

A cultural shopping spree for better future...

By ERIKA COETZEE

WHAT kind of city can Cape Town become in the years ahead? How does a city with such deep divisions and inequalities become a more democratic and inclusive home for all its people? What is important to its inhabitants? How can they become part of the process of transition and how will it impact on their everyday lives?

Many of the programmes run by Idasa's Western Cape office during 1992 sought to address questions such as these. Events initiated around this theme tended to be very technical and...well...serious, attended by participants in conservative suits who quite freely used expressions such as 'metropolitanisation', 'discretionary revenue' and 'the regressive impact of user charges'.

Yet these questions were also explored over a five-day period by a group of effervescent young people from around the Peninsula. Taking part in an educational and creative programme hosted in conjunction with the Arts Foundation around 'symbols for a Democratic Cape Town', they brought with them an array of multi-coloured tackies, beads and t-shirts, fresh ideas, open hearts, a great deal of talent, enthusiasm and humour.

They set about addressing the complexities of democracy and transition by investigating what people in and around Cape Town thought about the city and the future, how they lived and how they gave meaning to their lives.

The first half of the programme focused on information-gathering in the form of something like a cultural shopping spree. The young people scouted the city collecting new experiences, insights, recurring patterns, interesting logos, colours, stories, faces and perspectives. They searched out statues and relief works on buildings, commercial trademarks on shopfronts and shopping bags, murals on bus stops and walls. They became cultural consumers and found that Cape Town was not simply an old-style department store with goods neatly displayed in separate categories. It could also resemble a flea-market jumble sale where you scratched.

At an advertising agency they examined the use of symbols in the production of media images and messages. On Robben Island, ex-political prisoner Lionel Davies led the young explorers on a mental journey through the corners of prison life and the memories that inhabit this symbolic location of resistance and solidarity. In a Langa hostel, they met a herbalist who let them in on the deep secrets of pain, ill-luck and



Cultural shoppers: footsore in downtown Cape Town.

Peter Bouman

healing. In Harare, Khayelitsha they saw symbols used to communicate political allegiance and services offered on walls and spaza shop signs; they encountered the second life of trademarks on wrappers and packets, used as wall paper in shacks.

After two days of non-stop shopping their minds began to roam the exciting prospects of the creative work that lay ahead. They could choose from three art forms – mural painting, sculpture or graphic design – to express something about the city, the symbols they had seen and also what the city itself symbolised.

A powerful logo for the city, a lively mural and a diverse range of sculptures were among works produced. These are on display at the Arts Foundation (021) 253977.

Erika Coetzee is a regional co-ordinator in Idasa's Western Cape office.

Some ideas on symbols

A concise booklet which illustrates the functions of symbols in political and social life is now available from Idasa.

An introduction on the meaning and characteristics of symbols is followed by sections on symbols and conflict, the political dimension of symbols, and symbols and democracy. It concludes with an examination of current and historic symbols from the city of Cape Town.

The booklet has been compiled by Erika Coetzee of Idasa's Western Cape office and may be ordered from the Media Department at (021) 473127 or 1 Penzance Rd, Mowbray 7700.