Chapter 7

The politics of remembrance in the new South Africa

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Introduction

Since the advent of a democratically elected government in South Africa in 1994, the state agency for heritage management, the National Monuments Council (NMC), has been required to redress the imbalance in the list of officially recognised heritage sites, namely those heritage sites declared as National Monuments in terms of the National Monuments Act (Act No. 28 of 1969, as amended in 1989.) This list has been heavily criticised as being largely composed of white colonial buildings or structures, generally neglecting those heritage sites of relevance to the majority of South Africans (Frescura 1992). In redressing this imbalance, there is a tendency towards the identification, interpretation and commemoration of heritage sites that are symbols and expressions of the recent political change and which promote the concept of a new South African identity and nation.

This chapter discusses the many conceptual challenges facing the NMC in a new political context. It discusses the new role of our National Monuments (both old and new) and explores the need for the NMC not only to revise its traditional architectural approach to heritage management but also to deal with the contested, ephemeral nature of our contemporary past and identity and recognise events and sites in a meaningful and creative manner. In doing so, the record of national monuments becomes a twentieth-century artefact reflecting the dominant ideologies of the time.

The role of our old National Monuments in the new South Africa

The NMC has inherited a list of National Monuments that is comprised mostly of historical buildings declared as a result of their age and architectural interest. The list is heavily biased towards buildings of the Dutch and British colonial period and largely reflects Western aesthetics and cultural values. The NMC is now faced with the challenge of how best to proceed in its responsibility to protect and promote the cultural heritage of all South Africans. It is faced with

the decision of what to do with a list of National Monuments belonging to the material legacy of the colonial and apartheid eras.

In 1999 new heritage legislation was implemented to enable the democratisation of heritage management in South Africa and to address the need for the list of heritage sites of national significance to contain sites that are significant to the nation as a whole. In terms of the new heritage legislation all existing National Monuments declared in terms of the existing legislation, will be reclassified as Provincial Heritage Sites. National Heritage Sites will have to be motivated afresh. (A small number of existing National Monuments will, by means of a schedule gazetted at the time of the passing of the new legislation, be automatically proclaimed National Heritage Sites. Robben Island, Table Mountain, the Castle of the Cape of Good Hope and Sterkfontein Caves amongst others are likely to be placed on that schedule.)

In reviewing the existing list of National Monuments, it is clear that the practice of heritage management has left us with a valuable archaeological record reflecting the changing political ideology of this century. This is reflected both in terms of those sites selected for conservation and the manner in which they have been conserved. As such, the entries in the list are twentieth-century artefacts informing future generations of the politics and values of society at the time of declaration. For example, the numerous eighteenth-century 'Cape Dutch' and nineteenth-century 'Victorian' buildings on the existing National Monuments list provide a valuable record of how European material culture was used to create, justify and reinforce the notion of dominant superior 'white culture'. Furthermore, the numerous eighteenth-century Cape Dutch buildings provide a valuable record of the political tensions existing between the English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans during this century. They also illustrate how Afrikaner nationalism during the 1950s and 1960s sought to claim and manipulate these eighteenth-century artefacts as symbolic of Afrikaner supremacy. The restoration of National Monuments of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) period (*c.* 1652–1795) until fairly recently generally presupposed the removal of all later layering from the buildings. Buildings were returned to their original appearance before the later addition of British period accessories, such as Victorian verandas and filigree detail. (Today, these additions are likely to be considered important elements of the historical layering of the building and warranting conservation.) To illustrate this point further, in the historical Western Cape town of Stellenbosch, an interpretative plaque placed on a Dutch period National Monument during the 1980s refers to the removal of Victorian additions which 'spoilt' its original Dutch appearance (Figure 7.1).

