

The Changing Role of Museums

Paul Tichmann, Curator, Luthuli Museum, Groutville, Stangar, South Africa

Over the past two decades museums all over the world have faced increasing pressures to transform as a result of political changes, technological advancement and globalization. David Anderson points to a growing demand in Europe for museums to be “agents of social and political change”.⁽¹⁾ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill asserts that “museums are seen as sites of cultural struggle and as a result, the stories that are told in museums of history, culture, science and art are no longer accepted as naturally authoritative.” She further argues that the museum is “being reviewed, reassessed, and reformulated to enable it to be more sensitive to competing narratives and to local circumstances; to be more useful to diverse groups; to fit current times more closely”.⁽²⁾ Museum audiences have become more sophisticated and more assertive in expressing their needs and challenging interpretations of their history and culture.

Moira Simpson argues that “There is recognition amongst museum professionals throughout the world that museums have not been providing adequately for the needs of culturally divided communities and that they must create profound changes in their philosophies and activities if they are to address these needs.”⁽³⁾ It is no longer collections that drive the priorities of museums but rather the needs of communities. Museums are increasingly called on to be more than just repositories of collections and instead to serve as spaces for intercultural dialogue, cultural expression and performance. Cultural diversity, cultural identity, human rights, reconciliation, environmental awareness have all become important aspect of the museum’s focus. These changes also call for the museum professional to adopt a multidisciplinary approach, to be sensitive to competing voices in interpretations and to be constantly engaged in consultation with communities. Museum exhibitions must become vehicles for dialogue rather than narrow narrations by museum experts.

The Luthuli Museum is tasked with conserving, upholding promoting and propagating the life, values, philosophy and legacy of Chief Luthuli. Chief Luthuli was Africa’s first Nobel Peace Laureate and longest serving president of the African National Congress. Chief Luthuli’s leadership within the multi-faceted roles he played – as educator, traditional leader, Christian, politician – was characterized by a visionary outlook, a genuine respect and love for people, deep commitment to non-racialism, democracy and non-violence. The Luthuli Museum is perhaps a little different from many other museums in that it is focused more on ideas and values than objects. The Museum’s displays as well as educational programming are aimed at promoting the legacy of Chief Luthuli.

The Luthuli Museum has an active programme of educational events each year. We have looked for creative ways to create a greater awareness, amongst students at school and tertiary level as well as the general community, of the legacy of Chief Luthuli. We also decided to link some of the educational events to international commemorative days such as World Book Day, World Environment Day, and International Day of Peace. Educational events have included school debates, story-telling/ reading workshops, leadership skills workshops, and environmental awareness workshops. The Museum has also provided holiday programmes during the school holidays, with a focus on workshops in drama, music, dance, environmental awareness, traditional games and board games, including chess.

The Luthuli Museum also entered into a number of valuable partnerships. One of these has been with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Creative Arts. Through this partnership we are able to run a "Time of the Writer" Outreach Workshop during which school students and community members in KwaDukuza are given the opportunity to dialogue with internationally acclaimed writers from various countries. This partnership also makes possible the "Poetry Africa" Outreach Workshop where students and the general community dialogue with renowned poets from around the world. The Museum has also been able to screen documentaries from Durban International Film Festival every year as a result of the partnership. Teachers and learners indicated that films such as "The Timbuktu Manuscripts" were particularly helpful. The partnership with the Centre for Creative Arts has been important in promoting an interest in literary arts and in film-making amongst youth in KwaDukuza. In an attempt to take this interest further the Luthuli Museum worked with local youth to launch a Luthuli Poetry Club in December, whose significance in terms of culture and development is explored further in Zinhle Nyembe's article.

The Luthuli Museum also partnered with a seed-germination project, Hlumisa Greening, to do workshop on environmental awareness. Hlumisa Greening has run several workshops at the Museum where they teach about the planting, germination and care of local trees, particularly the acacias.

Perhaps one of the most interesting events the Museum has participated in is the "International Day of Sharing Life Stories", (discussed in greater detail in Barbara Wahlberg's article) an event aimed at encouraging an appreciation of cultural diversity, tolerance and dialogue. The theme for 2009 was "Journeys Towards Justice: Capturing Stories of Human Rights in the Context of Migration." It provided an important opportunity for learners and community members to hear the stories of migrants from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, the DRC and Rwanda. Programmes such as these tie in with Chief Luthuli's call: "*If we truly respect fundamental human rights and noble divine concepts of man, the dignity of man and the worth of an individual, the brotherhood of man, we must come all out in defense of these values...*"(4)

References

- (1) David Anderson, "Museum Education in Europe: Societies in Transition," in *Transforming Practice: Selections from the Journal of Museum Education, 1992 – 1999*. Joanne S. Hirsch and Lois H. Silverman, eds., Washington D.C.:Museum Education Roundtable, 2003.
- (2) Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of visual culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- (3) Moira G. Simpson, "Charting the Boundaries: Indigenous Models and Parallel Practices in the Development of the Post-museum," in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*. Simon J. Knell, Suzanne MacLeod, and Sheila Watson, eds., London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- (4) Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.