The Reconstruction of Memory at Constitution Hill

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Abstract: The Old Fort Prison was Johannesburg’s main place of incarceration of prisoners for eight decades, including during the apartheid era. Virtually every important political leader in South African history, including Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, and Fatima Meer, as well as scores of ordinary South Africans caught in the web of colonial and apartheid repression, were imprisoned there. Today, this prison complex is home to South Africa’s Constitutional Court. Constitution Hill has brought former prisoners to “map” their memories of the site. They also host public dialogues on the injustices of the past, as typified by the prisons at Number Four, as well as people’s understanding of their constitutional needs and rights, and their experiences of the country’s young constitutional democracy.

Key words: Constitution Hill, South Africa, dialogue, prison, oral history.

Johannesburg had only been established for seven years when Paul Kruger, president of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, built the Old Fort prison in 1893. This high-security jail, situated on a high ridge north of the town, was intended to intimidate and keep control over the uitlanders (foreigners) in the mining town of Johannesburg. Kruger turned the newly built prison into a military fort after the Jameson Raid of 1896, when mainly English-speaking immigrants conspired with the British to overthrow the Boer government. With the advent of the South African War (Anglo-Boer War) in 1899, the Boer Staatsartillerie kept a sharp eye on developments from their perch high on Hospital Hill. But when the British took occupation of Johannesburg
in May 1900, the Old Fort was surrendered without a shot and the British army imprisoned Boer soldiers in their own fort. This marked the beginning of the long history of the Old Fort as a place of punishment, confinement, and abuse of prisoners of all political persuasions. Once the war was over, in 1902, the fort reverted to being a prison again, and was Johannesburg’s main place of incarceration of prisoners for eight decades, including during the apartheid era.

Three other prison buildings were built outside the rampart walls: the Women’s Jail, the Awaiting Trial Block, and Section Four and Five. The prison complex was racially segregated, with white male prisoners being kept in the Old Fort and black prisoners in the other three prisons on site. The Old Fort Prison complex commonly became known as Number Four. The jail always had a brooding presence in the city, especially as the elegant suburb of Hospital Hill grew around it.

Virtually every important political leader in South African history, including Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, and Fatima Meer, as well as scores of ordinary South Africans caught in the web of colonial and apartheid repression, have been imprisoned in these jails. The old stone walls tell a century’s worth of stories about an iniquitous political system, a brutal penal institution, and the resilience of generations of prisoners.

“We knew Number Four to be a very scary place, like going down a mine. When the police car arrived at the reception, you used to go deep, deep, deep into the earth.”—Sipho Sibiya, political prisoner

“My grandmother had taught us to say goodbye when we went to shop in town, because we never knew if we would come back or not. We used to say, ‘If you don’t see me, check for me at Number Four.’”—Nolundi Ntamo, pass offender

When the jails closed in 1983, the site lay abandoned for many years. In 1996, the judges of the newly established Constitutional Court announced that this notorious prison complex, because of its painful past, was to become the home of the Constitutional Court, which would work to build an open and democratic society based on human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedoms. The decision to house the Constitutional Court in the Old Fort was a bold one, highly symbolic of the extent to which the hopes for the new South Africa are built on, and honor, the pain of the past.

Since that momentous announcement, Number Four has undergone a remarkable process of transformation. It has become Constitution Hill, a major inner-city regeneration project and a thriving mixed-use precinct, with the Constitutional Court as an anchor surrounded by the old prison buildings, which have become important heritage sites.

The fundamental curatorial principle in turning the prisons into visitor attractions has been facilitating public ownership of the spaces, especially by the ex-prisoners themselves. Wherever possible, the process of making the
exhibition is displayed, and visitors and ex-prisoners are invited to add another layer of interpretation to Constitution Hill by leaving their responses to the exhibit.

The programs offered at the Hill are “lekgotlas.” Lekgotla is a Sotho/Tswana word broadly meaning a nonhierarchical dialogue that is conducted in the form of a public gathering to decide on matters of group and social importance. At Constitution Hill, the lekgotla program includes public debates, lectures, seminars, and workshop series, and it provides participants with the resources and space to define their place in a changing South Africa. Topics deal with the injustices of the past, as typified by the prisons at Number Four, as well as people’s understanding of their constitutional needs and rights, and their experiences of the country’s young constitutional democracy. For example, the “Our Constitution—Ten Years On” series, offered in partnership with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), gives ordinary people the space to evaluate the progress of the country as a democratic state.

