



## Making place for South Africans: rethinking urban conservation

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*An approach to conservation based on phenomenology recognises the human need to feel a sense of belonging both to society and to the environment, and seeks to maintain those qualities of the cultural landscape which, as manifestations of cultural values, both express and reinforce this sense of belonging. This article uses a phenomenological approach to explain the importance of urban conservation in terms of human experience of the urban environment, and how a 'sense of place' in this environment may be retained. It then discusses some of the ideological problems related to past and current conservation practice, and argues that, since urban conservation is involved with the production of a society's history, and hence also its identity, it can be a powerful and profound tool for bringing about commonly desired changes in our post-apartheid society.<sup>2</sup>*

### The human need for *stabilitas loci*

4 There are always two conflicting sentiments in us: a desire for stability and security, together with a fear of change, on the one hand; and a desire for growth, expression and choice on the other (Alsayyad 1995; Lightner 1992: 281). This conflict may be reconciled by a common thread, and that is our continued search for identity and meaning in our lives. By strengthening this common thread, urban conservation aims to manage the conflict as it manifests itself in the urban environment.

The city never exists in a fixed, eternal state. The city, and the cultural landscape in general — i.e. anything which shows evidence of human intervention — are material manifestations of people's lifestyles and values, and because

these change continuously, so does, and so must, the city. Parts of the city have to be constantly repaired or replaced in order to meet our ever-changing needs. So a city is never "completed", but is continuously evolving. In fact, the most pervasive tradition in the city is change (*Town Planning Review* 1985: 133). A city which does not continue to change is a dead city.

Lewis Mumford aptly sums up the notion of continuity versus change in the city: according to him, the city "stores and transmits the goods of civilization" (1961: 41). It is a continuously evolving expression of human culture, as well as the means through which that culture is transmitted from generation to generation.

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<sup>2</sup> The role that urban conservation can play in the development of a multicultural society needs to be explored further, and is the subject of the writer's current research. This research also explores the vital role of community participation both in conservation policy-making and in the identification of cultural significance.

A city will therefore incorporate a rich layering of physical fabric which represents contributions from all the different stages of its history. Over time, certain changes to the fabric of the city are necessary for it to continue to serve the ever-changing needs of its inhabitants; while at the same time those aspects of the city which continue to contribute to its functioning or to its sense of place, are maintained. In this way, the city is maintained as the "container" of civilization.

*In the city, time becomes visible. ... Through ... preservation, ... habits and values carry over beyond the living group, streaking with different strata of time the character of any single generation. Layer upon layer, past times present themselves in the city. ... By the diversity of its time-structures, the city in part escapes the tyranny of a single present, and the monotony of a future that consists in repeating only a single beat heard in the past. (Mumford 1938: 4)*

Cities which evolve slowly, and maintain their sense of place and identity, have a quality of continuity which contributes to a feeling of security and belonging in their inhabitants. A degree of stability in the urban environment, or at least fixed points in a changing environment, are necessary for people to build their identities around, and to orientate themselves. According to the place theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980: 18), "*Stabilitas loci* [stability of place] is a necessary condition for human life."

This fairly intangible concept has, in our materialistic culture, tended to be neglected in

favour of more material and objective values such as economic or use values (Townsend 1987: 34). But the need for *stabilitas loci* has a stronger influence in shaping our culture (both in its tangible and its intangible manifestations) than is generally recognised.

*Stabilitas loci* was less likely to be threatened in pre-industrial cities than it is today, for several reasons: These cities evolved relatively slowly, and people were less likely to relocate than they are today. Also, building materials were more place-specific and technology more limited than today. Thus settlements usually retained their sense of place.

