

The trouble with history

Iziko Museums of Cape Town and the healing of South Africa



In 1999, Professor Jack Lohman was appointed by Dr Ben Ngubane, South Africa's Minister of Culture, Science and Technology to lead the transformation of Cape Town's national museums. He is Chief Executive of Iziko Museums of Cape Town, an organisation consisting of 15 national museums, including the South African National Gallery and the South African Museum. Here, he explains the complex and challenging historical context of museums in South Africa and the radical recasting of the national museums he now oversees.

To transform museums in any part of the world is a daunting yet exciting challenge. To do so in a country that for the first time in its history is beginning to know itself is a privilege and a rare honour.

As a foreigner you cannot feel anything else but presumptuous to be given the challenge of repositioning museums to new national goals and of delivering to the country as a whole. It is not that a certain degree of objectivity is bad; it is just that you only ever have half the picture.

My knowledge of South Africa was based on Athol Fugard, André Brink, television documentaries, and the images that dominated the news in Britain for over a decade. I remember the day I arrived in Cape Town to address a general staff meeting to find out that only a minority claim English as their first language and that over three quarters of the 300 workers exist on a bread line. It was the beginning of a painful realisation that to take up the challenge of transforming museums, you need to be able to reflect with a degree of sharp perception on the strengths and shortcomings of the past.

South Africa is a country of inspiring heroes, of Mandela, of Tutu, of Makeba and others. These people really cut one to size in terms of one's own worth and yet assert with the greatest authority that whatever you are doing, it is vital and worth doing. These legendary icons of hope still form the backbone of the spirit and soul of South Africa. The miracle of transformation and the spirit of successful negotiation permeate

every decision, every strategy, every meeting. Museum directors in South Africa cannot be the puffed up versions you get overseas. This is a job not for a connoisseur-diplomat but for a politically empowered healer with a passion for heritage.

The need for change

Until a little under three years ago, museums in South Africa sat on the margin of the big changes that were transforming society. It is as if they were observing but not participating in transformation. Here, political disinterest, frozen budgets, job insecurity, the collapse of the Rand and the spectacular growth of the tourism industry, pushed museums further into retreat. To some the museums felt besieged. While the world around these institutions changed dramatically, museums pondered their future. The introduction of the Cultural Institutions Act, which came into force on 1 April 1999, grouping the national museums together into two clusters and placing them in a semi-autonomous state, sent a misleading signal to the museum community that things might get worse. The Act provided some guarantees for museum workers with regard to their conditions of employment but their loss of status as public servants pointed to a threatening and an uncertain future.

This inheritance was further complicated by the broader story of museums in South Africa. In 1960, housekeeping along apartheid lines had

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taken place. Africa's oldest and largest museum, the South African Museum, founded in 1825, was spilt into two. The European colonial collections and those dealing with the story of Cape Town were transferred to a new site, leaving behind the natural history and ethnographic collections. It was hardly surprising when Kenneth Hudson visited South Africa in 1975 that he wrote about the dehumanising way in which the indigenous collections were treated alongside natural history specimens. It was a view that stuck. In a speech on Heritage Day in 1997, Nelson Mandela called on museums to stop representing African people as 'lesser beings'. And the next day's press carried the story of why Mandela would not set foot in museums, under the headline 'Mandela slams racist museums'.

But the South African museum story is not just a one-dimensional tale of resistance to change. It is rather an unsettling story that reveals a complex mix of contradictory attitudes, belief systems and values. And some museums such as the South African National Gallery and the William Fehr Collection at the Castle of Good Hope had sought to bring about change and demonstrate their support of a multicultural South Africa well before 1994 through a programme of exhibitions. These cultural stepchildren had been criticised in their time for their bold experiments. But all the national museums hid behind their serious lack of funds as the reason for their inability to realise their potential in a new society.

Reinventing the concept of 'museum'

The first challenge was clearly to create a new way of being a museum and to acknowledge the perspective that was missing. A thorough reinterpretation of collections was needed. I found myself noting staff reactions and comments at workshops; 'when you broaden the perspective, you question things, you talk differently - this in itself is a transformation of minds': I was impressed how museum workers were ready to change the standard fare of museums to something more compelling.

