South African heritage places: expanding current interpretation and presentation

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South Africans have rich, complex and unique histories. Current South African society is similarly unique, non-monolithic and complex. The last twelve years of Democracy have not resulted in a co-constructed vision of how to identify, access, share, understand, interpret and present historical meaning that is resident in the various heritage places around the country. Current South African heritage management practice is compared to an emerging approach contained in the draft ICOMOS Ename Charter, an internationally constructed vision of appropriate analysis, interpretation and presentation of heritage places. The author identifies problems in current South African definitions, analyses and interpretations of heritage places, and presents an expanded view on managing cultural landscapes that may enrich current, local practice and result in a more accessible, rich, integrated and representative interpretation and presentation of meaning of place.

Key words: Heritage places, meaning of place, heritage interpretation, heritage site presentation, cultural landscape management, South African Heritage Resources Act, Icomos Ename Charter.

Erfenisterreine in Suid Afrika: 'n uitdying van resente interpretasie en verteenwoordiging

In Suid Afrika is daar ryk, komplekse en unieke geskiedenisse. Hedendaagse Suid Afrikaanse gemeenskappe is ewenals uniek, nie-monolities en kompleks. Die laaste twaalf jaar se Demokrasie het nie 'n saamgekonstrueerde visie opgelewer om daardie historiese betekenis wat in verskeie erfenisplekke in die land gewortel is, te identifiseer, onstluit, deel, verstaan, interpreteer en voor te stel nie. Eietydse Suid Afrikaanse erfenisbestuurspraktyk word vergelyk met 'n ontluikende benadering vervat in ICOMOS se konsep Ename Handves, 'n internasionaal konstrueerde visie vir toepaslike analise, interpretasie en voorstelling van erfenisplekke. Die outeur identifiseer probleme in hedendaagse Suid Afrikaanse definisies, analise en interpretasies van erfenisplekke en bied 'n uitdyende blik op die bestuur van erfenisplekke wat eietydse, lokale praktyk mag verryk en in 'n meer toeganklike, ryk, integreerde en verteenwoordigende interpretasie en verteenwoordiging van plekbetekenis kan resulteer.

Sleutelwoorde: Erfenisplekke, plekbetekenis, erfenisinterpretasie, erfenisterreinvoorstelling, kultuurlandskapbestuur, Nasionale Wet op Erfenishulpbronnne, Icomos Ename Handves.

The majority of the country's monuments and cultural heritage sites, meaning those that are inscribed on the National Inventory (the inventory of the National Estate) as defined in Section 39 of the National Heritage Resources Act (Ministry of Art & Culture, 1999 [hereafter NHRA25/1999]) and in provincial heritage registers as defined in Section 30 (NHRA25/1999), were proclaimed in the period leading up to 1994, under the National Monuments Council. These are mostly sites commemorating the history of Western European, white settlement, dispersal, contact, conflict and the various cultural expressions that accompanied the white occupation of the country from 1652 to recently, but with a smattering of African ethnocentric sites and sites, related mostly to non-Western, non-African minority groups. The post 1994 period has seen a number of new sites being proclaimed, under the auspices of transitory structures and then the South African Heritage Resources Authority (SAHRA) - up till now these have mostly been sites commemorating the Apartheid epoch, Struggle events and related personages, but also a number of ethnocentric sites that are more community driven than State driven. Of these two separate groups of sites, the majority are those that have come about due to governmental patronage - the registered sites promoted and sustained by small sub-cultures, often NGO's or specialist cultural societies, discrete communities or private individuals, are in the minority. Apart from the sites on the National Inventory, there is large collection of monuments and sites that belong to either the State or that are in private hands, but that are mostly unlisted, unrecorded and that are not managed as heritage resources - these are the large number of historic indigenous settlements, historic farms, historic towns,

townships and inner city townscapes that form the backdrop of our daily lives, that contain the memory of our combined past and that can be part actors on the stages for our future.

In international conservation best practice, heritage management includes recording, research, interpretation, conservation, presentation and development of heritage resources. While we have a small group of experts in the field of recording, research and conservation, presently the fields of interpretation, presentation and development of heritage resources are underdeveloped.

