



CODESRIA

12th General Assembly
Governing the African Public Sphere

12e Assemblée générale
Administrer l'espace public africain

12a Assembleia Geral
Governar o Espaço Público Africano

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حكم الفضاء العام الإفريقي

Notes for a Guide to the Ossuary

Louise Green and Noëleen Murray)¹
Stellenbosch University and University of Cape Town



07-11/12/2008
Yaoundé, Cameroun

This essay explores the conflictual relationship between private property and public space in the reconfiguring of the city of Cape Town in postapartheid South Africa. It focuses on one specific building, an ossuary, built by the Cape Town City Council to house the bones of some of the city's displaced dead. This ossuary, named the New Prestwich Memorial Building, provides a useful focus for addressing some of the complex ways in which 'human remains' emerge as one of the loci for the public expression of resistance to a developer-driven property market in postapartheid South Africa. The bones to be housed in this ossuary, though themselves mute, have set in motion an on-going and frequently hostile set of conversations in which the new dimensions of South Africa's public sphere are being negotiated.

Our reading of the New Prestwich Memorial Building sees it as a surface within the city of Cape Town that requires decoding.² It was built in 2007 to make material reparation for the city's 'emergency exhumation,' before public consultation, of skeletal remains from a building site in Green Point, adjacent to the city centre and consequently what is frequently described as 'prime property'.³ The bones, variously reported to number in the thousands, were discovered during the building of a luxury new apartment block called The Rockwell and became the centre of an immense city-wide dispute.⁴

These unnamed and unmarked dead became the tangible signs of the city's displacement of so many others, both living and dead. They highlighted the city's sedimentation in an unreconstructed colonial past and its fantasied participation in a global future. They came to stand for everything which is overlooked, hidden, elided and displaced in the construction of the new global tourist city of Cape Town.⁵

The phrase in the title of this essay, 'notes towards a guide' may at first seem puzzling. Like almost all public memorials, The New Prestwich Memorial Building already contains a guide in the form of an exhibition of images and texts. In these, the building is described as an Interpretative Centre. The exhibition includes a series of boards that describe the history of the area. The boards display maps, provide quotations from archival sources, offer information about early plans and developments in the city, and describe from archival

sources everyday life in District 1.⁶ The exhibition also includes a board describing the history of the dispute itself.

The exhibition, following the genre of such guides, manages the experience of the space. It consigns the bones respectfully but decisively to the realm of heritage. Our guide offers something less official. It emerges out of our own deliberate attempt to engage with the site as a landscape in history - incomplete, troubling and under construction. Remembering the texts written about the dispute, conversations had and overheard, television, newspaper and magazine coverage, colloquia we had attended, we walked from the now completed though not fully occupied Rockwell across the road and down three blocks to the site of the Ossuary and we noted the elements in the visual landscape that alerted us to the work being done by this combination of material substances and design. We attempted to read what the building was saying, what it was concealing and how it interacted with the city surrounding it. We reflected on what role it was performing and to what extent was it closing down public debate through the structuring of public space.

Our guide is imagined not as a systematic analysis of the site or an exhaustive survey of the issues relating to heritage, transformation and the city that the events surrounding the bones made visible. Instead through choosing the form of the essay, we wish to respond to the demands of the Ossuary as a material subject. In 'The essay as form,' cultural theorist Theodor Adorno suggests that what is valuable about the essay is its ability to trace the contours of a particular subject without imposing on it the forms demanded by disciplinary knowledge. He writes about the essay that 'it thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing over them'.⁷ Our essay takes the form of notes appended to various aspects of the materiality of the structure.

