The emphasis on inter-generational female ties could, for many women, pose a challenge to developing intra-generational friendships. As indicated in Chapter Two, Group founders actively sought out friends within their own age-sets, a peer group that could come together to discuss similar concerns and experiences. Finding space for such relationships to flourish had been an important motivation for forming the Group: it also featured in the desire for a centre where activities and involvements could take place in a 'home away from home'.

In the mid-1970s, what had been pondered for years as a dream began to be pursued as a necessity 'because of the growth in membership and the interest of new members wanting to come in, wanting to do new things and we didn't have really the facility for that', according to Mayat. Over the following decade, the centre that emerged in the mind's eye of the Group would incorporate many functions and many facilities. Possibilities opened and closed regularly through the 1980s, but the quest for a centre was a persistent theme. This quest constitutes an important aspect of the Group's history, one in which failures and disappointments are as instructive as successes. Ironically, by the time the Group had gained all the elements and means to create their ideal 'haven of dreams', political and social changes had shifted the goalposts in two, paradoxical ways. On the one hand, in the mainstream, gender and racial politics had altered, creating more opportunities for Indian women in various public arenas, including the employment sector, and there was perhaps less of a need among the younger Group members for the kind of space that a centre promised. On the other hand, the local religious leadership had shifted towards a more conservative view of gender relations and of what was acceptable for women. Women from more conservative Muslim families were not likely to be successfully drawn out to a venue run by a women's collective known for its modernist views and a fifty-year-plus history of working to get women into the public domain. Crucial financial and institutional support for a centre – in which women would develop themselves educationally, economically and publicly – was not, in the end, forthcoming. The centre that was finally established had many of the most crucial facilities but it was, from many of the members' perspective, a compromise on their initial aspirations.

Hunting and gathering

In July 1979, Zuleikha Mayat met with AM Moolla at the site of vacant land in Asherville owned by the AM Moolla Trust to investigate the possibility of building a centre there, but no transactions emerged.[2] In November of the same year, Mayat sent letters to members of the public and various Trusts conveying the Group's vision for a centre.[3] This generated a good response, with several offers of land. For example, in December, Ismail Loonat, husband of Fatima, came forward with an offer of three quarters of an acre of land to erect a building for the benefit of the Group and community at large. In June of the following year, Ayesha Motala and her husband volunteered land at no cost in Reservoir Hills. For one reason or another, nothing came out of these initial offers: either the land was unsuitable or they came with strings attached that the Group did not wish – or have the capacity – to involve itself in, such as building a retirement village. Progress was made, however, when the Group was offered land on Hendry Road at the 'special reduced price' of R15 000. After inspecting the site in May 1980, members declared it 'suitable' and purchased it.[4] The land had belonged to a Dr Logue who had been running a school for children with disabilities across the road from the vacant ground. Dr Logue had been in contact with Zuleikha Mayat and AM Moolla and agreed to sell the land on the verbal understanding that it would be used for teaching children with various disabilities.

In the meantime, the Group continued to look for appropriate built space to refurbish and use while land was being sought and funds were being raised for the centre. The most pressing need at this juncture was for a demonstration kitchen to teach cookery to people who wanted to use this skill to earn a living. So, as a temporary measure, the Group rented premises in the central business district from October 1980. The premises were to be used for instruction in cookery, as well as classes in embroidery and arts. Several members volunteered to work in the kitchen and contribute towards the rent until the enterprise was able to pay for itself.[5] The kitchen itself was far from standard, however. Zuleikha's father-in-law organised the installation of a stove and donated a lounge suite; Ebrahim Moosa, husband of a Group member, a reconditioned fridge; Khatija Mall, a pot; and Gorie Patel, curtains.[6] Additional work on the 'Delights Centre' proceeded and the plan was for an official opening in April 1981.[7] However, this did not materialise. Minutes of the April

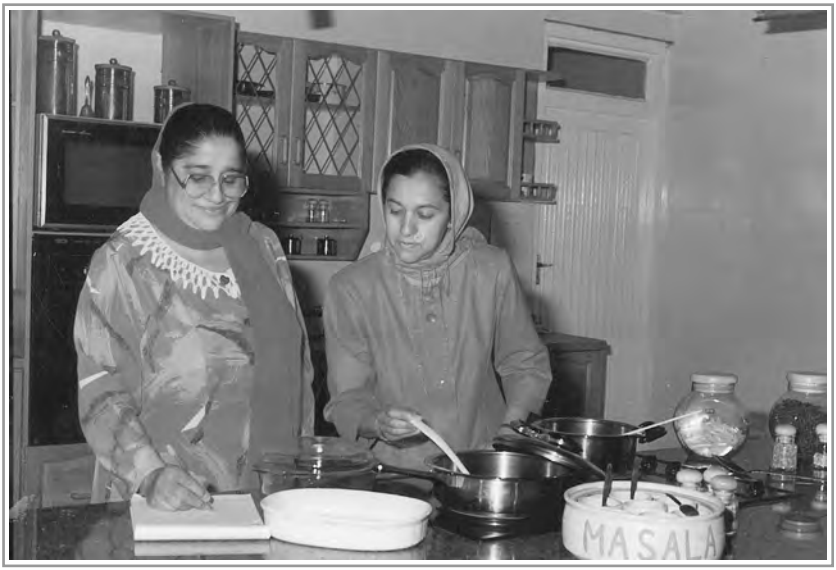
1981 committee meeting recorded that 'though members tried their utmost to make this venture successful, it failed to get off the ground as we could not overcome the obstacles the Health Board imposed'.

