

# A Tale of Two Apartheid Museums: Spatial Politics, Culture and Memory in Post Apartheid South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

To many South Africans, the end of Apartheid is almost unbelievable. After decades of unscrupulous and merciless racial oppression, white-only rule is gone. As the new political and spatial freedoms sink in, the people of South Africa are beginning to formulate how to commemorate and curate the nightmare of Apartheid. It was a defining era in the developmental arc of South Africa, a span of years that defines all that came before and after. As with other atrocities in human history it is crucial to remember Apartheid, for in such memorialization there is the hope that it will not be repeated. And in this hope lies the slow healing of the deep wounds it inflicted and the optimism to begin building a race blind future.

The strategy of museums as institutions for this effort is not an obvious solution for a country where a majority of the population was denied access to the nation's museum until nine years ago. Instead, oral histories made up the bulk of memorialization among the non-white population of South Africa. But the history and effects of Apartheid goes beyond that population. It includes the white population – Afrikaans and English, and it includes the international communities that participated in both its propping up and the tearing down. It is a history that must be remembered all over the world – for its insidious legalism, its official lies and its brutal repressions. And so, inevitably, museums dedicated to Apartheid will be built – probably one in every major town in the country.

Already in cities all over South Africa there are small community generated museums that document the local impacts of some aspects of the Apartheid era. In Cape Town the District Six Museum commemorates the vibrant section of the city which was bull-dozed in the 1970s to make way for new white development. That development was never built, and the land that was District Six is a vast gap in the Cape Town fabric

that, while still contested ground, is slowly being filled with educational, residential and public facilities. In Soweto, there is a moving museum/memorial named after Hector Peterson, the best known of the 200 students shot in the 1976 student protest against continually degraded education. In another part of Soweto, an impromptu community center museum documents the neighborhood of Klip Town which will soon be the location of a large project subject to an international competition. None of these museums attempts to take on the entire scope of the history and consequences of Apartheid.

To date, there are only two Museums under way that are formally dedicated to the larger story Apartheid. They are two of many likely efforts to explain, document, and curate the Apartheid story. The first of these was opened near Johannesburg to great fanfare and critical acclaim in 2001 and has been mistaken by many South Africans and most foreigners as “The Official” Apartheid Museum. Fortunately, this is not the case. While the National Museum in Pretoria is curating materials and mounting focussed and limited exhibitions on particular events, the nation has avoided such a certainly contentious “official” project. No doubt the experienced leaders of the “new” South Africa are waiting for some years to give perspective and for time to heal some of the most grievous wounds before undertaking to build the consensus around such an institution. So the new museum near Johannesburg, by virtue of the being the “first”, has gained great prominence.

However, another museum dedicated to Apartheid is also underway. This one is located in a much less visible location and is only just now under construction due to delays that grow out of its political and cultural context. When seen in light of the Johannesburg project, this museum is a radically different institution, both physically and culturally. It calls into question the internationally accepted and seemingly natural strategies of presentation and memorialization of eras of profound upheav-

al—think Holocaust Museum in D.C.. This is particularly relevant in a country where ninety percent of the population has been excluded from these types of institutions until quite recently, and in a nation where oral traditions of memory sharing are still alive and vivid.

Taken together, these two museums provide an important perspective on the importance of spatial remedies to the severe spatial consequences of Apartheid.

### THE SPATIAL IMPACT OF APARTHEID

What do I mean by severe spatial consequences of Apartheid and the need to remedy them? While apartheid ended in South Africa legally and politically in 1994, its policies still affect everyone spatially, socially and economically. Aferall, “apartheid” means separation, and a large proportion of the laws and policies of Apartheid were about formalizing and extending the already existent and long standing racial segregation in South Africa. After the election of the Nationalist Party to power in 1948, the Parliament rapidly passed a series of Acts that spatialized segregation: The Group Areas Act, 1950; The Population Registration Act, 1950; The Bantu Authorities Act (establishing so-called “homelands”), 1951; The Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act (required passbooks for movement), 1952;

From the window of an airplane it is easy to see how deeply Apartheid is written into South Africa at the scale of the landscape. Even the smallest towns appear as two towns. One consists of a grid of tree-lined streets and comfortable houses surrounded by lawns. Its shriveled twin, always some distance away, but connected by a well-traveled road, has a much tighter grid of dirt roads lined with tiny houses or shacks. Here trees are a rarity and lawns non-existent. This pattern appears no matter the size of the population: here, the white town and, over there, the black “township”.