But in today's world, change can and does happen relatively rapidly, and continuity of a sense of place is more difficult to maintain. *Stabilitas loci* can be threatened, or eroded, for example if a familiar landmark is demolished; if we have to deviate from our usual route; if a traditional event or activity ceases; or with the sense of alienation brought about by the many instances in this country's past of forced removals and relocations effected by the apartheid regime. In these situations, the environment can seem abstract and foreign, and its inhabitants could feel psychologically disorientated, and alienated from their environment (Frescura 1987: v). (I do not wish, however, to deny the pleasure, even excitement, we may derive from the experience of newness and new places. The desire for new experiences

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## Phenomenology and the sense of place

is apparently an enormously powerful impulse - as evidenced by our excitement, for example, at the prospect of travelling abroad. But I do believe that this enjoyment of newness presupposes a perception that there is a degree of stability in one's own environment. In other words, if our "base" is secure, we are more able to explore outwards from it.)

6 Because *stabilitas loci* is so important to our psychological well-being, it is necessary to consciously intervene in the processes of change in order to create some sense of stability in the environment, and hence in our lives. The question, then, is how can the need for stability be compatible with the dynamics of change? Norberg-Schulz (1980: 18) reassures us that, even with rapid change, the *genius loci*, or "sense of place", does not necessarily have to change or get lost. This is one of the roles of *urban conservation*, that is, to manage change in urban environments whilst protecting, even enhancing, their particular sense of place.

It needs to be stressed at this point that, contrary to popular belief, urban conservation does not limit its activities to the preservation of existing cultural resources. It also plays an important role in urban planning and design, in that it seeks to identify and maintain those qualities of the urban environment which have cultural significance. Thus conservation is used also to inform future development in the city.

The existential meaning and role of the urban environment is best investigated using a phenomenological approach, which is largely based on the theories of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger (1971: 160), the basic character of being is *dwelling*, which involves a wish to belong to the environment, to feel "inside" a place and to feel "at home". Similarly, Bognar (1985: 189) describes dwelling as an act by which people affirm their own existence: "We build to grasp and concretize the universe; ... [to] help us understand and remember who we ourselves are." Buildings translate or "concretize" meanings which are related to human existence, into spatial forms, or "places", and thus give people a sense of belonging to their environment, and to the world as a totality. The phenomenological approach thus sees the built environment as something which transcends mere shelter; as what Norberg-Schulz (1980: 5) calls "a concretization of existential space".

Since phenomenology "understands a world wherein people and their environment mutually include and define each other" (Bognar 1985: 183), it follows that *place* can only be defined in terms of human experience of it. A place is a "lived space" — a space which is inhabited or experienced — and can therefore only exist with reference to people. Alan Gussow (1971: 27) explains it thus: "The catalyst that converts any physical location ... into a place, is the process of

