

Heritage and Memory in Cape Town: Writing a database for Cape Town's Memory Project

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Where text is absent, the history of (African) oral societies is constructed from found and sourced objects, artefacts, implements, ruins and so on.'
Joachim Schönfeldt¹

On 11 June 2005, the City of Cape Town in cooperation with the Cape Town-based Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) organised a public manifestation to celebrate the city's heritage and memory. The City Hall was decorated for this occasion with living art works symbolising elements representing South Africa's history. At 2 pm about 150 people gathered in the central room where they were seated in front of a stage with a comfortable couch on it and above it a giant television screen. After entering the City Hall via the side entrance on Adderley Street, and writing down their contact details, the guests were handed a 'This City Works For You' map. In this they found a range of documents: a program, an overview of all the memory-related projects and organisations in Cape Town, a list with sector coordinators – persons who had agreed on coordinating "the various sector[s] or interests groups of the Memory Project", and a Draft Statement of Intent. The program set out that the participants were to listen to speeches by honourable figures in South Africa's reconciliation process, such as Dr. Charles Villa-Vicencio, Zubeida Jaffer and Judge Albie Sachs. Between presentations the guests would be briefed on "the work done to date", they could engage in a "sharing of experiences" and were asked to discuss the proposed Statement of Intent.²

The draft began:

We, the undersigned individuals and organizations commit ourselves to working together to ensure that the memory of injustice and oppression in our City and the contribution of so many to freedom and justice are reflected in the life of the City in a manner so as to reinforce reconciliation, solidarity, democratic values and civic commitment.³

In describing the work the City had carried out up until then for its citizens, a representative of the Heritage Resources Section (HRS) gave an overview of the City's current Heritage projects. During the afternoon, the initiators of the Memory Project and the City's heritage branch invited the public to reflect on the future of the celebration of memory, history and heritage in Cape Town. According to the IJR website the guests were invited to discuss the following problem: "Cape Town's public spaces do not reflect the experiences of the range of communities that live here. The dominant memorials and architecture tell the story of British and Dutch life at the Cape. How will the experiences of other communities become part of the public life of the city?"⁴ As part of the intense internship that I undertook at the City of Cape Town's Heritage Resources Section, in the period from 17 February until 11 June 2005, I was actively involved in the organisation of this Memory Project.

In August 2005, about two months after I had finished my internship at the HRS, I walked through the Gallery of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, and enjoyed an exhibition titled ‘The model man: The hero of his own drama’. This exhibition consisted of illustrations and texts by Johan Schönfeldt and Ivan Vladislavic, presenting iconographic images and an accompanying story line. Rather than the normal procedure, in this exhibition the narrative was written *after* the images were made. I was intrigued by the idea, as articulated in the exhibition brochure, of objects as “augmentation to speech” and Schönfeldt’s remark that the history of African oral societies is constructed from objects. I find his question, “In speech, when does a speaker revert to visuals?” very insightful for describing my early fascination with the Memory Project.⁵

Six months earlier, I had taken the lift up to the sixteenth floor of Cape Town’s Civic Centre looking for the City’s Department of Urban Design. After explaining to several people my interests in questions of identity, heritage and development, I was offered to be involved in an “exciting new project” requested by the Mayor’s office, called the Memory Project. That day I left the Civic Centre with the constituting document for this project, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the City of Cape Town and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO).

This three-page document introduced the Memory Project as follows:

The celebration of the first decade of democracy provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the contributions and sacrifices of residents of this City in securing our freedom from oppression.

Currently the symbolic aspects of our environment from street names to public spaces and public buildings to memorials almost exclusively reflect the colonial and apartheid past. There is very little expression of our democratic values in this symbolic life. The City is committed to engaging with our citizens to find ways in which our public space, the physical environment and the cultural life of our City can better reflect this.

