



**Figure 6:** An example of a portrait created with wet plate photography.

# 6

## IDENTITY AND MEMORY

The significance of the site is established as well as the theoretical premise from which the park will be explored (in chapter 5) and a vision proposal will stem. These theoretical themes will be addressed in this chapter.

## 6.1. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE



**Figure 6.1:** Collage of Joubert Oark precinct (Adapted from images from JAG Archives N.d.)

# SIGNIFICANCE

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*“The ritual of oral autobiography here (in Zimbabwe) is that we introduce our stories by locating our position in the family.*

*‘I am the eldest in a family of seven’  
‘I am the last born in a family of four’  
‘I am the middle child in a family of seven,  
two died, only five remain’*

*Identity begins in that one sentence: I am the first, the middle, the fourth, the second, the last.” – Gappah 2015:12*

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GGappah (2015) describes how identity within families is framed in Zimbabwe. In a similar way, the significance of the park and the gallery starts with their position in the continuum of parks and galleries around the world.

The park was the first park in Johannesburg and the first public space requested by the people of the town (Grundlingh 2015: 35). It was also the first non-segregated park in the city, being marked as inclusive in 1974 (Christy et al. 2014).

The gallery was also the first gallery in South Africa to house one of the largest collections in Africa with both local and international works worth billions of Rands (Aphane Wiew Architects & Urban Designers 2013). The original building is the only gallery to form part of Edward Lutyens’ architectural repertoire as well as the only completed building he designed in South Africa (Aphane Wiew Architects & Urban Designers 2013; Carman, 2015: 16). The Meyer Pienaar extension to the gallery building is also one of the first examples of post-modern architecture in Johannesburg (Barker, 2016).

The significance of this public space is clear when studying and attempting to understand the roots of Johannesburg and where these entities fit within its urban planning and cultural history, which in turn adds to the collective identity of this place.

## 6.2. ART AS PART OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY



Figure 6.2: Rethink. (Trinkhaus, 2009)

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*From the beginning of art-making, we have believed that artworks capture and preserve the essence of their makers and even their owners.*  
– Erin Thompson 2016

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Art in itself encapsulates identity, not only of the artist but also of ourselves (MoMa 2015). It has the power to freely comment on socio-political conditions and therefore has the ability to expose that, which may not be a part of the collective opinion. Art is not confined to an authority to filter its meaning or statements, but artists are free to represent what and how they choose. It challenges the norm and opens our eyes to other ways of thinking about our society (Gregos 2014). Artists express their own identity in the artworks they create, with their own agendas and themes of interest.

When a collection of works, whether by one or various artists, is viewed or studied the themes that are portrayed are emphasised. Housed in these themes, the agenda of either the artist or collector is highlighted – agendas furthermore being representative of their identity (Thompson 2016). The strength in messages portrayed by artworks lies in the curatorship. Similarly, one could say that the curators of a national gallery have the weighted task of accumulating works of art that are able to represent certain themes that relate to more of a collective rather than individual agendas. The archives of such institutions therefore have the ability to capture certain identities in time and place.

According to Rodney Harrison (2008:179) heritage, and what we chose to remember or celebrate, is a way in which a nation is able to piece together a collective social memory. This establishment of positive and negative aspects of a nation's history results in the formation of tradition.

In the act of collective remembering, people are able to deal with certain truths together and are able to go through the motions of forgiveness. Jacques Derrida, during a lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1998, spoke about forgetting and forgiveness. In dealing with legacies of unrest and discrimination we will be able to transform our social standing in the present. The act of forgetting and the act of remembering are vastly different (Derrida 2002: 78). In order to forgive we need to remember (Derrida 2002: 78). The documentation and expression of such histories are fundamental in ensuring that we do not forget and remember as vividly as possible.

Through the expression of our pasts and displays of moments in history that affected change in people and the attitudes towards social norms, JAG is able to add to the discourse of reconciliation with the use of art as a tool to make these stories accessible.

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*“Art is an unnecessary necessity” – Katerina Gregos, 2014*

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### 6.3. JAGAS AN ARCHIVE OF ART & IDENTITY

JAG as part of our collective heritage



Figure 6.3: "Leaves of Grass" by Geoffrey Farmer. (Orlowski 2012)

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*"The archive is not simply an institution but is the law of what can be said, the system of statements... that give shape to what cannot be said." - Foucault*

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Bhekizwe Peterson (2002) explains as a continuation of Peterson's perspective that smaller institutions such as churches, galleries and museums could be considered archives in their own right. Satellite institutions such as these could give us more insight into smaller sectors of the nation, allowing a more specific form of archive (ibid.). These archives could aid in filling in the gaps of the whole. It is in the representation of the collective that the value of JAG lies, perhaps more in the role of a museum or archive than as an art gallery.

