

Searching for Relevance:

Survival Strategies of Museums During Times of Political Uncertainty in South Africa

Thomas W. Thurner

Introduction

In 1925 the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs published his first book based on the theory that human memory functions within a collective context. Collective memory, Halbwachs stated, is always selective – different groups of people share distinct collective memories. Therefore, social groups create their images of the world through agreed-upon versions of the past that are vital for their common identity. In France, for example, wealthy old families remember the past differently from the nouveaux riches, while constructions of reality by members of the working class differ from those of their middle-class counterparts.

Social, collective and historical memory are provisional, however; their sustenance requires conscious effort by institutions or groups, as they can be contested, forgotten, suppressed, invented or reinvented. As social memory exerts a powerful influence over the common future by reinventing a common past, it is frequently used as a strategy in political and ideological struggles such as World War II, the Palestine conflict, strife in postcolonial Africa or the breaking up of Yugoslavia (Paez et al., 2008; Supple, 2005; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 2007; Brundage, 2000; Buruma, 1994; Stoller, 1995; Werbner, 1998). Novels such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* portray vividly the enormous control over collective memory wielded by totalitarian regimes.

The sustaining or reinvention of dominant social beliefs and collective memories is supported by cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, monuments and heritage sites. Not surprisingly, these institutions find themselves in the line of fire in any politically or ideologically motivated conflict. The use of cultural institutions in the inventing and reinventing of social memory has been studied in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union (e.g., Gstraunthaler and Piber, 2011).

In the South African context, post-apartheid examination of the Afrikaner version of history shows that African art, history and culture were largely ignored (Coetzee and Nuttall, 1998; Coombes, 2003; Rassool, 2006; Erasmus, 2001). Also, social memory told only one side of the story, giving identity to just one ethnic group. It is not surprising that this situation changed after the abolition of apartheid. As early as 1991 the African National Congress (ANC) set up a commission on Museums, Monuments and Heraldry within the department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. This body was replaced in 1993 by the Commission for Reconstruction and Transformation of the Arts and Culture, and the new commission scrutinized the strategy of the old museum establishment for transforming the museum sector and released a report titled *Museums for South Africa: Intersectoral Investigation for National Policy*.

Andre Odendaal, director of the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa,

Thomas W. Thurner, PhD, is Adjunct Professor at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa, and Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia. His research interests lie in creativity, art and cultural institutions and their role in social and economic development.

has summarized the ANC view of Museums for South Africa (MUSA): “Almost predictably, I regret to say, the old apartheid bureaucrats and the museum establishment who dominated MUSA were unable to come up with the answer. As far as the African National Congress is concerned, MUSA does not even get out of the starting blocks. [It] can only be seen as an attempt by the old state bureaucracy and the museums establishment to unilaterally restructure the South African museum sector, preserve the status quo and pre-empt democratic processes and changes.” He further stated that “the conscious and unconscious ideological functions of (their) collections were being ignored” (quoted in Coombes, 2003, p. 15).

The early years post-apartheid were characterized by a struggle between the old regime and the new. The old regime attempted to prolong its influence through strategic appointments and acquisitions prior to the general election. When the cultural policy-makers finally moved on, new dark clouds appeared. The National Arts Council of South Africa (NAC) was founded in 1997 but was disbanded 10 years later due to allegations of mismanagement and corruption. After artists demonstrated for more transparency in arts funding, the NAC got off to a fresh start in August 2006.¹ Meanwhile a number of provincial bodies had not yet established decentralized arts funding, and artists and cultural institutions, especially those in rural areas, were receiving no government funding at all. Critics voiced concern that the Ministry of Arts and Culture was merely organizing parties and commemorative events and that the formulation and implementation of policies was largely being ignored (Rassool, 2006).

The situation has improved significantly since that time. The current cultural policy supports the arts as a means to enhance social cohesion

and economic empowerment. Art is seen as giving identity to the new South Africa and as vital to its economy.