We envisioned a key lekgotla program for Constitution Hill, Mapping Memories, with these principles in mind. Our intention for Mapping Memories was to reach a broad audience including some primary groups—former prisoners, teachers, and learners—as well as heritage specialists and new audiences attentive to survivors’ roles in reconciliation, rights, and democracy, through workshops and exhibition. Former prisoners are a primary constituency at Constitution Hill. Many are growing old, and it is important to capture the memories that may otherwise be taken with them to their graves.
For teachers, special projects and exhibitions of this kind present avenues for storytelling about the past that can then be simulated in classrooms. Several heritage workshops for teachers are conducted at Constitution Hill throughout the year, and project materials will be shared with teachers to enhance the available strategies and methodologies around heritage studies.

The challenge for many heritage sites is in defining the role that they can play within the educational curriculum. This project offers a highly relevant example of how learning areas that are intrinsic to the new curriculum—such as oral history—can be brought to life in an imaginative way. One of the primary aims of the new democracy is to give people the skills to represent histories that were previously silenced and suppressed, and this project will showcase this endeavour. In addition, learners in our schools are often disconcertingly ignorant of aspects of apartheid and the colonial past. We intend that this project will inform them of the struggles that have resulted in the human rights culture in which they live.

We also expect that Mapping Memories will attract other audiences to the Hill. Heritage specialists engaged in expanding the means of representation of the past beyond the linguistic and other conventional forms of recording history should find it interesting. Others will be drawn as part of the growing, international interest in discourses around reconciliation, human rights, and democracy, and in self-representation by survivors of torture and abuse in those discourses. A similar project, for example, conducted by ex-prisoners who were incarcerated in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland, has raised much interest from scholars in history, cultural anthropolgy, and the arts.

Mapping Memories

As curators, we relied on former warden and prisoner testimonies to understand the rhythms and workings of these places that had occupied such a central place in the psyche of mainly black people living in Johannesburg under apartheid. The vast majority of prisoners had been in the jail simply because the color of their skin meant that they had transgressed one of the discriminatory laws of the day. There were others who were thrown into jail for directly participating in political activities against apartheid. And then there were those who had committed crimes, although the line between political prisoners and so-called “criminals” was sometimes difficult to draw, given the nature of the criminal justice system under apartheid.

There were several challenges in these initial workshops. The first was to locate the ex-prisoners, because there was no register of prisoners. Once we had found groups of former prisoners—mainly political prisoners to begin with—many were reluctant to dredge up their extremely painful memories. Some refused to participate because of the horror of their experiences. We ended up working with specific groups of former prisoners—women political prisoners from the 1970s and men from the early 1980s, for example.
Through oral history and life history processes, the story of the jail slowly and painfully began to emerge.

We discussed various avenues for implementing the workshops. We decided on asking former prisoners to take photographs of the jail and to draw their experiences. They would also record oral testimonies to accompany the photographs and drawings. The material generated in the workshops would form the basis of an exhibition and book, and would also provide the springboard for public seminars and discussions on human rights issues at Constitution Hill. We hoped that the material resulting from the workshops would be powerful physical prompts facilitating the exchange of knowledge and empathy, and would allow ex-prisoners to take pride in sharing and legitimating their memories within the new political context. We anticipated that, through this strongly autobiographic process, memory would be given a unique form.

Many former prisoners had never considered using drawing as a means of recording and unearthing memory. Some were apprehensive about participating in this activity because they feared a lack of talent and ability. But as the process went along, the participants realized that the drawing process could be an effective way to understand the past for themselves as individuals, as well as for the group; the push and pull of lines on a paper stimulated debate and facilitated memory. The drawings have become valuable recordings that increased our understanding of buildings that have disappeared, patterns of punishment and humiliation in the prisons, as well as other deeply complex tissues of memory whose recall gives dignity to the past.

Several people in the group had lost loved ones while they were in prison. They were left bereft and traumatized, not only by the loss of a father, mother, or child whom they were unable to bury, but also by not having a memento of the dead. Drawing provided a means for an image to be made that served as this memento.

