

Museums, sustainability and memories of apartheid

Talk delivered on the occasion of International Museums Day at the McGregor Museum, Kimberley, 19 May 2008.

Leslie Witz, History Department, University of the Western Cape.

Thank you for inviting me to give this talk on International Museums Day. It is perhaps appropriate that I am giving this talk here for it was ten years ago that I together Martin Legassick, Ciraj Rassool, Michael Abrahams and Gary Minkley visited the McGregor Museum to assist with its new exhibition entitled *Frontiers*. The aim of the exhibition was to construct a racially inclusive past of the people of the Northern Cape and Martin Legassick, as the expert in the history of the northern Cape, had been called in as the historical adviser. He brought the rest of us along because our interest and research in public history. Our concern was with the ways that histories were presented and represented in the public domain. Going back to my notes for the talk that we gave I see that we made two major points. The first was that there must be much closer alignment between the designers and researchers, and that exhibition designers are more than visual functionaries following the historian's script. Secondly we challenged the museum to break down the classificatory division that existed between the exhibitionary and ethnographic work of the Duggan Cronin Gallery and the historical work of the former Sanatorium building of the Macgregor Museum.

I want to start my talk today with that visit not to reflect on what has happened at the McGregor Museum since then, but to mark it, with some hindsight, as a significant moment in what was happening with museums in South Africa. I think there have been two important developments in the world of South African museums. Firstly, the McGregor Museum, along with many other

museums, was perhaps for the first time being placed in a position of having to develop its own collections and exhibitions in an inclusive manner. Many of the older museums, developed during the days of apartheid and before have since then added elements to their displays in their attempts to transform in accordance with the new political dispensation, to represent newer concerns and attract wider audiences (although admittedly there are some museums that have remained static and are almost relics of the past). Secondly, there has been a flourishing of new museums. Many that would fit into the category of what Paul Williams has called the ‘memorial museum’. These are museums that usually use a specific site of repression and/or torture and/or massacres to evoke memories of suffering in the past. They are explicitly political, provide historical interpretations within a ‘moral framework’ and their defining characteristic is that they ‘function as a memorial’.¹ Their collections are typically small and their greatest assets are ‘the stories entrusted to them and the confidence imparted to them by survivors, family members, and their descendants, who use them as both spaces of private mourning and public memory’.²

For this talk I started to make a list of the new museums which have been specifically constructed with the intention of displaying, recollecting and educating about aspects of the violence and suffering of the system of apartheid. Most obviously there is the Apartheid Museum adjacent to Gold Reef City Casino in Johannesburg that seeks to provide an all-embracing socio-political narrative of South Africa by focusing on the period from 1948 to 1994. Others plot specific aspects of apartheid: the District Six Museum, the Cato Manor Heritage Centre, the Sophiatown Museum and the South End Museum, in Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth respectively, draw attention to forced removals; the Cata Museum focuses on the

¹ Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 8.

² Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 184.

operation of apartheid in rural ‘homelands’ of the Eastern Cape; the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum and the Kwa Muhle branch of the Durban Local History Museum tell about the culture and control of migrant workers; the Red Location Museum in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, the Hector Petersen Museum and Freedom Charter Museum in Soweto emphasise anti-apartheid struggles; the museum at the old Johannesburg Fort, adjacent to the new Constitutional Court, highlights the harshness and brutality of imprisonment; new national museums like the Nelson Mandela Museum in Umtata, Qunu and Mfeko, the Luthuli Museum in Groutville, the Robben Island Museum in Cape Town and Freedom Park in Pretoria are built around a narratives of repression and resistance. This is my list so far and I am sure there are more to be added – the other day I heard of the museum that recalls the pass resistance and the massacre at Sharpeville, and there has been a lot of discussion about a Crossroads museums in Cape Town – but the key point is that in all of these institutions apartheid is consigned to the museum as an era that has passed and as a deliberate strategy of remembering.

For the purpose of this talk I want to refer to these changes in older museums and the flourishing of memorial museums as an almost compulsive museumizing that has taken place in post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, given the priorities of post-apartheid South Africa – employment, health, housing and education – it must be considered extraordinary that such an expansion has taken place. I know museums continually complain about the lack of funds to develop displays, maintain collections and run educational programmes, yet even within these limited budgets I maintain that it would not be inaccurate to assert that there has been a boom in the museum sector.

