Uncast in stone: Inspired by absence to build a solid museum practice

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ABSTRACT

Museums all over the world have accepted that intangible heritage has a valuable place in the memory of the world. However, tangible and intangible heritage are often regarded as dichotomous – located at opposite ends of a spectrum, leaving many custodians of intangible heritage struggling to occupy a firm place in a sector dominated by objects, physical sites and other forms of material culture.

District Six Museum (D6M) in Cape Town, South Africa, has built a strong memory practice that rests on a constant affirmation of the synergies that can exist between tangible and intangible heritage when engaged as part of a dynamic continuum. It leans strongly towards privileging intangible heritage, advocating for it to be acknowledged as valid and substantive in its own right.

In this article, I reflect on three projects of the D6M, which serve as lenses into this methodology, demonstrating that working with intangible heritage can make sustainable impacts. At the same time, I draw on the project plans to show that conceptualising, crafting and implementing actions collaboratively with the community that is the museum's most natural and closest constituency – in this case, the displaced people of District Six – can contribute to building community cohesion and psychosocial healing. The D6M initiatives discussed in this article demonstrate the powerful possibilities inherent in processes that work closely with memory keepers as co-curators rather than as source communities.

Keywords

memory social justice, memory work, memory and affect, personal narrative, public art, absence national heritage, site work

Introduction

I am a child of a family displaced from District Six under apartheid. I have been a human rights activist since my student days, and an educator for most of my adult life. The District Six Museum (D6M) was the locale where I found that these two spheres of my involvement could find symbiotic expression, and for 20 years, ending in 2020, it was my professional home. For 12 of those years, I was its director, and even after leaving the employ of the institution, I have chosen to remain involved as a research associate and a member of the board of trustees. The power of the Museum's work and the ongoing relevance of its role continue to keep me connected.

District Six was an inner-city neighbourhood in Cape Town, South Africa that was razed to the ground as part of legally sanctioned forced removals[1] under apartheid. The once diverse area was declared 'whites only' in 1966, and those who were not classified as such were forcibly removed to racially defined, barren and under-resourced townships, which were far from the places of employment and education and the social networks of those displaced.

Although the D6M Foundation started its journey as an activist movement as far back as the late 1980s, its formal launch as a museum coincided with the birth year of the new South Africa,[2] in 1994. Its focus then extended to support community members, as they lodged claims for the loss of their right to land, to reclaim their connection to the land through memory and to be acknowledged as major partners in the future development of District Six, which includes memorialisation. The museum has been able to demonstrate that an inclusive, fluid and even ephemeral approach to memory work can be a powerful tool for building communities and inspiring their agency, particularly those who had experienced recent histories of loss. Over time, D6M has ostensibly become the 'face of the District Six story' (Coombes 2003,118), with the trajectories of the community and the institution being inextricably intertwined.

Soon after the birth of the new South Africa, the African National Congress-led Government of National Unity placed issues of heritage, culture and national identity on the agenda in all discussions about building the 'rainbow nation' (Marschall 2010; Frieslaar and Zulu 2020). It was a time of national exhilaration and a celebratory sense of achievement, tempered soon after by the troubled logistics of implementing the steps to build a lasting, rights-based democracy. The extract from the late President Nelson Mandela's speech at the opening of the Robben Island Museum[3] in 1997 makes a clear statement in this regard:

> When our museums and monuments preserve the whole of our diverse heritage, when they are inviting of the public and interact with the changes all around them, then they will strengthen our attachment to human rights, mutual respect and democracy, and help prevent these ever again being violated.

The milieu into which D6M was born enabled it to creatively occupy the concept of being a 'museum' – with all the limitations of its colonial association – in an emancipatory way. It was able to enter the fray as a new space, without outmoded curatorial practices that needed to be transformed, free from the burdened limitations inherent in older institutions. Museums that had been formed in the colonial and apartheid periods of South Africa were called upon to embark on a process of transformation, reinforced by then President Mandela, as seen in the extract above. The creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[4] in 1995 contributed to a strong awareness of the power of personal and collective memories enacted in the public sphere, and D6M found a conducive national environment within which to grow its memory work.

D6M's approach to memory

Memory has played multiple roles in the life of D6M and its associated community of displaced residents. Telling their personal stories or reminiscing with erstwhile neighbours in the museum space is often the way that they first encounter D6M.

The trauma and humiliation of having experienced forced removals as part of the larger apartheid project contributed to a diminished sense of self. Stimulating personal memory as an assertion of agency in such a context holds the potential for healing (Delport 2001; Viljoen 2016; Abrahams 2001). Memory of the land and engagement with its topography feature prominently in narrating the past of District Six. Activating memory to support people's right to return residentially was present even before the promulgation of the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994.[5] In its founding document, the D6M Foundation defined its role as being to trace, record, preserve and commemorate the rich history and the unique culture' of District Six. Tapping into excised and suppressed memories was an important way of building this record; the creation of D6M was a crucial pathway that enabled the Foundation to fulfil its custodial mandate.

