In 1982, when Nelson Mandela, prisoner 488/64, was transferred from his jail cell on Robben Island, to the Cape Town mainland, he could never have imagined that some seventeen years later, in 1999, he would return to inaugurate Robben Island Museum, one of South Africa's first three UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Robben Island has become South Africa's most famous cultural tourism attraction – an international symbol of freedom and liberation. The maximum-security island prison was home to key leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), the so-called ‘Rivonia Trialists’ of 1964 that included Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki. Mandela spent nearly twenty years imprisoned in its ‘B Block’ where political prisoners accused of plotting against the apartheid government were kept between 1960 and 1990. Shortly after Mandela’s release in 1990, proposals began to circulate suggesting new uses for the island, among them that it be converted into a ‘university’ – South Africa’s own version of the Open University. The site, renamed Robben Island Museum (RIM) in 1997, is today heralded as the locus for civic engagement in the ‘new’ multicultural South Africa. The museum was formed to contribute to the economic development of South Africa by attracting international tourism, and to contribute to the transformation of South African society and the enrichment of humanity.

From gulags in the former Soviet Union, to the Slave Forts on Ghana's Gold Coast, communities are struggling with their long ignored and hidden histories of state torture, terror, and mass genocide. With the rise in the ‘prison tourism’ phenomenon across the globe, new heritage management strategies require an important re-envisioning of sites of ‘dark tourism’. Can these sites of tragedy and ‘dissonant heritage’ be used as models for community-based education and renewed political and social inclusion? Marginalised urban communities across South Africa are also questioning state-sponsored ‘national narrative’ efforts, like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that sought to investigate human rights abuses while granting amnesty to those accused of crimes against humanity. As art historian Annie Coombes has argued in History After Apartheid (2003): difficulties have arisen in South Africa, as elsewhere, since the rhetoric of ‘community’ is the result of a genuine attempt to incorporate a more representative multicultural diversity in many aspects of public life, but can also be a slipshod way of ‘managing’ the more contradictory and potentially troublesome aspects of cultural and political diversity.

This paper briefly examines efforts to establish historic places, like these sites of the former ‘prison industrial complex’, and of political unrest as potential alternative educational and community-based museums for enhancing citizen participation. I will argue that these sites can be seen as viable ‘tools for social justice’ and human rights through a renewed process of civic engagement in grassroots community-based museums. Can a community-based museum model help to establish a culture respectful of human rights only a mere decade after apartheid? Can these heritage sites begin to foster a set of political values and attitudes favouring human rights through civic engagement for all South Africans?

I am focusing on two sites in my larger research project – the Langa Pass Office and Court Building in Cape Town and the Hector Pieterson Museum and Memorial Precinct in Soweto, Johannesburg. Both cities have invested numerous resources in developing new initiatives encouraging domestic and foreign visitors to reflect on the country’s non-white population – an examination of heritage resources within former all-Black townships that, unfortunately, has been deferred until recently. The ‘Township Tourism’ movement continues to grow, heavily impacted by day-tours into the townships with scheduled visits that include ‘shebeens’ (unlicensed bars), schools, community centres, and traditional faith healers (‘sangoma’). A decade of democracy has brought massive reforms and advances across the heritage industry, while changing little the understanding of the cultural significance of Black heritage resources in South Africa’s still isolated townships. Despite ten years of massive reform by the ANC, and the emergence of new political discourses of nation building and Black self-empowerment, these inequalities are growing.