Why has this occurred? I want to suggest it can be summed up in the theme of international museum day this year: Museums: Agents of social change and development. And I want to use development in the very broadest sense of the term, and not merely to refer to its usual usage in the domain of economics. In post-apartheid South Africa museums have presented the possibility of changes in the domain of visualizing a new, more inclusive society. This, of course, was historically the reason for the growth of the public museum in the nineteenth century alongside the nation state. By drawing upon notions of the museum as a domain of public education and citizenship, museums could potentially help ‘form a new public and inscribe it in new relations of sight and vision’.³ So, museums were part of creating in the nineteenth century a nationalized self-disciplined public citizenry. Of course, in late twentieth and early twenty-first century South Africa the idea of creating a nationalized public citizenry has been one of the foremost projects of the post-apartheid state. And museums, through their displays, collections, and activities, have been key institutions that have actually sought to construct this citizenry. There is of course a tension here between constructing a nationalized citizenry and ideas of democratic participation that is supposedly the hallmark of post-apartheid South Africa. I want to suggest that the most effective museums have been those which have challenged, questioned and opened to debate the limits and frameworks of the new national citizenry rather than merely sought to reflect it. For me this is far more effective development in that it creates more than a public citizen who is part of the nation, but a critically engaged citizen who constantly questions and queries the nation and its underlying assumptions.

The second way one can think of development in relation to museums is in much more conventional terms as the bearer of structural economic change. Recalling my days as an

³Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 73.

economic historian the point was constantly made by our lecturers about the difference between growth and development. The former may be thought of as increasing the volume of trade, income, profits and so on. It may not however lead to development in that few would benefit and the inequalities in society may remain the same or actually be widened. In South Africa the post-apartheid state has adopted a strategy whereby it envisages that growth will lead to development. In such a framework the objectives are defined as increasing productivity, marketing effectively and sustaining long-term growth in order to create jobs and alleviate poverty. Whether this is effective or not has been the matter of considerable debate. But if we take it as the policy being pursued then museums are potentially one of the sites or, as economists would say, nodes of development. This is not because they would employ large numbers of people but they could potentially become major tourist attractions and also be at the forefront of cultural led regeneration of cities. The examples of cities like Bilbao in Spain, Newcastle in England, and Lowell in Massachusetts in the USA are constantly cited as examples where museumizing has led to the economic development of the city. Culture is seen as the new engine for development. It is not surprising then that the mission of the Department of Arts and Culture is defined almost entirely as ‘developing the economic potential in the cultural industries.’⁴ For museums the implications are two-fold. On the one hand they are instructed by the Department to ensure ‘effective and efficient use of limited resources,’ undergo a ‘systematic process of restructuring and rationalization’ and subject themselves to ‘performance measures.’⁵ On the other hand their primary role, according to the Department, is to position and market themselves so that they become ‘part of a strategy of branding the Country as a sought-after tourism destination.’⁶

Museums in South Africa, and not only state-funded ones, are increasingly being required to

4 Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, *Annual Report 2001/2002*, 29.

5 Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage*.

6 Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, *Annual Report 2001/2002*, 9

become commercial operations⁷ with international tourism as their core function.

What I want to suggest is that these two notions of development, one that seeks to create a critically engaged public citizen, and the other that wants to use tourism to boost economic development may be at odds with each other. Tourism, as an industry, relies upon sets of images of societies that appear as complete, isolated and closed.⁸ These bounded societies are marked as different in order to make them desirable destinations.⁹ In promoting tourist activity as voyages of discovery and exploration to these enclosed places of difference, the industry draws upon and sustains the image of the colonial enterprise that indeed often paved the way for opening up of 'primitive' and 'exotic' destinations. The promotion of South Africa as a place of exploration, where one encounters wildlife and ethnic indigeneity in comfortable, secure surrounds, the fabled 'World in One Country,' draws precisely upon these metaphors of exploration and uncritically celebrates the development of colonial modernity.¹⁰

Museums in post-apartheid South Africa thus appear to be faced with a set of conflicting demands. They are being urged to brand themselves so as to be incorporated into a tourist package that invokes the colonial journey and at the same time being required to present new histories and discard colonial ones. When tourists are, in the novelist J.M. Coetzee's words, the primary crop to be cultivated,¹¹ it becomes immensely difficult to move away from the colonial

7 Ciraj Rassool, 'Community Museums, Memory Politics and Social Transformation: Histories, Possibilities and Limits', in I Karp, C Kratz, B Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, C Rassool and G Buntinx (eds), *Museums Frictions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

8 Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 176.

9 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 152.