Research Question and Methodology

With the victory of the ANC in South Africa’s first free elections, in 1994, the focus shifted to monuments and heritage sites. These were seen as more suited than museums to the task of relating the history of the struggle against apartheid, which had become the unifying feature of the South African view of history.² In South Africa, interest moved away from museums in the European tradition – collecting artifacts to be exhibited by a team of curators. A number of newly created museums and heritage sites have received the lion’s share of attention and no scholarly work has been devoted to the struggle of other museums to survive in the new setting. This article attempts to fill the void by analyzing the survival strategies of two museums at the frontlines of the battle. One has a long and remarkable history of collecting Africana. The other was founded in 2003 but soon fell victim to mismanagement of funds (provided by the state) and had to find alternative means of survival. As the stability ensured by their institutional status vanishes, these two museums are struggling to find a new place in the museum landscape and new social relevance. The article is intended to show the degree to which museums are able to choose freely between the different options available to them and the extent to which their choices are constrained by their trajectories.

Museums are fascinating research subjects, particularly from a policy perspective. They can be a means of relating the development of a nation from the Stone Age to the present day. By

ABSTRACT

The author attempts to shed light on the consequences of politically induced changes in the museum landscape. He describes how two South African museums, Museum Africa and the Origins Centre, search for and find new relevance after the demise of apartheid and the rise of a new political regime. While one museum finds new meaning in its collection, the other joins forces with other institutions and takes advantage of new business opportunities. This article discusses survival mechanisms of institutions that rarely find their way into the headlines and thereby creates awareness of the potential consequences of political changes for cultural life.

KEYWORDS

Social capital, museum management, strategy, legitimacy

focusing on the cultural distinctiveness of regions within the broader historical landscape, museums can foster the creation of identities for regions or ethnic groups as well as the nation as a whole. In this way museums can become vital instruments for nation-building, which is particularly important in times of political change and retelling of the historical narrative (Gstraunthaler and Piber, 2011). However, observers of the museum landscape might get the impression that policy-makers perceive them as highly agile organizations with built-in survival mechanisms. For example, when state budgets are tight, museums are expected to make up for any shortfall by becoming profit-making institutions. Such sudden paradigmatic shifts leave museums organizationally vulnerable, often with dire consequences (Gstraunthaler and Piber, 2007).

In support of this line of argument, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the directors, various curators and members of the management team at the two museums.³ The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes and were audiorecorded, transcribed and analyzed. Data collection and analysis was supported by interviews with leading South African specialists in arts and culture and by examination of selected documents.



Museum Africa: "To tell stories that had not been told before"

"Housed in what used to be the city's main fruit and vegetable market, MuseuMAfrica is Johannesburg's major history and cultural history museum. The structure of the original building, erected in 1913, has now been imaginatively built into a modern arch building, with new pillars driven into the clay soil to support the several floors, without

connecting to the original outside skin of the building. Its collections have been accumulated and preserved since 1933, when an impressive collection of Africana was bought by the Johannesburg Public Library from J.C. Gubbins, turning the museum into Africana Museum in Progress, with most exhibitions showing collections of black traditional culture . . . you step into the typical 1950s shebeen at MuseuMAfrica in Newtown, downtown Johannesburg, and an automatic motion monitor churns out a Marabi tune. You are instantly transported back in time and spontaneously overwhelmed with emotion. For those whose collective cultural memory is embedded in the permanent exhibition, the museum is pregnant with nostalgia. And complete with mannequins in Stetson hats, the gumba-gumba record player and the inescapable bar atmosphere, the shebeen comes alive." (Museum Africa Web site: http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=252&Itemid=51)

Museum Africa is located in the heart of Johannesburg. The museum began its work in the early 1930s by collecting everyday objects from African cultures. Housing one of the most impressive collections of its kind, Museum Africa reflects the *Zeitgeist* better than most of its peers. Yet it is not the collection itself that is most valued by the museum and the community. Its mandate was to study "the other," the unknown, the cultures of Africa as seen from a European perspective. No matter its original purpose, the collection now offers valuable access to the different identities of the South African and broader African societies. This is particularly important given the many refugees living in Johannesburg and in South Africa generally. *It started in 1930 as the Africana museum and was always perceived as Eurocentric. It did collect diverse cultural material, yet it was informed by the dominant historical logic. [At the height of] apartheid, they collected [objects] about the others . . . The collection might*