The experience was also gratifying for the facilitators. Their training as artists was put to a unique use, serving as a conduit to memories that otherwise had no representation. Joyce Dipale, like many others, had been tortured at John Vorster Square. One day she asked one of the facilitators to draw that torture. She directed this drawing with great particularity, speaking determinedly as she explained the wall socket, the placement of the electrodes, the black hood over her head. This confrontation through visualization seemed to mark a milestone for her, causing a re-living of trauma as well as some degree of closure. This process made apparent once again the importance for each individual to confront the devils of his or her memory.

Courage in the workshops took many forms and found many expressions, sometimes in the connections between individuals, sometimes through group solidarity. It was interesting to learn about the small strategies devised to cope with everyday challenges to dignity, such as Nikiwe Deborah Matshoba’s determined act to send money and food to prisoners who were not allowed to receive these items, as they were being held under a different act, behind a high wall in another section of the prison. For many of the male participants,
courage was defined through their political association and beliefs, and the ways that they maintained their group identity throughout their imprisonment. John Mahapa describes how he would communicate with comrades by attaching a message to a piece of string and throwing it to comrades in other cells.

Among the Pan African Congress (PAC) men, the cohesion of collective memory was striking, and it matched the cohesion of the group of people who had been comrades in arms under the banner of the PAC. The similarity of their memories in prison spoke to the discipline and collective strength of their behavior in the face of prison indignities. Their expectation of the workshops was that at last they had a chance to tell their political story that they felt had been marginalized by the dominance of African National Congress (ANC) history. Interestingly, over the course of the workshops, their stories became more and more biographic, and smaller, more intimate details started to emerge from the collective narratives of their political past.

The so-called criminal participants did not bring with them a cohesive ideological identity. Neither did they enjoy the support that this kind of identity gave to the political prisoners. Their stories were about the battles against the vagaries of prison life and the domination of the cells by gangs. Sexual practices in prisons are seldom articulated outside of prison with any candor. The taboos that restrict their expression ensure that these practices are not given the chance to be reframed. The workshops provided a safe forum in which to speak and hear of experiences that were the cause of trauma and which had remained suppressed and unspoken for decades. One participant, Zolile Mgweba, made a skirt from a prison blanket resembling one that he had been made to wear as the “wife of a prison boss,” an object emblematic of the sexual life of many who were in Number Four. One of the other participants, Khaya Isaac Magi, remembered his experiences at Number Four through the medium of painting. The perspective that Khaya adopts is one of looking down on a scene from above, as if able to see all that went on in the cells simultaneously. Each tableau is recorded with a need to assemble multiple aspects of memory, a palimpsest of recall.

Using drawing, painting, or sculpture to explore memory gave both connection and distance, connection because these were memories closely known and distance because the act of learning a new language diverted attention away from what was being said to how it was said. Making something physical in this way functioned both as defense and means of exposition. The unfamiliarity of the medium acted as a kind of buffer between the traumatic experience and its confrontation.

In previous workshops, a great deal of trauma surfaced during the process of exploring memories of the jails. As a result of these experiences, we made provision in this project for a psychologist to be on hand. In fact, this service proved not to be necessary; participants were able, in general, to engage in the process without the very raw emotions of their first encounters with the prisons. It appears that, because many of the participants have been part of
the workshop processes from the beginning of the development of the site, they have already begun a healing process.

Mapping Memory in Practice

At the first workshop held with the former prisoners, the entire project was introduced to the participants and the various options for recording memory were explained. The workshops were multilingual, with oral history coordinators acting as translators when necessary. Careful emphasis was placed on assuring former prisoners that no prior experience of the technologies and creative methods available to them was needed, and that the process of becoming familiar with these mediums was part of the growth and learning process of the project.

The former prisoners then ventured out on their first endeavor. We asked them to walk through the jail and place a red flag in the space that held their best and worst memory during their time of incarceration. This process allowed the former prisoners to reacquaint themselves with the site, but was also a way for them physically to reclaim their happiest and saddest moments in the jail. The markers remain as visual icons throughout the jail and thus form a new layer of exhibition that visitors will notice immediately on entry to the jails.