The following year, the Group was back at the drawing board, stressing at their general meeting in August 1982 that premises were required urgently because of new requests for cookery lessons. Possibilities continued to be investigated. Essop Timol, who served on several important community trusts, took some of the members on a visit to the former Crescent School in Pine Street. They reported back that it was certainly large enough, centrally situated and 'very convenient'.[8] In December, an Activity Centre Committee was constituted to communicate with Timol and architect Rodney Harber about developing the site.[9] Yet, the Group was unable to get this property on terms it could afford. Over a year later, at the end of 1983, the secretary reported that public response to Group activities continued to be 'excellent, but everybody was interested in knowing when the Group was to have its own premises!' She continued: 'For a long time now we have repeatedly tried to do something but to no avail. Let's make this our New Year's resolution that 1984 be the year to launch something new. Let's breathe some new life into this.'[10]

Yet, the search continued as 1984 came to a close. In March 1985, Mariam Moosa took the Group to view a property in Burnwood Road, but they found it to be too small. In November, Zuleikha Mayat and a few members visited premises in Dunnotar Avenue, run by Mawlana Patel. It was a house divided into two, with a large hall at the back. 'Our ladies were really sorry that we weren't able to buy the site for ourselves.'[11] The mawlana felt that the premises were too big for him and he was willing to lease part of it to the Group, but not sell it to them.[12] In March 1986, Timol once again accompanied the Group to a site on Clayton Road. However, they were offered a lease only and could not buy it outright. This, and the stipulation that the centre would have to be open to the public, an arrangement they were not keen on, caused them to reject the offer.[13]

Kitchen space

In September 1986, a Mr Sabat of the South African National Zakaat Foundation approached Laila Ally to send some members to look at their kitchen and to provide them with a list of crockery and cutlery requirements. Members informed him that they were hoping for 'top quality' fittings and utensils. It all



Fatima Patel and Fatima Mayat in the Centre's kitchen.

was meant to happen quickly: Laila Ally and team would make their visit on 27 September and the kitchen would be opened in mid-October.[14] However, when the Group visited, they found that this proposition was unrealistic. There was much to be done, such as installing the eye-level oven and a stove, and tiling work. Once again, members went about the business of hunting and gathering essentials. Thanks to the initiative of Mariam Motala, the Group got a set of AMC pots and a new microwave on loan for a year.[15]

The kitchen was only ready at the end of May 1987 and the first cookery lessons, a series for schoolgirls, ran in June. Several of the members took charge of the demonstrations.[16] Cooking came with religious instruction. An Islamic talk was presented to the participants before each session. The kitchen was officially opened on 10 October 1987, with AMC Classics making an official presentation of its pots. The press, representatives of various organisations, and some of the women who had contributed recipes were invited. Profits from the cookery lessons were given to the South African-based Al-Imdaad Foundation, which provided humanitarian assistance in various regions of the world.

The Group started with a six-week course that took place each Saturday morning. A class was held for schoolgirls from nine thirty until eleven thirty in the morning and from noon to two o'clock for ladies. Both were reported to be 'progressing well, despite the inefficiency of the stove', and, in response, funds were raised and a new stove installed. Classes proved so popular that holiday sessions were added in December.[17] Another four-week course began in March 1988. Classes were also introduced for underprivileged participants free of charge. Instructors focussed on different types of food. They were paid a nominal fee but most returned the money to be put into a kitty towards the Group's persistent dream of a kitchen of their own. Classes ran for a full year, as agreed with the South African National Zakaat Fund, and were discontinued thereafter even though Zubeida Asmal, who co-ordinated the lessons and menu in conjunction with other members of the Group, urged that classes be continued because of the positive response from the public. Other members preferred doing so in their own centre.

Dreams beyond kitchens

While the kitchen was being established there was still the matter of the land that had been purchased on Hendry Road. After about a year the Group realised that it did not have the capacity to run an institution for children with disabilities and Mayat, who was on the board of the Natal Indian Cripple Care Association (NICCA), decided to sell the land to NICCA, thus fulfilling her verbal commitment to Dr Logue. Shortly thereafter, however, NICCA was offered more suitable land by VN Naik and sold the land back to the Group in 1982 for R20 000 on the verbal understanding that should the Group ever sell it, the profits would be shared with NICCA.[18] The Group decided to develop its centre on the land. By August 1985, a quantity surveyor had submitted a plan showing the contours of the land and Fatima Loonat and Zohra Moosa met with an architect to discuss their proposals. To accommodate their pocketbook in the depressed economic climate of the 1980s and to remain true to their grand vision, they considered building their centre in stages.

But while plans were being considered, a legal glitch arose. A permit was required since the land was in a 'border' segment in relation to the racially designated Group Areas, and permission had to be obtained from the City

Council. In their appeal to the Durban City Council in March 1986, the Group explained their need for the space:

> Wishing to spare as much money as possible for Community Aid, we have all along conducted our multifold activities from members' homes. [In preparing the *Indian Delights* manuscript] the experiments in the kitchen for testing recipes, the typing, task of proofreading, the making-up of dummies for the printer, all this and much more has been done in our homes. However, the volume of work in keeping accounts, selling of books, storing books, interviewing persons, filing, is just too much. In order to carry on, we are desperately in need of a venue.