These notes are structured around six words or phrases that we found at the site, part of the written text through which the official guide directs the visitor's interpretation of the landscape. These words and phrases appeared to us to mark moments of intense symbolization, signifiers in which the ideological work of the architect and the authors of the exhibition became most visible. They represent points of entry into this heavily symbolically overlaid landscape. Removed from their comfortable position in various disciplinary modes of

description, these words become interpretative devices through which it might be possible to open up cracks in the surface not only of the memorial itself but also of the city as a whole.⁸ They are: Gateway; 'Engraved Palimpsest'; Mirrors; Visitors' Book; Rock, Brick, Concrete; and Closed

1. Gateway

In the period post 1994 municipalities, much like many other institutions, in South African cities have been through a period of transformation, focusing on 'restructuring'. New urban policies have been drafted aimed at enabling local authorities to govern cities in a more equitable manner.⁹ However, these local authorities have been slow to implement new policies. In Cape Town in particular, a city wracked by political infighting and changes in governance, the period of transformation has seen city management in disarray. It is within this context that applications were made by a developer to build new luxury apartments in Prestwich Street, in the fast gentrifying area of Green Point. The official in charge of 'heritage' signed a demolition order for a warehouse in an area that was well known to archaeologists and historians to contain sites of burial.¹⁰

The ensuing public dispute over the proposed development at Prestwich Street therefore started with a legal claim against the city over the granting of this order by the developer.¹¹ Throughout the more visible process of dispute in which local community groups became vocal about the 'bones' of Prestwich Street, another battle was being fought over the property rights of the developer against the city council, which the developer ultimately won after a lengthy process of appeal.¹² The Prestwich Memorial was ultimately built on less commercially valuable land nearby which belonged to the City Council as an 'act of conciliation'. The awkward triangular piece of ground (which contains an electrical sub-station, around which the memorial is built) has been reconceptualized as a 'Gateway'.¹³

In the display devoted to the building itself, the architect, Lucien Le Grange, uses this term to describe the building. He writes 'Perceived as a series of walls into which – and behind which – the recovered skeletal remains are stored, the building constitutes a strong edge along Somerset road and insodoing defines a 'gateway' into the Green Point precinct.'¹⁴ Reading this allows the great black grid-work that covers the large sliding doors at the front and the rear and even the side of the building to come into focus. Not only does this provide the

building with impressive if perhaps somewhat unnecessary security. It also signifies a gate, which is, at the moment, closed.

On our visit we entered through a small side entrance concealed behind a small brick extension. In order to enter our guide had to shift slightly a pile of things belonging to the workers who are currently maintaining the grounds. They had placed their things here because it appears so secluded, so out of the way of general traffic. Once inside the structure becomes even clearer. If all three sliding doors and grid-work frames were slid back it would be possible for a small crowd to walk through the building, in one end and out the other.

In one of the displays, 'About the exhibition', the openness of this space is emphasized.¹⁵ The displays currently situated in the space between the doors are described as temporary, able to be moved aside if the occasion demands it. The building makes itself available for symbolic ritual in the abstract by maintaining a degree of blankness, a certain, careful neutrality.

Yet what would be the significance of passing through this 'Gateway'? What is the significance of a gate which is not attached to a wall or impassable boundary of some kind? Does the presence of the Gateway imply a boundary, invisible possibly but one which the city wishes to map, mark and control.

The idea of a gateways in current planning discourses in Cape Town perhaps also seeks to express a nostalgia for a different, older ordering of space, as defined by the colonial city, neatly bounded between the outer streets of Buitengracht and Biutenkant Streets. It suggests a city on a different scale, designed for pedestrian mobility not the standardized road system of the motor vehicle. The reinscribing of 'gateways' in the city suggests the desire to express the existence of variation within the city, of non-homogeneous space, a sense of passage through from one space to another. In the case of the Prestwich Memorial space, the transition from the 'old city' to Green Point is not clear as both are irrevocably marked by a landscape of modernity with high rise buildings forming a continuity that defies this neat distinction which might have been there once.