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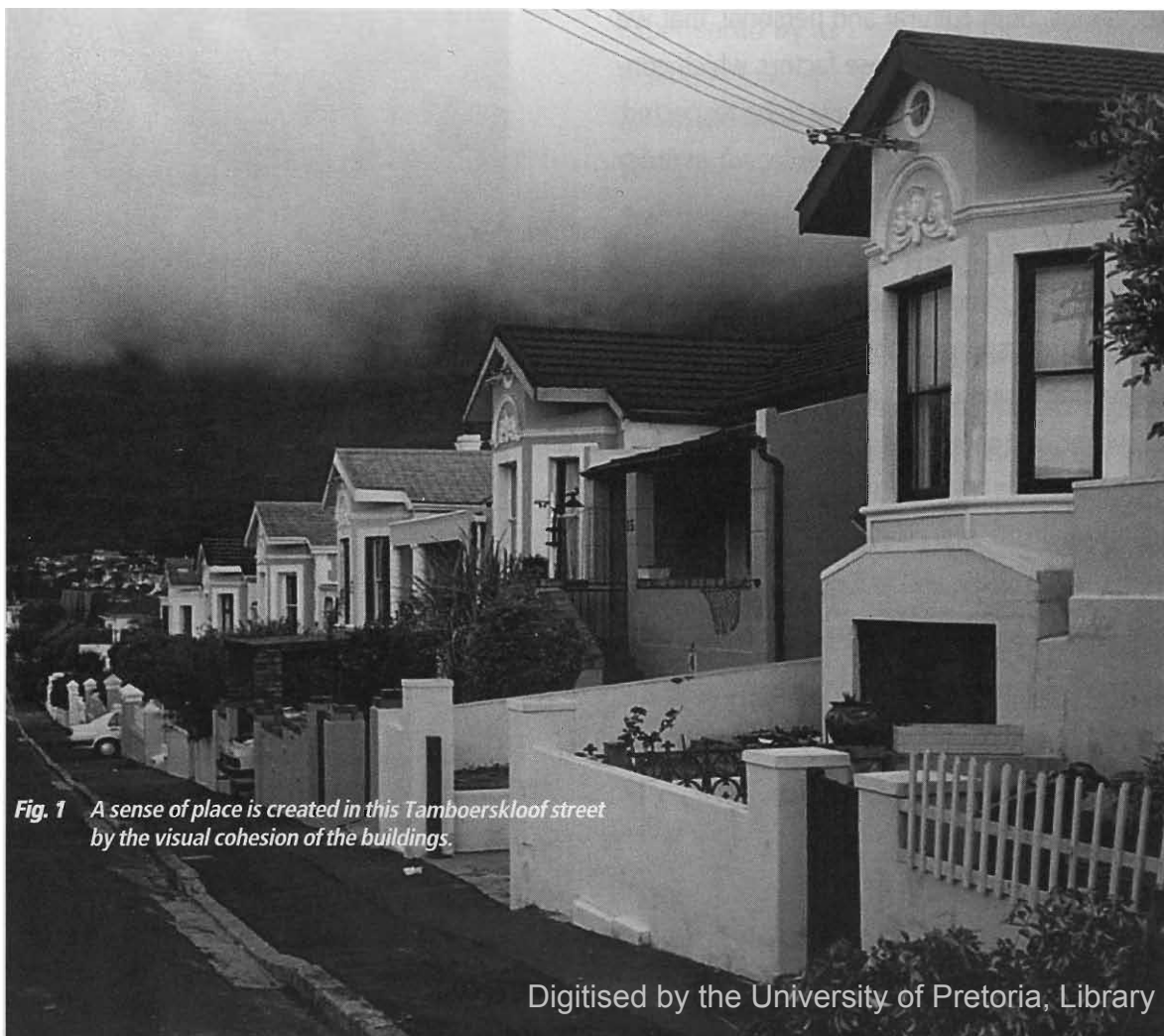
experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings." *Sense of place* refers to a person's feelings about, and experience of, a particular place. The sense of place depends on the whole system of relationships between the history of the place, the meanings it embodies and makes manifest, and its inhabitants.

In terms of tangible components, areas having a strong or distinctive sense of place could be, for example, areas with a sense of visual cohesiveness, or areas that are readily definable by boundaries or with a major focal point (Murtagh

1976: 388-9) (illus. 1)<sup>3</sup> It is often assumed that places *only* comprise tangible components such as these. However, intangible factors such as *cultural* values can quite often be more significant than a place's visual or physical aspects. In fact, the cultural value of any place colours our perception of it regardless of the visual values ascribed to it. Examples include areas that are associated with particular people, events, or historical periods, which in our country are often places having political association such as Robben Island or District Six.

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<sup>3</sup> All illustrations are of places in Cape Town



**Fig. 1** A sense of place is created in this Tamboerskloof street by the visual cohesion of the buildings.

A sense of place is also derived from other non-physical components such as activities, sounds, sensations, smells, etc. Some of the components that contribute to Cape Town's sense of place, for example, are the flower selling activities in Adderley Street and on the Grand Parade (illus. 2), the sound of the Imams calling from the surrounding Mosques, the smell of the biscuit factory in Woodstock, and the smell of the sea when a North-wester blows.

In short, sense of place is made up of all the various features and qualities that make up our actual *experience* of a place, whether tangible or not, and this includes also the meanings or associations, both cultural and personal, that we attach to a place. All these factors which contribute to a sense of place have to be respected, or *reinterpreted* (rather than *replaced*), in order to conserve the sense of place.