It could therefore be argued that JAG is a library or archive representing the identity of Johannesburg throughout its existence. Each artwork acquired represents a different paradigm in South Africa's history, from colonialism to apartheid, the dawn of democracy and today's expressive political works. Each transition is representative of a shift in political standing and social norms.

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*"There is no political power without the control of the archive" - Derrida, as cited in Stoler (2002: 88).*

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As an archive, JAG is a collection of media that represents that which has come before. As suggested by Derrida (Stoler 2002) archives as state entities (as is the case with JAG) are controlled by the state, asserting political bias over the data it archives. Similarly, the artworks that are collected by a gallery are in some way representative of the bias of the political power or the curator of the time.

During the TRC hearings a call was made for a more inclusive representation in the collections of national identity. Despite JAG's appearance as a colonial construct and its history as a European time capsule, the fact that JAG boasts the largest art collection in South Africa and the biggest collection of African crafts is evidence of JAG's attempt to become more representative (Aphane Wiew Architects & Urban Designers 2013; Burger 2016).

Archives should not only be representative of the special and noteworthy, but should also represent the everyday and mundane occurrences that form part of our history. In this sense, JAG may fall short as art itself transcends the mundane. Therefore, JAG houses an archive of the spectacular that has perhaps grown from everyday happenings that the artist experiences.

Denis Bryne (2008: 150) states that heritage does not solely belong to the state, but can also belong to and be added to by ordinary people and local communities. In this way, places that are framed as heritage sites can become sites of social significance by inviting change and improvisation by the people frequenting there.



## 6.4. JAG AS A REPOSITORY FOR IDENTITY

Art, as outlined above, is integral to our identity as both individuals and a collective society. Our histories also shape us as a nation and the representation of such histories allow for people to deal with past social ills, allowing a more cohesive and unified social collective to form. Therefore, it can be argued that JAG as a museum of artworks representing our histories can be seen as a potential repository of identity of both the smaller community and South Africa as a whole.

The success of JAG's attempt at inclusion is still up for debate, but its attitude towards the matter is testament to its determination and resilience in the face of tumultuous political climates that often insinuate its demise. These intentions of inclusion, though noble, are not realised in terms of the full potential of the gallery. The gallery has the potential, as an archive of South African identity, to serve as a device for introspection and investigation into identity. However, the absence of an open and accessible interface with the public realm sees the museum as falling short of its potential to do so, which is the architectural issue.



**Figure 6.4:** JAG's exhibition of African crafts, the largest collection in the world of its kind.

## 6.5. MUSEUMS TODAY

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*“Museums all over the world are in a climate of change. The museum as an institution is contested by some, upheld by others. There are those who would do away with it altogether; while others call for its adaptation and change. And there is the array of those, oblivious to its stirrings, who are quite satisfied with things the way they are.” -Charles Hunt (2009: 69)*

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As stated by Arnize (1999) museums are in a unique position in that they are representative of the “cultural conscience of a nation”. The original museums or galleries established in Africa were colonial constructs, “elitist” institutions that encouraged only the educated to visit them (Arnize 1999). Many still view museums as merely buildings where unwanted or unnecessary items are deposited and thereafter put on display for the amusement of the refined. This negative connotation is hampering the growth of these institutions as their worth goes unnoticed by the general masses and therefore do not have a place in our political climate of democracy (Arnize 1999). According to the Heritage Association of South Africa there is a great need for museums of openness and transparency to encourage understanding and invested involvement in art from the immediate public (Kayster 2010).

The JAG building does not promote this current theme in the fact that there is no public interface, although it must be noted that an attempt was made to create one. The

physical dislocation along with local misinterpretations of the building’s function have led to an institution with very little connection to its context (Seejarum 2015: 154). If JAG is a portal for introspection then it requires the presence of people to realise this goal.

The answer perhaps lies in bringing that which is usually enclosed within these institutions into the public realm. An opportunity for a better engagement and understanding of the community will evolve, which will allow these institutions to actively engage with their surroundings. By placing what is usually veiled inside the gallery in spaces where everyday people can adapt, add to and engage with the works then the space can gain social significance both through the gallery and its surrounding community.