Once inside the building, on the left and the right, outside of this public space, the bones are housed. Peering through another low black grid structure we see only bare concrete shelves. Le Grange describes the space in this way: 'The storage area – or ossuary – is made up of

linear spaces which ramp down into the earth and include timber shelving system for the storage of some 4500 boxes of skeletal remains.’¹⁶

This functional storage space invites contrast with more traditional modes of housing the dead. Graves, mausoleums, cemeteries are traditionally sites of aesthetic excess: elaborately carved gravestones, mosaic tiles of startling blue, colour, cloth, flowers, beauty and transience, alongside the enduring memorialization of marble or stone. This functional modern space does not invite a personal response. There is no room for flowers, candles or incense or for small personal rituals of symbolic remembrance. [We are thinking here of how this differs so markedly from the Kramats on Table Mountain around which such rituals have accrued.]¹⁷ Despite its apparent openness, it is formal space. The bones are to be locked away from the prying eyes of academics but also away from the public, those who have identified them as ancestors whether actual or symbolic.¹⁸

The gateway is one prominent structural metaphor used by the architect, but it is not the only one. If in one sense the building is the marker of a boundary, in another it is a rewriting of space, or a writing over of space, what Le Grange describes as an ‘engraved palimpsest’.¹⁹

2. Engraved palimpsest

The term palimpsest has been used twice in relation to the Prestwich case. First to describe the site by academics Nick Shepherd and Christian Ernsten and again by Lucien Le Grange, the architect who designed the Prestwich Memorial.²⁰ Reading the architect’s panel in the exhibition, he refers to using the notion of an ‘engraved palimpsest’ as a conceptual starting point for the design of the building.

We wondered about this as it appears that this concept has been used in two different senses. In Shepherd and Ernsten’s paper in ‘Desire Lines, Space Memory and Identity in the Postapartheid City’, they appear to be using the word in reference to the notion of a manuscript which has been over written, where previous layers have been rubbed off to make room for the present text, but that markings or traces remain of the earlier wording.²¹ This analogy of cities constructed through layering and overlays enables their interpretation of the archaeology of the site.

In the architect's reference to the term he alludes to an 'engraved palimpsest', invoking another meaning, where a brass plate can be termed a palimpsest, with a new inscription written on the reverse side of a previously engraved plate.²² The distinction may be subtle and both are useful tools for analogy but there are pointed differences. In the first sense the notion of overlaying and over writing allows for a reading of the site that does not preclude previous writings, although these may be faded and obscured by the current text which is dominant and immediately legible. In the second sense the notion appears to imply the reversal and perhaps the denial from sight of the previous insertion, as a new message is engraved onto the landscape.

What does this say about disciplinary approaches to engagement with sites of memory and memorialisation? Archaeologists and architects are two of the major sets of professional and disciplinary players who work formally with heritage in contemporary South African cities (as opposed to poets and artists, say?) They are both often charged with tasks beyond their disciplinary boundaries – where colonial archaeology has been challenged for its role in 'racial science' as Shepherd and Ernsen reveal (after Legassick and Rassool)- architects are often placed in the position of interpreters of places, and asked to do much more than build buildings.²³

What emerges at the Prestwich Memorial (rather than on site) however appears to be a notion of interpretation – or more precisely that of an 'interpretive centre' borrowed from many similar international examples – which has turned the metaphorical brass plate around and is an attempt to inscribe or 'engrave' new sets of interpretation into the fabric of the city.²⁴ Perhaps it is at this level that the building reflects an architecture of closure, and has become seemingly impossible for people to accept, despite the architect's best intentions?

3. Mirrors

As with many modernist buildings, the idea dominates.²⁵ The building is a very authoritative gesture. It takes control of the bones, the public, and the symbolism. It leaves nothing to chance. It does this in part with mirrors. In place of windows, the building has polished bronzed mirrors. Approaching the locked structure to look inside, you are instead confronted with your own image. This is not without a certain everyday usefulness. At least two passers-by paused, as we approached, to consult their own reflection in these surfaces. Yet at the same

time it contributes to the impression given by the building that it is fully defended. It is not possible to see inside, to catch a glimpse of the interior.