Interpretation refers to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site, and **Presentation** denotes the communication of interpretive content through the specific inclusion, type and arrangement of interpretive information, physical access, and interpretive infrastructure at a cultural heritage site.

If "heritage" is "that which we want to keep", a fundamental question relating to heritage is "why do we want to keep it?", which immediately presents related questions namely "whose heritage is it?", "what does it mean?", "how are we going to present it?" and also, "who are "we"?" This paper inquires if the management context can cope with these questions when "we" engage in identifying, assessing and managing heritage.

The majority of the cultural heritage sites that pre-date 1994, have for the most been sites with a singular meaning interpreted and presented from a discourse that emphasised ethnic diversity through difference, excluded multivocality and denied universal access - in reality, the histories of most of those that have been excluded were in some way overlapping with and bound up with that of a cultural elite whose histories were represented. In the treatment of certain layers of history, there was also a certain disregard for the authenticity and integrity of those layers, sometimes a total disregard.

Have the last twelve years of Democracy brought about a change in approach to interpretation and presentation of heritage sites? For the existing pre-1994 heritage sites most of the interpretations and representations of history have remained unaltered as witness of a certain discourse of cultural elitism. Some of the post-1994 heritage sites can be said to suffer from the same deficiency. Also, there is a creeping tendency towards mono-ethnic sites. Currently, with some striking exceptions, most site interpretations and presentations follow a formulistic approach embedded in heritage legislation, the reasons for which will be made clear below. Yet, there appears to be a small nudge towards interpretation and representation of sites that tries to address issues of access, ownership, diversity, multivocality, inclusivity and introspectivity.

While historic artefacts have an intrinsic value, their interpretation and presentation are cultural acts, rooted in cultural discourses. The manner in which we perform these acts have a bearing on the range of meaning that is decoded, the range of society that will be able to co-construct meaning, the range of interpretation, and the ultimate value to society.

If there are limitations to current interpretation and presentation practice locally, are there lessons to learn from a wider heritage management community?

The evolving Ename Charter

The last three years have seen an emerging approach for the interpretation and presentation of sites, which is contained in the 5th draft of the "Ename" Charter (ICOMOS, 2006) for the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites, a vision for appropriate analysis,

interpretation and presentation of heritage places, as co-constructed by a wide group of heritage practitioners and the members of the Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation, being a committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)[1].

In recognizing that interpretation and presentation are part of the overall process of cultural heritage conservation and management, this draft Charter seeks to establish seven cardinal Principles upon which the interpretation and presentation of heritage sites should be based - these are:

1   Access and Understanding
2   Soundness of Information Sources
3   Setting and Context
4   Authenticity
5   Sustainability
6   Inclusiveness
7   Importance of Research, Evaluation, and Training

While all these principles are important as an integrated approach, to further the argument the author will focus on the Principle 3 "Setting and Context" and Principle 6 "Inclusiveness". Principle 3 relating to "Setting and Context" is defined as follows:

> *The Interpretation and Presentation of cultural heritage sites should relate to their wider social, cultural, historical, and natural contexts and settings*
> 3.1 Interpretation should explore the significance of a site in its multi-faceted historical, political, spiritual, and artistic contexts. It should consider all aspects of the site's cultural, social, and environmental significance.
> 3.2 The public interpretation of a cultural heritage site should always clearly distinguish and date the successive phases and influences in its evolution. The contributions of all periods to the significance of a site should be respected.
> 3.3 Interpretation should also take into account all groups that have contributed to the historical and cultural significance of the site.
> 3.4 The surrounding landscape, natural environment, and geographical setting are all integral parts of a site's historical and cultural significance, and, as such, should be taken into account in its interpretation.
> 3.5 Intangible elements of a site's heritage such as cultural and spiritual traditions, stories, music, dance, theater, literature, visual arts, personal customs and cuisine should be noted and included in its interpretation.
> 3.6 The cross-cultural significance of heritage sites, as well as the range of perspectives about them based on scholarly research, ancient records, and living traditions, should be considered in the formulation of interpretive programmes. (ICOMOS, 2006: 8).