Over time, the necessity of memory became more apparent, not only as a means to fill the gaps of unwritten

histories but also as a valid source of knowledge and information in its own right. D6M accepted that memory was subjective, believing that such subjectivity of memory as a source should not detract from its value (Field 1999; Linde 1993;Portelli 1991; Lowenthal 2005). D6M has made strong arguments for the validity of multiple perspectives from which to view the same historical occurrences as experienced by different people, and it continues to emphasise that there is no singular story of District Six.

Thinking of memory as a fluid and malleable process rather than as a finished product helps to illuminate its true nature. Sean Field describes memory as,' by definition, a term that directs our attention not to the past, but to the past-present relation. It is because "the past" has this living existence in the present that it matters politically'. It is also useful to note that memory of the past involves 'unravelling fragments of the past as it really happened, fragments of a past desired, and fragments of a past which meets current (and expected) future demands' (Field 1999, 7,10).

Working with the people who are memory carriers, the D6M curatorial team have been sensitive to the different and often simultaneous roles that memory recall plays in their lives. D6M understands that sharing memories does not take place solely for the purpose of relaying historical occurrences on a linear temporal plane, but that it also satisfies several inner processes of personal sense-making and recovery. The curatorial team supports people's need to recall memories that matter: whether what matters at the time relates to accessing a land claim, to narrate as full a personal story as possible so as to build and preserve the family's history and legacy or even to vent and give expression to narratives that were not previously encouraged. In the wake of the truth-telling context provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, acts of remembering and public narrating gained prevalence and validity and contributed to a dynamic and fluid practice.

Memory and affect

One of the ways in which D6M engages with the scarred site of District Six, largely vacant though it is, is through narrated site walks led by former residents. Frequently, the storytelling is tinged with fresh emotions, revealing the longing and sense of loss that still lingers despite the passage of time.

In broadening our understanding of the senses of memory beyond the recall of places and events, Nadia Seremetakis reminds us that memory

> has social and sensory coordinates that are part of the living membrane of the city [...] found embedded and miniaturized in objects that trigger deep emotions and narratives [...] linked to sounds, aromas and sights. We take this enmeshed memory for granted until the material supports that stitch memory to person and place are torn out from under us, when these spaces suddenly vanish under debris (Seremetakis 2000, 4).

Something as simple as finding a pottery shard, hearing the *athaan*[6] while standing in the long-ago familiar path of the south-easter or smelling the fishy-salty smell of the sea and hearing the sound of the foghorn can trigger a range of memories expressed either in words or in an outpouring of emotion, or even silence.

'I still miss the smells of District Six. I used to walk up Hanover Street on my way home and could identify what different people were cooking', says Linda Fortune, a former District Sixer, as she shares her story for her chapter in the *District Six huis kombuis:*[7] *food and memory cookbook* (Smith 2016, 45). The smell most commonly associated with the main street in District Six – Hanover Street – would be that of the fish market that was located there. In the same publication, Tina Smith (2016, 15) refers to the stories she had heard from the participants' oral narratives, of 'visiting Wellington Fruit Growers[8] in Darling Street, assaulted by the pungent smells of cheese mixed with cold meats, polony and dried fruit'. She speaks of how the recall of tastes and smells has infused the book and has 'illuminated new pathways of collecting and has given us a deep sense of connectedness' (Smith 2016, 17).

Memory and heritage: Continuum or at opposite ends?

'Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed', reads Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1995, 370) now well-cited quotation. She contends that the discourse associated with heritage – that of conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, recreation, recuperation, revitalisation and regeneration – implies that there is a heritage product that exists prior to its identification, evaluation and celebration. She understands heritage to be a 'mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past'.

In its early years, 'working with memory' was the

way in which D6M most frequently described its work. Occasionally, the term 'heritage' was loosely used prior to its formal entry into the discourse of national heritage. This trajectory essentially started with the decision to submit an application to have the vacant site of District Six declared a National Heritage Site (NHS) in 2004. In channelling its memory work in the direction of 'heritage', D6M has been part of the cultural production of this particular District Six heritage.

While there is a strong relationship between 'memory' and 'heritage', they are not equivalent. Heritage, like memory, can be experienced through the senses, but it is only through social interaction that it comes into its own. Heritage is more than a materialisation of memory and involves issues of culture, identity, politics and political will. What is to be officially recognised as national heritage is closely tied to an understanding of national identity and nationhood and is simply not neutral (Viejo-Rose 2015).