The implications of this separation are compounded in large cities: huge distances separate the black townships and the jobs in the “white” city. While no longer prohibited from living inside these cities, most working class blacks cannot afford the move, and many do not want to leave their communities. So they remain in the township locations where transportation to work remains inconvenient, expensive, and overcrowded (and therefore dangerous).

This is only the largest scale of what emerged as the compulsive racist neatness of Apartheid. Not only was dwelling separated, but of course so were schooling and health care and all other services and activities. No commercial facilities were allowed to service the townships without permission from the government. The pass laws meant that anyone of color had to have explicit permission and reason to be anyplace outside of his or her

residential area. Access to a public library or museum was automatically out of the question. One government strategy of containing people deemed to be politically dangerous was “banning”, where the person was confined to a given area and not allowed to be in a room with more than one person at a time. Defiance of banning was a popular resistance strategy during the Struggle (as the movement against Apartheid was known). Steve Biko, in particular, used this defiance to great effect.

During Apartheid the townships were giant bedroom communities for the essentially captive, underpaid labor that built the prosperity of South Africa. Now, as middle class blacks are able to move to formerly all-white neighborhoods in the cities, the townships are poor working communities struggling to make themselves into towns. Shops for food and basic necessities are just now establishing themselves in a convenient manner in the townships. Rather than abandon the township locations, the new government is building houses there by the thousands—but few other new buildings. It is an odd policy that reinforces the separation from the hearts of the cities, and causes one to wonder about the perspective of the new government. In what appears to be an effort to avoid confrontation with the already nervous white community, the current administration seems unwilling to forcibly reverse this segregation by building this new housing closer to employment and within the cities.

Regardless of the wisdom of the current government policy, everyone in South Africa who experienced Apartheid seems to naturally understand the language of space and architecture. Blacks lived their lives within the tight confines of the small houses of the townships, the factory and the path between them, unless employed as domestic workers or gardeners in the homes of the wealthy whites or as cleaners and errand “boys” for offices.

### THE TALES: GOLD AND RED

So, this is a tale of two Apartheid Museum projects. These buildings could not be better suited to describing two extremes of possible responses to the cultural context and conflicts of the “new” South Africa. The first one, which I will call “Gold”, reflects a kind of international liberalism cloaked in political correctness and victim drama. The other, I call “Red”, is a community based project framed by a radical rethinking of the project of memorializing, bringing to light the fractured qualities of memory and the imperfect definition of victim and perpetrator. The architectural language and curatorial program of each museum reflects its physical context, its historical perspective, the experience of the client group, and the process by which it came into existence.

**TALE ONE: GOLD**

The Gold Reef Apartheid Museum is located on the outskirts of Johannesburg on land reclaimed from a played out gold mine. These mines were the reason for this city which appeared almost overnight after gold was discovered in the 1870s. Despite its relatively late arrival and relatively remote inland location, the city became South Africa's economic engine. Unlike San Francisco, which was at some remove from the California gold fields, Johannesburg was built right on top of the mines. The ground under the downtown is laced with abandoned mining tunnels which present a constant hazard during large building construction. In other nearby locations, the gold was removed through strip mining, and everywhere in the landscape of greater Johannesburg, hills of slag and barren excavated overburden dot the landscape and leave tears in the continuity of building development. And all that wealth, all that gold was dug out primarily by abused and poorly paid, black laborers.

The city, along with the province of Guateng, have been urging developers to occupy reclaimed land to help fill in these huge gaps in the metropolitan landscape. In step the Krok brothers, scions of a wealthy family who made their fortune developing and selling toxic skin-lightening creams to a nation where light skin was a precious cultural commodity. The Krok brothers wanted to build a huge casino in tandem with a themed amusement park, Gold Reef City, which "recreates" old Johannesburg of the gold boomtown era complete with Las Vegas style amenities like roller coasters and other rides. The site they had their eye on was an abandoned gold mine site on the outskirts of Johannesburg, a 15 minute drive from the center of the city, and a 25 minute drive from Soweto.