Further, Principle 6 relating to "Inclusiveness" is defined as follows:

> *The Interpretation and Presentation of cultural heritage sites must be the result of meaningful collaboration between heritage professionals, associated communities, and other stakeholders.*
> 6.1 The traditional rights, responsibilities, and interests of property owners, nearby residents, and associated communities should be noted and respected in the planning of site interpretation and presentation programmes.
> 6.2 The multidisciplinary expertise of scholars, conservation experts, governmental authorities, site managers, tourism operators, and other professionals should be integrated in the formulation of interpretation and presentation programmes.
> 6.3 Plans for expansion or revision of interpretation and presentation programmes should be open for public comment and involvement. It is the right and responsibility of all to make their opinions and perspectives known.
> 6.4 Because the question of intellectual property and traditional cultural rights is especially relevant to the interpretation process and its expression in various communication media (such as on-site multimedia presentations, digital media, and printed materials), legal ownership and right to use images, texts, and other interpretive materials should be discussed and clarified in the planning process. (ICOMOS, 2006: 11).

Of course there are omissions in the above Principles, and one may differ with the specific content. The Principles are however not finite and intended to be a living document model for

application in various environments - for this reason there is an iterative process in which the principles can be augmented and altered as contexts shift.

If one however agrees with the necessity of including the above Principles or aspects thereof in a local heritage management context, let us inquire how the statutory heritage management environment is geared to include these Principles.

A South African context

The NHRA25/1999 regulates how all the identified heritage resources are to be identified, assessed and managed whether they have general protection only or are inscribed on provincial heritage registers or the National Inventory. As a way of identifying problems in current South African definitions re the principles context and inclusiveness, as they have a bearing on interpretation and presentation of heritage places, we should therefore focus mainly on the relevant statutory principles included in the NHRA25/1999.

How are the stated principles of "inclusiveness", as well as "setting and context", represented and defined in the current Heritage Act, and how do they pan out in reality?

The terms "inclusivity" and "inclusiveness" do not appear in the NHRA25/1999 at all. However, the Act confirms the principle of inclusivity when it states:

> Our heritage is unique and precious and it cannot be renewed. It helps us to define our cultural identity and therefore lies at the heart of our spiritual well-being and has the power to build our nation. It has the potential to affirm our diverse cultures [author's underscore], and in so doing shape our national character. (Preamble NHRA25/1999).

Without delving too deep into what is specifically meant by "our" and "our diverse cultures", it is useful to inquire on how one may participate in managing heritage. The term "participate" appears once, and the terms "consult/consultation" appear 40 times, mostly in terms of inter-governmental consultation, but in terms of a wider societal consultation, most notably where the Act reads:

> Heritage resources form an important part of the history and beliefs of communities and must be managed in a way that acknowledges the right of affected communities to be consulted and to participate [author's underscore] in their management. (Section 5(4) NHRA25/1999).

In terms of participation and consultation this Section augurs well for the future of participatory local heritage management. However, while many post-1994 heritage projects have a proud record of meaningful community involvement, especially at sites of conscience[2] or where political redress was paramount, in large regional infra-structure projects there has been a distinctly unbalanced process of weighing community heritage rights against singular development objectives.

The NHRA25/1999 also pronounces on the rights of society, like the requirement in Section 5 (3) (c) of having to give further content to the fundamental rights set out in the Constitution, the requirement to respect publication rights of owners of heritage resources (Section 27 (23)(a), or the need for consent of the owner in the process of proclaiming a heritage resource or area (Sections 27 and 28). Yet, the integrated basket of rights and the need for integrated interpretation and presentation as indicated in the draft Ename Charter (ICOMOS 2006) are not adequately dealt with in the Act, and will in most probability have to be obtained through recourse to other Acts.

When we turn our attention to the stated Principle 3 related to "Setting and Context", the provisions of the NHRA25/1999 are even more disappointing.

