

Moulding freedom and erecting responsibility: An article on contentious commemorative structures and heritage in a post-apartheid South Africa

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Introduction

Heritage and museum professionals are constantly faced with the debate concerning the preservation of commemorative structures such as monuments and the selective cultural memories attached to them in countries with contentious histories, such as South Africa. Heritage and museum professionals are stewards of history and collective memory in educational institutions like museums on behalf of the citizens of their country and for future generations. But in public spaces like town halls or parks where commemorative structures are found, the public ultimately decides what parts of history will be represented in day-to-day life. This article will explore the civic responsibility and issues of cultural freedom when it comes to preserving, removing, and displaying contentious commemorative structures in public spaces in post-apartheid South Africa.

Moulding freedom

Commemorative structures are representations of memory and are generally found in public spaces. These structures can simultaneously commemorate a chosen historical narrative and blatantly exclude and ignore any other narratives, especially those of subordinated groups (Marschall 2017: 204; McGinn and De Kamper 2019: 37). These structures—as features in the landscape—generally go unnoticed, but once they *are* recognised, they impose on the viewer, a person or an event that demands an act of expression, acknowledgement, and remembrance. This does not, however, mean that reception of the structure is always

positive, especially when socio-political climates have shifted since the structure was first erected (such as colonial statues in post-apartheid South Africa). Socio-political changes like those in South Africa were most likely not anticipated by the architect of the structure, whose materials of stone or metal intended it to last for generations. Commemorative structures can therefore invoke expressions of rejection, vandalism, and destruction in the name of forgetting the old social order. According to Sabine Marschall (associate professor of Cultural and Heritage Tourism at the University of KwaZulu-Natal) (2017: 203), a bronze statue on a pedestal is ‘a time-honoured symbol of societal respect and admiration, and its location in front of a city hall or another place of importance and visibility is perceived as an affront and provocation’ in the face of a new social order (Marschall 2017: 210). This perceived affront and provocation was the case with the Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2015, when students at the University of Cape Town campaigned against and vandalised a statue of Cecil John Rhodes, an English imperialist, on the university’s upper campus and serving as a symbol of the university’s lack of transformation (Marschall 2017: 204, 210).

In general, the South African narrative around freedom is that it was gained through struggle and physical socio-political expression such as protest, but in a post-apartheid South Africa where freedom is enshrined in the constitution, dialogue and counter-narratives have become the primary form of expression (Marschall 2017: 205). That is why the Rhodes Must Fall movement was such an interesting and public case, cropping up because dialogue had failed students struggling with socioeconomic hardships and inequality, despite living in a ‘free country’. The Rhodes statue was a stark reminder of that reality (Marschall 2017: 206). Ironically, it was through public consultation and dialogue with the students that the statue was eventually removed and placed in storage (McGinn and De Kamper 2017: 40).

Erecting responsibility

In the freedom narrative of a new ‘rainbow nation’ where all groups are included in national identity, the destruction of commemorative structures was halted in favour of building new commemorative structures and heritage. It also seemed unnecessary to spend funds on removing commemorative structures where funds could be used elsewhere such as building new, more representative cultural institutions and symbols (Marschall 2017: 208). It has been a fine balance for South Africa’s democratic government over the last 30 years to reinvent a nation, for which it has gotten a lot of criticism—either doing too much or too little. Starting with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa chose

the direct, rip-the-band-aid-off approach in an attempt to heal the deep wounds in South Africa's collective memory (O'Reilly 2004: 12).

South Africa could not be free from its painful past without dealing with it first and learning what South Africa's new collective identity would be (O'Reilly 2004: 13). The government felt responsible to build and create new institutions that highlighted Struggle History, forced removals, oral histories, and the voices of formerly oppressed peoples. Some examples of new institutions that focus on historically ignored narratives are the Apartheid Museum, Freedom Park, the District Six Museum, and the soon-to-be-opened Sarah Baartman Centre of Remembrance. The goal of these institutions is to create spaces of healing and dialogue, as well as to include oral histories and previously ignored histories. This also means consulting and involving the public and broad communities in decisions on how their history should be represented and what they want to have represented (O'Reilly 2004: 13). These spaces provide alternative and more responsible ways of dealing with contested history (McGinn and De Kamper 2019: 39). Subsequently, this gives South African citizens the freedom to tell *their* (his)stories without necessity for destruction.

However, memories of the past remain incredibly contested and South Africa has many disputed commemorative structures. The transition from the apartheid government to the new democratic government was relatively peaceful (O'Reilly 2004: 14; Marschall 2017: 207; McGinn and De Kamper 2019). It can be argued that the destruction, defacement, and vandalism of a public commemorative structure is part of its natural life in the public domain. During times of transformation, these structures can act as canvases to express political and social freedoms (Marschall 2017: 205). Defacement was widely applied during the struggle movement, as the defacement of symbols was a key expression of protest to achieve change during that era (Marschall 2017: 206).

Sometimes destruction cannot be prevented, since acts of destruction are opportunistic, but it remains the responsibility of heritage professionals to at least deter it. According to conservator Dr Isabelle McGinn, and her colleague Mr Gerard De Kamper from the University of Pretoria Museums, the preferred conservation method regarding commemorative structures is to place them outside of the public domain or in storage, as is the case with the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town (McGinn and De Kamper 2019:42). This is unfortunately not always possible, and destruction is irreversible which is what heritage professionals are so acutely aware of, even though this can at times add to the changing symbolism of a structure (Marshall 2017: 209; McGinn and De Kamper 2019: 42).

The National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999, Section 27 states that no heritage structures may be altered without a permit (SAHRA 1999: 27). This means that in a democratic country, South Africans have the freedom to have offensive and unconstitutional cultural structures removed, but they also have the civic responsibility to follow the correct legal procedures in order to promote dialogue and to prevent indiscriminate destruction.

Conclusion

At times, even new commemorative structures come under fire from groups who are disgruntled by the new political and social orders. In other instances, commemorative structures are just simply vandalised for their scrap metal value, which helps the law to determine the fate of contentious cultural structures (Marshall 2017: 209, 212, 214). Allowing legislature to decide is hard, because these structures are emotionally and symbolically charged, and it can be a very slow process when immediate action is desired (Marshall 2017: 206). That is why dialogue and the consultation of communities prior to and during such processes is such a huge responsibility in a country now considered free, and why a task team on the transformation of the heritage landscape was created (McGinn and De Kamper 2019: 39). Retaining cultural freedom in an inclusive society requires some consensus and collaboration to be reached (Marshall 2017: 213). It is a massive undertaking to build a new nation and whether consensus or perfect cultural freedom is ever to be reached, is another debate entirely.

References

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