A permit was granted and a feasibility report on the site was prepared in April 1986. Because the Group intended using the centre for charitable purposes, Zubeida Seedat applied to the City Council for a rates rebate but was unsuccessful. The Group received some tempting bids from potential funders for assistance with construction, but these came with strings attached that did not fit in with the priorities and vision of the activity centre that they themselves had in mind. While they waited, members took care of the upkeep of the land, which turned out not to be a straightforward task. In February 1987, for example, they negotiated with a Mr Khan to clear the land. Yet when Nafisa Jeewa and Zuby Bobat inspected the property they reported that his work had been 'unsatisfactory'.[19] On 3 March 1988 the City Health Department sent a letter of warning to the Group that an inspection had disclosed the presence of 'a number of unauthorised shacks being used for human habitation'. Problems such as these were frustrating members.

Meanwhile, in spite of financial hold-ups, the Group was busy coming to a consensus on their vision for the centre that could be incorporated into a set of architectural plans. Members submitted written suggestions.[20] After much discussion, Zuleikha Mayat summarised a collective vision for the centre, which they hoped to make into a unique and fully equipped educational and supportive space for women, one that would also be used to convey a sense of South African Indian heritage and history. In her July 1988 presidential report, Mayat suggested that the centre would be

> a complex where mothers and children can learn and relax, so one of the units is to be a crèche where mothers can leave their children on a full-

> time or part-time basis. Charges will be same as other crèches around town…I would like to emphasize that the complex will not only be one that embodies the activities and achievements of the Cultural Group, but it will also commemorate in some way the leading women and men who have played a role in this country and I hope that we will start right from the time of the arrival of our people here. The complex must be a museum of our people, not in a dead manner, but one that reflects its continuity. I had in mind glass-enclosed cabinets on the walls of the different units where historical papers, photographs, artifacts, etc. can be on permanent display.[21]

Nafisa Jeewa also recalls that members wanted 'a cultural centre so we have everything there – cooking, promoting culture (Indian culture – not Islamic culture – Indian culture!) and ladies could have a little outing, play table tennis or whatever, you know, that kind of thing. That was the idea. Then we said, alright, if there's a janaza, and you live in [an] apartment and you can't have it in your home, we'd use that centre for the funeral as well.'

In August 1988, Mayat presented a set of plans to a general meeting of the Group. The centre was to include a hall, a crèche, a pre-primary school, a kitchen, a jamaat khana and a ghusal khana. There would be a gymnasium, a swimming pool and a squash centre for fitness enthusiasts, squash being a game that became very popular among Indians in the 1980s. The centre was to include an 'advanced library' for research purposes, as well as a residential area with two suites. Members also felt that activities and spatial provision should be made for older members of the community who 'were feeling left out' since the growing trend towards the formation of nuclear families and working mothers left many grannies and older aunts lonely.[22]

Clearly, this was to be an enormously costly project. To raise awareness of their need among the community stakeholders who commanded resources to assist in generating the required funding, the Group held a special dinner at the (de facto men's) Orient Club on 6 September 1988. They planned with care. In fact, as Mayat would later record, 'many years of thinking had gone into this project before we approached the Community. We realised fully that the task facing us was a gigantic one. That it was not only a matter of erecting the project but the care and maintenance afterwards.'[23] According to the report of the general meeting that followed the presentation, 'an exclusive invitation list was drawn up and sent out…The meal was outstanding and the guests

were pleasantly surprised by the layout.' Mayat addressed the audience on the future plans for the community centre. She told male listeners 'Listen, you men are allowed four wives. If we [women] give half a million, you give two million!' Architect, AR Gaffoor, outlined the plans and the session was opened to questions from the floor. The response was divided. Some in the audience were optimistic, while others were hesitant about the community investing such a large amount in a single project. They were of the view that the money could be put to better use by investing in several projects. There were suggestions too that the Group should build its centre in stages as the 'project was too big for the Group to handle'.[24] Reflecting on this period, Zuleikha Mayat has an explanation for the lukewarm response:

> You know, [the Group has] always been just a nuisance value. [Members of the Orient Club] respected me and so on – but they didn't take you that seriously. At that meeting I said, 'Look, we've got this land in Hendry Road, right? We develop it. We have the land and we've got half a million rands which we'll give from our capital.' I said, 'Now, if you men also come up with about a million or so, we can start there.' Nothing came about. The plans were drawn up. After a while, a few meetings and so on and phoning them all the time, nothing came of it. Their co-operation was lethargic, they murmured that the women would never be able to run the proposed centre, there were even innuendos that we take on some males as trustees. Then they came up with a [new] plan [saying], 'Why do you want to go and *build* a centre? This [other property] Mariam Bee Sultan [with existing buildings] is available, we'll get that for you.'