Firstly, the definition of a "heritage site" is very limiting. While a "heritage resource" can mean any <u>place</u> or object of cultural significance; (NHRA25/99 Section 2 (xvi)), a "heritage site" is meant to be a <u>place</u> declared to be a heritage site by the competent level of authority (NHRA25/99 Section 2 (xviii)). This term "place" is then further defined as:

> *(a)* a site, area or region;
> *(b)* a building or other structure which may include equipment, furniture, fittings and articles associated with or connected with such building or other structure;
> *(c)* a group of buildings or other structures which may include equipment,
> furniture, fittings and articles associated with or connected with such group of buildings or other structures;
> *(d)* an open space, including a public square, street or park; and
> *(e)* in relation to the management of a place, includes the immediate surroundings of a place; (NHRA25/99 Section 2 (xxxii)).

One can immediately understand that the <u>physical</u> meaning of place is denoted here. This description of "place" as a physical entity is echoed in the Australia Burnt Charter (Australia ICOMOS, 1999: Section 1.1).

Secondly, while the term "setting" does not appear in the Act, the term "context", meant as in the surrounding environment of the heritage resource, is only mentioned once, ie in Section 7 (1) (c) as part of the assessment criteria for Grade III or "local heritage, ie to "assess the intrinsic, comparative and <u>contextual</u> significance of a heritage resource".

Furthermore, the need for <u>management</u> of the context or setting of a site is not mentioned in the chapter on management and never required in the Act, but obtusely added to the definition of "place" in Clause 2 (xxxii) (e) as seen above.

The lack of inclusion of the requirement for management of the setting or context places large obstacles in the way of its successful conservation.

Thirdly, the aspect of "intangible heritage" as an inherent component of a <u>heritage site</u> is not included in its definition in the Act. While certain intangible heritage, like aspects of inherited living culture, are deemed to be heritage resources, (ie Clause 2 (xxi)), this mainly denotes living heritage as expressed by cultural traditions, and is therefore silent on other intangible components of a heritage site that must be included. It is only when there is a requirement to <u>assess</u> the cultural significance of a site, in terms of Clause 3 (3) (a-i), that the almost hidden intention of the Act comes to the fore, ie that a place or an object is part of the National Estate if it has certain <u>cultural significance</u>. As per the Australia ICOMOS Burnt Charter (incidentally one of the underlying documents used for the NHRA25/1999), conservation is: "All the processes of looking after *a place* so as to retain its *cultural significance"* (Australia ICOMOS 1999, Article 1.4), with the retention of cultural significance based on a respect for the cultural significance embodied "in the *place* itself, its <u>fabric</u>, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects " (Australia ICOMOS, 1999: Article 1.2), and with the imperative that "Significant *associations* between people and a *place* should be respected, retained and not obscured. Opportunities for the *interpretation,* commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented" (Australia ICOMOS 1999: Article 24.1).

The Australian definition underscores the indivisible relationship between the tangible and intangible aspects invested in a heritage site, whereas in the NHRA25/1999 this relationship remains hidden.

> The fact that the Acts definition of "heritage site" as "place" is not inclusive of its intangible components, precipitates in the heritage management field as a impoverished understanding of a site's heritage value, and assessment of development potential of a heritage site. It is suggested that the statutory directives for heritage management be augmented to include a richer description of the term "place" which would enhance the meaning of the concept "heritage site".

The astute reader would have recognised that requirement in the Heritage Act for the <u>assessment</u> of cultural significance, which is at the heart of understanding what we are dealing with in heritage terms, is in fact the very process of <u>interpretation</u> that this paper deals with. The Act indicates nine criteria for the assessment of cultural significance, which is in itself a limiting factor. As an aside, the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter (1999: Article) suggests that as many criteria of cultural significance as are suggested by the heritage site, can be included in the interpretation process, which is a liberating and enriching device.

The Act itself does not provide any guidance on the process and manner of assessment, or to say interpretation. Conversely the competent authorities dealing with the assessments or interpretations have no guidelines against which to measure its quality.

