

ARTICLE

A Glance into Public Memory: Which Public? Whose Memory? The Demise of Red Location Cultural Precinct

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Abstract In 2021, the international award-winning South African Red Location Museum (RLM), situated within the Red Location Cultural Precinct and termed a 'national site of struggle' by Noero Wolff Architects, remains derelict. This paper is about the continuing narrative of state-built infrastructure being held hostage to community protests. It focuses on the museum and its depiction of the public/s that made Red Location. The intensity of community protest has had a significant impact on the Red Location Cultural Precinct with the museum's closure in 2013. As I shall argue in the paper, more attention should be paid to the questions of museum public/s and whose memory heritage projects intend to document. Furthermore, the place of cultural institutions such as township museums requires a review of the idea itself. Given this context, I discuss two intertwined narratives, one, the concept of the promise of infrastructure, and the second, the impact of politics on heritage.

THE DEMISE OF RED LOCATION CULTURAL PRECINCT

In a fitting tribute to the significance of the events that took place in New Brighton during the long struggle against apartheid, the newly formed African National Congress (ANC)-led municipality had in 1998 embarked on an ambitious memorial initiative. This grand sale of hope through infrastructure development was followed by the launch of an international architectural competition for a national 'apartheid museum' to be sited in Red Location. It was not only through this development that Red Location became widely known, but also, as in many South African cities, the construction of new public identities through memory and heritage as a form of illustrating a change in post-1994 South Africa has been widely studied in scholarly, professional and popular works of literature (Coombes, 2003; Judin & Vladislavic, 1998; Nuttall & Coetzee, 1998; Rassool, 2000).

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For the longest time, the township of New Brighton was envisaged as a site for creative re-imagining.¹ It was imagined as a cultural and artistic hub, a home where jazz music, theater, dance, and visual arts could, if correctly resourced, grow and flourish in the new South Africa. The design competition attracted entries from architects in South Africa and beyond and in 1999 was eventually awarded to Jo Noero and Heinrich Wolff of Noero Wolff Architects. In the early days of the post-apartheid period, this high-profile and well-resourced project quite literally put Port Elizabeth on the museum and heritage map. Around the same time in Cape Town and Johannesburg, there were new urban regeneration initiatives linked to the idea of the 'Creative City'. Swiftly, the idea of an apartheid museum was taken from Red Location and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, a commercially funded private museum, opened its doors in 2001. Yet even the acclaimed Apartheid Museum with its two racially classified entrances for 'whites' and 'non-whites' to demonstrate the rise and fall of apartheid in South Africa, has, due to Covid-19, had its fall, closing in March 2020 (Toyana, 2021).

THE PROMISE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

In the early 1990s, the idea of transforming Red Location, part of New Brighton near the then Port Elizabeth, now Gqeberha, was offered the promise of development for the area through a public memory narrative of a museum. This was meant to memorialize the space and its contribution to the struggle against apartheid. According to Rory Riordan,² the Council's Administration and Finance Committee resolved to put R52-million (approximately \$3.4 million) in municipal funds toward seven township-based developmental projects. These included a three-year, R13-million (approximately \$833,000,00) commitment to a cultural centre in Red Location (Riordan, 2007). With this funding, three buildings were completed in Red Location: the museum in 2006, an art gallery, and a library completed in 2010 but never opened. A plan for a theater and 210 subsidized houses remains only an idea.

Faced with a national competition, the ambitious creative project in New Brighton was transformed into the RLCP. The project won a string of prestigious architectural awards for its design (Murray, 2013). The subsequent history of the now disavowed museum and its cultural precinct has been one of relentless housing dispute and contestation, leading to the precinct's closure in October 2013 (*Mail & Guardian*, 2016). During the conceptualisation and design phase of the museum and cultural precinct, in the early 2000s, there were intense contestations. Compromises demanded by 'the community' dictated basic infrastructural housing delivery be part of the cultural precinct's brief. Red Location's struggles cannot be separated from other similarly contested heritage projects. The contestations about public history in some of the oldest townships such as Alexandra (Nieftagodien, 2014; Sihlongonyane, 2009) and Kliptown (Judin et al., 2015; Kuljian, 2009) near Johannesburg, should be noted. This township-based heritage and urban development projects have presented ambitious spatial transformation prospects corresponding to that of Red Location, producing similar contestations to those playing out in Red Location where impressive heritage projects anchoring aspirations of spatial transformation emerged.