The City of Johannesburg was happy to see such development, but demanded a give-back in exchange for development assistance of all sorts. In response, the Krok brothers started with imagining a recreation of tribal villages – but were challenged to go far beyond such a trite vision by the excellent team of architects and planners they hired to visualize the project. The idea then evolved into a "People's Museum", a step up from the village recreation scenario to talk about the history of the various peoples of South Africa. The theme of a Museum to Apartheid was settled on only after a trip to Washington DC, to see the Holocaust Museum as a model for museum excellence. This is how the Gold Reef Apartheid Museum ended up as a small player isolated in a landscape of endless parking lots. The real attractions at this suburban locale is the theme park and the casino, which shout for attention with huge colorful signs and the giant ferris wheel. The Museum is overwhelmed by the spectacles that surround it and set a discordant tone for the serious nature of its content.

The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C. did more than just inspire those who programmed the Gold Reef Apartheid

Museum. It provided a prototype of how architectural language might be deployed to create metaphoric spaces of oppression. The notion is that the architectural qualities of the spaces act in concert with the content to generate an almost visceral experience of the events described in the displays. Here movement up and down is used metaphorically. Ceiling height is deployed strategically to compress and release the visitors' bodies as they move through. Lighting dramatizes. In some places sound design encompasses the visitor. What little material evidence of Apartheid that exists is mostly two dimensional documents. These, along with photographs and text are displayed on and sometimes within a labyrinth of wire boxes intended to remind us of cages. While all these dramatic devices are occasionally effective in terms of evoking emotion, in the end the visitor starts to feel suspicious. Perhaps the memory of the Theme Park across the parking lot lingers. Perhaps we have become suspicious in this age of media manipulation. What is the goal of all this staging? What are we meant to believe? What has not been said?

This narrative curatorial style by nature leaves much unsaid and many points of view unrepresented. The museum has been criticized by many as omitting all but a handful of the thousands and thousands of white members of the ANC and other anti-apartheid groups, many who were imprisoned, banned, or killed for their stances and actions. It has also been criticized for its un-nuanced version of the conflicts between the ANC and other black organizations during and after the Apartheid era. It eliminates almost entirely the role the Communist Party played both in supporting and drawing suspicion to the ANC. Many black South Africans who lived through the Apartheid years and suffered under the Nationalist regime find the museum exhibits melodramatic. For me, the opening gambit of receiving an entry card marked "white" or "non-white" was particularly weak. Visiting the museum with a black friend, we intentionally took on each others race and entered by the separate gates similarly marked. But the impact of this gesture of segregation is rapidly diffused by the fact that after only 20 meters of photographs and text, and a supposed confrontation with cutouts of officials seated at a table judging the color category one should be placed in, the paths reunite. The whole exercise seemed trite in the light of the stories I had been hearing in the townships. Exhibits of pass cards cannot contain the humiliation of being stopped routinely to have one inspected. A room with a ceiling hung with a grid of 121 hangman's nooses (the number of known political prisoners executed in custody) can never evoke the horror of illegal midnight arrests, random imprisonings, torture and death. And a small room overwhelmed by the heavy metal hulk of a government armored personnel carrier cannot transmit the never-stable mix of fear and courage required daily in the Struggle to end the Apartheid regime.

The museum seems designed for those who never really experienced the dehumanizing repression and violence of

Apartheid. It is for the white people, the foreigners, and for the generation of South Africans of all colors now in high school who never directly experienced Apartheid. It is an elegantly made container that emphasizes the violence, hatred, divisiveness and tension of the decades. The picture is drawn with a broad brush and does not address the complicity and participation of some blacks with the white regime. Nor does it probe the complexities of the racist tensions fomented between blacks and those designated "colored" by Apartheid. Finally, the Gold Reef Apartheid Museum does little to move beyond the Struggle, to describe the true miracle of South Africa: the remarkably peaceful transition from the legalized routine racism of Apartheid to the current vision of the nation as a race-blind democracy. It does not grapple with the complexities of the painful Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, nor does it take on the stories of white racists who have slowly begun to understand the ignorance and small mindedness of their beliefs.

Despite its cultural and curatorial failings, the project is a well-crafted and exquisitely detailed piece of architecture by Johannesburg architects Mashabane Rose. The spaces are skillfully deployed in an attempt to mitigate the obvious inappropriateness of the site. After entry into through the white/non-white gates, one emerges onto the roof, treated as landscape. A large bulk of building and a high, well-placed wall shut out views of the theme Park and Casino, leaving open a view across the reclaimed mined landscape to Johannesburg in the distance. It almost works except for the faint screams of gleeful fear from the roller coaster at Gold Reef City. A long flight of stairs leads from this almost contemplative landscape down into the museum proper. After wandering through the exhibits that stretch along the spine of the long narrow building, one re-emerges out into the landscape—where emotions are released and the fresh air is welcome. Another wall blocks the Theme Park, the parking lot and the busloads of school children and tourists arriving. This is a generous gesture to the visitor—a snippet of recovery time before being flung back out in the commercialized world of Gold Reef City.