Achieving a more accessible, rich, integrated and representative interpretation and presentation of meaning of place

The quick scan of how the NHRA25/1999 performs on only two of the draft Ename Charter's principles, has shown that it does not score too well. When one considers that most heritage interpretation is performed in a paint-by-numbers fashion in the format suggested by the statutory requirements of Environmental Impact Assessments and Heritage Impact Assessments, and that there is usually a very small budget to do decent research and perform rich and integrated interpretation/assessments (never mind site presentation), the picture looks even bleaker. It is true that the very good assessments that come out of those processes are mainly due to the integrity of some of the heritage professionals, rather than the due to the requirements of the system. Clearly we need an overhaul of the environment in which we perform cultural interpretation and presentation.

The first aspect where we can make a drastic improvement is in a richer definition and understanding of "place".

From both a phenomenological and a cultural-constructionist viewpoint, the idea of "place" as <u>physical entity</u> should be replaced by an idea of "place" being a <u>mental or cultural construct.</u> The construct of place arises from the synergetic relationship existing between an individual or individuals and a physical site and its related elements, which relationship occurs as the individual/s ascribe/s either perceptual or associational meanings to settings, through a process of environmental perception and cognition (this being either intuitive or through a process of deliberate decoding).

In this construct of "place", we can also construct an understanding of the "ecology of place" [this ecology is of course one of many co-existing ecologies], in which relationships and interactive, open systems can be identified and understood.

A more recent concept of place that embodies the above ideas of place, is that of the "cultural landscape" in which concept the main characteristic of place is that deriving from a specific relationship between nature and culture. UNESCO defines a cultural landscape as:

> the combined work of nature and of humans, being illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal (UNESCO, 2005: Section 47).

But, rather than staying stuck with a limited number of cultural landscape categories, as for instance in the UNESCO World Heritage Operational Guidelines (2005: Section 10), where we identify the "Clearly defined landscape" designed and created intentionally by man, the

"Organically evolved landscape" and the "Associative landscape" a large number of landscape characterisations may be devised and layered to more clearly interpret the meaning inherent in the landscape and the relationships between various aspects of that meaning.

> In the work of ICOMOS SADC on Intangible Heritage, it was stated that:
>
>> it is important to understand that there is a multiplicity of values that exist within any one site and that these relate to emotive, intellectual, physical and sensory experiences of the site. These values include those of symbolism, identity, culture, living traditions, remembrance and memories, the environment and nature. In terms of the World Heritage Committee and the work of ICOMOS, intangible heritage provides the confirmation of the values of the place, and its significance. (ICOMOS SADC[3], 2003).

Meaning in a landscape can be mapped as one method of interpretation. An integrated mapping of the ecology of place relies on the principle that any cultural landscape has intended, or purposefully encoded cultural meanings, as well as accrued meanings which, through a decoding process may be read or deciphered from a recognition and understanding of the socially constructed, multi-layered relationships between people and a physical site and related elements.

To manage a cultural landscape, the layers of significant and related historic and current tangible and intangible aspects of the site will be identified through research, the historical layers of relationships between tangible and intangible aspects of the heritage place will be identified, analysed and interpreted, and the results mapped. Of necessity this process should be inclusive, accessible, and participatory. New technologies of data capture and presentation of data ensures that a larger range of layers and relationships can be accessed and linked to a large range of metadata, while physical access to sites provides personal contact with the tangible and some intangible components of the site and are at the core of site management, access from remote locations is also a possibility.

There are very sophisticated and relevant interpretations and presentations of multiple expressions of humans" being in the world in many fields of knowledge construction. This is especially true in the fields of philosophy, history, art and architecture, geography, sociology and anthropology. Many of these fields intersect in the context of heritage management. In this field there is no problem in constructing "rich" definitions of cultural significance and an ecology of place that define relationships between tangible and intangible heritage in one indivisible whole, or to map both tangible and intangible values and definitions of cultural significance in an integrated, multi-layered interpretation of a heritage place, and to include these in heritage management principles. However, the number of practitioners who think in these terms is small, and the number of people in officialdom who think in these terms is minute. It is also very difficult to make these ideas manifest in policies and guidelines of Heritage Management Plans, and to sustain those policies and guidelines in planning and management structures to ensure their continued legibility, when they compete with policies and guidelines from more dominant planning and development domains.