Out of the propensity to restore many historical buildings to their original appearance, a newly constructed Dutch culture of clean whitewashed historical thatched buildings emerged. The interiors of Dutch period buildings were painted white and joinery was painted green, purifying and brightening the impression. (Today, however, the original dark decorative interiors of these

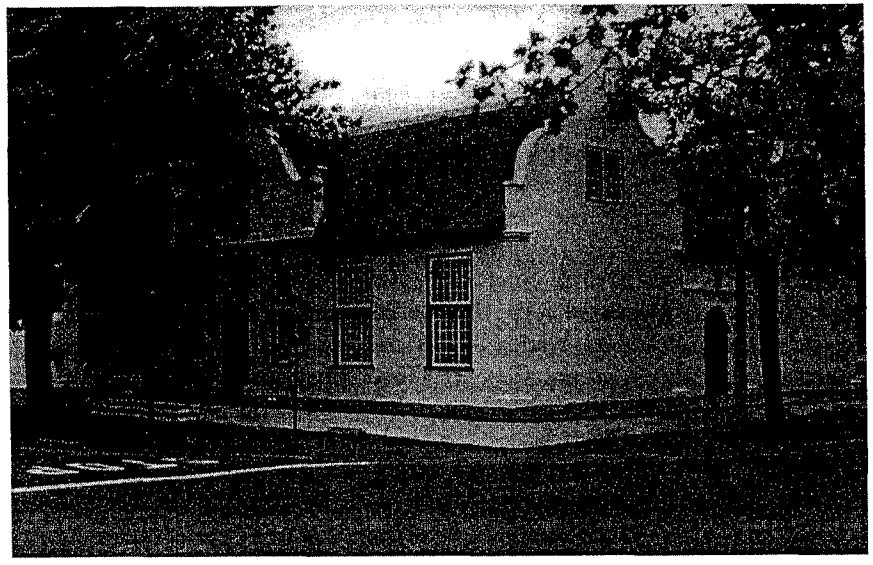

Figure 7.1 Cape Dutch house. (Photograph by David Hart and Sarah Winter.)

buildings are recognised, as well as the wide variety of colours used on their exteriors.)

In recognising the valuable contribution of South Africa's old National Monuments towards an understanding of the complex nature of our history and its society, the task of transforming heritage management is not simply one of replacing the existing list of National Monuments with a list of new Heritage Sites. The appropriate place within the new South Africa lies not in their removal from the record, but their reinterpretation within the current context. In this regard, the designation of existing National Monuments as Provincial Heritage Sites rather than their removal will serve to give recognition to their value as artefacts of the previous political and social system. This recognition will be emphasised by the fact that the bronze National Monument badges will not be withdrawn from the site, but will remain, reflecting their iconic status in the old order.

The NMC was recently involved in the erection of a new commemorative memorial and interpretative plaque at the site of the 'Battle of Blood River'. This is the place where the Afrikaners defeated the Zulus in 1838. It was a historic battle in which thousands of lives were lost. The new memorial and plaque is somewhat different from that previously erected within the old system. The original memorial, however, still remains. The old memorial emphasises Afrikaner victory and the fact that this victory was God's will. In contrast the new memorial emphasises reconciliation.

Possibly one of the most contentious old National Monuments is Dr Verwoerd's holiday house at Betty's Bay in the Western Cape. Dr Verwoerd is

regarded as the architect of apartheid. The cottage, which was built by Dr Verwoerd himself, was declared a National Monument in 1973 during the height of apartheid. Clearly, re-interpretation of this site presents an interesting challenge.

The new nature of our National Monuments and their role in the current political context

Many of the recently declared National Monuments have a markedly different character from those declared during the colonial and apartheid eras. Sites have become more contemporary in nature and symbolic of or associated with the recent political transformation. There is a shift away from the basic assumptions of age and aesthetics as being fundamental criteria for conservation and a move towards the recognition of sites associated with events or people, but which as physical objects are of little interest. Given the architecturally biased conceptual framework, which has dominated conventional conservation practice, the identification, interpretation and commemoration of Heritage Sites which is less bound to bricks and mortar is indeed a challenge for the NMC.

