Building on a Heritage of Struggle: Museums and Monuments for a Democratic South Africa

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Introduction

History teaches us that peace, democracy and good governance are not possible without justice, equity and redress. In South Africa, all sectors and institutions, including museums, have been challenged to come forward with practical programmes to redress the imbalances of the past so that true democracy can take route and flourish.

Transforming the Old

The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology was established as a new government department after the first democratic elections in 1994. Since then, much effort has gone into transforming the heritage sector so as to bring these institutions, including museums, archives and monuments, into line with the core principles, aims and objectives as outlined in the Departments White Paper, namely:

- Equity
- Access
- Enhancement of the quality of life
- Human resource development
- Sustainability
- Redress
- Promotion and protection of multi-culturalism and diversity
- Promotion of innovation and excellence
- Nation-building
- Enhanced international co-operation

These principles, aims and objectives have been translated into new policies, budgets and structures, and underpinned by new legislation and governance frameworks. This transformation itself was brought about through a long and tortuous process of debate, contestation, negotiation and consultation – an exercise that has helped to deepen the maturing culture of democracy and tolerance in South Africa.

Establishing the New: The Legacy Project

After the democratic elections in 1994, the President's office was inundated with requests to consider the commemoration of various historic events and leaders. These applications came

from widely diverse sources, and were prompted by a range of motivations. In response to this need, the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology was approached to develop a proposal for the implementation of a *Legacy Project* in accordance with the Government's vision of reconciliation, development and nation building.

In its motivating concept document, the Department argues that museums, monuments and commemorations should be integrally linked to usable public spaces so that they form the hub of a community. Acknowledging the shared heritage of all the country's diverse communities has the power to affirm, both emotionally and spiritually, and enables people to explore their sense of place and identity as South Africans. The expression of multiculturalism through monuments, museums and plaques, as well as festivals employing arts (including praise poetry, storytelling and testimony) to commemorate what is meaningful to communities, has a profound potential to unite and build the new South African nation.

The document acknowledges that notions of heritage are often contested in multi-cultural societies, and that reminders of the past are often fraught with pain. The argument is made however that " … struggles against historical injustices and inequities are part of our national consciousness today; they have become a part of our culture, hailed as such by the international community. Our acknowledgement of this legacy both sensitizes those who may be unaware of this heritage of humanism, and empowers those whose history was formerly suppressed. Enriching our understanding of the past will help to heal our body politic and shape a new South African Heritage".

A number of key principles were formulated so as to guide Government in its decision on which individual legacy projects to support, including:

- **Diversity:** It was argued that South Africa's rich multicultural society should be affirmed in all projects. Acknowledgement of diversity illustrates and applauds democracy, respect for differing histories, recognition of identity and reconciliation. The celebration of all cultures ensures that there is place for all in society.

- **Inclusive practice and representation:** Clearly the heritage of the majority remains markedly under-represented in our heritage institutions, including museums. Gaps exist particularly in the areas of pre-colonial history, in perspectives on past conflicts, in oral culture, in indigenous interpretations of land struggles during the colonial era, and in the struggle for liberation. It was stressed that preference should be given to projects that address these disparities.

- **Public participation:** The maximum amount of people should be given a voice in the decision making process, including artists, historians, academics, and most importantly, the communities directly affected.

- **Heritage as an educational tool:** It was argued that the reinterpretation of existing monuments and memorials could be used as a valuable educational tool for the understanding of the struggle to achieve democracy.

- **Redress of provincial and local inequities:** It was important that the geographical imbalance in the representation of heritage also be addressed in that the histories of the larger cities are currently better represented than the smaller towns and the rural areas.

- **Sustainable delivery:** Integrating heritage projects into broader infrastructure development projects would ensure their continued use, relevance, and sustainability. To this end it was deemed important that Legacy Project proposals acknowledge the needs of the disadvantaged, promote job creation, include training and empowerment of the community, spread resources and skills to the economically neglected and aim to benefit cultural and heritage tourism.

- **Legitimacy through participation:** Consultation is a key legitimizing process. The Legacy Project implementation framework argues for a procedure that promotes "ownership" of the heritage. This should include, where possible, public hearings; inviting the community to participate in the concepts and design through competitions and commissions; community gatherings and forums (be they of the landless, or focus groups such as historical societies, trade unions, etc); exposure in the media in all languages, especially the radio; and consultation with democratically elected representatives.

- **Sensitivity to the environment:** Care should be taken to design commemorations that are appropriate to the environment, sensitive to its natural and social context and appropriate aesthetically to our South African culture.

The Legacy Project proposals were submitted to Cabinet and approved. A co-ordinating **Legacy Committee** was established and mandated to receive all proposals for heritage representations and to evaluate these according to the principles listed above. The Legacy Committee decided upon a number of proposals and projects for short and medium-term delivery, which were submitted to Cabinet and approved, namely:

- A memorial to the late Mozambican president, Samora Machel
- A memorial to South Africa's first Nobel Prize winner, Chief Albert Luthuli
- A memorial commemorating the Zulu losses at the Battle of Blood River
- A Women's Memorial at the Union Buildings in Pretoria.
- The Nelson Mandela Museum
- Constitution Hill
- The centenary commemoration of the Anglo-Boer War
- A commemoration of the Khoi San
- Freedom Park

To date the memorial to Samora Machel and the monument to the Zulu at the Battle of Blood River have been completed, while the other projects are in the process of implementation. Of specific interest to this gathering are the Nelson Mandela Museum, and the Constitution Hill

Project where the proposed museum of the Constitution will be built. Unfortunately, space and time do not allow for a detailed description of the individual Legacy Projects. Allow me however to share with you some of the things we have learnt in implementing these initiatives that could perhaps contribute to the challenge of developing museum and heritage practice in the furtherance of democracy, peace and good governance.

- **Policy and strategy:** Good governance is dependent upon a well-articulated policy and strategy framework. This will ensure that there is a shared and common vision amongst all of the stakeholders involved in any particular project.
- **Legal Framework:** Good governance requires a clearly defined legal framework so as to ensure accountability and transparency.
- **Political Authority, Credibility and Legitimacy:** Democratic practice is not possible if there is no mechanism to bestow authority, credibility and legitimacy by popular consensus.
- **Consultation:** Without popular support and a sense of ownership amongst those involved, democratic practice and good governance are not possible. Dynamic consultation is necessary to achieve this.

Conclusion

In the past South Africa's museums mirrored in their structure, governance and programmes the autocratic apartheid government that funded them. As such they excluded the majority of South Africans made foreigners in their own country. With the advent of a democratic government, museums are being re-conceptualized and restructured so that they reflect and celebrate the history and culture of all South Africans. Sitting as they do in the interface between the "state" and the "people", museums can and must play a critical role in the negotiation and mediation of political power and individual and collective identity. As such, museums have an important role to play in the fostering of democracy, peace and good governance.