In terms of architecture, new buildings should be designed in response to the existing environment (assuming it is perceived as an appropriate one). However, one should beware of slavishly imitating, rather than responding sensitively to, the existing environment. New design can visually conform *too* much, and lack originality, resulting in a bland, unimaginative environment.

Fig. 2 Flower selling on the Grand Parade is an activity which has become a familiar part of the city.



As Brenda Lightner (1992: 286) says,

*There is a danger in overcontrolling our physical environment. Clearly we lose something from our urban lives [sic] when we lose the quirky, the outrageous, the unplanned, the unexpected, the ugly, the surreal, and even the offensive (illus. 3).*

It can also result in "pastiche", or the arbitrary reproduction of examples from past architecture (illus. 4).

But, as I have argued above, the visual aspects of a place are not its only attributes; our *experience* of it is of the most importance when considering the sense of place. The appearance of a place is far less important than how all its components integrate in their specific location and context, to become a "place", how this place is experienced by its users, and the meanings it embodies for them. Thus, for example, it would be advisable for Cape Town's Victoria and Albert Waterfront (V&AW) to retain its fishing and shipping industries, as these activities — with their particular sights, sounds, and smells — create the sense of an authentic working harbour. These industries are at present under threat, as they are gradually being 'edged out' by more profitable and tourist-oriented pursuits. The place is thus fast changing from a working harbour to an entertainment spot — almost a theme park — for tourists and the wealthy. This is an example of a sad and frequent irony, in which the very qualities which made a place attractive for development are destroyed by that development.





Fig. 3 Quirky, perhaps outrageous for some: Jinty's Junk in Long Street

### Many views of the past

Conservation has in the past claimed to be objective and scientific, and has aimed at "historical correctness". Correspondingly, one of the most pervasive myths about conservation is that it can return buildings or environments to some supposedly authentic and "correct" original state. Since the Industrial Revolution and the Modernist period, when change started happening alarmingly fast, many people have regarded

"the past" nostalgically as a completed phase in history, from which we have been separated. Linked to this may be a nostalgia, however veiled or unconscious, amongst white South Africans for the security and privilege afforded them by the apartheid era.

But conservation cannot bring back a lost period in history, although it may appear to. "The origi-

nal state", according to Philippot, (1976: 373) "is a mythical, unhistorical idea, apt to present [the past] in a state that never existed." Conservation is, rather, a *present-day* interpretation of the past, and as such belongs to the *présent*, and not to the past. (Viljo [s.a.] 81).

Another reason why it is impossible to show a complete or correct version of history is because one's view of the past is culture-specific; hence in a multicultural society such as ours, history is a multi-faceted idea, in that it is perceived and interpreted from many diverse perspectives. There is therefore no correct view of the past but many views relating to many different cultures. "Every conservation measure ... touches upon cultural values and our interpretation of the past" (Viljo [s.a.]: 76).

Conservation practice is informed by the selec-

tion and interpretation as well as reformulation of cultural values. (Townsend 1987: 35) It thus promotes and protects certain selected cultural values, in the form of their material manifestations. This means that it inevitably consolidates the cultural and historical experiences and values of those particular socio-cultural groups who control conservation activity. This has been particularly evident in this country, where one group of people has had the power to politically control others, and thus also to promote its own view or version of history.

Political domination in this country manifests itself, for example, in the declaration of National Monuments in this country, which by no means reflects its various cultural groups in correct proportions. "97% of all declared national monuments reflect the history and values of white immigrant groups" (Townsend 1993: 29; quot-

