

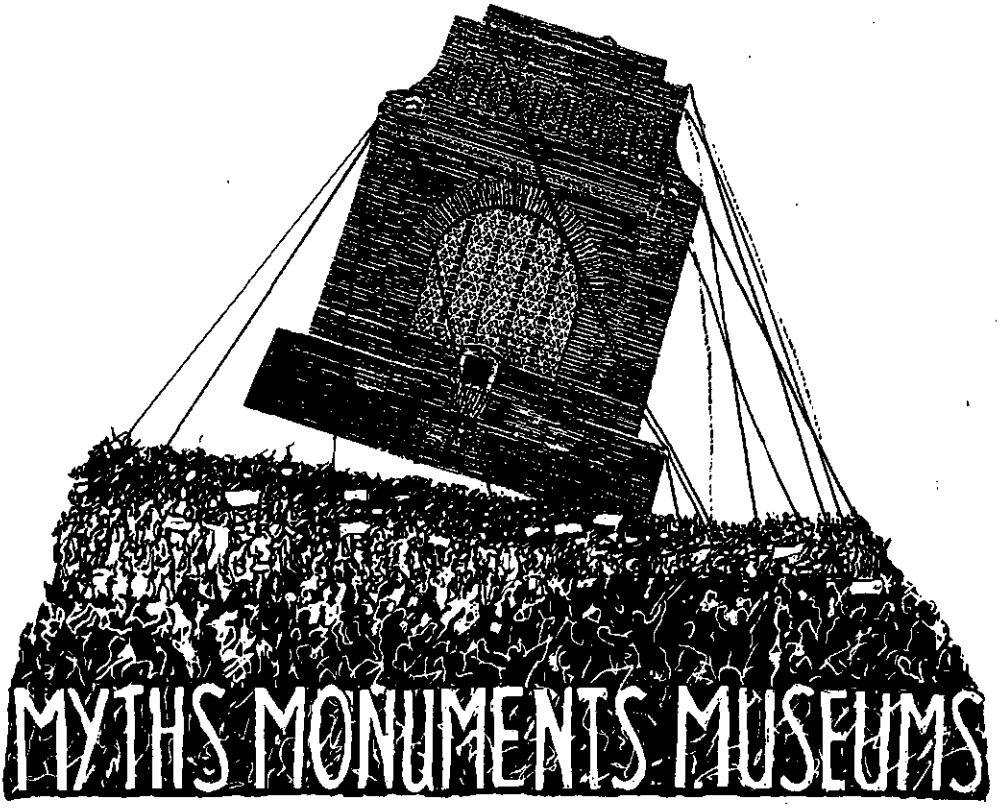
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Hidden heritage: our past, our future.

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NEW PREMISES?

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
HISTORY WORKSHOP

HIDDEN HERITAGE: OUR PAST,
OUR FUTURE.



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HIDDEN HERITAGE: OUR PAST, OUR FUTURE

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> "The design of the Voortrekker Monument ... was to serve as a tangible tribute to a group of people who, through their tremendous efforts, had laid the foundation for a white civilisation to be built in the interior of Southern Africa ... The statue of the Voortrekker Mother and her children symbolises white civilisation while the black wildebeest portray the ever threatening dangers of Africa."
>
> (Moerdijk, 1970, pp 29, 36)

The above quotation accurately reflects the bigotry which is responsible for much of the antagonism displayed by blacks towards heritage structures in South Africa. While the Voortrekker monument is not a proclaimed national monument, it was nevertheless erected as a national heritage structure on state land and largely paid for with state funds. By exploiting and perpetuating the racism which characterises our society, exclusivist heritage structures such as the Voortrekker Monument and the Strijdom Monument have contributed significantly to the polarisation of attitudes to the question of heritage between blacks and whites. This, along with the perception by many blacks, that bodies such as the National Monuments Council and the Simon van der Stel Foundation are elitist, has made the whole issue of heritage conservation very problematic.

In re-examining the issue of heritage, questions such as: 'who owns the past?', 'whose heritage should be conserved?' and, ultimately, 'who decides?' have to be asked. Such questions are intimately bound up with factors such as socio-political dominance, since it is the perceptions and values of the dominant

group which shapes the whole issue of heritage conservation (Tunbridge, 1984). It follows then, that the perceptions and values of the poor and the politically weak, tend to be ignored. The situation in South Africa has been exacerbated by the historically subordinate position occupied by blacks, a position which, during the apartheid era, has resulted in the further weakening and political marginalisation of this group.