Directly after this marking process, the prisoners were asked to take photographs of their flags. Their initial lack of familiarity with the camera turned into an adventure as the images in the viewfinder literally allowed the former prisoners to see the place in a new way—to reframe their spaces.

It is significant that the exhibition of both the men and women former prisoners had its opening on Women's Day, August 9, 2006—the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 Women's March to Pretoria, when approximately twenty thousand women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against legislation aimed at tightening the apartheid government's control over the movement of black women in urban areas. The women's work is on display in the Women's Jail and, like the women's march of fifty years ago, it will stand as a celebration to the strength and resilience of women in the struggle for democracy.

Ultimately, the process of mapping memory is central to building a human rights culture in South Africa. Our rights today acquire a particular value through explorations and physical memorials to the past. Because Constitution Hill is a heritage site that has at its core issues of democracy, human rights, and gender, we feel it to be our responsibility also to allow a group of former prisoners to contribute to the great process of reconciliation in South Africa outside of the legal and political languages and the official discourse of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Cell drawings offered another means for former prisoners to map mem-
ory. Cell geography has been an ongoing area of interest for the curatorial team. The prisoners spent almost all of their time in the cells, and the arrangement of these spaces had a massive impact on their experiences and their sense of dignity. Research to date has shown that the cell geography was shaped both by the prison authorities and the prisoners themselves. The authorities had to respond to the challenges of massive overcrowding in the jails, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s when apartheid was at its height. The authorities also had to respond to the challenge of dealing with political and “common” prisoners in one space. Once the cells were locked each night, the geography of the cells was determined by the gangs that operated in the prison, particularly in Number Four, where gang members took complete control.

In the workshops, we asked the former prisoners to draw the layout of their cells as a way of exploring the power relations in the prison and explaining how the spaces affected their dignity. It is interesting that some of the prisoners also chose to draw other areas of the jail in response to this exercise. Some chose to draw the whole experience, from registration of prisoners until they entered the cells. All of the drawings that resulted are a valuable archive of the intersection of personal and official records of prison life.

Family drawings gave the participants still another means of mapping memory. Workshops to date have demonstrated that former prisoners are often reluctant to talk to their families about some of the memories associated with prison. They need prompts to assist them in dredging up often traumatic memories. In the second workshop, former prisoners were asked to draw their family members and talk about how their families coped while they were in the jail. The former prisoners were then asked to invite two family members to the last workshop to participate with them in the process. Our hope was that this invitation would create the opportunity for a dialogue about the impact of apartheid on family structures.

Indeed, involving friends and families of former prisoners in a project of this kind has been deeply rewarding, despite the cursory nature of the interaction. The visit seemed to open potentially rewarding avenues to explore issues that may not have been spoken about in family structures before. It turned out that many of the friends and family members had never visited the site, and the family members’ accounts of finally visiting the prisons were very moving.

Making the Exhibition

Over the last few years of working on exhibitions in the jails of Constitution Hill, it has become clear that each exhibition offers mere fragments of insight into the experiences of former prisoners. No single exhibition can claim to represent a finite truth about its subject. But these memories deepen as the process of oral history continues, and the exhibitions have to accommodate accumulative layers of truth as they are revealed.
Mapping Memory is just one of those layers. It augments what is already known, adding to the textures of the place and, most importantly, has provided for groups of former prisoners to hear an echo of what they experienced here. Parts of the exhibition are temporary and will eventually find their way into the archive, but other elements of the exhibits will form part of the permanent exhibition. The cell reconstructions show the scale and conditions of cells that have now disappeared, demolished some time after the decommission of the prison. For former prisoners who had been housed in these cells, it was very disorientating not to be able to find the spaces where their lives had been so profoundly disrupted. There was literally no place to locate memory. These prison cells had also been enforced homes and were thus important places in the memories of their inmates, despite the conflicting emotions that this evoked. The partial remaking of such spaces together with the objects and drawings that the participants have made serve as a bridge to the reconstruction of memory.

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Clive van den Berg is responsible for the art and design of several of South Africa’s most prominent public projects, and designed the museum at Constitution Hill. Van den Berg’s integrative approach to art and architectural construction has allowed him to produce spaces in which previously unheard or even suppressed narratives can also be articulated.