10 See Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz. "'South Africa: A World in One Country': Moments in International Tourist Encounters with Wildlife, the Primitive and the Modern.' *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 143, no. XXXVI-3: 335-371.

11 John M. Coetzee, 'The African Experience', *Preservation*, March/April 2002, 24.

images of South Africa as essentially African place that is the staple of the tourist industry.

I want to show how these tensions operate by referring to the example of a museum where I am the chair of the board, the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, the only township based museum in the Western Cape. Lwandle, from its inception in 1958, consisted entirely of hostel type accommodation for workers who mainly serviced the nearby fruit and canning industry and the surroundings municipalities of Strand, Gordon's Bay and Somerset West. These hostels were only intended for single men and Lwandle was never constructed as a community. The museum emerged out of the scheme in the immediate post-apartheid period to convert hostels into family units, serving as a reminder of a system of migrant labour, single sex hostels and the control of black workers through the identity document which controlled access to employment and residence in urban areas - the infamous pass book.

But from the museum's establishment in 1998 there have been constant struggles over establishing a museum community. There have been pressures from local residents who question the value of a museum when the major imperative is housing and employment. So, when the museum wanted to make use of an old hostel as part of the museum the residents responded: We 'desagree with you about this room to be a messeum. Firstly give us accommodation before you can get this room. Thank you. From room 33'. Secondly, the provincial museum authorities, who largely provide the museum with its funding on an ad-hoc basis, have question its materiality as a museum without holding a substantial collection. Finally, the tourism sector wants to make the Lwandle community an ethnically bounded one (to display 'Xhosa' culture).

Given the way that the migrant labour system was based upon a deliberate use of ethnic categories, the museum rejects apartheid notions of community, where these are based upon racial and/or ethnic identities. Instead it seeks to establish the spatial configuration of Lwandle and all its residents as its immediate community. Alongside the local community the museum was also keen to attract a community of international tourists. One of its first funding applications was sent to the Western Cape Tourism Board, expressing the hope that the museum would become ‘an extremely popular tourist venue.’ Reservations that the museum might have had about using racial and/or ethnic categories were cast aside as the museum presented itself as seeking to depict ‘the life of the local Xhosa people, their past and their present culture’, providing a ‘WHOLE African experience for a tourist ... an opportunity to see glimpses of the past, a comparison with the present, dancing, singing, arts and crafts and a taste of Xhosa cuisine and Fashion’. Placed in an extremely vulnerable position, with little or no possibility of funding on the immediate horizon, the museum, in order to establish itself, found that it ‘had to dance to the tune of tourism.’¹²

One way the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum endeavoured to become a destination is to place itself on a township tour route. Township tours are based on the premise of making the ‘real city’ visible¹³ and there is no doubt that township tour companies and their guides are presenting, through their routes and destinations, parts of the city that stretch beyond the usual scenic sites and historical trails. But in the stories that are presented, the sites that are visited and the routes along which one is guided take one into an almost essentialised Africa, where key stops are the

12 Bongani Mgijima and Vusi Buthelezi, ‘Mapping Museum-Community Relations in Lwandle’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 4 (December 2006), 800.

13 Cape Rainbow Tours, *See The Cape With Colour* (pamphlet), (Cape Town: Cape Rainbow Tours, 2000); Grassroute Tours, *Grassroute Tours Invites You to Have a Look Beyond the Rainbow Curtain* (pamphlet), (Cape Town: Grassroute, 1999).

craft shop, the ‘witch doctor’s store’ and a ‘shack where a few elderly men sit on the floor [and] conversate and drink Mqombotie [sic]’. In this world of tradition the township tour remains an encounter where the west meets the Africa.¹⁴

There is very little place for museums as destinations on these tours. Tourists are sometimes taken to museums but they are generally not located in the townships. These museums usually provide an historical explanation (context) before making the journey across the imagined frontier between the city and the township. The township is being offered as a place of difference. Museums do not fit into this pattern, being cast as places of ‘Europeanness’ instead of an essentialised ‘Africaness’ of almost ahistorical timeless traditions.¹⁵ So, when the Lwandle museum, for instance, endeavoured to offer, a ‘safe guided walk’ through the ‘whole township’ with an excursion through ‘an original historic hostel’ it found that it had to represent itself as an African place. The walk is presented as an opportunity to ‘learn more about the migrant labour system (1958-1994).’¹⁶ But this legacy of repression under apartheid is placed within an internationalised tourist representation of traditional Africa as a place of essentialised ethnic rhythms, tastes, and crafts. The result is that the intention to portray the political and economic history of migrancy ‘slips almost magically’ into tourist expectation of ‘authentic Africa’, where migrant histories might be exoticised to fit in with the tourist expectations long conditioned by histories of travel.¹⁷ As with other township tours, the tavern, the homes and the crèche become destinations on the walk. On its promotional material the museum included images of ‘traditional

14 ‘Life in Transit in Makeshift Housing: Khayelitsha,’ *EventMagazine: The Exclusive Guide to Cape Town*, February 1998, p 7.