There are many features of the site that are worthy of celebration and that could have been the focus of its heritage evaluation and celebration: its music, literature, political life, visual art or unique geography, among other things. I suspect that its declaration would have been more easily finalised if it were positioned within one of these frames. Instead, D6M worked collaboratively with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) to 'produce' its significance centred around the forced removals and the destruction of the neighbourhood. This was its national relevance: as a metonymic symbol of an uncomfortable past that dare not be forgotten. It dares not be forgotten because its impact still prevails in the spatial and psychic lives of so many and holds a key to understanding the pathologies that still pervade South African society: 'the legacy of apartheid cannot be discarded altogether, as it remains inscribed materially in the urban geography of South Africa and figuratively in the collective trauma of its population' (Ignatieff 1996,4). In the light of the country's need to reconcile and move on, the glorious stories of resistance and reconciliation are often valorised. Those who still today feel no reconciliation feel excluded and tacitly judged by their inability to move on.

While there has been no major opposition expressed to presenting the significance of District Six as being deeply embedded in its destruction, the heritage regulations, as derived from the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA, the Act) of 1999, have led to an impasse in terms of how to practically achieve this. Declaring District Six as a NHS cannot be done outside of the provisions of the Act, but the definitions provided by the Act and the criteria for declaration, rigidly applied, seem to exclude the reality as presented by the District Six scenario. Its case requires a more nuanced reading of the Act and its intention in order to memorialise destruction and absence rather than materiality, and there is a need to argue that the 'qualities so exceptional that they are of special national significance' (NHRA 1999,section 7 [1] [a]) are embedded in absence. D6M sees this legislative dilemma as a wonderful creative challenge and undertook to work closely with SAHRA to develop a unique and dynamic set of solutions.

The nature of heritage

Heritage continues to be a useful catch-all phrase for some while being a deeply emotive one for others. In the new South Africa, it has been one of the main avenues for negotiating issues of identity, ownership of cultural assets, citizenship and nation-building (Marschall 2010). 'Heritage is difficult to define not least because it is all-encompassing, containing tangible artefacts and structures of the past, as well as landscapes and intangible aspects of culture, such as traditions, customs and oral memory' (Marschall 2010,1). Add to this the complex heritage landscape represented in the devastated site of District Six, and the definition is further challenged.

Commenting on world heritage in a somewhat cynical tone, David Lowenthal writes:

> All at once heritage is everywhere – in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace – in everything from galaxies to genes. It is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move without bumping into a heritage site. Each legacy is cherished. From ethnic roots to history theme parks, Hollywood to Holocaust, the whole world is busy lauding – or lamenting – some past, be it fact or fiction. (Lowenthal 1998, xiii)

Of the many challenges inherent in the field of heritage, Lowenthal captures one of them: how to balance the drive to present heritage as deriving its value from being non-exclusive and as a tool for building democracy and valuing marginalised histories, while at the same time deriving its value from being unique and special – hinting at undemocratic exclusivity. Otherwise, everything could indeed be heritage, thereby rendering the category meaningless. Many definitions and sets of parameters exist –all attempting to pin down this ever-present but elusive concept.

United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) approach to heritage has influenced the global discourse substantially. Its production of heritage lists has contributed to the creation of a hierarchy of what is considered to be valuable and noteworthy. The production of lists has also contributed to an understanding of heritage as 'things', leaving 'object poor'[9] communities wanting in this regard.

The largely preservationist discourse, as foregrounded by UNESCO, has contributed to the 'freezing' of aspects of cultural forms that are regarded as heritage, as if they should remain unchanged over time (Macdonald 2018). In addition, 'national heritage – including through the making of national museums – has helped make nations imaginable as "communities" by endowing them with long and glorious histories and generating senses of national belonging among citizens' (Macdonald 2018, 9). Histories of loss and destruction stand outside of this understanding of national heritage.

South Africa's NHRA affirms the place of intangible heritage, but its overall framing is still within the traditional definition of heritage as objects and places.

South African national heritage

In its work with mobilising the past to illuminate the way to a just, rights-based future, D6M has found strong affinity with the aims of the NHRA as expressed in its Preamble:

> This legislation aims to promote good management of the national estate, and to enable and encourage communities to nurture and conserve their legacy so that it may be bequeathed to future generations.[...]
>
> 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.

Intangible heritage is mentioned here, but most of the provisions following the Preamble relate to tangible physical sites and their protection. A preservationist approach to heritage sites in the Act is indicated by its specification that sites need to be conserved and improved; demarcated by fences, gates or walls; marked with badges or signs. Emphasis is placed on ownership of sites, based on the assumption that 'sites' are all properties in which title deed and ownership trump their heritage or other value.