I maintain that while the Robben Island Museum offers an acceptable (or more easily palatable) vantage point for ‘collective memory making’ for the ANC in a ‘new’ democratic South Africa, it is the sites in the former all-Black townships, which highlight the many continued injustices and social ills faced by residents still victimised by a legacy of segregation (ie. poverty, the AIDS pandemic, etc.). What are the necessary steps to be undertaken if an informed model for sustainable
tourism that engages the complex social, economic, and environmental issues facing these long ignored townships is to truly take hold.13 Perhaps historian Jean Comaroff is correct when she characterises the democratising spirit of history in the postcolony by suggesting that

‘local traditions are [being] reinvented, long-silent ancestors speak once more. Some intellectuals offer ‘struggle tours’ in which mundane urban spaces express vocal counter-histories; so much so that public life has been overtaken by a growing cacophony of testimonies’.14

Despite attempts by the government to build an inclusive national identity, grassroots community-based organisations remain marginal in the creation of a national narrative that exposes the history and processes of apartheid more fully. In heritage work, community ownership is an essential part of transformation, but a recent study that gives an overview of the entire heritage sector in South Africa admits that, to date, community involvement and participation have received very little attention.15 Clearly, massive post-apartheid upheavals were reinvented at the same time as the ANC began efforts to acknowledge the country’s atrocities and human rights violations, and to commemorate the decades-long liberation movement that began in the 1950s.

It is important to note that before 1994, much of South Africa’s cultural tourism product was largely dominated by sites connected with European heritage, including the legacies of the Anglo-Boer and Anglo-Zulu wars.16 Since 1985, museum professionals in South Africa have begun a process of self-critique and analysis that has led them to recognise that their institutions, too, played a part in the oppression inflicted by the ruling white minority since the early nineteenth century. Many of the country’s museums were founded by the settler elite, while museum culture itself was a product of the forces of colonialism and racial apartheid which were to dispossess huge numbers of coloured and indigenous peoples from Southern Africa.17

A major result of the explosion in cultural and heritage tourism activities across South Africa since the first all-free elections in 1994 is a growing interest on the part of foreigners in the former all-Black townships adjacent to most major metropolitan centres. Tours for whites curious about the living conditions of ‘primitives’ and ‘exotics’ in the ‘Bantu townships’ had already been taking place outside cities like Johannesburg as early as the late 1960s. By 1976, with the rise in Black consciousness, and the growing turmoil caused by student protest against Soweto’s government officials, many of these early tours to the townships ended.18

In Cape Town, township tours emerged sometime in the late 1980s as a kind of ‘field trip’ model for white Capetonians who wished to see the ‘other side’ of Cape Town through controlled and orderly means without threatening their fragile domination of Black South Africans. By the late 1980s townships were being incorporated into the more mainstream South African tourism industry. Many of the early township tours were initiated by local white government officials curious to learn more about the ‘Black areas’ about which they knew so little because of the strictures of the apartheid state.19

Townships throughout the country have become major tourist attractions and destinations in recent years. Townships were historically at the forefront in the struggle against apartheid, and township tours resurfaced after 1994. The images emerging from the 1960s Anti-Pass Laws Campaign in Langa, the 1976 student uprising in Soweto, and the 1980s massive reform movements against apartheid had all originated from within the bounded spaces of the local townships. Some heritage professionals argue that with their depictions of, “real” history, “real” people and the “real” South Africa... township tours are presented as an alternative to cultural village performances as tourists are invited to see the local residents in the townships as more authentic and in non-performative environments.20 Despite any claims that township tours are truly ‘non-performative’, local residents perform for tourists in different ways – allowing visitors to enter their homes, businesses, and to photograph their once private traditional healing practices. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued:

The everyday lives of others are perceptible precisely because what they take for granted is not what we take for granted, and the more different we are from each other, the more intense the effect, for the exotic is the place where nothing is utterly ordinary. Such encounters force us to make comparisons that pierce the membrane of our own quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves, an effect that is also experienced by those on display.21

When the African National Congress first took office a decade ago, it proposed a new policy framework entitled the Reconstruction Development Program (RDP). The RDP is considered an ‘integrated, coherent socio-economic policy framework that seeks to mobilise South Africans and its resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future’. Its six basic principles, linked together, make up the political and economic philosophy that underlies the work of the ANC. Those principles most significant to developing a more pluralistic and democratic society include: (1) a people-driven process; (2) nation-building, (3) link reconstruction and development; and (4) the democratisation of South Africa. Subsequent policy development has grown out of the RDP – particularly concerning cultural heritage conservation and economic development through the growing tourism industry. For many community leaders and local government officials, tourism – perhaps more than any other sector – has the potential to achieve the varied objectives of the RDP.22