It is against this background that the institute for Justice and Reconciliation and the City of Cape Town agree to establish a partnership to convene a participative and inclusive process to identify and plan a set of projects that would help commemorate the role and sacrifice of our residents for freedom.⁶

Thus, as part of the celebration of ten years of South African democracy, these two parties endeavoured to transform the ‘symbols’ in Cape Town’s public space, physical environment, and cultural life. In reading the text, I was struck by the absence of historical analysis or reflection (besides a single sentence in the introduction referring to the colonial and apartheid past), and by the fact that the authors of this document had not used notions such as identity, culture, or heritage. The City and the IJR seemed to attempt to create memory objects without a narrative. Under “the purpose of partnership”, I read that the City and the IJR also aimed to promote, “a deeper sense of reconciliation and common understanding amongst all citizens”, and a “strong culture of civic engagement and participation in the City based on [...] recognising our history of struggle.”

Furthermore, the document outlined that the scope of the process should cover at least the following areas:

- The creation of a City memorial to the struggle and those who participated and sacrificed;
- Supporting community initiatives to acknowledge the contributions of individuals, organisation and communities to the struggle for freedom;
- Establishing a struggle route as a way of supporting community initiatives and creating awareness;
- Approaches to street, place and public building renaming;
- Ways of using city facilities and programs to deepen our memory of the struggle for freedom including libraries, social development programs and so on.⁷

In the process of the organisation of the Memory Project, the City and the IJR envisaged working on a draft policy on memorials, public places and buildings, and street names. According to the MOU, this would include an extensive public participation process: “A wide range of stakeholders (local, provincial and national government; NGOs and CBOs; religious communities, families and tertiary institutions, and so on) will be invited to participate in the dialogue and visioning process.” In addition, the initiators focused their work on “giving voice to victims of oppression” and on “creating opportunities for participation of marginal groups”.⁸

Although there was a lack of in-depth analysis in this document, I saw in this last sentence an aspiration to think through the transformation of Cape Town’s public spaces in new, more inclusive ways. Moreover, the desire, as transpiring from this document, to create new icons in the City’s social environment fascinated me. Therefore, in answering Schönfeldt’s question, it is perhaps possible to say that the City of Cape Town reverts to and constructs visuals when in the absence of a coherent narrative.

On 17 March, during the first meeting of the working group of the Memory Project, I learned about the vast ambitions of the initiative-takers. The Memory project was to cover not only existing and new projects and programs of the HRS related to the memory of slavery, colonialism and apartheid; a major part of the discussion was about a plan to develop a so-called ‘Mothership Project’, what one could call an ‘icon building’, comparable with the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg or the Guggenheim in Bilbao. The City’s urban designers had their sketches and plans ready – possible places for this new construction were the Foreshore area or the Riebeeck square, but their favourite location was the Athlone Power Plant. The designers envisaged that this building would be a new central space for commemoration, cultural creativity and commercial activity in Cape Town.

As part of this project, I was asked to write a database with all the organizations and projects on heritage and memory in the Cape Town metropolitan area. The representatives of these organisations constituted the public during the debate in the City Hall. They were the participants in the process aimed at writing a coherent narrative concerning Cape Town’s symbolic environment.

¹ Joachim Schönfeldt, 'Illustrating the unwritten text: *Silence!* and *Roar!*', in: Joachim Schönfeldt, Ivan Vladislavic and Andries Walter Oliphant, *The Model Man* (Johannesburg 2004) 9.

² Program Cape Town Memory Project, Town meeting to discuss Memory Project. Document handed out in City Hall, 11 June 2005.

³ Draft Statement of Intent of the Cape Town Memory Project. Document handed out in the City Hall on the 11 of June 2005.

⁴ Url: <http://www.ijr.org.za/reconciliationreconstruction/memoryhealing/document.2005-06-15.7562808523:> Welcome to the Memory Project (6-9-2005).

⁵ Schönfeldt, 'Illustrating the unwritten text: *Silence!* and *Roar!*' 9.

⁶ Memorandum of understanding between the City of Cape Town and Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, as received from Liezel du Preez on the 15th of February 2005.

⁷ Memorandum of understanding.

⁸ Ibidem.