

5.0 South African Arts & Culture Policy: From Nation-building to Urban Renewal

In South Africa over the past ten years, official government Arts & Culture policy has developed and changed alongside the perceived changing needs of the country. It is argued here that there has been a tangible shift in Arts and Culture policy from the early post 1994 period, to the current situation. It will be shown that world city discourse and specifically the use of culture industries such as tourism to serve as catalysts for urban renewal and to gain strategic advantage within the world city system, have become normative in much Arts and Culture policy, from a national to a municipal level.

As thinkers such as Jennifer Robinson have pointed out, cities such as Johannesburg are

entwined in two of the most powerful discourses and sets of practices shaping cities. The idea of being a global city and the urgent requirement to improve the living conditions of the poor, are respectively the parameters of the world city hypothesis and developmental understandings. (Robinson, 2003: p. 259)

While Robinson is referring to processes being played out in cities, it is argued here that these same tensions between paradigms are being played out at a national level with Arts and Culture policy. The early policies of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) were aimed at developmental concerns, while, it is argued, more recent policies are operating with the world city hypothesis with very specific impacts for cities such as Johannesburg.

Since the birth of the new South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) government has had to juggle the tensions above; namely its massive development agenda within an accepted neo-liberal economic policy model. In the early days of the new democracy, the government was able to merge these various political, cultural, economic, and social agendas, under the patriotic project of nation-building.

The nation-building project was packaged under the government's policy of Reconstruction and Development (RDP). This was also the framework within which early Arts & Culture policy operated. There are a number of examples that demonstrate how the government used museums and heritage to try and embody RDP development principles as well as to

unify “the people” through a shared sense of history and culture. In fact the National Heritage Act of 1999 begins with the premise that art, culture and heritage:

helps us to define our cultural identity and therefore lies at the heart of our spiritual well-being and has the power to build our nation. It has the potential to affirm our diverse cultures, and in so doing shape our national character.

Our heritage celebrates our achievements and contributes to redressing past inequities. It educates, it deepens our understanding of society and encourages us to empathise with the experience of others. It facilitates healing and material and symbolic restitution and it promotes new and previously neglected research into our rich oral traditions and customs.

(DAC, 1999: preamble)

During this early post-Apartheid era, the ANC used cultural discourse to bring a vision of the new nation to life. As early as 1991, the ANC had established a Commission on Museums, Monuments, and Heraldry (Coombes, 2003: p. 14) which was an attempt to start recasting Apartheid era monuments and museums as more reflective of the new nation and all its peoples. Museums were now encouraged to promote the values of inclusion and diversity on which the new nation was founded.

Within the new South Africa, museums had to adapt to the new democratic and non-racial dispensation and as Coombes points out, museums are not “neutral spaces” (Coombes, 2003: p. 151) but are often the spaces where discussions of citizenship, nationhood, and ethnicity take place. Perhaps of even more importance than what is exhibited, are the processes that lie behind what is exhibited. In the last decade, the processes of curatorship have come under scrutiny as microcosms of the political arena. With many museums still perceived as white elitist organizations, the need to increase democratic participation in museums is apparent.

According to Coombes, in these museum discussions “the concept of ‘community’ figured large.” (Coombes, 2003: p.157.) The re-building and re-structuring of museums with community input and to reflect community needs was seen by the ANC government as part of the development process. As stated at the Revitalizing the Nation’s Heritage workshops, “Museums are an integral part of the principles and key programmes of the RDP” (Coombes, 2003: p. 161). The workshop document goes onto state:

[Museums} are there for the people, their principal mission is to aid in the protection and sustainable utilization of our country’s natural and cultural heritage. This document...synthesizes possible ways for museum’s commitment to the RDP principles and participation in the key programmes. (Coombes, 2003: p. 161)

The strategy above, according to Coombes, was quite prescriptive and stressed the importance of museums within the nation-building project. Along those lines, it was strongly recommended that while communities may want to “retain their cultural identity it is more important that they should focus on common ground and shared aspirations. History museums should concentrate more on the history of common challenges and solutions and less on the history of conflict.” (Coombes, 2003: p. 162)

Museums were thereby tasked with the role of creating the space, resources, and knowledge actively to mediate and contribute to development issues. Coombes uses the example of the creation of the Tswaing Crater Museum. The museum created at this space was tasked with much more than simply reflecting environmental or cultural heritage. Instead, as she quotes De Jon and Van Coller, the museum was

to provide both the knowledge and research necessary to resolve disputes regarding land distribution and restitution; moreover museums should play a part in facilitating other basic rights such as housing and education....Taking their lead from the RDP document, museums are made to meet the needs of each objective outlined in the government paper. (Coombes, 2003: p. 162)

The Tswaing Museum was seen as a community driven museum that was based on the basic principles of the RDP. The goals were nothing less than those of the ANC government as a whole, including “furthering peace and security for all, aid in nation-building, linking reconstruction and development, and to provide a means of consolidating the democratization of South Africa” (ANC RDP Document as quoted in Coombes, 2003: p. 166). In terms of the outcomes of this most ambitious project, they were clearly mixed, with various levels of community participation and approval taking place.