RÉSUMÉ

L'article met en lumière les conséquences de changements, amenés par des bouleversements politiques, à la légitimité du paysage muséal. Il décrit comment deux musées sud-africains, Museum Africa et The Origins Centre, cherchent et trouvent une nouvelle pertinence après l'effondrement de l'apartheid et l'instauration d'un nouveau régime politique. Le premier musée découvre un nouveau sens à sa collection et le second s'associe à d'autres institutions pour tirer avantage de nouvelles perspectives commerciales. L'auteur attire l'attention sur les mécanismes de survie d'institutions qui font rarement les manchettes et suscite ainsi une prise de conscience des répercussions possibles de changements politiques sur la vie culturelle.

MOTS CLÉS

Capital social, gestions muséale, stratégie, légitimité

reflect the ideological bias, but also what might have [been] hidden within that. You may find progressive and humanistic stories hidden within that. This museum represents these contradictions. This is its strength! (Director)

Given its history and the richness of its collection, Museum Africa was well positioned to contribute meaning to the new South Africa. In fact staff members recall how excited they were about the new opportunities and the museum's contribution to the development process. In the first democratic elections in 1994, there even was a ballot box placed in the museum. *From 1992 onwards, we were planning our displays. The first display was called Transformation and was [linked to] the political changes. Our target market were black urban kids.* (Curator)

Despite the excitement and motivation, Museum Africa soon lost its prominent position in the museum landscape through an unfortunate chain of events. Most particularly, the museum suffered from a lack of leadership and a loss of curatorial talent. Many well-regarded staff members left to take up positions elsewhere. Although they all had different reasons for leaving, the museum was not able to replace the personnel it lost.

One of the key reasons why it was impossible for Museum Africa to replace highly qualified personnel was organizational insecurity. There were long delays before positions were confirmed by the City of Johannesburg. *People were merely acting in their positions. The acting head of the museum – for eight years they never actually confirmed her post. For some reason they couldn't.* (Curator)

The transformation of society also resulted in the replacement of management personnel. When a new director was appointed at Museum Africa, many staff members disagreed with his vision of the transformation and some of the

new managers he brought in were seen as lacking in the necessary expertise.

At the same time, other institutions perused the huge collection of Museum Africa and found valuable pieces for their own exhibitions. As public attention shifted to heritage sites such as Robben Island, those sites were given access to the storeroom and archives at Museum Africa. In 1996 the museum's in-house exhibitions came to an end. There was no money to add new pieces to the collection and the museum slowly but surely fell into disuse. Exhibitions were brought in from outside and dealt predominantly with art rather than history. Visitors kept returning to Museum Africa only to find contemporary art exhibitions by organizations that had rented space from the museum. Their disappointment is well documented in the comments entered in the museum's visitor books.

In 2009 the museum finally got a new director. The new director, who had previously been at the Hector Pieterse Museum, began to revitalize Museum Africa and return it to its former glory. He explains that the museum now has a different role to play and that the absence of successful exhibitions is not worrisome. *Museums tell stories – now we want to tell a story.* (Director)

One of the first actions of the new director was to tackle the staffing problem. He is seeking people with research skills, experience in organizing in-house exhibitions and experience in contextualizing exhibitions in order to make the huge collection accessible. At the moment he is focused on filling key positions that have long been vacant. The director was asked about the kind of people he hoped to attract. *We want people who have research skills, who can do exhibitions in-house. We want to make our collection accessible. I want to improve the role of the museum as a centre of research. I have an ambiguous attitude [towards] museums . . . as self-sufficient and income-generating. I don't think we should [take]*

RESUMEN

En este artículo se trata de arrojar luz sobre las consecuencias de los cambios inducidos por factores políticos sobre la legitimidad del medio de los museos. Se describe cómo dos museos surafricanos, el Museum Africa y el The Origins Centre, buscan y encuentran una nueva pertinencia después de la caída del Apartheid y el ascenso de un nuevo régimen político. Mientras que uno de los museos redescubre un nuevo significado para su colección, el otro suma fuerzas con otras instituciones y aprovecha las nuevas oportunidades comerciales. En el artículo se destacan los mecanismos de supervivencia de instituciones que rara vez se encuentran mencionadas en los titulares, de manera a crear conciencia sobre las posibles consecuencias de los cambios políticos sobre la vida cultural.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Capital social, gestión de museo, estrategia, legitimidad

the commercial route. At the moment we're not charging [an] entrance fee. If we want [people] to pay, we have to offer something. (Director)