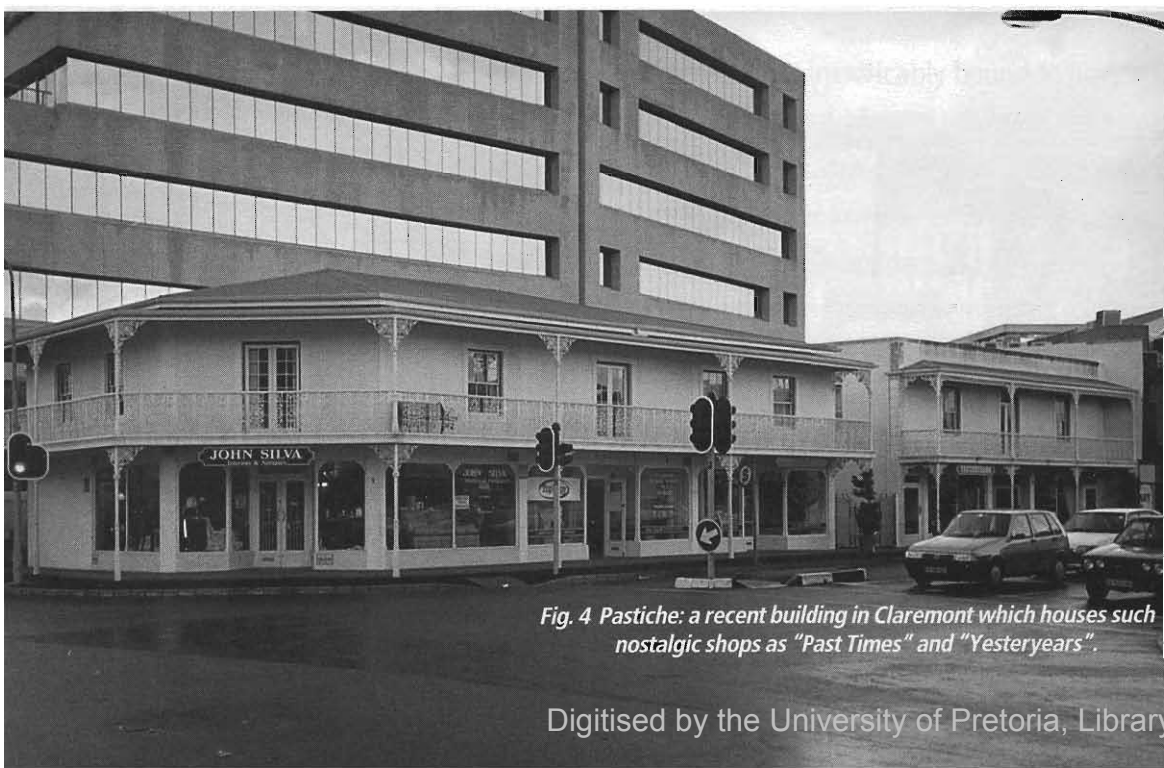


Fig. 4 Pastiche: a recent building in Claremont which houses such nostalgic shops as "Past Times" and "Yesteryears".

ing Frescura 1991). Moreover, "[m]any monuments [in South Africa] are culturally chauvinistic aides-memoire ..." (Japha & Japha 1993: 26). Older buildings may be seen by previously oppressed groups to represent a time when the country was under colonial or apartheid rule, and therefore conservation seems politically regressive. Such distorted practice has led to the perception that the role of conservation is to preserve privilege for dominant groups and promote their own view of history, and the assumption that conservation only benefits privileged minorities, rather than society as a whole. Conservation may thus be regarded by some groups as "a way of asking diverse populations to toe a cultural line, forcing them to sing the public song ... to adopt an historic heritage that not only is not theirs, but may represent their oppression." (Lightner 1992: 283)

When history is used for consolidating political power, it is popularized and commodified, as has happened increasingly since the tourist-oriented "heritage industry" became so popular (Pistorius 1992: 12-13). Often in such cases "conservation" is used to present a view or version of "the past" which is frozen at a particular point in time, some idealised golden age to which it pretends to return us. By displaying only a partial, selected and often fantasised version of the past, history becomes distorted or sanitized.