But Mayat did not leave the matter there. Following the meeting she contacted some members of the Orient Club individually and was encouraged by them to proceed with the Group's existing plans. Another geographical survey of the land was carried out and Group members agreed to hold regular workshops to explain the building, administration and programmes to the public.[25] Mayat opposed the suggestion to stagger the development as she felt that it would 'hamper the entire concept'.[26]

In February 1989 the Group Areas permit expired and the Group was required to apply for a new permit. At the same time they received an offer of purchase for the land and they briefly considered selling it and then renting a

different site. Three members accompanied Essop Timol in March 1989 to view land that was available in Clayton Road but the property was found to be too small. In May, the land in Hendry Road was finally transferred to the Group. In September, Zuleikha Mayat wrote to the City Council to try once again to get the rates waived. Although the Group provided a comprehensive explanation of past activities, and emphasised that the centre was an education and community centre, the appeal was rejected for a second time.[27]

At a general meeting in October 1989, the Group resolved to raise funds for the Hendry Road development, which the municipality had valued at R97 000. Things looked positive in this direction. They approached Essop Randeree, who gave his blessing and agreed to assist with fundraising. The support of well-connected men such as Yusuf Lockhat, AM Moolla, Essop Timol and Essop Randeree was necessary for the Group to successfully procure funds as their confidence and affirmation assured other contributors that the project was legitimate, above board and worthy. The Muslim Charitable Foundation, an organisation formed in Durban in 1982 to co-ordinate charitable projects and ensure that fundraisers were bona fide, gave the Group a letter of recommendation for the fundraising drive after interviewing Shairbanu Lockhat, Fatima Loonat and Zuleikha Mayat. The Hafisa Mayat Trust agreed to donate R50 000 and the AM Moolla Charitable Trust pledged R10 000.[28]

However, when the committee met again in November 1989, it was clear that many Group members had begun to have second thoughts because most of the major players in the Muslim community hedged on giving their full support. The pledges, while substantial, fell far short of the requirements. Zohra Moosa warned that to undertake 'such a big project was too much' and that the Group should settle for something more modest. She suggested that a hall with a properly equipped kitchen, which could be hired out, was sufficient to their basic and immediate needs.[29] As Zuleikha Mayat explained, she valued this counsel as 'Zohra is a very, very, good thinking person and moderate, so she would come up with that [idea].'

Some members, however, still favoured a full-scale centre. But when the architect went ahead and advertised the project in local newspapers in February 1990, as required by law, there were several objections from white residents in the area and the matter had to be placed before the City Council for discussion. Meanwhile, Zuleikha Mayat continued to approach possible

funders but failed to secure firm commitments of a substantial nature.[30] At the Group's AGM in July 1990, Mayat made an impassioned plea linking the activity centre to the legacy of the Group. After outlining the achievements of the Group, she added:

> I mention all this not to boast but to give you, the members, pride in your own work. To make you remember what a magnificent contribution you have played in Community and National life. If this were to go overboard and forgotten then it will indeed be a pity. Should you decide to carry on in the proposed Activity Centre you will go down in the history of Durban. It is up to you what you wish to do in the future years.

In November 1990, Mayat met with local sporting icon Yacoob Omar, the husband of Hajira Omar, and secured his help to organise a golf tournament to raise funds for the centre. They attracted fifteen players, secured sponsors for each hole, and sold pre-packed lunches at the tournament, which took place at the Papwa Sewgolam Gold Course on 2 February 1991. The February 1991 meeting reported that the tournament was 'a very successful event and it went off very well', with a profit of R13 915 made. A joint Group effort and community support was crucial for this success. Reward also came in the form of appreciation from the public. One participant, a Dr NM Jugmohan, wrote to the Group on 3 February 1991:

> Golf is a game of ecstasy. One has to play it to experience this emotion. However, when it is married to a noble cause as yours, this ecstasy reaches new heights. I, on behalf of all the participants in your prestigious tournament, wish to thank you and your tireless workers for providing us with a wonderful opportunity to share in your glory. Women's Cultural Group…take a bow!'

At a monthly meeting of the Group in December 1990, Mayat reported that members had visited a site belonging to the Muslim Youth Movement in Roslynn Avenue with architect Rodney Harber. The inspection team felt that although the land was smaller than the Hendry Road property, the gradient was level and therefore it would be cheaper to build on. The Group debated swapping its Hendry Road plot for the one in Roslynn Avenue and building a more modest structure. Mayat worked feverishly on the project. She met with Baboo

Jadwat of the Muslim Youth Movement, as well as the Orient Islamic Trust and the Orient Old Boys to ask them to assist financially with the building of the gymnasium and swimming pool. Some bargaining resulted in an understanding that women would use the facilities during the day and the men at night.[31] Harber presented a set of sketches in early January 1991 and yet another collection drive was launched. Essop Randeree got involved once again and went around with the women on their collection drive. Mariam Motala, Khurshid Nadvi, Khulsoom Moosa and Zuleikha Mayat were to visit women in their respective areas to secure pledges of R50 or R100 per month to make up R1 000 from each contributor. Mayat prepared brochures that illustrated their plans.[32]

There was yet another setback in August 1991 when the Orient Old Boys decided not to participate in the Roslynn Avenue project after all and proposed an alternative. This decision was finally conveyed to the Group in response to a letter that Zuleikha Mayat had sent a few months earlier, on 20 April 1991, to AK Lockhat, in his capacity as president of the Orient Old Boys, in which she questioned the Orient Club's commitment:

> Future income and expenditure on maintenance of centre was discussed in detail [by the Group] and it seemed that it could be feasible and viable to proceed. There are two questions that have perplexed me personally. After all that quizzing from your members, I have not been able to fathom to what extent the Orient Old Boys will be helping with the fundraising for building, and what income generating programme they would undertake once the Centre becomes operable. These are questions that my members will be asking and you will agree that they are pertinent. Perhaps you could verify from your members at one of your meetings.

