

***Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa.* Steven C. Durbin. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. 341 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by C. Kurt Dewhurst

Since the end of the apartheid era in 1994, scholars have been drawn to South Africa to study this country's complex, fast-paced, and often inspiring changes. Beyond the much-reported challenges of the AIDS/HIV pandemic and of building a capitalist economy with a diverse middle-class, one of the most lively areas of contestation has been the role of museums and cultural heritage policy for the self-declared "Rainbow Nation." Steven C. Durbin's *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa* is a most welcomed contribution to the assessment of the progress and pitfalls of museum practice in this country's period of recent change.

Durbin brings to this subject, including past experience in writing on cultural policy and a desire to assess how aspirations for transforming the nation's cultural heritage sector match reality. Over a period of five years he interviewed approximately 100 individuals including museum workers and numerous leaders in the national government. In addition, Durbin examined news accounts reflecting spirited debates and critiques both in academic circles and public settings. His writing demonstrates that he is a keen observer of South African everyday life. He captures both the public conversations as well as the private views of South Africans as they consider what it means to be a South African.

This volume presents especially well the accounts of museums as contested sites within the broader cultural context of South Africa's progressive constitution, the government's doctrine of reconciliation, and the negotiation of names of sites, monuments, place names, burial grounds, and archives. Durbin suggests that the real call for action to transform museums began with an address given by President Nelson Mandela on Heritage Day in 1997 at the inauguration of the Robben Island Museum, when he used this moment to characterize museums as places that were by and large disgraceful to the majority of South African's citizens. In his rebuke to museums, "Ninety-seven percent of their displays reflect colonialist and apartheid points of view," Mandela demanded an end to this state of affairs and he called for museums to "catch up with the times, reflect democratic ideals and experiences of the bulk of the population, and not focus simply on a privileged few" (p. 2).

Durbin examines the broad range of museums—both historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions—including those focusing on art, cultural history, natural science, natural history, agriculture, military matters, and traditional crafts. His study includes major institutions in large cities as well as museums and historic houses in small towns, even those in relatively remote sites. His exploration builds the case that *colonial legacy* is felt more acutely in art museums and the *apartheid legacy* is most apparent in

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cultural history, natural science, and natural history museums “where ideology was interwoven into narratives that their curators composed” (p. 242). He is particularly critical of the “New Legacy Projects,” a special national initiative to address historical deficiencies and to broaden representation by developing new museums and establishing new monuments and memorials.

The book is organized around major themes that have been provocative both inside and outside the museum field. An early chapter not only examines how and why white museum personnel complied with the apartheid beliefs and restrictions during the apartheid years but also provides important accounts of the ways that dedicated museum workers often subverted, evaded, modified, and challenged those beliefs and restrictions. He makes the case that within professional circles, such as the South African Museums Association, clear seeds of change were underway before the formal end of apartheid.

Durbin presents two of the most sensitive and emotional issues faced by museums in the post-apartheid years. One is how indigenous people have customarily been exhibited in museums. He cites the controversy surrounding the Eurocentric approach used in the South African Museum to depict the Khoisan people and the efforts museum staff made to update the exhibit. Their modifications only called even more attention to the inherent colonial interpretation of indigenous culture and, after much public protest covered by the media, the exhibit was finally completely removed. Subsequently, the South African Art Gallery, located next door, created “Miscast,” a landmark exhibition that critically examined the history of Eurocentric museum practices in South African museums. Durbin also carefully examines the case of Sarah Bartmann who was born in South Africa in 1789 and sensationally exploited in England as the Hottentot Venus, with public curiosity being based on her body shape. After her death her body was maintained in fluid preservatives in the collections of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. The repatriation and reburial of her remains in her homeland became a national symbol of the growing activism and achievements of the South African cultural heritage sector.

Durbin thoughtfully chronicles the organic process of museum-making in his description of the emergence of the District Six Museum, part of an international network of museum sites of historic conscience, that are shaped by community memories. In the case of the District Six Museum it was the memories of members of a multiracial community who had been forcibly removed by the apartheid regime. Through the process of creating their museum, community members are not only reclaiming their heritage but they are active forces in rebuilding a sense of community. Durbin also presents examples of new museums that have become sites of local and national contestation: Robben Island Museum, Constitution Hill, and the Voortrekker Monument.

The final chapters are devoted to the practicalities of operating museums today in South Africa with attention to problems such as funding, training and hiring practices jurisdictional disputes, and the conflicts between museum and cultural workers and governmental bureaucrats. Durbin takes critical aim at what he calls “reorganization schemes such as amalgamation” that have led to creating “flagship museum systems” in Johannesburg/Pretoria and in Cape Town (p. 255). It is true this decision has been

particularly controversial, but the effort to force governmentally funded museums to find economic efficiencies is, in reality, a growing practice in countries beyond South Africa. Durbin offers some perceptive commentary on the current state of affairs for South African museums when he observes they face a “delicate balancing act” as they learn how to “shed the ideology corsets of the past without replacing them with similarly restrictive fashions.” He observes that museums need to move beyond the “authoritative curatorial voice,” but cautions that new strategies are needed for integrating African collections with existing collections. Durbin properly notes that leading South African museum scholars are calling for greater “focus on historical approaches rather than looking at a particular ethnic group in separation from whatever other things were going on” (p. 255). As he points out, “the irony is that at the at the same time that scientists, scholars, and curators are increasingly viewing race as a cultural construct, many in the general population are embracing it as a distinct, tangible biological entity around which to mobilize...and to press their claims of for spiritual union and common cause, land, status, and power” (p. 256).

*Transforming Museums* is a valued contribution to a growing body of literature on cultural heritage policy and practice in South Africa. Durbin could have, however, addressed the fact that some of the most innovative cultural heritage work in the world is being tackled in South Africa. Museums in South Africa are now in various stages of transforming exhibition and collection policies to incorporate multiple perspectives; building human capacity in the cultural heritage fields; and building broader audiences, including underserved or emerging audiences that never considered museums as part of their life experience. The international museum field has much to learn from colleagues working in South African museums as they seek to build cultural heritage institutions that are responsive to the needs of a more inclusive society in today’s South Africa.

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