More importantly than the actual outcomes of the project however, was the ambitious way in which the ANC directly linked heritage and social upliftment and nation-building. According to this model, culture and heritage were viewed as the means not only to building a new nation, but also to promote participatory development processes for social and economic upliftment.

However, within a few years, much of the government’s macro-economic policies were changing. The Reconstruction and Development project was superseded by the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) project. As the government’s overarching policy shifted, so too did the language within the Department of Arts and Culture. At this national level, the Department began to utilise the global language of world city discourse and a series of policy goals, White Papers, and projects began to push the agenda of arts and culture as economic drivers within a global context.

As early as 1998, the Department commissioned a report entitled, *Creative South Africa: A Strategy for realising the potential of the Cultural Industries*. The introduction to the report, authored by the Cultural Strategy Group (CSG), clearly states the function of the Arts within the GEAR framework:

The Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology (DACST) is contributing to the government’s Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy through a number of initiatives intended to enhance the economic and social benefits of arts and culture. (Cultural Strategy Group, 1998: p. 4)

This document clearly accepts certain basic premises that mirror the premises of world city discourse. Primarily the entire conceptualisation of the culture industries within the document is based on the global understanding of how these industries can lead to urban renewal. According to the report:

The term “cultural industries” is used to describe a wide variety of cultural activities which all have commercial organisation as their prime motivating force.

The cultural industries that CSG concentrated on..... [were selected] based on a number of criteria including the recognition that these sectors were identifiable industries in South Africa; are potentially internationally competitive; have the potential to create employment and offer opportunities for rural and urban job creation. (CSG, 1998: p. 4)

The document goes on further to position the need for South Africa to use the culture industries to achieve strategic advantage within the global system:

Encouraging the cultural industries in South Africa is one of the most powerful means of enhancing the country’s identity and distinctiveness... In a globalising world where every place begins to look and feel the same, it is cultural products and activities that mark out one place from the next – difference in this sense creates competitive advantage. (CSG, 1998: p. 6)

The report elaborates further:

In a globalising and homogenising world, local identity is increasingly being threatened. The maintenance and development of local cultural distinctiveness is key both economically and socially. (CSG, 1998: p. 13)

It is quite clear that this report is openly and unabashedly influenced by world city discourse. The authors of the report view the success of similar initiatives in the UK as guidelines for South Africa. They explain the similarities between these examples and the South African situation, whereby a new economic model has emerged where traditional jobs have been replaced by “value adding jobs...advertising, finance, consulting, media, tourism, fashion

design and a range of activities traditionally classified under 'services'. "(CSG, 1998, p. 12)
The report claims that while "culture creates wealth" (CSG, 1998, p. 12), it also

creates 'meaning' and thus [is] concerned with and embody the identity and values of a country. They can communicate both the heritage of South Africa as well as the idea of what it means to be a South African in the 21st century. (CSG, 1998: p. 12)

Within this section tourism is specifically highlighted: "tourism in general, and cultural tourism specifically, are powerful instruments in creating the desired image of South Africa abroad."(CSG, 1998: p. 13)

It is notable in the report just how important the symbolic and perceptual value of the culture industries is seen to be. The report concludes by stating that:

Culture will help change South Africa's image for the better. It will be seen as a country of creativity, innovation, and vibrancy; a country of possibilities and opportunity. These [new ideas] will be locally derived and distinctive, yet globally oriented.... (CSG, 1998: p. 56)

The report clearly understands the importance of strategic advantage within the global system, and views the arts as a powerful way to posit difference as advantage and to redefine and re-imagine South Africa within the global mindset. It is also clear that to the Department of Arts and Culture, culture and the culture industries have two distinct and crucial roles; economic development and global image enhancement for the country.

These goals reflect a marked shift in policy, language, and goals from previous policy discussion that focused mainly on social upliftment, nation-building, and small scale economic development. The Department, in 1998 even adopted a Cultural Industries Growth Strategy (CIGS) based on the findings of the Creative South Africa report. This national policy framework clearly has positioned arts and culture as key to economic success, and perhaps even more importantly, to changing the perceptions of South African globally.

In the Department's Annual Report for the years 2000-2001, it is clear that this policy has remained a pillar of the Department and that the two goals of image creation and job creation remain central to policy thinking and language. Within the area of Arts & Culture, the Department states as central issues:

- The search for a new national artistic identity in the context of relatively static resources
- The translation of theory into action in terms of the contribution of the cultural industries to job creation (DAC, 2001: p. 1)

The report goes on to state

At the January 2001 Cabinet Lekgotla it was affirmed that cultural industries....would in future be embedded in economic programmes from the twin perspectives of growth and job creation. (DAC, 2001: p. 3)

The report summarises some of the outcomes of the Cultural Industries Growth Strategy, which spent two years researching the best areas of intervention. Some of these were identified as:

- The development of public private partnerships
- Market development
- The utilisation of culture as a tool for urban regeneration (DAC, 2001: p. 25)

The last point above, that as the use of culture in urban regeneration was to become a powerful point and has been picked up by cities, most notably Johannesburg.

In the Department's Strategic Plan for April 2004 - March 2007, many of these same points are once again highlighted. The support of the culture industries as central to economic development and to the identity and perceptions of the country are mentioned repeatedly. The Department has put significant emphasis on these two outcomes of the culture industries and cities have become the testing ground where this policy is played out.