The following examples illustrate this shift in emphasis. After Mr Nelson Mandela's release, the NMC considered declaring as a National Monument the section of pavement on which he was arrested for the second time before his long imprisonment. The site of the aeroplane crash of Samora Machel, the late president of Mozambique, was recently declared a National Monument. In both these cases, these events were brief and the physical attributes of the site are largely inconsequential.

Houses where significant struggle leaders have lived or were born have also been declared or are recommended for declaration as National Monuments. For example, Mandela's house in Qunu, the house at Victor Vester Prison where he lived before his release and where the new constitution of South Africa is said to have been begun, Steve Biko's house in King Williamstown in the Eastern Cape and John Dube's house in Umlazi in Kwa Zulu Natal. These houses form the closest material link to our leaders in the recent political struggle and are recognised as national symbols of freedom.

Robben Island is an example of a Heritage Site whose recognised cultural value has shifted in the new political context. The original motivation for the declaration of the island (drawn up in the 1980s) focused on its rich natural and historical significance (from the period of the first European settlers in the Cape to the period of apartheid when the island was used as a political prison). In comparison the motivation for the declaration of the island as a World Heritage Site (drawn up in 1998) focuses largely on the island's more recent political apartheid history and its significance as an international symbol of hope, and triumph over adversity.

Conceptual issues relating to our new National Monuments and their role in the current political context

There are number of conceptual challenges relating to our new National Monuments and their role in the current political context. These challenges are centred on the contested and ephemeral nature of a new South African identity and its contemporary past. The concept of a South African identity and nation cannot be viewed simplistically. In view of South Africa's history of cultural oppression and the complex nature of its society there is a lack of consensus as to what constitutes a South African identity or nation (Tomaselli and Mpofu 1997). Therefore, as expressions of a new South African identity, the challenge lies in the ability of our new National Monuments to express what Tomaselli and Mpofu (1997) term 'South Africa's creative tensions'. These tensions refer to the 'fine dialectic' between individual and collective, conflicting and common identities (Tomaselli and Mpofu 1997).

A further conceptual issue regarding the nature of our new National Monuments concerns the difficulty in conserving a heritage of our recent political past. The difficulty lies in the fact that there is much contemporary relevance in historical political issues in South Africa, many of which remain unresolved. Weyeneth (1996) makes a similar argument in his article on the conservation of Heritage Sites linked to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. He outlines the difficulty in conserving a Civil Rights Movement of the contemporary past, particularly after 1965. He explains that this is when 'the story becomes more complicated: when the heroes, victims, and villains become harder to define, when the violence seems to take on some utility; when society loses consensus about the meaning of the movement and what the future should hold' (1996: 28).

In the search for national symbols of the political struggle against apartheid, there is a current tendency to focus on the contribution of the leaders in the struggle. The declaration of the houses where these leaders were born or lived serves to immortalise their role in the struggle. One hopes, however, that this recognition will not be at the expense of the key role of many ordinary people in the struggle, of whom many were women and children. It is important to mention that while the physical fabric of these houses as political symbols are considered to be of little consequence in the motivation for their declaration – simple dwellings similar to thousands of others in South African's townships – they form part of the apartheid material legacy. It can be argued that the relevance of these houses lies most strongly in their materiality, which in its ordinariness is common to the experience of the multitude of oppressed people, and thereby demonstrates hope for triumph over adversity (Figure 7.2).

With the difficulty often in establishing a relevant material link to many events or people associated with our recent political past, the NMC has also been faced with the responsibility of constructing memorials such as that at Blood River, which is dedicated to events or people considered to be of national significance.

Figure 7.2 Cape township. (Photograph by David Hart and Sarah Winter.)