15 Leslie Witz, ‘Museums on Cape Town’s township tours’, in N Murray, N Shepherd and M Hall (eds), *Desire Lines*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 259-275.

16 Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, *Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum and Arts and Crafts Centre* (pamphlet), (Cape Town: Lwandle Museum, 2000).

17 Mgijima and Buthelezi, ‘Mapping Museum’, 805.

dress', claiming that it is a site of 'cultural activities' and offering, among other items, 'beadwork and other locally produced souvenirs'.¹⁸

Another set of pressures to depict Lwandle as an ethnic African place has come from within the several quarters of the museum sector. This is expressed in the following terms: the museum should show where the people of Lwandle are from. The museum responded to this pressure in an unexpected way through the development of new permanent exhibition. *Imbali zeKhaya - Stories of Home*, which opened in October 2005. Drawing upon the heritage preservation work of the museum, particularly interviews that were carried out by museum staff, the exhibition depicts the ambiguity and meanings attached to the concept of home by the residents of Lwandle. These are stories that tell about how Lwandle is not considered a home by some but merely a place of work. For others it is a permanent home where they want to be buried. Others still consider Lwandle as one of two (or maybe even three homes). Home, as it appears in the exhibition, is most definitely not a reference to a designated ethnic rural space where the planners of apartheid sought to place the migrant worker. The exhibition thus narrates, visually and textually, the stories of the people who live in Lwandle today and their experiences in the hostels. It tells about their homes in the Eastern Cape and in Lwandle. It ends with a somewhat triumphalist assertion about how what was once intended only as a place for male migrant workers has been turned into a community with its own museum.

The key issue for the Lwandle museum of how to locate itself within the international tourist image economy still remains. On the one hand the museum has embarked upon projects that seek to develop new notions of a public citizenry through the construction of a new set of public

¹⁸ Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, *Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum and Arts and Crafts Centre* (pamphlet).

pasts. In addition to the new exhibition described above a photographic exhibition entitled the ‘Transported of kwaNdebele’ by the world-renowned photographer David Goldblatt positions Lwandle within the broader history of migrant labour in South Africa. Activities were organized around Women’s Day in August where women were asked to decorate the last remaining hostel with memorabilia and to narrate their stories of their encounters with the pass laws. An art competition and oral history program was developed in collaboration with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. Young people drawn from Lwandle were trained in the techniques of drawing and asked to produce paintings depicting migrancy. As a result of this project these drawings now form part of the museum’s exhibition entitled ‘Migrancy and Belonging’. The museum also has a schools ambassador programme together with the District Six Museum where local school learners are trained to become museum guides.

At the same time the museum must also engage with international tourists and aspire to locate itself as a unique destination on routes into the past. This is even more the case when the provincial museum authorities are saying to the museum it must become sustainable. This is almost an impossibility – there are very, very few museums throughout the world that are sustainable. And those that are generally have the backing of large corporates or have a substantial endowment. For Lwandle the prospects of either of these are not imminent. So, it has to place its hopes in becoming a tourist site and although it keeps to the well-worn township tour routes it also attempts to represent its tourist activities as transformative tourism.¹⁹ Thus an important part of the tour organised by the museum is a visit to peoples’ homes, not to see and gaze upon people, but to talk with and hear stories about their lives and histories. Also, it has

¹⁹ The museum derives this notion from its collaboration with Frank Kronenberg who was initially working for Ishabi Tourism. See www.ishabi.com for more details. He subsequently moved on to co-found Shades of Black Productions.

tentatively started making steps in organising specific events that will link people through cultural associations rather than depicting stereotypes. The first of these, an international football match between Killersters United ‘from one of the poorest areas of Dublin’ and TK Lions from Lwandle took place in February 2008. A report on the event indicated that ‘the results were magical. 25 working class Irish blokes see reflections of themselves in the faces and places of an African township half a world away’. Here, the report maintained was ‘the possibility to go elsewhere and come back different -- kinder, humbler, more connected, more grounded in your own identity because of what you've shared with others’.²⁰ Similar events are in the offing as the museum seeks not just to assist in changing the ownership structures of the tourist industry (still dominated by operators who were designated as ‘white’ under apartheid), or to create jobs for those associated with the tourist product, but also to alter what has become the foundational narrative of the ‘township tour’.