Once the Orient Old Boys had clarified its position, members recognised that it was becoming increasingly difficult to realise their dream in a manner that would secure the activity centre as an independent Group-controlled outfit. Members did not wish to tie up the bulk of their energies and finances into a project that would be a compromise of their autonomy and vision. At the AGM in September 1991, the Group decided not to proceed with the project under these circumstances. They also felt that they 'owed it to the community

not to allow the magnanimity of the Sultan family to go to waste'. This was a reference to ML Sultan, who had arrived as an indentured worker in 1893 and accumulated wealth through banana and tobacco farming. After the death of his wife, he created the Mariam Bee Sultan Trust in 1932 in her memory. His family contributed to numerous educational and social welfare projects, including the ML Sultan Technical College and the school in Kenilworth Road which had become dilapidated through disuse and was now being offered to the Group. The Group had already collected funds for the activity centre and had to decide what to do with it. Following the AGM, Mayat wrote to donors on 16 September 1991 outlining the reasons for putting the project on hold:

> Knowing that we did not have the woman power to tackle the task on our own, we approached several of our Societies which were involved in activities similar to ours. Unhappily some never had the time to meet us. Those that did, after several meetings, came to the conclusion that they too could not commit their members for the maintenance of the complex in future years. Most organisations that depend on voluntary help are faced with the problem of too much work and not enough hands coming forward to help on an ongoing basis. Besides the above, in all honesty we must admit that our timidity in collecting funds from the public has now brought about an embarrassing situation. The Women's Cultural Group has always taken pride in the fact that unlike other societies who depend on the public, we have always generated our own funds. Alhamdolillah, over the 40 years we have managed this by our own efforts. In this our first major effort at collecting funds, we found to the credit of our Community that they responded generously. If it did not come up to our expectations it is merely that our efforts were not aggressive enough. We know that you will understand our embarrassment at having to declare that we are not proceeding with our Centre, a Centre that despite our decision will be of vital necessity in the future when the coming generations will be faced with a barrage of challenges and an increasing erosion of our values.

Mayat said that the Group did not 'consider it appropriate to retain the money you donated' and they were willing to return it, but asked benefactors to consider donating their monies towards the Bursary Fund, which the Group

was hoping to increase to R1 million. 'Should you entrust us with your money, you can rest assured that we will be helping the right people.' There was an overwhelmingly positive response to this appeal.

Mariam Bee Sultan School

While pulling out of the Asherville project, the Orient Old Boys proposed that the Group lease the Mariam Bee Sultan School in Kenilworth Road. The Group decided to accept the offer because the Hendry Road property was costing over R2 000 per month to maintain and they had received warnings from the city police that criminal charges against the Group were imminent because squatters were encroaching on the property.[33] The land was sold in August 1993 for R200 000. As had been agreed verbally, profits from the sale were shared equally with NICCA.

After inspecting the proposed premises in Kenilworth Road, Zuleikha Mayat reported in February 1992 that the various buildings were in a derelict state and that extensive renovations were required. The only condition stipulated by the Sultan Trust was that the dawah classes and the madrassah run in the building at the back would be continued.[34] When negotiating a lease the Group had understood this to be a joint project with the Orient Old Boys. At a meeting with Orient Old Boys and the Sultan Trust in March 1992, however, it became clear that the Group would have to fund the entire project. The trustees of the ML Sultan Trust emphasised that the premises were to be used solely for Islamic purposes and that the 'image of the place must conform to Islamic standards. No social functions were to be held there.' Mayat informed the Old Boys' representatives that as the Group had thought that this was to be a joint venture, they would have to (re)consider their involvement.[35] Following the meeting the Group wrote to AK Lockhat on 11 March 1992:

> The Sunday meeting has shaken my confidence. We were completely thrown off balance when Mr Abdullah said that the only consideration was to be what the Group proposed to do at the premises and that the financing of it was not on the agenda. Meeting was hurriedly terminated for on my part I just could not fathom how such a gap in the understanding between two parties could emerge. I came home with two committee members. We did not discuss the meeting at all even though sub-

> consciously that was uppermost in our minds…I discussed the matter with members of my committee. Unanimously the verdict is that our perception all along has been that the Sultan Trust premises was to be a joint responsibility and you will recall that both at meetings and in telephone calls the words 'joint responsibility' had often been uttered.

They angled their argument with potently gendered metaphors:

> To us joint responsibility means just that. In other words, like a marriage partnership the two units together see to the welfare of the task at hand. In our minds we accepted that the premises revolving around, so to say, domestic issues, its day-to-day programmes, would be under our charge. Mothers do that all the time and mothers nowadays also subsidise family income, therefore we are prepared to pay not just our share towards the project but to go beyond that. The total assumption of the financial burden by us was not on our agenda…In reporting on where matters stand at the moment Mrs Nadvi requested that we get the Orient Old Boys commitment in writing. This is completely in keeping with Qur'anic hidayah, but I turned this request down saying: 'Khursheed, these are our sons. We know whom we are dealing with so there is no need for written attestation'…We continued to assume joint responsibility because you would in effect be helping the community.
>
> Should we commit the Education Trust funds into the Sultan project, just to see it slowly becoming anaemic like the Mariam Bee Trust, and we are left with somebody else's property to look after and no funds to continue? You may want to know – would this not have happened with the Hendry Road project? Emphatically *no*! With the prestigious building we envisaged…all the multifarious facilities would have ensured full occupancy. Its popularity would be an advertisement itself and the number of persons using it would have generated income necessary to keep it alive…We benefit the community through the activities of the Group. Like the Old Boys we only have the back[aches] and headaches and no fringe benefits to any of us.[36]

Mayat explained that the money they had raised for the building of the centre in Hendry Road was invested in the Educational Trust. They could not use that

money at Mariam Bee because these were to be leased premises. She appealed, as well, to the growing paternalistic concern in the religious community around young women and implied that it was appropriate for a women's group to be addressing this through a special centre, writing: 'We wished to give something concrete to the Community, something that is going to be sorely needed for the hifazat of our daughters in the future years.'