A sizeable and intimidating structure heralding transformation, freedom, and prosperity was envisaged. The sustainability of this development was meant to be realized through tourism, a script that was sold to the community together with the liberation struggle commemoration narrative – a predisposition that is often found in post-apartheid modern heritage projects in South Africa. This conflation of the idea of the museum and the state by residents ultimately led to the closure of the museum. The work of three historians, Witz et al. (2017) presents a convincing argument on the state of heritage, and historical narratives and brings a ‘spotlight . . . exposing old lies and illuminating new truths’ about space (Witz et al., 2017). Their book *Unsettling History: South African Public Pasts* describes the notion of the ‘heritage complex’, which explains the focus on heritage in the post-apartheid era. The critical heritage approach suggested by these scholars allows meaningful insight into the narrative of the RLCP’s heritage landscape and public memory.

At the centre of this paper is also the concept of ‘promise’. Emma Mackinnon writes on the history of political thought and has theorized ‘promise’ through Hannah Arendt’s classic discussion of ‘promise making’ (Arendt, 1998: 7) as a political practice, and its relationship to the uncertainty of action (Mackinnon, 2018: 94). In the RLCP case, my understanding of the ‘promise’ is based on how space was used to project a ‘possible future’ in South Africa’s post-apartheid democracy. In developing this element, I have noted Arendt’s description of promise-making together with Arthur Danto’s discussion of the philosophy of history. What Danto phrases as ‘narrative sentences’ (Danto, 2007: 152) to emphasize the uncertainty and how political actors might revise the past itself, and so alter its legacies, is not a far-fetched phenomenon for RLCP. Mackinnon points out how this ‘uncertainty is not just a matter of unforeseen consequences but is also uncertainty about the past about how the past will matter for the present and the future’ (Mackinnon, 2018: 94). In making promises, political actors narrate the past to contest its meaning for their present, to project possibilities for the future, and so to render certain futures possible (Mackinnon, 2018: 94). As I have previously suggested, the ‘grand sale of hope’ contains both classical and spatial injustices.

In my presentation at the Modern Heritage of Africa Symposium at the University of Cape Town (22–24 September 2021), I showed filmmaker and actor Zwai Mgijima’s short video clip from the trailer of his forthcoming full-length documentary titled *New Brighton Noah*. In this documentary, Mgijima narrates the brutal loss of more than eight Covid-19 infected senior men in his home village of Sheshegu, in the town of Alice in the Eastern Cape province. Emotions and tears are shed as the family walks through the graveyard where many tombstones are engraved with the Mgijima surname. The clip portrays a powerful visual depiction of the demise of the Red Location Cultural Precinct, with poetic narration provided by Mgijima. In this way, the *New Brighton Noah* project aligns with Mgijima’s quest to capture memory through filming, an activity he refers to as a safer form of preserving public memory (Mgijima, 2022).

Mgijima is a New Brighton-born thespian, one of the shining stars trained by the late Winston Ntshona, the Tony Award-winning actor and playwright of New Brighton who collaborated with John Kani and Athol Fugard on acclaimed productions including *The Island* and *Sizwe Banzi is*

Dead.³ Mgijima is shown on-site at the RLCP, making the trailer in 2020 through difficult circumstances. With the funding obtained from National Arts Council, the RLCP component of the video was made under the watch of hired security personnel. Some of the security personnel members are ex-convicts who render these services for the safety of production crews in the precinct. Based on his previous experience of a robbery whilst accompanying the photographer, David Goldblatt (EP Herald, 201 at the Emlotheni Memorial in New Brighton, Mgijima opted for this safety measure. In a manner intended to be thought-provoking, I then juxtaposed these against the visuals produced by Noero Wolff Architects, (<https://www.noeroarchitects.com/project/red-location/>). I opted for a visual presentation at the conference because there is no amount of description or explanation that can adequately describe the prevailing state of ruin of the precinct (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tnX70fr-wc1bfOEW1HSWubkuJRsuc_5Z/view).

