

Does our history inform the shaping of our democracy today?

Yes it does as modelled in the street re-naming , e.g Schoeman to Frances Baard

Historians have an ethical obligation to be humane, accurate and astute in the writing of history. They should be in the forefront of mobilising in the actual practice of history. The public owns the past. Public History is seen and read by large numbers of people. It is designed mostly for a mass audience. It seeks to promote politically self-conscious community based histories that are open to all and are usable in socio-economic, political and environmental struggles.

Street and place naming also map the historical and political landscape of our country. This is part of the new national historiography. It engraves the historical consciousness of South Africans who encounter these national markers (streets and places) in their daily lives.

A law Professor - Mia Swart, from UJ asserts that SA is still a nation under reconstruction. Name changing contributes to the forming of her national identity and collective moral frameworks. There is therefore a historical necessity for renaming. This should be understood and accepted both as a reflection of cultural and political transition – consistent with South Africa’s constitutional and international legal obligations.

Name changing serves several functions which range from

- Constituting a form of symbolic reparation for gross human rights abuse. This assists in restoring dignity and public recognition of victims or survivors of injustice
- Constructing a politicised version of history;
- Serving as a mechanism for transitional justice.
- Serving as a vehicle for commemoration;

The famous researcher of environmental studies, Azaryahu Maoz, believes that commemorating street naming “conflate history and geography and merge the past people commemorate into ordinary setting of human life. Embedded into language, people are active participants in the construction of their social reality. “

The re-naming of Schoeman to Frances Baard Street, was accordingly a continuation of transformation of the physical environment of this country. It was laying a claim to something more authentic, democratic, non-sexist and non- racial.

The naming of a street for Frances Baard is part of a larger movement for South Africa – to affirm the historical importance of the black majority citizens who challenged traditional white dominated conceptions of the past that frequently ignore their contributions.

Who was Frances Baard?

She was part of the Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape and the broader South African “mixed bag” where the rich, the poor, the educated, the illiterate, as blacks, Indians, coloureds and whites – all of these activists believed that they were representing the interests of the same people, the oppressed and the exploited.

She was never a passive victim of repression. She was important to all formations that fought the injustice of apartheid. She was part of the political, labour, women movements of her time. That is why she should be visible to everyone in this country. Her memory should transcend traditional racial, sexist and economic boundaries.

Frances Baard – sends a message that expresses

- the womb of the nation
- a place where something special was conceived,
- someone who was warm, sheltering, encompassing, protective of humanity.

It is therefore befitting to bring significant public attention to the historical contribution of Frances Baard, It is fitting that such a heroine and veteran of the South African struggle should leave posterity with a record of her life and experience. Her memory assists survivors of gross human rights violations to heal. Her memory also goes a long way to assist the previously divided society to reconcile.

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Thembeke Mufamadi