Lockhat replied on 23 March 1992 that the Orient Old Boys was 'committed to assisting' but that the organisation's 'involvement will entail assistance in administration, maintenance, fundraising in respect of the physical plant…The "ownership" of the project must, and has always, rested with the Women's Cultural Group and that we merely assisted and acted as the catalyst in expediting your interests.'

'Ownership' settled, Mayat visited the site with a builder in May and estimated that renovations would cost around R150 000. The Group had already set aside R17 000 and the Educational Trust R13 000 for this purpose. There was much discussion among members at their meeting in May as to what to include, and especially whether a kitchen was viable, given the cost of building one. It was eventually agreed that although expensive, a kitchen could be turned into an income-generating enterprise. While the Hendry Road project was to have been an Educational Trust project, the proposed Mariam Bee project was designated as a Group project so as not to be excessively dependent on the Trust.[37]

A committee was tasked to write to the Department of Health and the Licensing Department and begin raising funds. Various fundraising projects were mooted including a jumble sale, a 'Ladies Morning' that would include guest speakers, a fashion show, yoga demonstrations, and finger lunch. Additionally, a dinner was proposed for September 1992, when, it was hoped (in vain as it turned out), visiting Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan would be a drawcard.[38] In negotiating with the South African Cricket Board, Mayat wrote:

> Wishing to spare as much money as possible for the needs of others, our Group members have deprived themselves of the comfort of an office, of the assistance of paid clerks. All the work entailed with compiling recipe books, typing, proofreading, scrutinising the over four thousand applications we receive from students asking for assistance, the selling of books,

> etc., has been conducted from our homes and no member has ever been paid. All work is by voluntary help from members. We desperately need an administration centre and a cookery-teaching kitchen (which work too was conducted from our kitchens). We have most generously been given a doublestoried school, free of charge for twenty-five years. This building whilst very soundly built has been badly neglected and to renovate and furnish it is going to cost a lot of money. If we take the money from our bursary fund it will mean that no students will receive help for a few years. Therefore we are working the soles off our shoes to obtain more funds for our other projects.[39]

In March 1993, Group members visited thirty-two homes in Westville alone to raise funds. Groups of women also visited potential donors in other areas. A Ladies' Morning was also held in March at the Truro Hall, where the guest speakers were Zubeida Seedat and Shairbanu Sacoor. It was mainly members who ran the event while former members and other women in the community who had excelled professionally were usually given an opportunity to address such gatherings. A jumble sale was held at the West Street flea market in August. Another jumble sale on 31 October 1993 at the churchyard in Lorne Street raised over R1 200. A qawwali function at the Truro Hall made a net profit of R2 000 in December 1993. This was followed by a ladies-only fundraising lunch at the Truro Hall in January 1994, where the guest speakers included Shoaib Omar, who spoke on Islamic law, and dermatologist Dr Zubie Hamid. There were also talks on aromatherapy and reflexology. The minutes of the February general meeting described the luncheon as 'a really lovely function and was a fantastic success. Group members have to be commended for all the hard work they put in before and after the event. The guests were very pleased with the sumptuous menu, guest speakers and the free skin care products which were given to them.' A net profit of R15 000 was made. While fundraising was proceeding smoothly, plans for the centre, unsurprisingly given their history, did not pan out as hoped.

The Mariam Bee Sultan Trust complex consisted of a two-storey school building and a large cottage at the back that had been used as a madrassah. The lease for the building was secured for twenty-five years and that for the cottage for ten years. It was initially envisioned that the Women's Cultural Group and Educational Trust would use the offices on the top floor for administrative

purposes, with the Trust subsidising the running costs of the Group for a maximum of R1 000 per month. The lower floor of the building and the ablution block was to be known as the Women's Cultural Group Activity Centre and was to be used to organise community programmes, including cooking classes. A memorandum prepared by Zuleikha Mayat for the Group in January 1994, however, expressed disappointment at the outcome:

> At last we are in a position to assess what programmes can be put up in the activity centre. First the bad news: instead of a cottage and a double-storied building we are left with truncated premises consisting of the Madrassah ground floor and the Jamaat Khana area on the top of our office/cum storeroom/cum consultation room. How did this come about?

That is a long and complicated story, as the Group was forced into sharing the premises with the Islamic Medical Association (IMA) and the Al-Ansaar Trust. The IMA was also looking for premises and in September 1992 the Group met with the IMA and Orient Old Boys and agreed in principle that the Group would enter into a lease with the Sultan Trust, and draw up a separate agreement with the IMA for use of part of the premises. It was also agreed that all the organisations would be involved in raising funds for the refurbishments. The centre would be known as the Mariam Bee Sultan Centre, with the Group's section known as the Women's Cultural Group Activity Centre.[40] While these negotiations were going on, according to Zuleikha Mayat:

> I got there one day and saw the cottage being used [by someone else]… [They were] putting things up and I said, 'What's wrong?' A member of Orient Old Boys was there and he said, 'Oh, they're going to have a madrassah there.' I said, 'But we've taken this on.' He said, 'But how can you do all this and part of [the agreement] was there must be a madrassah around here.' Alright, and [these newcomers were] also doing good work so we allowed that. [And] next thing is they've given the top floor to the IMA!

