



REDEFINING THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-DRIVEN MUSEUMS: REFLECTIONS ON/OF DISPLACEMENT IN DISTRICT SIX MUSEUM, CAPE TOWN

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This paper proposes an approach to museum re-definition dilemma by looking at why museums emerge today, to which end, by which means, and how they engage with their stakeholders. I present a case study based on District Six Museum and neighborhood from Cape Town, South Africa. The museum was developed and maintained as a community museum in the post-apartheid era, by a community that has been forcibly removed and no longer exists as such. My study presents the Museum as it is today and relevant background information, together with an overview of traces of recent histories in the surrounding neighborhood. Together with literature findings on the role of this Museum in South Africa, these constitute the base of final reflections on how knowledge is produced and re-produced under overt and covert oppression regimes, i.e. before and post-colonial and post-apartheid, and how museums can and should rise from community engagement in order to mediate and interpret negative history.

Keywords: museum definition, authorship, community participation, museum role, naming.



Introduction

Motto: The exhibition is the Museum in action. It is the framework through which the public interfaces with the Museum. The objectives and strategies of the Museum are manifested and generated through the workings of the exhibition framework which is specifically constructed to perform these functions.'

This paper brings forth the case of the *District Six* Museum from Cape Town, South Africa, in relations to the territory it stands for: the former neighborhood known as District Six, in 1970 renamed as *Zonnebloem* – a former colonial name for a farm in the area². Since this paper is sourced from both desk and field research,

I intend to emphasize the subtle relationship between museum formation processes and how its medium- and long-term mission are impacted by stakeholders' engagement: displaced community versus local governance and economic interest. The structure of the paper follows a short description of the museum and its main exhibition, the case of the Bloemhof / Skyways flats as depicted in the museum and its status in today's neighborhood, ending with final reflections on the to-and-fro dynamics between museums and the communities they emerged from and where they activate, which in this case are different from one another.

Ghost neighborhood, living museum

District Six Museum is a private entity located by the premises of what is left of the neighborhood previously known as District Six³. Under the Group Areas Act (1950), this part of the city, conveniently located between the iconic Table Mountain and the harbor, was declared "white" on February 11, 1966⁴. Between 1968 and 1982, its residents were forcibly removed and more than eighty percent of the area has been bulldozed to make room for urban development serving the white population, which actually never happened. The population of District Six consisted of mostly non-white people – which, in the "rainbow nation", as it is called now, meant a melting pot of coloured descendants of former freed slaves, including the population of Indian descent, native Africans, some white groups, and other migrants. It is depicted as a vivid, vibrant community, abusively scattered across the land, in the suburbs and townships, now striving to reconnect and claim, physically and symbolically, what could still be feasible under nowadays conditions.⁵ The museum opened in 1994 and its collections, mostly included in the *Digging Deeper* exhibition, were constituted by crowdsourcing from the affected, dismantled community of 60.000 members of different races. The exhibition engages visitors at all levels. Local volunteering guides are former residents who share personal histories and viewpoints, according to both personal and collective interpretation of the events. As president Thabo Mbeki put it, the forced removal of our people from District Six has come to symbolize everything that was wrong about the system of apartheid and white minority domination... "we are renewing ourselves as a district, as a people, and as a nation, giving back to all our people their common heritage."⁶

The opening and functioning of the District Six Museum generated a wide array of literature. It offers a unique cultural experience in a city where the theme of apartheid, colonialism, or ethnicities is little curated in museums of Cape Town, the "Mother City", despite the presence of national institutions such as Iziko Museum of South Africa⁷. In the post-colonial and post-apartheid era, the descendant communities of the oppressed need

to have their voice heard and their histories passed on in an act of remembrance and social healing, since "colonialism is an important subject in its own right and a metaphor for the subtle relationship between power and knowledge, culture and control."⁸ In post-apartheid South Africa, many museums "were sourced and resourced through photographs and oral history. Such strategies appeared as distinct from older museum classificatory, collecting, and display strategies that had relied on the aura of the artifact. Orality and visibility were used in these new museums (including District Six, n.aut.) to constitute new subjects of history with voice and agency."⁹