Mgijima, who worked with Riordan as a project social facilitator, opens his video by stating that 'men build places of healing, heritage structures, legacy and continue to ask how many stones can destroy a structure? When art is silent, the wicked take over and society crumbles.' This is Mgijima's reality as a socially aware creative practitioner in the arts in New Brighton. In his trailer, Mgijima includes footage of himself crawling in and out of broken windows at the museum, demonstrating just one of the many ways to access the museum. This is in a context where municipal officials are strictly banned by the community from entering the premises, marking a prevailing state of lawlessness and appropriation.

Mine is an attempt to give a perspective firstly, on the RLCP closure, and, as in Mgijima's cinematic sentiments of disappointment, what this closure means to the residents, the municipality, and heritage practitioners. Furthermore, I explore how political hindrances are viewed, and examine how projects are framed in such a way that buildings are expected to interact with the community instead of the community interacting with the buildings.

The RLCP's brokenness ranges from shattered windows and ruined exhibitions to dismantled design features. What was formerly referred to as the *Memory Box* exhibition now contains no memories. Exploiting the perspective of memory, Jo Noero, the museum's architect, had intended to present worker histories through *Memory Boxes* (Herholdt, 2013) housed in the spaces generated as part of the architectural design. Noero's elucidation of 'memory boxes' was inspired by the boxes southern African migrant workers used to accommodate their prized possessions (Herholdt, 2013) and warrants further debate. In the original display, one of 12 memory boxes was dedicated to migrants who were a significant part of Red Location and thus formed part of the public memory of the place.

As previously themed in the now demolished display, New Brighton was home to hundreds of single male migrant laborers. It is therefore unsurprising that the national Defiance Campaign started there on 26 June 1952. This is where Raymond Mhlaba⁴ led a group of 30 volunteers through the 'Europeans-Only' entrance of the New Brighton railway station (Baines, 1994: 214).

NO HOUSING, NO MUSEUM!

In 2013, the slogan ‘No Housing No Museum’ accompanied ‘service delivery protests in New Brighton (Murray & Kadi, 2022). New Brighton, close to the former city of Port Elizabeth, is home to one of South Africa’s most ambitious post-apartheid visions epitomized by the cultural precinct located in Red Location. Known as *Ilali Ebomvu*, Red Location is New Brighton’s oldest neighborhood and ironically remains a space of underdevelopment and poverty. Residents who were dissatisfied with the pace of housing delivery alongside the R22-million cultural precinct began to air their dissatisfaction by forcing the museum to close (Sizani, 2019).

Yet the question of housing in South Africa’s second-oldest city cannot be delinked from its past. New Brighton was first established in 1902. It is situated approximately 10 km north of Port Elizabeth’s central business district and consists of seven housing schemes, namely Red Location (1902), White Location (1925), McNamee Village (1938), Kwa Ford (1948), Boastville (1948), Elundini (1951), and Thembalethu (1962) (Baines, 1994, 9).