A prime example of such historical distortion is Disneyland (from which we derive the word "Disneyfication"). Disneyland includes a confection of idealized and fake structures, and is therefore a complete fantasy, a nostalgic trip to some lost golden age. Another example is Gauteng's Gold Reef City. But, as "theme parks", these

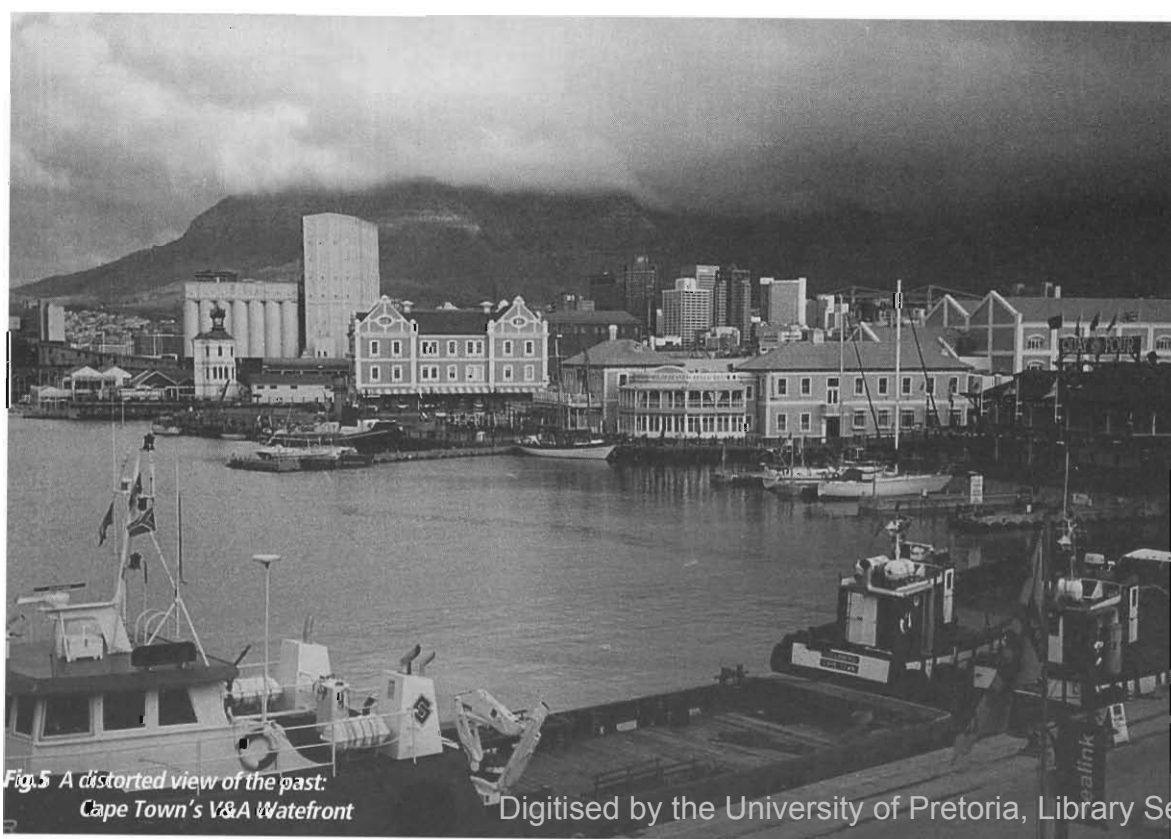


Fig.5 A distorted view of the past:  
Cape Town's V&A Waterfront



places are clearly removed from everyday human experience, and therefore can be excused, to an extent, for their distortions. When boundaries are blurred, however, between fantasy and "reality", such a view of the past becomes particularly problematic. An example is Cape Town's V&A Waterfront (illus.5). Many of the warehouses and other buildings which used to house industrial activities have been "cleaned up" and "neo-Victorianized" into fancy shopping malls and entertainment spots for those who can afford to go there. The harbour's history of workers, convicts, slaves and lepers has been almost obliterated. In fact, one of the historically most significant places — the embarkation point to Robben Island — has been largely ignored. This little glazed brick building stands as a reminder to some realities of the past with which the V&AW Company is clearly uncomfortable. The building has in fact recently been given a coat of paint which serves to better harmonize it with its more up market surroundings.