Visiting the museum, it struck me as a performative display, framing the past to make it speak for itself. Yet, "histories in museums are not a simple visual rendering of the academic historian's text. There are always contests over histories from different communities. A variety of academic experts are constantly asserting claims to knowledge and authority. Above all, from my perspective histories in museums are conceptualized and choreographed through engaging the limits and possibilities of visualizing new and different pasts."¹⁰ Thus, even though profoundly visual, the exhibition cannot be considered a photographic exhibition, since the photos are included in the display first of all as objects that belonged to residents and that carry a high emotional charge, denoting and not connoting the life in District Six before the social trauma occurred. This mounting goes hand in hand with a few objects that are collected from former residents and that are used to reconstitute interiors of dwellings, which adds to the authenticity and the inter-relations that were interwoven in the lives of the inhabitants of a district / symbolic community.

One of the most striking characteristics of this museum is that it is a flagship in the talks for restitution of property. "As one of the stakeholders in this process, the Museum has had to confront several concrete realities associated with the return. It has had to immerse itself in exploring the relationship between landscapes and memorialization in support of human rights, urban justice, and the creation of a more just and inclusive civil society."¹¹ In addition to that, the museum is highly self-reflexive, questioning the very idea of community as "the designation of 'community' is quite misleading, obfuscating the 'history frictions' and the 'knowledge transactions' that had and were taking in processes of what we call 'museumization'.¹² The museum also seeks to provide curatorial experience since "engagement as critical heritage practitioners seeking not merely to question prevailing discourses but to be actively involved in finding ways to open up routes to new public pasts."¹³ Participatory actions in the museum are focusing on providing a vivid, safe space for former residents to reconnect or initiate recuperatory



action, but it also engages with all visitors who provide feedback that is further integrated into the exhibition. One of these initiatives is related to the petition that asks the government to declare District Six a National Heritage Site, this impacting directly on all socio-economic unfolding of the fate of the land and what is left of the buildings, such as the former Bloemhof flats, nowadays Skyways residence.

Bloemhof flats versus Skyways Residence

In the museum, a separate section is dedicated to the buildings of the residential complex previously known as the Bloemhof flats. In Skyways residence, no clue is given to the past of the buildings marked by social aggressiveness and symbolic violence. Since it is one of the building complexes, at the outer limit of the neighborhood, that was left untouched by the demolition rampage, its eviction escapes the logic of the salubritization narrative (which also included high crime rates and vernacular urbanism). The complex was built to provide a best practice example in the 50s to what renewal in the neighborhood should look like since the main rationale of the displacement-oriented discourse was the insalubrity of the neighborhood, that justified total erasure and appropriation by the white population. The community living there consisted of Muslims, and the complex was spared from destruction due to high real estate value. The residents have been all forcibly removed, the sense of community disintegrated, and a real estate company took over, renting properties to students and families. Since garages and a swimming pool were added, and the buildings received a facelift, it could be difficult to identify the place other than from old photographs and discussions with the staff working there. Today, it is the property of a real estate company, which claims to represent and value the “rich cultural heritage.”¹⁴ The act of renaming the complex by actual or previous owners, together with no sign of its previous history or other remembrance act, totally erase from memory the history and spirit of the place, making room for social amnesia and a higher return on investment, since being associated with negative history could result in lower profit margins.

One sign of the previous history can still be found in Skyways residence, in the sublet Airbnb facility called “The Old Laundry”, that was established in the former community building: a painting about District Six, its iconic streets and multi-ethnic residents. In my opinion, it is relevant for the way private initiatives recover, uncover, or cover inconvenient heritage histories, based on their engagement and agency in social wellbeing, at all levels. What is voiced in District Six Museum is silent in the neighborhood itself, sent to oblivion for newcomers, unless advised otherwise: tourists and new generations. This case is raising questions about the

dynamic between a museum and its stakeholders.