According to Vuyisile Msila, the forced removal of people from Korsten led to the establishment of Red Location, and fear of plague was one of the reasons that led to the formation of New Brighton (Msila, 2014, 89). In her thesis, ‘The power of apartheid: territoriality and state power in South African cities: Port Elizabeth 1921–1972’, Jennifer Robinson argues that the ‘location strategy’ was a way of entrenching white colonial hegemony, governing the undisciplined, and ensuring that black people could be contained where they could be monitored and controlled effectively (Robinson, 1990). In 1961 Frantz Fanon wrote, ‘the town belonging to the colonized people . . . is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other . . . The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light’ (Fanon, 1961: 38). Fanon’s famous passage evokes common and intrinsic nuances in spatial justice and planning in Red Location. Described by Msila as corrugated iron houses built-in ‘barrack type’ dwellings leftover from the South African War concentration camp in Uitenhage, Red Location’s original make up of 8×10 m and 8×30 m units (Msila, 2014: 67) advances the size and shape debate of the prevailing housing delivery debacle of the current 40 m^2 against the previous 48 m^2 RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) houses granted to other residents of Red Location.

As in many places in South Africa, the experience of infrastructure has long been an affective and embodied distinction between the settlers’ town and the town belonging to the colonized people (Mrázek, 2002). Fanon’s description of ‘men living on top of each other’ is in many instances a depiction of Red Location and migrant labour. As previously alluded to, this is one of the features about the place that inspired Noero Wolff Architects.

Since its establishment, Red Location has always been a space of struggle. Baines succinctly explains that, with its deplorable and overcrowded living conditions, Red Location has become a haven for the criminal and delinquent elements among New Brighton’s youth (Baines, 1994: 212). Many acclaimed political and cultural leaders were either born in or lived in this site of struggle. With

an overwhelming impression of Port Elizabeth's townships as places of poverty and squalor, Baines further confirmed that the original 90-year-old structures have never been upgraded and remain among the most unsightly places in Port Elizabeth's townships (Baines, 1994: 243). However, this was until the post-1994 promise of 'housing for all' (ANC Election Manifesto, 1994). It is this that in 2013 led to the sweeping closure of the cultural precinct. This meant that tourists, municipal and other administrative officials were refused entry. Harsch reminds us that when Nelson Mandela became president, he proclaimed the unbreakable promise of 'housing for all' (Harsch, 2015). This now broken promise was meant to be delivered through the government's policy of RDP, another policy disappointment that removed the meaning of decent housing for many in South Africa's townships.

The RDP housing program referred to the state's provision of low-cost housing to poor South Africans with a combined income of R3500 or less (Greyling, 2009). With all the complexities related to delivery, the involvement of people is a crucial requirement within the model, and a 'bottom-up' approach should have been implemented. In most cases, however, beneficiaries are drawn in at the later stages of projects, and their involvement is minimal with limited room to sanction their expectations (Manomano, 2015). As seen in Red Location, the participation of beneficiaries and other stakeholders remains problematic; their continuing exclusion from consideration as projects are rolled out has resulted in endemic violence (Chakuwanba, 2010) and a yawning impasse.

In contemporary South Africa, there is a persistent narrative of state-built infrastructure being held hostage during community protests. The effects of this kind of 'hostage-taking' are becoming more extreme with time, intensifying the need for serious reflection on the connotation of the term 'public/s', and to be clear about which public is being referred to and whose memory is chosen to be documented.

In light of the intense contestations during the conceptualisation of the project, the compromises eventually entered into by the community dictated that fundamental infrastructural housing improvements be delivered. This delivery was the deal maker for the opening or closing of the RLCP. To a certain extent, this presents two scenarios: a museum building without artifacts; or community houses that are living museums. Could it be that the Red Location community wants direct participation in the imparting of knowledge about their destiny, or put differently, direct ownership of telling their plight, thus creating a new museum?

In the context of urbanization, do cultural institutions like township museums require a review of the idea itself? When one juxtaposes Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum in Cape Town and Hector Pieterse Museum in Johannesburg with Red Location Museum and its surrounding cultural precinct, the dynamism of the precinct in a modern heritage context supersedes the narrative of poverty in which these sites are located. This has created a safety net and a sense of ownership for some institutions, but not for RLM and its surrounding precinct. An observation of Soweto's Vilakazi Street with its enormous tourism potential continues to set a precedent for some of the heritage projects established for the same purpose.