Taking advantage of this, I stopped in the restrooms conveniently located near the exit—where the beautiful, expensive detailing of the project continued. As I washed my hands in the latest model Kohler stainless sink, I could not help but think of the almost unimaginable scope of poverty I had witnessed in the townships—and the remarkable dignity of the people who faced it daily. Here, at this new museum on the edge of Gold Reef City, 80 million rand had been spent on an elegant building that employs mostly whites. The extravagance of this budget was made evident by the fact that there was plenty of money left over for high-end fixtures in the restrooms. I emerged into the sunlight angry, registering I a new way what any residents of the townships had told me: the new threat to the stability of South Africa is now the enormous divide between classes.

## TALE TWO: RED

As if to respond to the Gold Reef Apartheid Museum, The Museum of Struggle, has just begun construction in the heart of the black township of New Brighton, next to the small south coast city of Port Elizabeth. [Map] New Brighton is one of the oldest black townships in South Africa. This is due to the fact that unlike most of the black townships which were completely new communities plopped down on barren soil, it was an existing mixed race working class town. When the Group Areas Act, which separated people into living communities by race, was passed in 1950, the non-black residents of New Brighton were forced to relocate, leaving behind the remains of an already intact community. This history is often cited by the people of New Brighton when they are asked why they think that the ANC got its start in the livingrooms of the shacks of the community. New Brighton was the location of some the earliest ANC civil disobedience actions, beginning in 1952. While this was only four years into the Apartheid regime, the legacy of segregation and forced removals go back to 1847 in Port Elizabeth.

The oldest part of New Brighton is a grid of unusual shacks made of very thick, old fashioned corrugated iron. It is rusted red with age. These are the remains of barracks, originally constructed to house Boer women and children in the English concentration camps during the Boer war. Later the buildings were used as army barracks, then relocated to New Brighton in 1903 as the beginning of a "model native settlement". The red color of the iron oxide paint, now peeling and rusting, gave the area the poetic name of Red Location. Most of these historic buildings have been much modified, added onto over the decades, with bits and pieces of the red iron hauled off and reused in other parts of the township. They are unsafe and barely habitable.

After Apartheid ended, a group of community leaders in the Port Elizabeth Area began work on a scheme to preserve Red Location and the history it represents and use it to attract tourists and their dollars to the still isolated New Brighton township. The group included Govan Mbeeki, esteemed ANC leader and friend of Mandela, whose son is the current president of South Africa. In 1998 a national competition was announced for the design of a town center precinct which would restore some of the corrugated iron houses, and include new housing along with a library and markethall, and an Apartheid Museum.

The competition was won by the small South African firm of Noero-Wolff. And it is interesting to note that Mashabane Rose, the architects for the Gold Reef City Museum, were awarded second place. The winning scheme envisioned a bustling precinct with bus and taxi ranks, open-air vending and informal trading along with more formalized shops and new higher density housing. Three things stand out in this scheme over the

others proposed. First, the proposal is carefully controlled so as not to overwhelm the existing fabric of New Brighton which is almost entirely single story small single family houses on small walled lots. New public space is carefully sized to become open, but not vast. The scale of the new buildings along the street is kept low. The street edges are reinforced by the buildings, but also graciously allow for occupation by providing shaded porches for walking, sitting and talking, and trading. This is one of many places the architects created for the architecture to support and improve the difficult lives of the residents of the township. Another is the waiting benches at the taxi and bus ranks which include a metal armature that can become hanging and display areas for the informal traders who inevitably show up at these locations all over the world.

Second, the architectural language deployed over the site is one of a straightforward, slightly industrial aesthetic. It is a celebration of the ordinary materials that the local people have scrounged over the years to keep out the rain and hold the Red Location shacks together. And it is a nod to the factories across the railroad tracks from Red Location where the ANC first began to form among auto-workers. It is also an acknowledgment that the architectural language of museums, libraries and other kinds of existing civic buildings in South Africa have little positive resonance with black and colored South Africans. These represent, instead, the language of exclusion from public life, and of officialdom and long waits for revised passcards.