Discussions and final reflections

Community-based ethnography as a research method should consider the extent to which museums have been transformed through their intersections with social engagement, reflexivity, cooperation, and decision-making processes. This way, museums are a response to the self-representation needs of a given group. The status-quo of the museum as a static or high-inertia institution is challenged at an accelerated pace, given the rise and development of new forms of museums. First of all, the paradigm in which a collection of objects is used to establish a museum is turned bottom-up by initiatives around the world to create museums that only afterward create collections. These initiatives emphasize the fact that the role of the museum should, first of all, be more proactive than reactionary, and that museums’ mission should start mentioning the interests and needs of the communities they serve.

District Six Museums is a very particular case in general museums’ landscape not only in South Africa. It is an example coming out of practice on how a beneficiary community is able to coagulate resources, both physical and symbolic, to tell a story. Shaped against the background of apartheid, it clarifies many grey areas, engages with nuances, holds space for different voices, and, more importantly, for dissonant points of view. It proves that a museum should be a means for an end and not an end in itself.

The museum may emerge from a symbolic community’s need for healing through recognition of past trauma, yet it is not a museum about one community per se. It is about the apartheid-era forced removals, a phenomenon that can be well illustrated by the (ongoing) bulldozing of buildings and memory of this specific neighborhood, but is, unfortunately, is not a singular case⁵. The museum highlights the cooperative social elements that led, in time, to the unfolding of such a phenomenon. Despite the transgenerational passing on and processing of social trauma, it may address less and less a specific community and be more and more representative for forced removals, displacements, social gaslighting, and other attributes of oppressive regimes.

The topic of a museum activating in a community different than the it was born from is even more relevant in a larger time frame since former residents and their descendants are likely to disengage or engage at a different level with museum actions, due to a natural generational passing on of both trauma and legal rights. Thus, the drive of the community and the momentum that makes this museum such a landmark and best practice example in the museological landscape are also likely to change. Engaging actively with immediate communities could be the key to maintaining the *status quo*.

Based on my field research, I would emphasize that engaging with a community is successful only if performed at both levels: with locals, tourists or members of the symbolic community that give birth to museums; and with local governance and economic stakeholders' actions which mirror the real impact of any museum's actions, since no museum is an island and District Six Museum, more than many others, is a mean and not an end in itself.

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Notes:

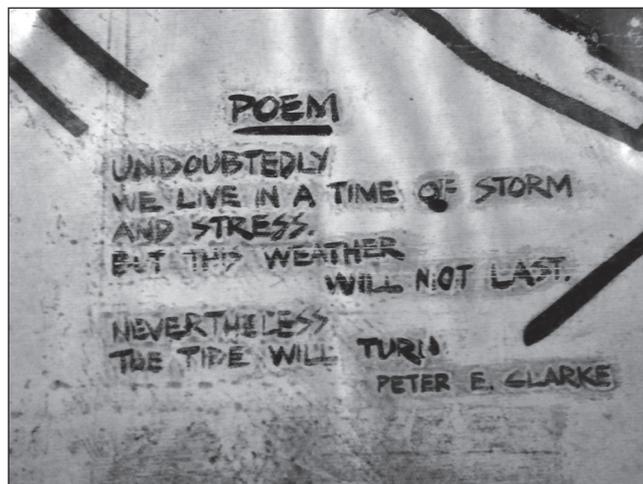
1. Jos Thorne, "Designing Histories," *Kronos* (Cape Town: University of the Western Cape) 34, no. 1 (2008): 139-158.
2. Research visit to District Six Museum took place in July, 2019, as part of the Doctoral Winter School in Arts and Anthropology organized in Cape Town and Johannesburg by an academic consortium led by University of Paris III in cooperation with IZIKO Museums of South Africa. Supported by a partial travel grant from the University of Bucharest under the doctoral mobility funds program and by UEFISCDI through researcher's mobility grant 2019.
3. www.districtsix.co.za information retrieved on March 31st, 2020.
4. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/district-six-declared-white-area>. Information retrieved on March 31st, 2020.
5. Henry Trotter. *Trauma and Memory: The Impact of Apartheid-era Forced Removals on Coloured Identity in Cape Town* (Cape Town: UCT Press), 50 - 52.
6. Quotation extracted from a panel on display in the museum.
7. During my visit in July - August 2019, Iziko Museum hosted no permanent exhibition on South African history or ethnography. The last ethnography exhibition was closed only after 2010, after extensive criticism rose against the showcases of „bushmen” in the apartheid-era dioramas. Information retrieved during the Doctoral School in Iziko Museum.
8. Premesh Lalu. *The Deaths of Hintsa. Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC Press), 6
9. Leslie Witz, Gary Minkley, and Ciraj Rassool. *South Africa and the Unsettling of History* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press), 25.
10. Thorne, "Designing Histories," 158.
11. <https://www.districtsix.co.za/restitution/>.
12. Witz, Minkley and Rassool. *South Africa and the Unsettling of History*, 25.
13. Ibid.
14. <https://inspot.co.za/property/skyways-cape-town-cbd/> and <https://inspot.co.za/>. Information retrieved March 31st, 2020.
15. It is also the case of other areas in the South African urban landscape that had been declared white, such as Sophiatown in Johannesburg, now the financial heart of the city after the non-whites have been evicted and the area being massively torn down.