While reflecting on RLCP as a ‘snubbed’ cultural precinct, I recollect that for more than two decades, Leslie Witz, Gary Minkley, and Ciraj Rassool have investigated sites of historical production in which complex ideas about pasts are invoked. They have suggested how we might navigate a path toward understanding the agencies of image-making and memory production (Witz et al., 2017). Their intensive and collective research outlines many questions we might ask about the beginning and end of RLCP. These include the cultural politics of social history, tourism as an arena of place-making, and the construction of museums as sites of heritage production and public memory for a new South Africa. In all of this, modern heritage has presented its own complexities, which were never anticipated. Modern heritage continues to compete with all other basic needs in this case housing or shelter.

In conclusion, the politicization of cultural heritage has become widespread in South Africa. The very sites and museums that were built after the end of the apartheid era have and continue to do so even within the dominant narrative of the ANC. I have examined how the interchange of heritage and tourism with politics finds expression in public memory and among its publics. This has led to a phenomenon of lack of ‘social maintenance’, which refers to the formation of positive relationships mainly by means of promoting self-representation in others (Chevallier et al., 2012: 231). In this context, ‘social maintenance’ could mean the continued presentation of the precinct development plans to the RLCP community. But this was not the case and as a result, conflict continued from the initial stage right up to the demise of the RLCP.

Having observed this demise, further focus should be on what type of spatial ‘legacy’ was intended for Red Location and whether ambitious ‘post-apartheid’ projects offered to transform the city have succeeded or failed. To understand these themes there is a requirement to draw on how the production of memorial space emerged and what it has produced. Historian Gary Minkley, Research Chair in Social Change at the University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, has developed an innovative approach to defining social change through what he frames as the notion of ‘social acts’ (National Research Foundation, 2014). Minkley’s approach is removed from the traditional view that social change inevitably leads to improvement. In Minkley’s view, process ‘leads to unpredictable outcomes as it removes traditional assumptions about the impact of change’ (National Research Foundation, 2014). What is inspiring about this initiative is the mission of ‘searching out that which might not be expected, predicted or known about the social, opening up new ways to think about the problems of the post-apartheid era’ (National Research Foundation, 2014).

A politics of correctness and redress in heritage landscapes has taken center stage in the RLCP project. To this end, the absence of political stability and unity for redress has given this entity time to speedily mature to its ‘end of life’ and destruction by the very same politics that were at the forefront of its development. As a non-architect, I have gained an inspiring perspective from Carson Smuts, a fellow PhD candidate and South African-born architect, and designer based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 2020, I was part of a cohort attending weekly virtual seminars facilitated by Professor Noëleen Murray, where the question ‘what is the role of the architect in community building and what happens after the building?’ was posed (Smuts, 2020). Given Smuts’ reflection and the state of decay at RLCP, it is worth locating the role of the architect post-occupancy

and continuing promotion of award-winning status in the context of a building that is 'under destruction'. The 'post occupancy' role is a rare practice when projects are in a state of collapse. The relationship then only becomes a business transaction.

Given the rise and fall of this award-winning public memory project, what should be of interest is how architects developing these projects might think about the 'end of life' of a building, ruins, closure, or worse case scenarios. In view of the number of closed heritage projects in South Africa, should this not provoke a need to focus on the limitations of architecture in planning for the unknown? The tale of modern heritage in Africa continues to produce complex narratives like the one of the Red Location Museum in the Red Location Cultural Precinct. **END**

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NOTES

1. Following an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1903, the Cape Colonial government established New Brighton to re-house Africans relocated from Port Elizabeth's inner-city locations.
2. Rory Riordan is a liberation struggle activist, a business consultant for the Red Location Cultural Precinct, and a municipal councillor.
3. *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* is a 1972 play about identity loss whose location is set in a photography studio in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth.
4. Raymond Mhlaba was a resident of Red Location, union leader, and Rivonia Trialist sentenced to 25 years in the prison alongside Nelson Mandela.

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