According to Mayat, AK Lockhat and Solly Suleman persuaded the Group to agree to the scheme 'in the interests of the community'. The Group felt pressured to agree because the Al-Ansaar Trust had lost its tenancy in Essendene Road, where it had been operating a madrassah. In terms of the agreement reached

in 1992, the IMA was to share the upper floor of the building with the Group while the Al-Ansaar Trust would conduct a madrassah and nursery school in the cottage. The Group tried unsuccessfully to secure two rooms of the cottage for an office and a storage room. The Group sub-leased the properties to the IMA and Al-Ansaar Trust on the same basis that it leased them from the Sultan Trust. The IMA could use the premises until the expiry of the lease on 30 June 2017 and in the event of an extension of the lease, for the duration of the extended period. A Group memorandum dated January 1994 explained the complex and complicated negotiations and alluded to the strain that this put on the Group: 'intense pressure was applied on the Women's Cultural Group at meeting after meeting…[Eventually] Mr AK Lockhat, addressing Mrs Z Mayat in particular, his very words: "Bhaboo, I want to ask you a special favour. Please give half your office space to the IMA." With great reluctance, and really just to push the record off the track, where it had got stuck for so long, we agreed. Here the saga of space and areas ended.' As a result of this arrangement, according to Mayat, the Group was left

> with only a fraction of the space that we originally needed. Where are we to store our *Nanima's Chest*, old records for past years which by law we are required to keep (and this occupies an entire filing cabinet plus three large cartons in my garage), our three huge volumes, fifty copies each of the two editions of *Indian Delights*, the brochures, the transparencies and printing plates for *Best of Delights* and *Indian Delights* (and this occupies a large space in my linen room – this is valuable for if they are lost it will cost us something like a hundred thousand rands – not to talk of the months of hard work involved). Members must also remember that whenever we have jumbles and sales, we ask members to keep the stuff and invariably only two or three persons volunteer to do so. I am embarrassed whenever I have to ask Hafsa Mohamedy to keep our stuff for us. We must also remember that we lost a precious set of [stainless steel] pots…[41]

Reflecting on this period, Mayat believes that because the Group had become frustrated by its numerous attempts to find a suitable space, they became beholden to the Orient Old Boys for providing assistance; consequently the 'women's weaknesses were exposed. Instead of standing up we submitted!'

Renovations began in September 1992. The work was onerous, and most of the negotiations over prices and the supervision of the renovations were done by Fatima Mayat, Ayesha Vorajee, Mana Rajah, Ayesha Solwa, Shameema Mayat and Khairunnisa Jazhbhay.[42] Many in the community assisted in various ways, according to Zuleikha Mayat. Mohamed Joosub was helpful with building materials; AK Lockhat and Solly Suleman provided advice and helped to supervise the renovations; Malls Tiles offered tiles at a special rate and contributed financially; Randeree Bros. provided a computer; Khurshid Nadvi an oven casserole set; Honey Bee an electric tava; and on and on went the list. The kitchen was a priority, but the costs remained prohibitive. Fortunately for the Group, Khairunnisa Jhazbhay 'came to the rescue and, with her husband, agreed to do the kitchen. The Group contributed to labour costs.' Dr Yakoob Jhazbhay also donated eighty upholstered chairs; Sabera Timol negotiated with Defy for the purchase of appliances such as fridges, a freezer, hob and oven; Laila Ally and Ayesha Vorajee were to get samples for tablecloths, overlays and aprons; Rabia Haffejee from the Islamic Women's Association donated a freezer; Mana Paruk donated twenty platters; Rabia Osman provided a water cooler; Khurshid Nadvi gave a set of Pyrex dishes; and Razia Haffejee donated a spice container. The involvement of community members in these little ways was crucial in getting the Centre off the ground, and access to such resources has always been significant in the successful implementation of the Group's many ventures.

Nafisa Mayat was appointed the first administrator of the Centre, which was officially opened on 11 June 1993 to coincide with the Group's 40th anniversary as well as the Eid Milan. In her speech marking the opening of the Centre, Mayat expressed gratitude to benefactors and friends, and a hope that the new space would benefit the new South African society that was coming into being with the end of apartheid:

> From the activities of the organisations housed in this complex, we hope to see to the needs of not only the Ummah but also that of all others who share this lovely country with us. May our joint activities help towards maintaining the peace and stability that we all crave for. We are living through historical times. Let us all help towards forging a just and compassionate future.

The current Centre is not the envisioned haven of early dreamers, but it provides a practical meeting space and facilities for many activities.