A series of staff workshops brought out a strong feeling that a truth and reconciliation commission was required for the collections themselves. A full audit was discussed and initiated, which could reveal the extent of national holdings and possibly the darker side of some of the collections with their encoded



The Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum (above), which was closed in 1999 (below), two years after it was criticised by Nelson Mandela

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symbolic meanings. The result could only enhance the credibility of a new organisation. It was this process that led to the evaluation of the human remains in the collections and the closure of the famous and popular Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum, the very exhibit Mandela had criticised two years previously. A shutter was effectively pulled down over a giant showcase, which presented the casts of real black men and women taken at the turn of century and which had titillated white audiences ever since. Amidst uproar from the white community and tour guides, this first act of political correctness emerged as an emblem and an engine driving the national museums towards democracy.

At the same time there was a need to look panoptically at the museums in the national portfolio and to see them as organically linked - not only as unwilling members of a new institution but also to look at their shared past, present and future. Members of the Board of Trustees, the Council, encouraged viewing the portfolio as a crucible, which could help shape a new nation. This formed the foundation of the organisation's vision.

A further context and impetus was provided by President Thabo Mbeki's dream of an African Renaissance. This is based on the idea that roots, values and identity coupled with hard work and economic growth will help the continent realise its undoubted potential. The museums, it was felt, could clearly contribute to shaping this concept. The planned new Slave Museum, the development of the Castle of Good Hope and the 'Origins and Destinies' exhibition and research programme could clearly provide a physical expression for the concept. Such a vision had

clear appeal. Thabo Mbeki became the first South African President to visit the South African Museum. A few months later, referring to the museum showcase set up in front of the Speaker at the opening of Parliament, the President spoke about the importance of African heritage in contributing to his vision.

Transforming the national museums

The outcome of this process of re-envisioning was the recasting of the national museums in the south of the country as Iziko Museums of Cape Town, a meta museum with a crafted set of values, a vision and a strategy that could take the museums from where they are today to a dynamic future.

The vision statement is a powerful commitment: *'Iziko Museums of Cape Town are African museums of excellence that empower and inspire all people to celebrate and respect our diverse heritage.'* The Xhosa word *Iziko* means the hearth, the place where ancestors meet to tell stories. It has a further meaning as the centre of cultural activity. As a new brand its name was felt appropriate in meeting the enormous challenge of audience development.

The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology came out in full support of reinventing and recasting the image of the old national museums. But at the same time they found it politically wise to create new ones. Robben Island Museum, the Nelson Mandela Museum and Freedom Park became an opportunity for exploring new narrative approaches to museums and a testing ground for



reexamining repressed memories to a much broader audience.

A period of heavy transformation ensued. A new delivery structure was developed and peopled. Every museum worker had to go through the pain and anguish of applying for their own job or for a new one. But the result broke an effective glass ceiling, which had prevented disadvantaged workers from progressing within the museum industry and acted as a catalyst for significantly raising productivity. With a clear work plan the organisation's compass now points to a new horizon.

A framework for growth

But to succeed in the next phase of development, three things need to happen. First, a process of portfolio rationalisation needs to take place. National assets need to be re-examined against new criteria and a national collections policy needs to be drafted, discussed and agreed. The result could be a rebalanced museum sector with a stronger appeal. Second, a mammoth programme of training needs to be initiated across all museum disciplines but especially across those that are still relevantly new in South Africa such as customer care, marketing, fundraising, human resources and commercial development. The launch of the first 'Museums MBA' in July 2002 at the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town will go a long way to address the leadership vacuum. Third, the national museums need to create a new way of communicating with the public and businesses, and drawing funds from them.

This will be the organisation's future oxygen. Fundraising, membership schemes, friends and volunteer groups need to be created, activated and nurtured. International funds need to be leveraged for scholarship and research.

Everyone working at Iziko and the Department of Arts, Culture Science and Technology has had the honour of contributing to the process of creating a new national museum organisation and transforming an arguably stagnant cultural sector. A new organisation with a vibrant future has emerged. It is this charge of energy that comes from others' needs and demands that has ultimately delivered change.

All images courtesy of Iziko Museums of Cape Town