An analogy may be drawn with the Aboriginal people of Australia who, having been similarly marginalised by their country's colonial history, have often had to helplessly witness the destruction of their heritage. Despite major changes to Aboriginal heritage laws, all too often, both private and state-sponsored development has been allowed to destroy that heritage (Ansara, 1989; Maddock, 1989). A recent case concerned a proposed dam to be built over a sacred women's site in Alice Springs. The Northern Territory government had been poised to go ahead with the development despite protests from local environmental groups as well as from the Aboriginal community. The state was temporarily restrained by the Federal government however, which invoked the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act of 1984 (Koori Mail, 1992).

Like Australia, South Africa has a poor record as regards the heritage concerns of blacks. An examination of the list of proclaimed national monuments, confirms the almost complete exclusion of the perceptions and values of black South Africans, thus reflecting their disempowered status. According to a recent estimate, only 2% of national monuments relate to the pre-

colonial era (Deacon, 1991a), while only about 15 dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, commemmorate black culture or history (Deacon, 1991b).

In a recent article, Janette Deacon of the National Monuments Council (NMC) has correctly pointed out that the NMC is both legally and morally bound to conserve the cultural resources of all South Africans. She maintained that the reason this has not in fact happened, is not the fault of the law but of "the ideological perspectives and changing priorities of the general public" (Deacon, 1991a, p.14). This is true up to a point, but it also needs to be acknowledged that it is the racially-based power structures of South African society which has enabled the dominant group, which happens to be white, to impose their ideological bias on the issue of heritage conservation.

It is clear that, in adopting a primarily Eurocentric approach to the subject of heritage conservation, a severely distorted and one-sided picture of South Africa's rich and diverse cultural history, has emerged. Major political players, such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) have made it clear that this imbalance must be corrected (Restorica, 1991; Pearce, 1992). It is equally clear that a new approach to the conservation of our common heritage must be found - one which seeks, not to glorify the colonial conquests of the past, nor to perpetuate the racial divisions of the present but to accurately reflect our country's history and to celebrate its cultural achievements. In devising a new approach to heritage conservation however, there are a number of problems which should

be taken cognisance of.

Problems

The feeling of hostility towards the concept of heritage conservation which exists in many black communities, is one of the biggest obstacles. A rather extreme form of this attitude was expressed by Strini Moodley of the Azanian Peoples Organisation who has stated that:

> "95% or more of the so-called national monuments have to be done away with because they do not reflect the ethos of the broad majority of the South African people."
>
> (Alexander, 1991, p. 10)

While the overt hostility displayed by this comment may not reflect a widespread attitude, it nevertheless reflects a commonly held resentment against what is perceived as the glorification of the colonial heritage. For many black South Africans, the colonial era is associated with conquest, dispossession, slavery, dominance and control - an era based on assumptions of white cultural superiority. Thus, when looking at the reminders of that era, such as, for example, Groot Constantia, instead of objectively admiring its graceful architecture, many are instead irresistably reminded of the slavery and subservience which was an integral part of its construction. In a context in which South Africans are struggling to throw off the psychological shackles of a regime which tried to legitimise an ideology based on an acceptance of black inferiority, it would be as well to treat feelings of

hostility towards heritage conservation with great sensitivity.

Antagonism to the concept of heritage conservation has been fueled by the forced removal of large numbers of black South Africans through the application of the Group Areas Act. The consequence of manipulating human beings in accordance with the dictates of a racist ideology, has been the destruction of community identity since this was often rooted in a strongly felt 'sense of place'. The history of forced removals in this country is strewn with examples of communities such as District 6, which, along with their cherished symbols, were destroyed.

Another well known example concerns Sophiatown. Shortly after his arrival back in South Africa, ANC returnee Tom Sebina, went to visit his old haunts in Sophiatown - the ironically renamed Triomf. However, other than the old street names, everything except his memories had been obliterated. It is little wonder that communities destroyed in this manner and transported to bleak environments of monotonous uniformity, felt nothing but resentment and bitterness towards their new surroundings, perceiving them as dumping grounds. Their heritage had been reduced to little more than a hidden map buried inside their memories - and how do you conserve that?

Another obstacle in the path of broad-based acceptance of the concept of heritage conservation, is the widespread apathy and lack of concern evinced by many black South Africans. Apart from the most obvious cause of such disinterest i.e. poverty and homelessness, the major causes are: firstly, the alienation of

blacks from the urban environment. In this regard, the anti-urbanisation policies and discriminatory land legislation passed by the Nationalist government have played a major role (Khan, 1991b). Under the system of migrant labour and influx control, Africans have been allowed to work in cities only under very strict controls. Prior to 1986, when the government finally accepted the permanance of black urbanisation, the prevailing attitude has been that Africans were allowed to shape the cities but not live in them. It is little wonder that, as a consequence of being treated as temporary sojourners and as foreigners in their own land, Africans in particular, have had little opportunity to develop a concern for the built environment.