When the Centre was completed, cooking classes took priority among the other activities that had been planned. Zohra Moosa, Laila Ally, Hafeza Paruk and Fatima Mayat were tasked with organising five six-week courses for the first year:

- For beginners: starting from how to cut, wash and prepare meat and vegetables for cooking, simple curries and rice dishes, simple savouries, sweets, breads and basic baking.
- Domestics: similar to beginners but oriented towards basic rice and curry dishes, how to look over things on stove or in the oven, breakfast dishes, sandwich fillings.
- Adults: planned menus revolving around dhal and rice; kitchdi and khudi; biryani; rotis and curries; breads and curries; savouries and sweets.
- Advanced: mithais, savouries, pickles, sweets, baking of breads, cakes, etc.
- Specialised: Chinese cooking; Italian, Eid menus; Diwali menus; embroidery; batik handcraft, etc.[43]

In recent years, cooking classes have become less regular, held only upon request. Reliance on volunteers is one reason for this, as Zuleikha Mayat explained:

> It's working with voluntary helpers all the time. Sometimes you arrange a class and that particular person who was going to do [the demonstration] is not available and then she phones one of the other members and says, 'Look, I can't take it up now', so then you cancel the whole class. So unless we have a full-time person we will not be able to do that. But what we are doing at the moment – a lot of [groups] have sent batch[es] of women to be taught, so they come and we teach them.

But long-time member Fatima Patel, who conducted many cooking classes in the 1980s, points to a deeper reason – cultural changes in attitudes towards cooking – for the classes being irregular:

> Oh, we really enjoyed teaching, especially with the kids, we really enjoyed that but nowadays the kids don't want to come for classes. We tried last year [2008]. We, you know, put a feeler through the community. The kids say no, they like to eat out and they don't like cooking. The trends have changed now. There's very few of them that want to learn because this eating out business has really got into them. Even when we had the classes, the young girls would say, 'Oh, we came because our parents told us we must come, but when I get married I'll just eat out', you know, that concept many have got in them. The trend has completely changed now with this new generation of children.

The Centre is now used for the Group's monthly meetings and other administrative tasks. The hall is home to things such as Tae Bo classes for women and karate classes for underprivileged children. The kitchen is used for testing foods, occasionally for cooking demonstrations and fundraising breakfasts, or for preparing part of the menu for fundraising dinners. It is also a venue for the lectures that are periodically organised around relevant contemporary issues. While tensions between the Al-Ansaar Trust and Women's Cultural Group have occasionally flared up over space, this has largely been resolved 'behind the scenes'. As Vorajee wrote to the Al-Ansaar Trust on 17 October 2002, 'Our two organisations are, rightly or wrongly, regarded as role models in the community and we will be judged harshly if we inflame matters and get involved in ugly spats instead of displaying leadership qualities.' Overall, Group members believe that much positive has come out of the Centre. Ayesha Vorajee reflected

The Centre's main hall (with a kitchen behind a removable panel) is the venue for luncheons, launches, dinners, lectures and meetings. Delectable food, beautifully presented, features on the agenda of every monthly meeting so that members can relax together and enjoy the fruits of their own skill and talent.

on this in a letter dated 17 October 2002 to the trustees of the Mariam Bee Sultan Charitable Trust: 'We have with the assistance of the Islamic Medical Association and Al-Ansaar Trust "resurrected" the Mariam Bee Sultan Centre, from which so much valuable work is being done…The Centre has become [a place], which all those actively involved and the Muslim community at large, can be proud of.'

Looking back

In the 1990s, the letterhead of the Women's Cultural Group bore the slogan 'Activity centre for all your needs as a woman'. Yet, in the end the Group settled for less than they had envisioned two decades earlier. They did not get

the grand activity centre that they had had in mind, but a shadow of it; and it took a lot longer to achieve their dream than they had anticipated. Zuleikha Mayat is adamant that this delay was not due to a lack of ambition or effort on the part of members, but that the men, upon whose patronage they were sometimes forced to depend, did not believe that women were capable of running a centre of this magnitude and scale. She emphasises one single fact that played a huge role in stymieing their ambitions: the lack of resources.

> If Al Baraka [Bank] had been in operation at the time, we would have had our Centre and it would have been as successful as the Al-Ansaar is.[44] They and others have used Al Baraka money to put up their structures. At that time there was nobody who was going to give us that money. It was all just us collecting and I told you we said we were prepared to give the land plus half a million rands but we wanted men to come in with at least a million or two. We didn't get that support at all.

The failure to recruit committed and enthusiastic younger members has also been a contributory factor. As Nafisa Jeewa points out, enthusiastic younger members may not share the same sense of desire or need for the kinds of spaces and activities that a centre could offer, and therefore did not 'work in that direction…When younger members – when young girls join a group, their ideas of life [are] different.' This generational change was crucial in dampening enthusiasm for a centre. Also important is that the role of husbands within families has changed. Whereas previously most husbands spent their weekends attending sports matches or playing sport, or simply being with 'the boys', it is apparent that husbands are increasingly spending time with their families. Aside from men playing a more active role in childrearing, restaurants across the city are usually full on weekends as families dine out. Hundreds of couples can be seen at the promenade on the Durban beachfront on Sunday mornings, while the shopping malls bristle with Muslim families on Sunday afternoons. This is as much a social outing as a necessary shopping expedition, and points to changing family dynamics, which have reduced the need for a social outlet for women. Older members' commitments have also changed. Their enthusiasm and energy levels have wavered as outside commitments (to their grandchildren, for example) have increased. An additional factor is that with the end of apartheid many more

Zuleikha Mayat has seen the talents of Group members blossom over many decades.

facilities, once the exclusive preserve of whites, are now open to Indians. Many Muslims, including women, have joined local gyms that opened in the early 1990s as well as the 'women only' gyms that have sprung up in recent years. Together, these changes made a grand Activity Centre superfluous.

Has Zuleikha Mayat any regrets about their Centre? 'No, no, no, no, we have done our thing, others have come into the scene, there's place – space for everybody. As long as the community work is on, that's fine.'