The continued growth of ‘township tourism,’ similar to the ‘ghetto tourism’ that is commercially successful in cities like Harlem in New York City or Watts in Los Angeles, requires urban and heritage planners to re-examine the tools for documenting and preserving sites reflective of the larger liberation struggle.23 Unfortunately, much of the physically extant heritage does not easily lend itself to the traditional standards of what is considered ‘architecturally significant’ or visually impressive. Much of the history of the anti-apartheid movement took place in the townships amongst what many heritage professionals would consider to be the ‘mundane’ and ordinary structures and environments of the poor. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a different set of criteria and strategies for documenting and preserving these important sites.24

The City of Cape Town has recently developed new community-based tourism initiatives that support skills development, job creation, and enterprise that reflect the city’s cultural diversity and promote cultural pluralism. The township of Langa, outside central Cape Town is significant as a site of protest and self-determination where, in 1960, 6000 people marched in protest
against apartheid pass laws. The South African police fired on the protestors, killing four people at Langa, as well as 69 others in Sharpeville, thereby catalysing the subsequent Black liberation movement. The Langa Heritage Foundation, in partnership with the City of Cape Town’s Heritage Resources Section has been working to conserve the site of the Langa Pass Office and Court Building and to develop a model program for sustainable tourism through a new community-based museum site. Local residents are now witnessing the creation of tourism-related jobs as concrete benefits of cultural heritage management, increasing public support for further heritage projects.

Langa was founded in 1927 and is the oldest surviving formally planned township of its kind in South Africa, the very first township established under the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923. The Act was designed to enforce racial segregation, control Black access to cities, and control the development of residential housing in the urban Apartheid City. The township’s population of over 47,000 comprises only 7 percent of the total number of Blacks living in Cape Town. The township was planned as a model ‘native urban village’ under the 1923 Act on a segregated site on the urban periphery of Cape Town’s CBD.26 Residence in Cape Town among Blacks could only be legally attained by having proof of being born in the city, or proof of employment. A pass, indicating the status of each person, had to be carried at all times and renewed regularly under penalty of law, and the threat of subsequent reprimand from local police. The handling of passes and cases related to pass laws was located within the Administration Block in Langa and the Pass Office and Court Building – a timber frame structure built in the early 1950s. The Pass Office and Court were built directly in front of the Administration building, in the centre of the Administration Block. Initially there were two structures: the main building housed the magistrates office, administration offices, holding cells and the court room and a secondary building was used as a holding cell, initially for male and later for female prisoners. Pass administration involved daily queues of people coming to have their passes renewed and to get new passes issued, as well as court proceedings against those found in violation of the Urban Areas Act – i.e. not carrying an up-to-date pass. Those arrested for pass violations would be charged and fined or sentenced to time in Pollsmor prison – with an average sentence of one month in prison for not having a pass. Residents from across the Cape region who lived during the 1950s and 60s through the early 1980s, had some experience with the pass hall either in acquiring a pass book or through forms of protest against the state. By the 1980s, the structure, built of untreated wood, was deteriorating from disuse. Although not considered ‘architecturally significant’ by most traditional conservation practitioners, the Pass Office has great historical value as the only extant pass office in South Africa. Many former pass offices were burned down as a result of the liberation struggle.

A multiracial group of heritage leaders and residents began meeting in 2000 to discuss the site’s potential. Funds for the restoration of the building and the initial museum were primarily garnered from the local government with volunteer support from the community. The partnership between the government and community representatives was initiated with a proposed large-scale documentation project, completed in 2003, of significant heritage sites throughout Langa. The proposed museum would address a number of important issues:

Figure 1 Langa Pass Court and Office Building Museum prior to renovation. Photo courtesy of Bridget O’Donoghue.