Discriminatory land legislation which enforced residential segregation by race, has had an even greater effect in alienating blacks from the cities. The tradition of officially segregated housing for blacks has its roots in the compound system of housing black workers during the early days of diamond mining in Kimberley. This was a trend which continued during the twentieth century by means of legislation such as the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which laid down guidelines for municipalities wishing to establish segregated accommodation for blacks. The Group Areas Act of 1950, building on the tradition of racial segregation, consolidated the pattern of locations situated at a considerable distance from cities and towns. Blacks were further alienated from urban heritage issues, both as a consequence of being physically distanced from such issues, as well as the fact of being placed in a situation in which it was virtually

impossible to stimulate such an interest. The dormitory nature of most locations, purpose-built to house workers as cheaply as possible, proved to be sterile ground to cultivate any interest in the subject of heritage conservation.

The second major cause of the prevailing disinterest in the subject of heritage conservation, is that for the most part, the cultural and historical symbols regarded as important by black communities have been denigrated - either by being ignored, or by being regarded as acceptable only when they could profitably be exploited in order to further the separatist aims of apartheid. A recent example of the former, is the fate of the Genadendal museum in the Cape, which may have to close because of lack of funding. The museum and its artefacts reflect the history of its missionary past, which happens to be the history of a 'coloured' community. This apparently condemns it to being a 'coloured own affair' and, since the House of Representatives does not have a museum structure, fears have voiced about the possibility of this heritage being lost to the nation (Van Rensburg, 1991).

The artefacts housed in the museum have been described by Hannetjie du Preez, Western Cape Regional Representative of the NMC, as a "national cultural treasure" and "the most authentic collection of everyday articles used in a given place in South Africa" (pers comm, 9 June 1992). Despite the obvious importance of the artefacts housed in the museum, the museum has nevertheless been allowed to fall victim to the persistence of the racial compartmentalisation of culture in South Africa and thus far, other than a small grant from the House of

Representatives, has been denied state funding.

On the other hand, the so-called Malay Quarter in Cape Town, also known as the Bo-Kaap, was singled out during the 1960s as being historically significant. Objectively viewed, the area is definitely conservation-worthy, as it contains the greatest concentration of pre-1840 architecture to be found anywhere in South Africa (Davis, 1990). Nevertheless, conservation efforts in the Bo-Kaap have been bedevilled by suspicion and antagonism on the part of residents who have been angered by the lack of consultation on the part of the authorities (Truluck, 1989). Given such factors as its acceptability to apartheid planners who regarded the Bo-Kaap as fitting neatly into an ethnic pigeon-hole, as well as such factors as the high costs of restoration which put houses beyond the reach of most residents - this effort in heritage conservation has often been dismissed either as the perpetuation of apartheid, or as an exercise in gentrification.

These then, are some of the problems facing the conservation of heritage structures. The question which faces us now is, how can these problems be overcome?

Proposals

The general impression gained when examing the list of proclaimed national monuments, is that blacks have been simply spectators, and not the shapers of history. The result of this distorted view of history has been evident in the elitism and imbalances in

the field of heritage conservation up till now. Hence, fundamental to the task of redressing these imbalances, is the formulation of a new policy on heritage conservation - one which reflects the multi-faceted cultural history of the people of South Africa. In this regard, Abba Omar of the ANC and Fitzroy Ngcukana of the PAC have been quoted respectively as supporting a "national non-racial culture" (Alexander, 1991, p.10) and of the proclamation of national monuments that are "linked to the population as a whole" (Restorica, 1991, p.8)

Secondly, it should be realised that a truly representative list of conservation-worthy structures can only be arrived at through broad-based community participation and access to a diverse range of ideas, values and perceptions. In this regard, we would do well to emulate the example of Australia, which is attempting to address such problems as the denigration of Aboriginal culture, as well as the negative effects of alienation, suspicion and antagonism in the field of heritage conservation. It has been suggested that the crucial first step in adressing these issues, was to accept and implement the principle of broad-based consultation (Jonas, 1991).

In South Africa, the principle of broad-based consultation has indeed been recognised by NMC, which has recently stated that it is "keen to widen the range of national monumants to include those of relevance to all people ..." (Alexander, 1991, p.10). In keeping with this policy, the NMC has already launched some encouraging initiatives. For example, the Bo-Kaap Trust Fund is working in close co-operation with the Bo-Kaap community.

Community representatives, as well as architects and officials of the NMC work together through the Fund to collect money to pay for the cost of restoration. In addition, the NMC is developing a kit which will enable communities and individuals to assess conservation-worthy buildings in their areas themselves.