The D6M curatorial team, of which I formed part, approached the provisions of the Act with great anticipation. As part of reflecting on this process at an international conference in 2005, I wrote:

> Coming out of a recent history when much of our understanding of memorialisation and memorials has been about greatness [...] great buildings and [...] people and about memorialising and monumentalising those [...] it's very exciting just being part of that discussion and that discovery, that intangible heritage is no longer the consolation prize for people who are constantly dispossessed from tangibles, from their homes, their buildings [and] from places. What you do have then are the intangibles and your memory and asserting that is in itself important and not secondary to the tangible. (Bennett, quoted in D6M 2007, 64)

The NHRA clearly attempts to go beyond the definition of 'heritage' as was described in the apartheid-era National Monuments Act, but it is limited by the vocabulary in which it is couched. Some of these limitations have come to bear in the struggle to have District Six declared a NHS. What started as a partnership with SAHRA, which was fulfilling its mandate to identify new sites for national status so as to correct the imbalances of the past, has become a tense relationship. The main challenge was the stark absence of physical traces – an outcome of the apartheid state's determination not to leave any material evidence of the residential community that had once lived there. Traditional approaches to heritage protection require substantial materiality.

A Commission on Museums, Monuments and Heraldry set up in 1991 made proposals for the transformation of the heritage sector so that it reflected the democratic and egalitarian intent of a future new South Africa and was representative of all of the country's people (Frieslaar and Zulu 2020). An Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG), which produced a report in 1995, noted that new legislation was needed to replace the National Monuments Council Act because of its 'antiquated, colonial-style legislation'

and because the conservation authorities had had a bias towards 'buildings and sites associated with European colonists' (ACTAG 1995, 80). They recommended that all existing national monuments be evaluated, new sites identified that could be considered for such status and communities empowered to participate meaningfully in this process. A White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage (1996) also had a set of recommendations including broadening the use of the term 'monuments' to 'heritage resources'. All of these fed into the Draft Heritage Bill (1998), which eventually led to the promulgation of the NHRA (1999) and the creation of SAHRA in 2000. Through all of these stages, transformation was an underlying theme, and great concern was expressed about the static and conservative leanings of the existing system.

The tone of the NHRA is consistent with the post-apartheid period in South Africa during which time it was written. It places substantial emphasis on nation-building, healing and restitution, but its attitude towards a destroyed place is unclear, and D6M has not been able to clarify this position in all its interactions with SAHRA. The propensity to favour the great men of South African history as national symbols of the country's heritage together with limited guidance for implementers as to what constitutes broad and meaningful public engagement has done reputational damage to the sector.

Sabine Marschall (2010, 14) refers to the 'teleological narrative of struggle', which was regarded as the overarching frame to cohere the national narrative. Its implied unity left little room for different narratives and ways of representation, and the felt urgency in embarking on the process of delivery left little time and space for comprehensive consultation.

The changing heritage and memorial landscape

In 1997, the Cabinet adopted the National Legacy Project, which gave rise to nine high-priority heritage developments throughout the country, which were decided upon in a largely top-down decision-making process (Marschall 2010). The categories under which sites could be declared hint at the epistemological dilemma the District Six declaration presented to SAHRA. All of the declared sites have substantial materiality attached to them and in some way feed into the 'great names and struggles of history' frame of the nation's grand narrative. While it is right that the country's iconic figures should be acknowledged for their role, the often excessive promotion of the stories of a small group of individuals is the dominant mode of cultural production emanating from government processes. In a country where many people already feel economically and politically marginalised, this approach entrenches marginality. It presents a skewed view of significance and perpetuates the silencing of the little-known yet important names and places of our history.

A NHS memorialising destruction: A misfit in the country's pantheon of great places?

It might seem contradictory that an entity that has built its practice on asserting the malleability and fluidity of memory as its strength has decided to place its weight and limited resources in the direction of a formal heritage declaration. This holds the potential for diluting its work, as the declaration would emphasise the protection of the remnant tangible fabric. One of the reasons that the D6M curatorial team chose to embark on this process was to demonstrate to community stakeholders that the rights-based legislative frameworks in the new South Africa could indeed serve the desires and needs of communities if engaged procedurally. In addition, the institution felt that it was well-placed to strengthen the case for intangible heritage nationally and to widen its scope from the way in which it (i.e. intangible heritage) was cast in the NHRA.

An additional benefit for the restituted District Six community would be that it could garner support for their desire to have heritage traces of the destroyed neighbourhood embedded in their rebuilt area. The call was definitely not for a replica of the erased neighbourhood. 'This kind of "scenographic" approach would create the semblance of a theme park of a Disney World quality that would ridicule the process of restitution', writes Lucien Le Grange (2008, 9).'Given the national symbolic significance of District Six, the process of restitution associated with it, and the scale of the development, a different approach to memorialisation is needed'.