1. To provide recognition of the significant value of Langa’s heritage;
2. To provide an opportunity for Langa’s residents who suffered repression under the Apartheid governments to be documented and for their experiences to be heard by interested people and succeeding generations;
3. To provide a place where oral histories may be recorded and historic artifacts be donated/loaned to the museum’s archives;
4. To provide a public venue where visitors and locals can listen to identified residents’ stories of historic events.
5. To act as a tourist destination that depicts the political and social heritage of an important historic area in a variety of media; and
6. To initiate the development of economic opportunities for local residents through the creation of a museum shop, tour routes and theatre performances.

The building opened amidst some controversy in its adoption as a local community museum. Resident attitudes toward the site were in direct conflict with what ‘the state’ and its conservation architects had envisioned.26 Community representatives wanted the Pass Office to closely resemble their previous experiences under apartheid while obtaining passes. The backless wooden benches, dim lighting, and poor ventilation would help visitors reflect on the history of South Africa while recreating its role as an artifact of apartheid. The city of Cape Town believed that the Pass Office should instead act as a more traditional museum with the necessary exhibition space for memorialising the past.27 Ultimately, and through much negotiation, some of which is ongoing, community representatives were able to achieve their goals for a more grassroots-based (and even culturally sustainable) conceptualisation of museum-making.
The ANC has, over the past decade, faced an enormous challenge in creating a new national identity that embraces the past while still allowing for a framework that incorporates all of its many diverse groups from across the African diaspora and its transnational borders. While a myriad of cultural and civic institutions are now involved in 'collective memory making' in South Africa, heritage sites are recognised as among the best equipped to document the nation’s challenges.

Social justice and social inclusion are both closely related concepts, and still remain largely missing in much of the current debates concerning township heritage and urban redevelopment across South Africa. In the late 1980s the concept of 'sustainable development' was introduced into the environmental debate as an expression of the interdependence between the three systems identified as basic to development: the economic system, the social system, and the biophysical system. Across South Africa, cultural heritage is seen as a primary vehicle for new forms of economic development – one able to contribute financially to broader issues of resource management for marginalised communities.

However, the demands of foreign tourism on South Africa may also paradoxically contribute to the destruction of the natural and cultural environment, and it is therefore essential to find ways to protect these environments for present and future generations – particularly in former all-Black townships. Interestingly, Scotland may serve as an example here, as it made important inroads in social justice and social inclusion through massive social policy development and constitutional reform in the early 1990s. Since 1999, with the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament, social justice has become a focus of much development work across local government agencies and policy frameworks. South Africa could similarly develop a clearly stated heritage framework based on social justice initiatives.

A central tenet of the sustainable tourism movement includes preserving bio-diversity. An often-overlooked aspect of the sustainability movement is cultural diversity – which should include a decision-making process that allows for evaluating and designating new heritage sites as a means of alleviating social disparities while addressing issues of social justice. Perhaps a modified form of 'cultural sustainability', coupled with civic engagement, would allow for continued community involvement.

I have argued that it might be possible to begin seeing these former prisons and sites of protest as repository for national histories, one that also embraces a new form of community-based civic engagement. Elsewhere, in Argentina for example, the Topography of Memory Program of Memoria Abierta (Open Memory) begins to link civic engagement with cultural sustainability through the work of architect of Gonzalo Conte. Through an alliance of eight Argentine human rights organisations and local citizens, clandestine detention centers and other urban spaces once used for purposes of state terrorism now work to explore the reconstruction of history and memory. I maintain that understanding the cultural significance of historic sites in South Africa’s former all-Black townships requires an intersectional framework that both cuts across a long-held 'tourist’s gaze' based on white supremacy and challenges our assumptions about power, authority, race, class, and gender in our globalizing world.

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