The Lwandle museum therefore constantly has to mediate the pasts it collects, presents and represents in order to place itself as a museum that both memorialises the life of migrant labourers and also seeks to attract tourists. Its primary objective is to be an apartheid museum. It wants to use artefacts and memories to, ‘commemorate migrancy and hostel life in South Africa’, ‘research, record and reveal the history of migrant workers in South Africa’, ‘serve as a center of education’, ‘give a space for debate and cultural performances’ and ‘trigger heritage consciousness within the community and beyond’.²¹ But the museum also desperately wants to promote Lwandle as a tourist attraction. It envisages that tourism generated by the museum will provide jobs, lead to the regeneration of the community, and mobilize human resources away

20 Kurt Ackermann, ‘Lwandle Magic: Township Soccer and Tourism’, <http://afrikatourism.blogspot.com>, accessed 11 February 2008

21 Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, ‘Proposal For Funding Our 2010 Community –Based Heritage Tourism Legacy Trail Phase 1’, 12 February 2008; Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, ‘Business Plan’, 16 March 2005.

from debilitating effects of ‘criminality, gangsterism, drugs and prostitution’.²²

While these are noble objectives the ever-present danger for the museum is that it may become a ‘safe haven’ for a ‘marketing a troubled history that glorifies colonial adventure and a repudiated anthropology of primitivism’.²³ This becomes even more alluring when South Africa’s National Heritage Council presents a public profile that highlights markers of ethnicity as representing the ‘challenges of transformation’ in the museum and heritage sector. It is not that depictions of tribe and ethnicity are, according to the *South African Heritage Magazine*, themselves to be challenged. On the contrary, they are constantly reaffirmed and are represented on the front cover of the magazine as semi-naked young men and women, in so-called ‘traditional’ outfits, performing and bearing pots in what seems to be a rural setting. This is the image of ‘tribes’ that has been at the forefront of South African tourist depictions since at least the 1920s and is now being re-packaged as ‘language, culture, traditions, societal values, indigenous knowledge and the philosophy of Ubuntu’.²⁴ The struggle of the Lwandle Museum is to make itself into a ‘Destination Culture’²⁵ through memorialising apartheid, provoking visitors and questioning assumptions rather than providing the pre-determined ‘exotic’ place of difference that the tourist industry and several heritage authorities have persistently called out for. Ultimately the ongoing question over the museum’s future is the essence of the struggle for development: how to construct an institution that strives to create a questioning public citizenry by recalling the memories of apartheid, while at the same time being constrained by the cultural and structural legacies of the system that established Lwandle in 1958.

22 Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, ‘Proposal For Funding Our 2010 Community –Based Heritage Tourism Legacy Trail Phase 1’, 12 February 2008.

23 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 136.

24 Sonwabile Mancotywa, ‘Message from the office of the CEO’, *South African Heritage Magazine*, Summer 2007/8, 3

25 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*.

If following Henrietta Lidchi, one then sees museums, like Lwandle, not as simply dealing 'solely with objects, but more importantly, with ... ideas - notions of what the world is or should be'²⁶, then for museums to position themselves as agents of development they need to think of themselves not as institutions that reflect or mirror society. More consciously they need to be seen as sites of representation that are integral to making pasts, envisaging futures and creating an engaged questioning public citizenry. I want to end off on a story that perhaps indicates that museums may inadvertently become sites of development. Over the past few months I have been teaching first year history students and a few weeks ago one of them came into my office seeking advice on an essay she was writing. She is also an estate agent. She saw a pamphlet on the Lwandle museum on my desk and said, "I know Lwandle very well. I sell property and houses there. There is a great demand for property in Lwandle because of 2010' I could hardly believe it but she reassured me this was the case. She then asked if she could take the museum brochure and I said 'of course'. She said she wanted the brochure because it would help her to sell houses in Lwandle. Once people knew there was a museum in Lwandle the housing prices would increase. So the museum in Lwandle has quite unknowingly contributed to social change.

26 Henrietta Lidchi, 'The poetics and politics of exhibiting other cultures', in Stuart Hall (ed), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997),160