As an independent museum firmly located in the non-governmental sector, the D6M team has had to ask itself several questions. What was the possible fate of its vibrant and living memory practice when faced with the opportunity (and possible limitation) of being subjected to official sanction? What would it lose by forming part of the collective of authorised heritage? Would its methodologies of privileging living memory be compromised? Would it be able to influence the heritage sector by its 'willingness to engage with the criteria and politics of heritage policy and implementation that has governed the South African

heritage landscape' (Bennett and Julius 2008, 58), or would it simply be overwhelmed by the scale of its attempt? What are the implications of entering the terrain of national heritage, which has as one of its purposes the building of a national identity, imagined as unifying?

The D6M curatorial team imagined that, just as it had been able to challenge traditional museology with its new approaches and its growing inclusive practice, it could also test conventional practices of inner-city development and memorialisation. In doing so, the remembrance of the traumatic removal of people from the former District Six could be embodied in the redevelopment of the area and in memorial sites that are active parts of public life within this new reconstituted urban fabric (Le Grange 2008, 17).

A window into D6M memory projects

Particularly since the 2004 NHS application previously referenced, the D6M team has been more consciously and conscientiously documenting its own practice. Depending on the nature of the project, teams would typically be constituted to consist of at least one of the curatorial management team (which consisted of the director and the heads of archives, education and exhibitions), arts facilitators, members of the elderly displaced community, youth recruited from schools or youth clubs, educators or musicians. The community created around the projects become the main project drivers.

The team was aware of the lingering cynicism about its claims that the knowledge assets of communities were as valuable as the formal knowledge of experts involved in community-building and heritage projects and about its belief that work with intangible heritage could make a real and lasting impact. In *Standing with the Public*, Noëlle McAfee (1997) refers to the inherent value of community knowledge. She emphasises that situated-ness provides strong contexts for knowing and that values commonly held by a group give rise to active solidarity and involvement. In this way, communities can be rich repositories of lessons that can serve as an impetus for community development, growth and learning. The community created around D6M's practice is a case in point.

As a way to demonstrate that memorialisation need not be monumentally 'cast in stone', D6M embarked on a number of pilot projects starting in or around 2004. Over time, they have come to be increasingly site-based, involving people moving through the physical topography in a combination of site walks, site-specific installations, *in situ* oral histories, performances and processions. They serve a pedagogical function by illuminating pasts through site immersions, drawing on the knowledge assets of community members as carriers of different ways of knowing about places and their significance. In this way, they function to make space for self-narration and self-representation accompanied by what could be called healing benefits. They are about the self as well as the other. 'When we are victims we are passive. As we heal we become active and take back agency' (Lapsley and Karakashian 2012, 201).

What follows are the three examples that I have chosen.

(i) Walking as commemorative practice: 11 February commemoration

The day that District Six was declared a White Group Area in 1966 was 11 February. It is a day that is remembered each year by members of the displaced community, with the practice dating back to before D6M even existed.

A growing cairn of stones has been the destination of a commemorative walk that takes place on 11 February each year. It is a ritual of remembrance that has grown organically, and, since the late 1990s, D6M has programmatised and popularised it. The stones that make up the cairn come from rubble that remained at the site after people's homes were bulldozed, together with stones brought from the areas to which people had been displaced. Laying a stone to connect various locales that have been 'home' has become an established annual act for many who were displaced from various areas, not only District Six. Everyone is invited to symbolically mark their connectivity as participants, not as an audience, to participate in 'collective witnessing rather than spectatorship' (Till 2012, 12).

The practice of using stones as markers of those who have gone before has several points of origin. In Indigenous Khoisan culture, stones were used to mark burials or other places of spiritual significance. 'Travellers would add a stone to the cairn as a mark of respect. They also feature in isiXhosa culture (*isivavani*),a practice probably adopted from contact with the Khoi'(*Bring a stone for the Princess*. Princess Vlei Forum. n.d.) *Isivavani is a* Nguni[10] word that means 'throw your stone upon the pile'. This concept has also been used in the design of one of the contemplative spaces in a national heritage project, Freedom Park in Pretoria, which aimed to work sensitively with the environment and draw on Indigenous knowledge systems. Across the world, there are a number of similar practices.

The significance of the location of the District Six cairn is that it has been created on the fragment of the last piece of the street that was the main artery of the district – Hanover Street. This scrap remained while most of the street grid was destroyed when homes were bulldozed. In developing its remembrance practice over the years, D6M has explored ways to sustain continuity together with renewal, particularly when the ritual seemed to be in danger of becoming a static and repetitive expression of victimhood and loss. It has evolved into a creative and collaborative space, rather than an event.

The processional component: Moving bodies through space

The ritual of laying stones occurs at the end of a walk of remembrance. It is more than a stroll from a point of departure (the museum building) to a point of destination (the cairn). Elissa Rosenberg (2012, 134) describes three distinct modes of walking, which she refers to as a new approach to 'commemorative practice used to evoke the memorial's fundamental quality of absence, its open-ended quality, and its engagement with loss'.