The inconclusiveness and polarity of the public debate that resulted in the Ossuary project is also evident in the making of the exhibition, the building and its associated public space. The polished and new quality of the building, its gardens and the exhibition conceals the breakdown in the partnership set up to guide the composition of its contents and form. According to Bonnita Bennett and the Prestwich Committee, the City of Cape Town – beset with its own fractious political rivalry with the Provincial Government – went ahead without consulting its partners and produced the exhibition.²⁶

Le Grange notes that: ‘Within selected openings in this wall, mirrored glass windows (which in time will be engraved with names and inscriptions) have been introduced to allow for moments of (literal and figurative) reflection by passers-by.’²⁷ The building itself is designed to induce reflection. The word performs the useful operation of blurring the distinction between two very different ideas: one, the literal reflection of an image and two, the notion of intellectual reflection, of thinking something over. The two do not necessarily go together. In fact seeing your own image as you approach the building operates less to induct you into the landscape of the dead than to remind you that the building has not forgotten you. It has its eye on you and is watching you pass.

Ultimately, these mirrors will be literal representations of the ‘engraved palimpsest’, a surface which will be written over with names and inscriptions. The effect will be a superimposition of enduring writing on the transient image of the passer-by. Yet these surfaces remain blank, suggesting a hesitation in making this enduring statement of purpose. What names and inscriptions can legitimately overlay all passers-by, can be written on the public of the city as a whole? Who is drawn from contemplating her own reflection to reflecting and makes the transition from passer-by to visitor?

4. The Visitors Book

Inside the Ossuary building there is a large, thick leather bound book which is a record of visitors to the Ossuary. It is perhaps the most material artefact in the space, perched in the dark unlit space of the empty reception desk, surrounded by old bits of take away food - a plastic spoon, some polystyrene containers and plastic wrappers – somehow juxtaposing (after

Lefebvre) the lived space with the formal aspirations of recording the building's own history of visitors to the place.²⁸ The book is designed in a traditional way, reminiscent of those found in the halls of country houses of wealthy landed gentry, which is in direct contrast to the clean modern lines of the building and the installation which houses the exhibition in its main space. It is a sort of curiosity that begs one to engage with it.

Yet somehow it is also a point of tension. The caretaker who lets visitors into the building via a back service entrance – ‘until the building is formally opened’ – insists anxiously that you have to sign the book if you wish to view the exhibition beyond. We were drawn to paging through the book, curiously in search of who had been there before us, and of who course who had not. The newness and relative emptiness of the book, juxtaposed against its thickness, suggests a slippage between aspirations for the space and actual visitation. Most of the entries were recorded at two official events, accompanied by a few random visits by members of the public with an interest in the space such as ourselves, an archaeologist, museum practitioners, academics and the like.²⁹

In the absence of any institutional management of the space, the visitors book becomes a sort of awkward anti-symbol – it is a material form of recording and the retention of this in a formal way, but it is also perhaps an attempt at knowing – knowing in the absence of remembering, as there is no one there to receive memory.

5. Rock, Stone, Brick, Concrete

The building is designed to emphasize authenticity not sacredness. In order to indicate that the space departs from the everyday world of the street, the architects have marked the landscape with a rock at the furthest point of this landscape and at two other points, creating a triangular frame for the building itself. The rock, a piece of Malmesbury Shale Stone, serves the purpose of indicating but not being an enduring ground for inscription. It is not a headstone, yet it makes a subtle allusion to the tradition of headstones.

The building itself is build partly from stock bricks and partly from the same stone. Le Grange explains that: ‘The external stock brick walls which have an outer skin of Malmesbury Shale stone, retrieved and quarried from the excavations in the V&A waterfront, resonate with the way cemetery boundary walls were built in the past.’³⁰ The building material itself is invested with symbolic value.

In describing the work of an architect who restores for himself an old farmhouse on 'Ile de France', Jean Baudrillard comments on this modern fascination with the old and the 'authentic'. The architect, in rebuilding his 'ruin' uses some old stones and tiles from the original house in order to invest the new with 'symbolic foundations'.