The V&AW's romantic reinterpretation of the past is thus neither representative nor authentic.<sup>4</sup> This problem will hopefully be partly resolved in future by the "Gateway Project", an initiative developed by the University of the Western Cape's Mayibuye Centre, which plans to build an apartheid museum at the V&AW (Minkley *et al.* 1996: 26).

When the past is frozen at a particular period, places become "sterilized" of the richness and variety of ongoing change. Urban fabric which does not relate to present-day experience becomes "museumized", which is counter-productive to the functioning of the city. Most importantly, it is likely to present a monocultural view of history. We're *not* a society of white middle-class Victorians. Our city includes minibus taxis, TV aerials, stinking subways and a brown haze on the horizon. We eat koeksusters, samoosas, and Chinese take-aways. We have to continue adapting the physical environment that we have inherited, in accordance with our ever-changing needs. We need to focus on the conservation and urban design challenge presented by a society as diverse and complex as ours.

### Conservation and identity

Conservation is inextricably bound to both cultural and national identity. Cultural resources express how a cultural group or a nation views — or has chosen to view — its past, and one's cultural and national identities are based to a large extent on one's view of the past. This means that cultural resources are an important means of affirming one's identity and sense of belonging, whether it is national, cultural, or per-

<sup>4</sup> See Goudie *et al.* (1995) for a more complete critical analysis of the V&AW.

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sonal. By attaching meaning to a cultural resource, or finding *new* meanings for such resources, one claims it as a part of one's history, and thus as a part of one's self- or group identity.

Given that we have many layers or levels of identity, conservation can reinforce a sense of identity at many different levels, for example at universal, national, cultural, community levels, etc. At a universal level, it may be used to create a universal sense of belonging in the world by conserving and reinforcing existential meanings in the environment. At a national level, it may be used to foster a national identity and a spirit of reconciliation by focusing on national symbols, activities (like sport), events (for example the

Cape Town Festival) and places which facilitate cultural integration or the development of a sense of national unity. Conservation may also be used to promote an acceptance of cultural diversity, and to conserve various different cultures, particularly minorities who may feel under threat — by protecting the material manifestations of these cultures, and the places which both express and support the ways of life and traditions practised by these cultures. Conservation can also operate at a community level, and serve to promote a community identity and a sense of togetherness. In short, conservation can support and reinforce our sense of identity, in all its various dimensions. And in supporting our sense of identity, it can give us a feeling of belonging and an ability to shape our future — or in other words a sense of empowerment.

### **Conclusion: a positive role for conservation**

There is no correct or incorrect version of history. As a multicultural society we need to understand and acknowledge *multiple* views of the past, and hence the potential for multiple meanings attached to the material manifestations of our past. And, while there may not be a correct view of the past, some views will be more *appropriate* than others, in terms of the broad goals of our emergent multicultural nation.

Where conservation is adopted as a strategy for consolidating political and/or economic power, it cannot fulfil its rightful function. On the other hand, it may help to transform the environment in such a way as to affirm a chosen version of the past, and thus facilitate the development of a South African identity, a spirit of reconciliation and an acceptance of different cultural groups within our country. Given our present socio-political circumstances as well as goals, it is the above role of conservation on which we should be focusing at present.

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Conservation can be used to support the broad socio-political aims of our present society, or, by continuing to concentrate on the interests of one socio-cultural group, it can become counter-productive. Obviously, a critical factor is *who* controls conservation policy-making and practice in this country — and this is obviously contingent on the socio-political power structures within society at the time. What is important, then, is that we are always aware of the underlying workings of conservation, and that we understand and appropriately harness its power.

(Note: The author would welcome readers' comments on this article, which may be e-mailed to [cwelsh@ctcc.gov.za](mailto:cwelsh@ctcc.gov.za))

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