The success of this kit, however, will depend on the extent to which the NMC works through community organisations in order to make these kits as accessible as possible. Broad-based community participation is essential, not only to ensure a move away from the arbitrary decisions of the past towards a democratically-determined heritage conservation policy, but also to overcome widespread fears that, in having their symbols declared national monuments, community control will not be lost.

One way to reach communities at the widest possible level, is through the youth. This can best be done by harnessing the enthusiasm of the young through the multi-disciplinary, issue-based, problem-solving approach of environmental education (Khan, 1991a. An excellent example of the potential that environmental education has in the field of heritage conservation, is the work done by Mmabatho High School in Bophuthatswana. Here, the pupils have been working on the late Iron Age Batswana settlement of Khaditshwene (Custos, 1992). The pupils are being given an opportunity to study modern archaeological investigational methods and to become involved in a diverse range of scientific, historical and cultural studies. Not only are the students being given a major opportunity to use the site as a field school for multi-disciplinary studies, but their efforts may well result in

the establishment of a game reserve and the proclamation of the site as a national monument. The work being done at Khaditshwene will hopefully inspire other schools to take advantage of their position as an integral part of their community, encouraging them to initiate community-based heritage conservation projects.

Thirdly, a new policy should be particularly sensitive to the politico-historical symbols deemed to be important by communities whose values have been hitherto ignored. Here again, a case from the Australian experience would be instructive. Twenty kilometres off the coast from Perth, lies Rottnest Island, an island whose history includes a lengthy period during which it was used as a prison for Aboriginal people. Minor infractions of European law (which was often barely understood), were met with long periods of imprisonment under extremely harsh conditions. Cruel treatment from sadistic jailers added to the high death rate among prisoners. More recently, the island was declared a national park and, with its hotel and holiday cottages, is a popular place among visitors.

While the small museum on the island documents its grim history, there is little, besides a casually roped off section marking a mass grave, which conveys the islands's political symbolism for the local Aboriginal community. For this community, Rottnest Island has become yet another instance of the contempt with which they feel their sacred sites and symbols are generally regarded (pers comm, Robert Bropho, Community leader, Fringe Dwellers of the Swan Valley, Perth, 24 April 1992). The parallels with Robben Island, as an intensely emotional symbol of black

political resistance, are obvious. It is vital that these, and other symbols of marginalised communities in South Africa, are treated with dignity and respect.

In this field too, the NMC has initiated some encouraging moves, by for example, proposing that a house in Kimberley, which once belonged to Sol T Plaatje, noted author, editor and secretary of the SA Native National Congress (later the African National Congress), be declared a national monument. Through the combined efforts of De Beers and the ANC, the house has been bought and, once restored, will contain a museum on the man and his life. This will be the first museum in South Africa, dedicated to the memory of a black person and its preservation is not only a triumph for all those involved, but is also an excellent example of community involvement and co-operation among a wide range of organisations.

My final proposal revolves around the necessity of relating heritage conservation to basic needs, such as housing and basic rights, such as the right to education. Conservationists tend to forget that conservation issues are rooted in a socio-economic and political context, and that consequently, strategies to elicit support from the public should take cognisance of those realities. Consider for example, the village of Wittewater, one of the many historically important mission stations dotted around the Cape. Many of the houses are falling into ruin, not because of deliberate neglect, but because the high cost of restoration cannot be met by their inhabitants, many of whom are impoverished pensioners (Seale, 1990). Here too, the NMC is working with the

community to restore a community-owned house as an example of what a fully-restored building should look like (pers comm, Matthew Beukes, Principal, Wittewater Primary School, 13 February 1992). However, although the residents of Wittewater are very keen to restore their homes, it should be acknowledged that the houses are primarily places of residence, and that the fundamental requirement is to make them habitable, not to turn them into museum show pieces.

Another way of making heritage conservation relevant to the needs of local communities, is to find new uses for heritage structures - uses which repond to the most pressing issues within the community. The Sol T. Plaatje museum is an admirable illustration of the constructive way in which heritage and basic needs issues could be simultaneously addressed - the museum is also home to 'The Bridge', a programme aimed at upgrading the educational standards of underprivileged children in Kimberley (Nevill, 1991).

The tendency of heritage conservation until quite recently, has been to reflect the historical triumphs of a small section of the South African population in a manner which has encouraged the divisions bequeathed by the past. I believe, however, that we in South Africa have finally reached a point in our history where we have a chance to heal our wounds and begin the slow, painful process of transforming ourselves into a nation. A fundamental contribution to this process would be the acknowledgement and commemmoration of our common past.

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