Finally, the winning scheme took the risk of proposing an explicit curatorial program for the museum. The strategy avoids the narrative hierarchy of the Gold Reef Museum, the Holocaust Museum, or many other contemporary memorial museums around the world. Instead, the architects devised a spatial network that presents multiple narratives on the same oppressive era. This is achieved through the creation of a huge, undifferentiated space with no windows, the only light from saw-tooth skylights covering it all. Within the space are twelve equally sized rooms called "memory boxes", closed on all sides except for a door, and open on the top to varying degrees to allow light to filter in from above. Each box presents a different perspective on the experience of Apartheid. Each tells its own story in its own language. The idea is that memory is unstable and composed of multiple perspectives. These are not the narrations of victor, nor of victims. They are not focussed on specific events—though they may tell stories of things that happened. They are focussed on the complex human experiences and memories of the era. The gloomy empty space in between the boxes evokes the half-light of trying to remember, of images receding out of focus, out of reach, of the state between a dream and waking.

In this museum, the architecture acts as a vast container. While the language and materials of the container have meaning, the building itself does not strive to affect emotions. Instead it has the abstract potential of emptiness—an emptiness to be filled

by imagination. The main exhibit hall is one large memory box, to be filled without hierarchy by various points of views, stories, artifacts. Clearly, the building is an explicit critique of the very kind of museum that is at Gold Reef City. As Noero writes paraphrasing Andreas Huyssen, "... we should move beyond the museum's present role as a giver of canonical truths and cultural authority, duping its visitors as manipulated and reified cultural cattle."

"The Museum seeks to remember the past in ways that are both familiar and frightening," says Jo Noero, "One of the horrors of apartheid was the sense of normalcy—the ability of its perpetrators to shut out from memory the ghastly consequences of institutionalized racism. And yet, at the time, the sense of impending terror in the country was undeniable." Noero should know. He was an active member of the ANC, architect to the Episcopal Archdiocese (which would make his primary client Archbishop Desmond Tutu), and a member of the Communist Party.

Construction on the Museum is just now getting underway, delayed by over two years by local politics. The politically savvy citizens of New Brighton insisted on the construction of the housing component of the project before the Museum was begun. Given their past experiences with broken promises from the municipal government, this is entirely understandable. There was a brief moment in 2001 when it seemed the Museum might not happen at all. The funds earmarked for the Museum were eyed by Municipal Council members representing white neighborhoods who have had difficulty living on their reduced portion of the area's wealth. However, raiding of the fund was forestalled and ground was broken for the Museum in January 2003. The recent shift in the name from Apartheid Museum to Museum of Struggle may in part be an attempt to distinguish the New Brighton project from the Gold Reef Apartheid Museum. It may also signal a change in the focus of the content as curators begin to work.

Clearly it is not yet possible to evaluate the architectural and experiential consequences of this approach to memorializing Apartheid. There are still important curatorial decisions to be made about this project. It cannot be author free. Along with the content of the boxes, particular individuals and events will be memorialized in a "walk of heroes" and a "hall of columns".

## IN CONCLUSION

So, just as the Gold Reef Apartheid Museum was part of a larger tourist development scheme, so is the Museum of Struggle. But there the similarities end. These two museums encapsulate the important challenges to architecture in a country where an enormous historical shift is taking place. They embody the extremes of the possible cultural strategies for memorialization as South Africa struggles with the challenges of dismantling the

spatial, economic, educational, social and cultural legacy of Apartheid. And they raise an equally troubling question of what is or may be forgotten – and how.

The political and cultural dynamics of South Africa are tense – far from resolved. Part of the needed resolution is the reorganizing of space to reflect the new sharing of power of life and landscape. In this context the cultural production and symbolism of architecture carries intensified meaning. It raises questions of where the narrative and referential power of buildings should be located and the ethical and cultural role architects and architecture plays in articulating this power.

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Vuisile Pandle and Celia Mtati, New Brighton Community Liaisons on Apartheid Museum
- The following residents of New Brighton: Tobeka Scolotela, Tozama Scolotela, Pulma Mngadi, Bongozina Fini, Bonginkosi Berick Sidliki
- Leslie Musikivahnu, architect, Johannesburg
- Albie Sachs, Justice of the South African Constitutional Court

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