



Greenmarket Square



CITY OF CAPE TOWN | ISIXEKO SASEKAPA | STAD KAAPSTAD

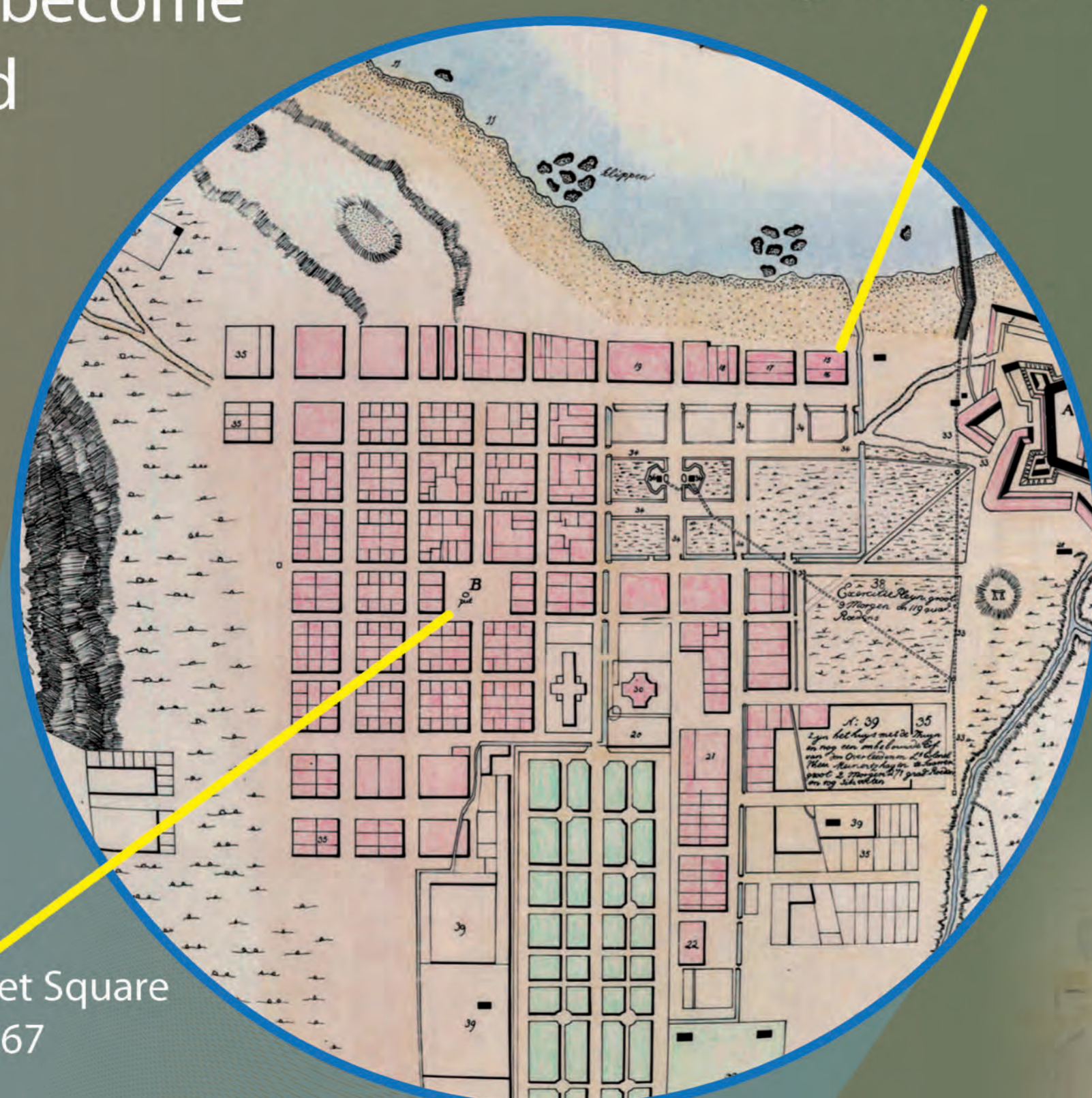
THIS CITY WORKS FOR YOU

The vibrant heart of Cape Town for over 300 years

In 1696, visiting Commissioner Daniel Heyns granted Governor Simon van der Stel permission to move the 'Burgher Watch' or police force, from their quarters in the Meat Store (on the shore near the Castle) to a new building more central to the residential, western side, of the growing town. Then in 1710, the Burgher Council took the decision to add two adjoining erven to create the *Plijn voor 't Waghuis* (plain before the Watch House) as a public gathering place. Thus the future Greenmarket Square was established to become

Cape Town and South Africa's, second oldest public open space, after the Grand Parade.

The location of the VOC Meat Store and original Burgher Watch House



Greenmarket Square
c. 1767



The central location of the square made it the ideal place for farmers to deliver their fresh produce for sale to the surrounding urban community. So in time this 'plain before the Watch House' came to be increasingly known as the *Groente Markt* or Greenmarket Square.

The picture by Sir Charles D'oly (above) captures the square as it appeared in 1832 as the bustling hub of activity it remains to the present day. Here one found farmers, travellers, Khoekhoen, free blacks and slaves Company officials and slave-holders - haggling with hawkers, fishmongers and other street-traders. Many of the informal traders here were slaves who earned enough to not only pay what their owners demanded for this allowance but also something for themselves.

Often referred to dismissively as 'coolie' *geld* (money) it was none the less sufficient for a growing number of these enterprising individuals to purchase their freedom and in many cases, that of their loved ones as well.

The original Burgher Watch House was a thatched, single-storeyed building and very similar in design to the one on the square seen in the adjoining pictures. As the century wore on it fell into disrepair and in 1755 made way for the much grander, flat-roofed and double-storeyed, Townhouse.



Greenmarket Square and the Old Stadhuis (Townhouse) by H. C. De Meillon c. 1830.
Courtesy: Brenthurst Press

The building remains one of Cape Town's most cherished historical buildings and in many ways reflects in its design the social milieu of the Cape by the mid-Eighteenth Century. At this time there were more slaves than free people at the Cape and fear of a slave uprising was ever present. In 1736 fugitive slaves set fire to thatch-roofed buildings on the edge of town and from which the flames quickly jumped - one to the next. Following this disaster the VOC resolved that all Company buildings in the future would have more fire-resistant flat roofs and the Townhouse was one of the first. Notice the Baroque, 'Rococo' style, ornamental mouldings and decorations in vogue at this time and in particular, the drip mouldings over the windows crafted by skilled slave artisans. This building later became Cape Town's first *Stadhuis* or City Hall and today serves as an Iziko museum housing the Michaelis Collection of Dutch and Flemish Old Master paintings

Also featured in the pictures above is a large stone structure which marks the place of an early well on the Square and later a swaai or swing pump. Fetching water from sources such as this was a daily chore for household slaves and these became popular gathering places where slaves could enjoy an all too brief respite from their household duties and acquaintances, renewed.

The adjacent modern water feature and fountain was designed to reflect this historic focal point of Greenmarket Square. The water flowing from this feature is perfectly safe to drink and we invite you to fill your water bottles with the same fresh, clean water that made Cape Town the port-of-call of choice along this coast for centuries.



Informal traders on Greenmarket Square painted by Charles Bell around 1860. The above 'Cape Malay' vendors are selling small grilled mutton steaks known as *carbonatjies* and other delicacies.
Courtesy: Bell Heritage Trust Collection - University of Cape Town



The 10 Years of a Democratic South Africa celebration, held on Greenmarket Square - February 7, 2004
Photos: Bruce Sutherland City of Cape Town