We live in a planning environment that values the tangible over the intangible. In a developing environment tangible heritage fabric often disappears due to deficient heritage management structures or by the yearning for the new, leaving only the intangible heritage, breaking the relationship.

Management of the cultural landscape must maintain these layers and relationships as part of the inherent significance of the site, and also devise ways of presenting the interpretation to visitors.

A Heritage Management Plan must thus include ways to ensure the retention of both tangible and intangible heritage, as well as the relationships between them.

Gwen Theron (Breedlove, 2002) of the Dept Architecture at the University of Pretoria has recently completed a *Systematics for the conservation of cultural landscapes with the view towards implementation,* as a Doctoral dissertation. This Systematics has not yet been embraced by the Department of the Environment, but it could be.

While a few local heritage practitioners are constructing interpretations and presentations within a notion of cultural landscapes[4], it is a fairly recent activity that is not yet grounded in a South African context. Once there is wider embracing of continuously deepening understanding of "place", and if this finds reflection in statutory requirements for interpreting or presenting context or "place", there is an opportunity of large scale augmentation of understanding of an access to heritage sites through re-mapping, re-interpretation and re-presentation of existing heritage sites, and of proceeding with new sites on such a reconfigured basis.

The second aspect where we can make a drastic improvement is with **Inclusivity.** In terms of enlarging the quality of interpretation and presentation we need to ask "Who Owns The Past?", and "Why do we keep the past?".

For this we need to look at:

- **Diversity and multivocality** - ie how to effectively incorporate the diverse perspectives of minorities, migratory and non-dominant groups in a reconstruction of the past.
- **An inclusive Public Heritage** - the national heritage authorities need to honour the rights of all citizens to be included—and feel included—in the representations of a common heritage, and to also relate to minority communities. We all need to address the question of what our official monuments should reflect - timeless ideals or changing realities.
- **Heritage Policy** - relating to what the current legal and economic implications of heritage "ownership" are and how these are reflected in official heritage policy. Do sites and cultural property belong to a nation, to the communities that produced them, or to institutions that claim to protect them as "universal" heritage?
- **Complexity of history** - most sites have a far more "difficult" reality than what is forthcoming from existing interpretation of and presentation on sites - Society has an ethical responsibility to retain a critical view of history. Sites with conflicted terrains have to deal with a multi-perspective history, commemorate tragedy and injustice and include the histories of both victimizers and victims.

Recapitulation

In the specific comparison made in this paper, the author has only looked at the two principles of Inclusiveness, and Context - while additional gaps in our heritage management make-up can be identified by also looking at the other principles of the current draft Ename Charter (ICOMOS, 2006), ie **Authenticity, Access, Soundness of information, Research and training,** and **Sustainability,** the point has been amply made that it is possible to improve the context in which we share histories, allow for richer, integrated and representative interpretation and presentation of meaning through facilitating linkage of overlapping histories within integrated, multi-layered cultural landscapes and provide greater access within an ecology of place. One can either align heritage management endeavours with an approach of existing guidelines such as the evolving Ename Charter, or construct and accept a unique South African Charter for Interpretation and Presentation of heritage sites, together with a legal review process to improve and augment the current National Heritage Resources Act.

Notes

1   ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) is a non-governmental organization with headquarters in Paris, France. Founded in 1965, its role is to promote the application of theory, methodology and scientific techniques to the conservation of the architectural and archaeological heritage.

2   According to the Ename Center for Public Archeology and Heritage Presentation (2006), sites of conscience are places with a 'difficult heritage'. This definition would include places that commemorate specific horrors, tragedies or the perpetration of injustices against humanity, and where there is a heritage responsibility for both victimisers and victims, even so-called victimisers and so-called victims. Specific examples in South Africa would be sites like Robben Island, the sites of the 1960-1 Pondoland massacres, the scene of the 21 March 1960 massacres at Sharpeville and Langa and sites of violent forced removals.

3   A new ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Intangible Heritage was established in 2006 to formulate a Charter for the inclusion of these values in the definition, interpretation and presentation of sites.

4   A selection of recent relevant work by the author (and collaborators) is included in the 'Works cited' list below.

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