The Origins Centre: "We are who we are because of who we were"

Opened by President Thabo Mbeki in 2006, the Origins Centre is a world-class museum dedicated to exploring and celebrating the history of modern humankind, telling the story of the emergence of human beings and humanity in southern Africa. Conceptualised by a team of academics and designers from Wits University, the museum aims to provide visitors with a unique experience of Africa's rich, complex heritage." (Origins Centre Web site: www.origins.org.za)

The Origins Centre at Witwatersrand University bills itself as a museum of human evolution, exhibiting early human remains and some of the earliest images made by human beings found in South Africa. Starting with fossils discovered in South Africa, it explores the contributions made to our understanding of the development of humankind. The focus moves through the development of art, symbolism and technology, restoring Africa's rightful place in history – at the very beginning of mankind's journey towards humanity. A few years after the Centre was founded, Witwatersrand University decided to change its management and to bring a more business-oriented culture to the museum. The Origins Centre was reopened in 2006 as a for-profit museum. *The university felt that the academics didn't have the requisite skills to make a business success. They wanted to introduce a business logic and insisted [on appointing] a commercial operator to run the museum. They introduced the café and ticketing [as well as] functions and events. They also brought in training facilities.* (Director)

Dissatisfaction with the commercial operator set in, however, and eventually a group of university employees took over the running of the Centre. The new management is quite happy with what they have achieved – with support from the university, such as legal advice and infrastructure support. The business is now structured into four categories: functions and events, education, the shop and the museum. *Functions and events is our main source of income. The education section shows the biggest growth. We train tourist guides and so forth, but also target rural communities [for training] in various skills.* (Member of management team)

One of the lessons the management team has learned from the former commercial operator is to focus on short-term business indicators and to keep operations small. Instead of trying to maximize visitor numbers, the team concentrates on bringing people in through different activities.

The team has also learned from the failures of the previous operator, mostly with regard to staff and culture – for instance, not everybody is cut out for museum work, and while some managers are strong in supervisory and disciplinary skills, they are not necessarily adept at customer relations. What the management team has retained from the previous operator is a sharp focus on business operations (functions and events) and on education. The lecture series in particular has resulted in plenty of free publicity. Management does wonder whether museums in South Africa are attracting a sufficient number of people. *Newspaper coverage of our activities costs us nothing. We look at the concept of "activation": You need something . . . to get people into the building. This is particularly true in South Africa [where there is] no real demand for cultural activities.* (Director)

The setup of the Origins Centre raises questions about the role of the museum in business. As this museum spends more than it brings in, why is it still operating? One of the reasons, according to the management team, is its connection to the university and the world of science, which create spill-offs. In addition, the Centre sees the museum as complementary to its other activities. *There's no point in adopting a European museum culture, because South Africa is simply different. We decided to adapt to the needs of this society. For example, schoolkids can come, but there are resource problems and transport might be costly. So we created a mobile museum. The average South African sees museums as full of dusty exhibits. That's what's in their minds. We want to change that and to cultivate an understanding of a museum as a place to learn.* (Director)



Synopsis and Conclusions

During the transformation of the South African government, Museum Africa lost its position as shining star in the cultural life of Johannesburg. When times grew less stable and the museum world was in disarray, monuments and heritage sites became the focal point of

cultural policies. Museum Africa tried to adapt, but the original idea of showing the ideological bias of the collection and engaging in societal discourse did not bear fruit. Due to institutional insecurity, it was almost impossible for the museum to change its strategy, as the loss of the director and members of the curatorial staff had left the organization in a state of paralysis. It was the approach of telling stories that brought Museum Africa back to life. This reorientation, which allowed for a new start, was introduced by the new director, who had experience, charisma and the necessary political backing of the new order.