Baudrillard writes: 'Rather as a church does not become a genuinely sacred place until a few bones or relics have been enshrined in it, so this architect cannot feel at home (in the strongest sense: he cannot thoroughly rid himself of a particular kind of anxiety) until he can sense the infinitesimal yet sublime presence within his brand new walls of an old stone that bears witness to past generations'.³¹

In a similar way, the architect of the Ossuary appears to feel a kind of anxiety associated with the modernness of the building. Tradition and history, disassociated from any particular tradition or particular history, are accorded a place through the presence of the stones themselves, mute witnesses to some abstract yet symbolically valuable pastness. The uses of stone excavated from the site of the Waterfront invests this modern structure with authentic value and makes an apparently material connection with the past. It suggests continuity, distracting attention away from the awkward fact that this is precisely what the unexpected discovery of the bones gives lie to. The city (as opposed to particular communities within the city) with its innumerable displacements has no continuity, no tradition it is able to draw on to house these bones. Instead the parts must make up for the lack in the whole. The stones are called upon to bear witness to past generations, but they do so discretely and tastefully. In fact they are so in keeping with the dominant aesthetic of 'naturalness,' antiquing and authenticity, that it is barely possible to distinguish the Ossuary building from some others in the gradually gentrifying District 1, where new buildings often gesture to the industrial aesthetics of their predecessors.³²

Leaving we are mistaken for tourists by some street people who have been congregating in the space between the ossuary and the church, not quite on Ossuary grounds. They greet us most politely: 'Welcome to the Mother, the most beautiful city in the whole world.' What marks us as tourists - our interest in this 'interpretative centre', our camera, our whiteness?

6. Closed

Visiting the building is perplexing because it is closed and the reasons for its closure (or more precisely its failure to be opened) make no sense in the light of the claim made by some heritage practitioners that the ossuary has brought ‘closure’ to the disputes over the final resting place of the bones.³³ It seems instead that the terms of the dispute have simply continued to haunt [sic] the city and that despite the confident claims of institutional collaboration made in the exhibition text, the building project for the Prestwich Memorial has become the central object of another unresolved argument over the custodianship of the bones that were disturbed and eventually exhumed out of sight for the Rockwell to be built.³⁴

What appears to be at play here is no longer simply the tensions between the profit driven desires of private development and the ‘communities of memory’ of those dispossessed in Cape Town, but the playing out of institutional and disciplinary interpretations of the Prestwich dispute, where the confident methods of conventional heritage practice and modes of interpretation have overwritten the more open discourses of interpretation advocated by the Prestwich Committee and the District Six Museum.³⁵ The building and its associated exhibition that were intended to unlock the historical tensions and bring closure to the trauma and argument have somehow perhaps simply concretised the dispute.

The case of the Prestwich development and the subsequent exhumations have however occasioned the production of new knowledges in postapartheid Cape Town, through which not only heritage practice but the established scientific and historical epistemologies of the colonial and postapartheid city are beginning to be rewritten.³⁶

In writing this essay we performed the role of visitor but also observed this performance. We both were and were not the readers to whom the exhibition was addressed. In refusing to be the ideal readers, in choosing instead perversely to juxtapose the disciplined/conventional words with the highly organized space and the unruly history, we sought to trouble the narrative closure promised by the Interpretative Centre. In our unofficial guide, we have not offered an alternative narrative, one that might claim to represent a truer story of the bones. Instead we have looked away from the bones at the landscape of the dead constructed to administer them. The solidity of the rock and brick structure conceals a strangely fissured edifice – one which struggles to assert its moral authority in the face of the intense skepticism of the interested public. (maybe one last sentence) The physically completed yet unopened

building stands as a sort of sign of the problem of monuments designed less to celebrate the dead than to manage the unruly past.

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- ¹ This paper acknowledges support from the National Research Foundation (NRF) funded project ‘ The Heritage Disciplines Project’, based in the Department of History at the University of the Western Cape. The financial support of the NRF towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinion’s expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at are those of the authors and are not necessarily attributed to the NRF.
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