The first mode she refers to is walking as a *journey*. She refers to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial located on the National Mall in Washington, DC as an example. The memorial is one that is designed to draw visitors into a contemplative space. The second mode she describes as a *transformative encounter*, designed to engage more directly with the world, and in the process evoking memory through the body's visceral engagement with place. She refers to a work by Dani Karavan, who designed a walking memorial to Walter Benjamin in Spain. The third mode of walking she refers to as an *everyday urban practice*, and she uses the Places of Remembrance memorial in the Bavarian Quarter in Berlin to illustrate this mode.

In the distinctions that she makes, Rosenberg is of course referring to memorials that have been designed in particular ways to induce movement in a set direction, to evoke responses. One of the main messages that walking as commemorative practice is intended to communicate, as she puts forward, is that remembering should be an active participatory practice, shifting the 'burden of memory onto the individual on the ground' (Rosenberg 2012,134).

Rosenberg's third mode of walking, that of the 'everyday urban practice', most closely describes the District Six walks of remembrance. As the group walks through the east end of the city, inevitably led by a marching band, they encounter curious shoppers and students moving between the surrounding campuses of the nearby Cape Peninsula University of Technology and occasionally some tourists. The route that the group meanders along will have several stops at vacant spots where stories will be shared about what structure might previously have been there and what memories they evoked. Often comments such as 'when I stood in my doorway I could see this part of Table Mountain' are made, and a repositioning of the body in the space to get a particular view is extremely poignant to observe. There were other reference points as well, but Table Mountain was always the stabilising signifier on the unstable landscape. The everyday space of daily transaction is, for that moment, transformed into a route of memory (de Certeau 1984), harking back to their pedestrian activities in the District Six of their past. It is not unusual for interested passers-by to abandon their own everyday practices of shopping, going to class or running errands to join the walk.

Memorial walks have been embraced by District Sixers with commitment and enthusiasm. As such, they have become a central feature of D6M's memory practice. Former residents and their families participate in planning and shaping the content and share the leadership along the walk. Community is built around the experience of walking a familiar route and, even with the absent streets, provides a sense of reconnection with place and reaffirms its value, frequently taking on the timbre of a pilgrimage.

Los Angeles historian and architect Dolores Hayden reflects on the ways that the urban landscape can trigger visual memory, and she suggests that its power is not adequately realised as a resource for public history. She writes:

> Body memory is (also) difficult to convey as part of books and exhibits. It connects into places because the shared experience of dwellings, public spaces and workplaces, and the paths travelled between home and work, give body memory its social component, modified by the postures of gender, race and class (Hayden 1995, 48).

However, she is referencing a built environment landscape, not an erased one. The experience of walking with District Sixers, though, resonates with her description, and participating in encounters involving activation of memory on an absent landscape is an education in itself.

Art, inscription and performance are generally woven into the commemoration, which may include non-permanent site markers or murals, recreated

street signs or curated performances along the walk to the stone-laying ritual: 'places and landscapes may provide an important non-linguistic presence (in memory, imagination, emotionally or materially) that will exist beyond the lifespan of the survivor' (Till 2015, 301).

(ii) The Peninsula Maternity Hospital (PMH) memory project

Located in District Six, PMH served the greater Cape Town area for 71 years, finally closing its doors in 1992, by which time most of the district was destroyed. The building was repurposed for several years, until 2015, when it was demolished to make way for a new community day hospital to serve the returning District Six community and the surrounding areas. D6M had been requested by the contracted developer to ensure that memorial traces of PMH's past were embedded into the new hospital space.

Chrischené Julius, the museum's current head of Collections, Research and Documentation and PMH project leader, devised a concept and convened a team of artists and facilitators to fine-tune it and implement the plan. A group of just over 30 participants volunteered to be part of the team, and for a period of approximately two years (2016–2018), they engaged with the archive of PMH material held at D6M, collected new material from their own networks, shared their memories and engaged with art, performance and design as research tools to shape the full concept collectively. The installation was completed ahead of the hospital's opening in 2018.

The skilled facilitation and pedagogical approach of the lead artist Ayesha Price ensured a deep level of engagement from all participants. The group was made up of former residents, retired hospital staff, returned residents, teachers from a children's centre in the area, and young people. In an interview about her practice and specifically the PMH project, Ayesha speaks about the personal significance of maintaining an open-ended, multi-authored vision. She expresses her desire to explore the ways in which art can be a 'tool for learning and living, rather than a commodity to be bought and sold'. She speaks of the experience of working with this diverse group as having been an exciting opportunity to 'use visual art methodology to assist them in the construct of their own memories as permanent, public artworks' (Valley 2018).

Hayden (1995, 234) believes that public art 'may hold the key to making new forms in the city that interpret the past in resonant ways. Artists can work with missing pieces, or erasures of important aspects of history, so as to re-establish missing parts in the story'. The PMH art project has been a powerful example in this mould, providing a replicable inclusive model of a process that could become one of the ways of working on the NHS.