The museum lost its professional staff to other institutions or to corporations as experienced curators became aware of the damage caused by the disruption in the network: loss of connectivity, trust, support and exchange of resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Although each curator had a different reason for leaving, many used their own networks to find other positions. As the museum could not act as a gatekeeper, its most important resources – its rich collection and its experienced curators – were the first to go.

The director expects Museum Africa to regain its strong position. His objective is to develop the research capabilities necessary for Museum Africa to once again become a centre of excellence in museology. He hopes to achieve this through collaboration with like-minded institutions internationally.

The Origins Centre, in contrast, is focused on human evolution and had neither the time nor the ambition to play a leading role in the museum landscape. The Centre was unconnected to the museum field, and establishing contact with institutions outside its own field was met with little resistance. This allowed the Centre to make use of the entrepreneurial opportunities offered by the transformation of society, such as using art and education as a means of alleviating poverty. The new management diversified the activities of the Centre, to include education and outreach programs in order to generate income. Although the museum is costly to run, the Centre sees no need to close its doors. Interestingly, and as a consequence of the path taken, the key personnel of the Origins Centre were not curatorial in nature but people who could open up opportunities and build bridges to other areas. The experience gained by staff in the sales departments of private companies or in the education field has harvested opportunities to fill the structural holes. At the time of the interviews, the

Centre had no trained curators on staff but had gained the financial independence needed to open the way to a new future. Now, the museum is a vital part of a much larger venture that benefits from the museum's reputation.

It would be simplistic, however, to believe that such a choice comes easily and that it applies to any institution. The move was facilitated by the appointment of a commercial operator that offered learning opportunities to the new "academic" management. Also, the current management team at the Centre come from different professional backgrounds, but nobody has curatorial experience. This allows for easy connections with, for example, the educational field or commercially oriented fields. The management team rejects the museum model as relevant for the South African context, as excellence is now seen in terms of income rather than recognition by the museum world.

For the Origins Centre, the future lies in moving further into other activities. The management sees museums as a field rather unsuited to the South African public, as they perceive a lack of museum culture in the country. Therefore the Centre's museum may become further disconnected from its peers and more integrated into the other activities of the Centre.

When a cultural institution faces the dissemblance of the structure under which it operates, it first goes into a state of shock, since its very existence is under threat. The uncertainty will be echoed in the individual decisions of its staff, as key personnel will find the situation intolerable. Management will attempt to reduce the uncertainty by maintaining close ties with political actors and discussing it openly with staff members. If people wish to leave, the institution would be well advised to try to negotiate a temporary leave. This would allow staff members to gain experience in other organizations and return to the institution once the situation has stabilized.

Moving towards alternative profit-oriented business models might appear to bring short-term relief. Venturing into other activities supported by the current political regime certainly ensures access to needed resources. However, this will be possible only through access to skill sets that have thus far not been part of the institution. Consequently, curatorial staff will find their now lessened situation challenging. Once such an institution is changing from within towards new business activities, returning to a cultural

institution devoted to excellence in curatorial activities will be difficult if not impossible. Therefore, such a decision should not be taken lightly, and will ultimately be more appealing to less established institutions.

This article has examined the survival strategy of two museums in South Africa that lost relevance in the transformation of society. What do the findings mean for the field of museum management? First, they show how quickly an established museum can become marginalized and left struggling for legitimacy and relevance in the new social order. Curators and other highly skilled personnel tend to leave crumbling organizations rather quickly. Enticing curatorial talent to return will be a difficult task. The article also demonstrates the important role of a museum director in choosing the right strategy.

There is a real danger that established museums will not survive turbulent times and will disappear forever. They are unlikely to transition easily to different activities or abandon their field of expertise and establish themselves elsewhere. Therefore, policy-makers would be wise to ensure that those cultural institutions that are playing an important role are given an opportunity to continue their activities and to find relevance in the new social order.

Notes

1. See, for example, <http://mg.co.za/print/2004-05-14-fat-cats-thin-acts>.
2. District 6 Museum and Robben Island are perhaps the most prominent ones.
3. For various reasons it was not possible to obtain visitor numbers.

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