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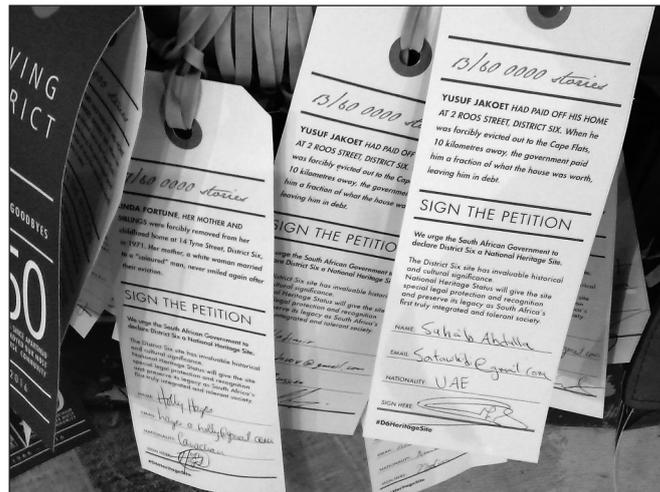
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Former residents have been invited to mark the floor-map in a personal manner ideas, quotes, poems, in a symbolic gesture to reclaim territory.



General view inside the main exhibition from the upper floor



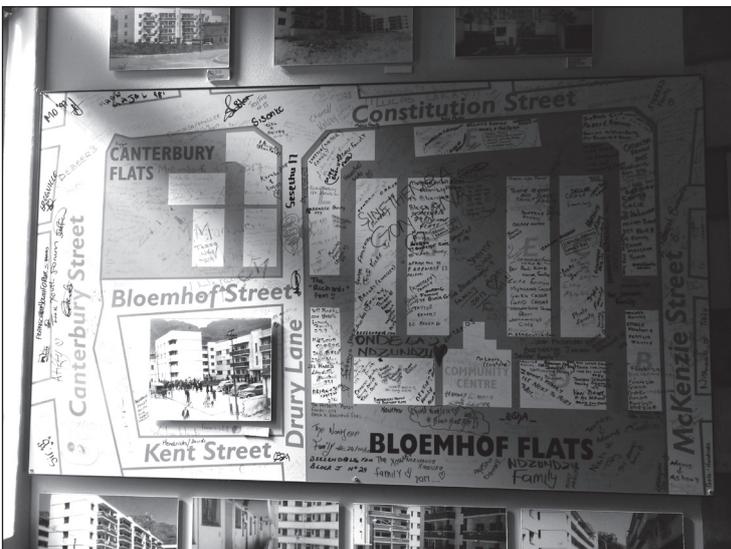
Participatory results are integrated as exhibits



Photographs are put to work in many ways. Their meaning emerges from the collective framing, which establishes a relationship between everyday life snapshots and the bulldozed, deserted field that is today most of former District Six



“White only” sitting bench is for everyone in the museum space



Plan of Bloemhof flats in the museum, with feedback from former residents and their descendants