Price describes how the project drew on First Nations methods of storytelling through palimpsests 'which reveal layers of voices over time that share the same place' (Valley 2018). The artistic output was a metal sculpture on the building exterior, modelled on the 'flower of Maryam'[11]– a flowering shrub used by midwives to assist with difficult births. The sculpture depicts the flower in both open and closed states, with each participant having drawn a branch connected to a single stem, and a seed and pod to depict each of their families.

> Closed, the flower holds the potential for life. Open, and once the seeds are dispersed, birth and rebirth is made possible. It is a powerful maternal image that speaks to shared indigenous knowledge and a sense of belonging to a community even through migration and displacement (Valley 2008).

A large mural, collaboratively designed and painted by the participants, graces another portion of the wall, titled *District Six in PMH, PMH in District Six.* Hands reaching out in an appeal for help acknowledges the pain of loss while simultaneously representing helping hands outstretched in a gesture of support to the returning community. The hands encompass archival references that symbolise a connection between the past and the present.

There are other components spread throughout the building such as a video installation, body maps of all participants and an art activity area for children, but the above are the two main exterior features that face towards the inner city.

South African public hospitals are generally understaffed and involve long queues and several hours of waiting. Usually, they are drab spaces with blank walls except for messages about chronic diseases and health warnings. The insertion of the art pieces into the space is a brightening intervention, and the artwork includes opportunities for learning about the building and its story. Not only does this project make a large visual impact, but it has modelled a process of inclusive art-making using public space. The process is substantially slower than if it were to be done by a single artist, but the sense of ownership and the personal investment experienced is priceless. These are the fruits of a patient participatory process.

(iii) Huis Kombuis food and memory project

> We all have our food memories, some good and some bad. The taste, smell, and texture of food can be extraordinarily evocative, bringing back memories not just of eating food itself but also of place and setting. Food is an effective trigger of deeper memories of feelings and emotions, internal states of the mind and body. (*Food and Memory.*18 May 2012).

Drawing on rituals of making and serving food that form part of all communities' stories, D6M developed a project called *Huis Kombuis* (HK).

Being a largely low-income community, District Six often included families who struggled to put food on the table. They might have been unemployed, or casual workers whose contracts had come to an end, leaving the family with no secure income. The community networks operated in such a way that nobody went hungry, and food was shared through an unspoken code of communication that left no one feeling ashamed that their cupboards were bare. Working with a few basic ingredients, such as cheap meat cuts or offal, bruised fruits or foraged goods, District Sixers prided themselves on being able to create feasts and extend hospitality to others as well.

Starting in 2006, the HK project participants met at weekly workshops where they shared their food stories and their recipes. They produced bespoke fabrics and textile kitchen products, recipe cards and eventually a book that captured their food memories. Their reminiscences about a lost way of life, their current living situations and their expectations for the new District Six featured prominently in their discussions.

'These food rituals did not die or disappear when people were forced to move to far-flung areas but instead took root in these new locations on the Cape Flats', writes Shaun Viljoen (2016, 9) in his introduction to the book. 'The foods and associated social practices were nurtured as part of recreating a sense of self, family and community, of rhythm and pattern that gives life meaning.'

In writing about the role that the senses play in historical memory, Nadia Seremetakis uses the term commensality, which refers to 'the practice of eating together'. She writes:

> Commensality is not just the social organisation of food and drink consumption and the rules that enforce social institutions at the level of consumption. Nor can it be reduced to the food-related senses of taste and odour. Commensality can be defined as the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of substances and objects incarnating remembrance and feeling (Seremetakis 1993, 14).

She further refers to historical consciousness and other forms of social knowledge as being transmitted through time and space so that each sense records the commensal history of the others, and in this way history, knowledge, feelings and senses 'become embedded in the material culture and its components: specific artefacts, places and performances' (Seremetakis 1993, 14).

Tina Smith has been the exhibitions manager at D6M for just over a decade. She has been the main driver behind the HK concept and also the project leader. She writes about the genesis of the project, which recognised 'nostalgia as an entry point into a more complex and layered narrative about cultural and culinary histories' (Smith 2016, 14).

Evoking all of the senses has been central to D6M's memory work, as it continues to explore and cement its practice. Visuality, orality, aurality and tactility were more pronounced in the early part of its life. HK has provided the necessary scaffolding for exploring the other senses – taste and smell – as part of a deeper excavation into the many layers of historical memory and has created a supportive environment for those who prefer to communicate their stories in non-verbal ways.