The Department of Arts Culture Science and Technology, under which the NMC falls, recently constructed a concrete and steel memorial to Samora Machel at the site of the air crash in which he was killed. Samora Machel was the president of Mozambique who played an important role in the fight against colonial oppression. (At the unveiling ceremony, the then Minister of Transport was to announce a £2.6 million project to build a road to the memorial.)

One such case of a memorial building in which the NMC is involved is the site at the Union Buildings in Pretoria where in 1956, 20,000 African women demonstrated as part of the defiance campaign against introduction of the pass laws. The event is one that is vivid in the memories of many living today. In a space that has always been the political domain of the state, the conceptual challenge has been to claim the space from the oppressor for the people. Many of the women who participated in the march have been interviewed in order to collect information on the event. The proposed memorial is being put out to competitive tender.

Where there is no artefactual or material symbol representing the event, one is being created in order to express the need to recognise and honour the event. It should be noted that the Union Buildings are already a National Monument, so that declaration of the site for the specific commemoration of the march is not possible. From monument identification, the NMC is moving into the realm of monument building.

In the case of Enoch Satonga, who was responsible for composing the new South African national anthem, Nkosi Sikelela, the NMC went to some lengths to locate his unmarked grave, the most obvious existing tangible artefact relating

to this person. The choice to erect a memorial on the grave and to declare the grave a National Monument came at the time where the anthem symbolised most strongly the rebirth of South Africa.

It is interesting to note that previously it was stated policy of the National Monuments Council not to declare physical monuments or memorials as National Monuments, and generally to remove itself from sites that were 'directly' political in nature. There are of course some obvious exceptions, such as the declaration of Dr Verwoerd's holiday cottage, and the underlying cultural bias of the so-called 'non-political' declarations is unarguable. Today, however, the policy not to declare memorials as National Monuments appears to have been cast aside, and the National Monuments Council is not only involved with the construction of memorials, but with declaring the sites on which to construct the memorials. Heritage conservation is clearly moving from the recognition and conservation of artefacts of the past, towards the construction of artefacts in order for the future to remember the present and contemporary past.

The need to create a material link to an event or person, or an appropriate and meaningful manner in which to celebrate and recognise an event or person, offers an exciting challenge. Although in certain cases the construction of a memorial might be considered appropriate, the opportunity of recognising events, or indeed celebrating heroes, in a more tangibly meaningful manner, which could have a direct positive impact on the lives of the community may be considered.

When we look at the total budget of the NMC (little over £500,000 per year nationally), it is questionable whether it should involve itself in the erection of costly monuments. Large impenetrable blocks of black marble, or massive concrete and steel structures erected at vast expense may often be inappropriate to the nature of the event or the person being commemorated. It might well be contested that monument building of the same scale and form and expense to the state as that of the past, should surely remain a material legacy of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism. We need to look for more resourceful ways of materialising the past. Nevertheless, the NMC has been placed in the position where it must redirect its scant budget to the construction of high-profile monuments such as those at the battle-site at Blood River, the memorial on the grave of Enoch Satonga and the women's march on the Union Buildings.

While the need to create a material link to an event is accepted, and the case for the construction of a monument or memorial may well be appropriate, the opportunity for a far more creative and imaginative approach to materialising the cultural significance of an ephemeral site must be sought. From the colonial period to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, monument building has been a powerful tool to inscribe racial exclusivity and white supremacy (Thornton 1991 cited in Tomaselli and Mpofu 1997, Bunn 1998). David Bunn (1998), in his insightful deconstruction of the nineteenth-century colonial monuments and early twentieth-century Afrikaner memorials, shows how these monuments serve

to keep selected memory alive. However, he also argues that in time the meaning of these monuments tends to become 'disjointed, partial and dismembered' (1998: 108).

'Monuments would like us to believe that they are haunted by the spirit of the past, that they are chambers echoing with the voices of the heroic dead. In time, however, most South African monuments have come to be haunted by what was repressed to achieve their exclusiveness and then their meaning has appeared to desert them' (1998: 108).