Conclusion

Karen Till (2012; 2015; 2018) has written about a 'place-based ethics of care', which draws on eco-feminism and feminist political theory. It calls for the language of 'care' to be introduced into the discourse of planning and policy makers so that they can 'consider more ethical and sustainable forms of urban change than those that continue to legitimate disciplinary forms of governmentality' (Till 2012, 3). What better place than the new South Africa, with its focus on rights-based processes and its much lauded constitution, to start thinking in new ways about the gap between the way wonderful policies are formulated and the ways in which they are interpreted and implemented? Could we think more deeply about how to grow a culture of care and solidarity within all levels of society to counter the rampant culture of impunity and corruption that seems to be on the rise? Government actors should be able to identify the non-governmental partners with whom they could collaborate to strengthen its nationwide path.

Traditionally, stone and brass monuments, refurbished buildings, polished plaques and pristine objects are the ways in which significance and heritage value is understood and admired. I wonder if D6M's conscious choice to resist the route of fixing narratives and permanently casting remembrance in stone is sometimes misunderstood as representing a site and narrative that has nothing significant to preserve and show and thus represents a deficit form of heritage. Some of the impact of its work is ephemeral, but it is lasting and palpable. Its choices have emerged from thorough observations of how monuments can become invisible even when in plain sight–the proverbial white elephants.

The D6M team of activists, educators, artists and historians have enabled learning to emerge from a range of disciplines, including visual and performance art, storytelling and writing, museology, activism and pedagogy. Their detailed attention to the everyday elegance of daily life, which includes rituals and traditions, has produced a committed, robust and engaged public. While D6M is not making the call for revolutionising all museum and heritage work in a populist fashion, it does make a strong argument for finding new ways of engaging with places of significance that have stories to tell, and with people connected to those places. In its 28-year-long learning journey, in a sector that is often resistant to change, D6M has learned that the key to retaining its dynamic memory practice rests on its ability to embrace transformation and to challenge rigid sectoral boundaries, despite the many challenges inherent in this choice.

This piece was written during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic,[12] which has forced us all to think carefully and differently about many things. It has forced us to evaluate what things matter more than others and even to bargain with life, promising to be better people if we 'make it through to the other side'. Arundhati Roy speaks of the pandemic as a portal – 'a gateway between one world and the next'. She reminds us that, historically, pandemics have forced a break with the past to imagine a new world. She ends her article with these words:

> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020)

There might be a portal of another kind that we as the museum and heritage sector need to walk through. We can emerge with a model that demonstrates that heritage can be empowering, that carefully designed processes are key and that people matter more than they are made to feel. We need to seek inspirations from both within and outside our sectors and engage with intangible heritage in all its facets with constantly refreshed eyes. Or we can continue to drag the dead weight of leaden monuments and plaques along with us. In the end, they might just drag us down.

ENDNOTES

1. The Group Areas Act of 1950 allowed for the declaration of areas in South Africa to be set aside for specific racial groups, as was specified under the Population Registration Act also of 1950.
2. South Africa had its first fully democratic elections with universal franchise on 27 April 1994. This date is regarded as the birthdate of the 'new South Africa'.
3. Robben Island was a place of incarceration where the late Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were held under apartheid. It was declared as the country's first post-apartheid National Heritage Site in 1997, and was declared as World Heritage Site in 1999.
4. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was established by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No.4 of 1995.
5. The Restitution of Land Rights Act was one of the first acts of South Africa's democratic parliament, promulgated in 1994.
6. The *athaan* is the Islamic call to prayer, recited by a muezzin at prescribed times of the day.
7. *Huis kombuis* is a colloquial Afrikaans phrase, which, literally translated, means 'home kitchen'. It refers to the kitchen being the centre or the hearth of the home. This project, and the book that emerged from it, is one of the examples that I will refer to later in the article.
8. Wellington Fruit Growers was a popular general dealer in Cape Town, which specialised in baked goods, dried fruit and nuts, cold meats and an array of cheeses for which it was well-known.
9. I first encountered the use of this term in a book by Paul Williams (2007) titled *Memorial Museums.*
10. The Nguni languages are a group of languages spoken in southern Africa, which includes isiXhosa, isiZulu and several others.
11. The 'flower of Maryam' is also called the 'rose of Jericho', 'flower of Fatima' or the 'resurrection flower'. The flower remains desiccated and dormant until immersed in water, when it slowly opens. It is known to assist with difficult labour experiences, either through visual suggestion or through some other way. Its botanical name is *Selaginella lepidophylla*. The gynaecologist-obstetrician who had been the consultant in charge of PMH was a workshop participant, and he brought along the dried plant that he had kept.
12. On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) China country office reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China. On 7 January 2020, the causative pathogen was identified as a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). By 11 March 2020, 114 countries had reported nearly 120,000 cases and WHO declared Covid-19 the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus. 'Guidelines for case-finding, diagnosis, management and public health response (August 2020)', National Institute for Communicable Diseases, https://www.nicd.ac.za/

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