The conceptual challenge for monuments in a new South Africa is to ensure that their meaning, not only their structural form is durable. To do this there is a need to construct and identify monuments that represent our collective or public memories. A more accessible and positive manner of materialising the ephemeral events of the past would be to look towards a material improvement of the general quality of life and environment of the people who were marginalised by our oppressive past, and who continue to live in sterile and hostile environments, a legacy of apartheid ideology and planning.

Dolores Hayden argues that public spaces can help to nurture the profound, subtle and inclusive sense of what it means to be a citizen, where identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories and collective or social memories are interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbours, fellow workers, and ethnic communities (Hayden 1995). Urban landscapes, she argues, are storehouses of these social memories, because the elements or features frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes – there is a need to restore some shared experience or public meaning – a recognition of a common and meaningful experience. Without lavish expenditures in poor living environments, it is possible to enhance the social meaning of public places that are sensitive to all citizens and their diverse heritage and developed with public process that recognises both the cultural and political importance of place.

Rather than creating expensive, monumental and dour memorials, the powerful but ephemeral events that have shaped our recent past might be better celebrated by an accessible and meaningful transformation of our public spaces. The argument for this is strengthened when one looks at the quality of our living environments – sterile, monotonous, uncontestable and dominated by apartheid ideology. With a recent past in which the voices of many ordinary people were heard only through protest in our public spaces and our streets, it would seem, once again, that these public spaces form the strongest and most accessible link to the collective memory of our contemporary past.

Catherine Howett's (1994) commentary on the new design for rehabilitating the 'white only' Kelly Ingram Park in downtown Birmingham in the United States is useful to the South Africa context, where one can draw similar parallels. The historical park was a venue for rallies and marches to protest against racial segregation during the 1960s, a time still vivid in the memory of those living today. It represents painful memories to the residents of Birmingham city. These protest marches and the police brutality against the protestors brought home to

many Americans for the first time the reality of racism against black citizens, and eventually led to landmark civil rights legislation in 1965.

> Here is an example of an important place made new, its meaning enlarged not only by the events that took place within and around it, but by the interpretation of those events that the City of Birmingham has chosen to inscribe in the fabric of the park.
>
> (Howett 1994: 39)

There are many opportunities in South Africa, from Freedom Square to the dusty, grassless spaces in the numerous faceless townships that have been sites of unity of spirit and of social protest. Here, the memories of the past may be celebrated and the real quality of life of the residents greatly improved by the upgrading of their public living environment, and the interpretation of the events that occurred there.

The interpretations of the past can no longer be done, as they were in the past, by architects, planners and historians involved with traditional conservation practice. While we see a change in the list of our Heritage Sites from buildings being declared purely on their physical attributes towards the commemoration of events, people and movements, the conceptual challenge comes more from the interpretation than from the physical form. This will require the development of new skills and sensitivities in order to be able to access, understand and interpret the new demands placed on our heritage managers.

Our traditional heritage practices had been imbibed from the well-established mother countries whose comparative homogeneity, identity and value systems had evolved over many generations, leaving us with an archaeological record of heritage sites which until recently, in terms of criteria, may differ little from those accepted in Europe. Today South Africa appears to be rejecting the dominance of the previously accepted traditional system of heritage values, and as a new country with an extraordinary diversity of cultures – whose indigenous value systems have been damaged through years of cultural suppression – is still trying to establish its own rules. It is clear, though, that there is a strong need for the bodies responsible for heritage management to respond to the needs and opportunities being offered in this new awakening, and to facilitate the celebration of the country's heritages, past and present, in an imaginative, positive and durable way.

Whatever the case, the Heritage List of South Africa, when viewed as an archaeological record, proves a revealing reflection of the social and political order of the time, and indicates clearly the current changes in heritage needs with which the authorities responsible are trying to grapple.

Information for this paper was also obtained from various National Monuments Council records, including various NMC files on specific heritage sites.

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