

Steve Theberge
Everywhere But the Ground: The Spatial Politics of Memory in Cape Town and New York
History Matters: Spaces of Violence, Spaces of Memory Conference
New School University, April 23-24 2004

This paper will examine the ways in which cityspaces reconcile their political past with their architectural present. Centrally, it is concerned with the spatiality of memory; how physical spaces embody, enforce and maintain historical social phenomena. It is based on my senior thesis, completed in March, which used ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two locations - Langa Township in Cape Town, South Africa, and the African Burial Ground in New York City – to examine how the function and meaning of previously (and currently) racialized public spaces are shifting, tracing how their racial specificity continues to be utilized by both state power structures and historically oppressed communities. Moreover, given the contested nature of both sites, it examines the deeply complicated questions that have been provoked about how and what is chosen for memorialization, and what form that memorialization should take - the relationship between place, memory, and social transformation.

Discovered during the construction of a federal building in 1991, the uncovering of what was once an African burial ground has sparked a far-reaching conversation about the history of New York City's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, how the city will choose to confront that past, and what will be done architecturally to honor it. Intense controversy has surrounded every step of the excavation and memorialization process, marked by a deep divide between how the "descendent community" and the Federal government envision the future of the site. The site garnered worldwide attention following its excavation, which culminated on October 3, 2003, when the remains of 419 colonial-era free and enslaved Africans were returned to their original graves on the southern tip of Manhattan. The site now has now been transformed into an official, state-sponsored memorial and burial ground.

A very similar process has recently been undertaken in Langa, the oldest “black” township in Cape Town, South Africa. Built in the late 1950’s to administer the newly mandated pass laws, the Old Pass Office has been at the center of much of the social and political conflict in Langa. It is now one of the few remaining Pass Offices left in South Africa, and after an extended and arduous process involving a collaboration between community members and city officials, it has recently been turned into a museum.

Does the creation of such memorial sites imply, as in the case of South Africa, the death of the movement that made those locations important? Or, as in the case of the Burial Ground, does it point towards a willingness to confront the horrors of the past? Cognizant that the process of struggle is a multivalent one, shot through with spatial and racial politics, I will argue that these sites are, in fact, *ongoing* sites of struggle, discursive spaces in which the very meanings of liberation and freedom (and explicitly white supremacist cultural foundations) in both New York and Cape Town are being contested.

The history of public space in South Africa can be characterized as a history of “state control, repressive action, and popular response,” (Japha 1998) in which the ideological tenets of apartheid were placed upon the land, creating a pattern of exclusion, compartmentalization, and complete state choreography of movement. White supremacist ideology impacted every aspect of the public sphere in South Africa, not the least of which were the arenas of planning and architecture. Under apartheid - as in all social settings- the cityspace embodied and reflected distinct social and political ideologies. Legislatively, through policies like the Group Areas Act; socially, through the dispersal of communities across the Cape region; and architecturally, in the planning and implementation of race-specific zones and townships, the city was used to enforce a white supremacist agenda.

Langa, the first black township in Cape Town, is a complex amalgamation of rigidly planned streets and neighborhoods, and sprawling “informal settlements,” engendering within the township an element of conflict between the middle class communities in the planned areas, and the working poor and impoverished in the informal settlements.

Built as an extension of the magistrate’s court, the Old Pass Office was the site of the administrative enforcement of the Pass Laws. It is here that those arrested for pass violations would be charged and fined or sentenced to time in Pollsmoor prison (the average sentence for not having a pass was a month in prison). Everyone alive in Langa from the early 1960’s to the early 1980’s had some experience with the pass hall, whether it was demonstrating in front of it or applying for a pass from it or being processed inside of its small wooden rooms. The building, while without any “high” architectural significance, has great historical value. As one of the few Pass Offices that remain intact – the majority were burned down in the liberation struggle – it offers a unique opportunity for the creation of a memorial for and museum about apartheid. (Silinga 2003)

The Pass Office resonates in a unique way with the fragmented population of the Cape region, and accordingly, it has received the most attention from both the CTCC and the community. Standing as a concrete representation of apartheid governmentality, many residents of Cape Town have a strong identification with the site and an emotional and political stake in its preservation. At the same moment, it functions as an 'authentic' apartheid relic, through which visitors and tourists can have taste of what life used to be like. In a bizarre re-inscription of the building’s meaning, it is now being imagined by many in the City Council and in the tourism industry as a literal “gateway to understanding apartheid structures in Cape Town” (Robinson 2003) Taking its place along side the other “tourist” sites in Langa, busloads of foreigners can now stop at the newly opened “Langa Heritage Museum.”

Interestingly, the community representatives were at first in strong opposition to this idea. They wanted a space that replicated as exactly as possible their experiences in the pass office, down to the backless wooden benches, poor ventilation, and dim lighting. They wanted a space that provoked as similar an experience as possible, not a space that paid homage to their history; memory, not memorialization was what they were after. This was to be a place they could bring their children, to recreate their experience, and they did not feel that the decay of the building represented their experiences or the history of the space. For many in Langa, the Pass Office is a very serious place, with a highly specific and symbolic meaning. For Sibongile Morara, a high school student, every visit “is a new experience...sometimes I become angry when I walk by...I think ‘this is what these people did, this is what happened.’ But the feeling that it is over outweighs what happened. It’s a very important place for me.” (Morara 2003)

Local architect Brett Robinson was hired by the city to design the new museum. His original design was very clearly a museum, using track lighting, comfortable facilities, refreshments, and exhibition space. It was seen, in his words, as a “black box, a timeline, a record of the events that had passed.” (Robinson 2003).

The residents of Langa were interested first and foremost in the creation of a stage on which they could see their direct experiences acted out in a raw – although precisely historically located – and malleable space. In contrast, the state planners and architects hoped to construct a site of memorialization, within which the events of apartheid were codified, archived, and placed into a museum framework. Both parties sought to recreate a version of the past, yet the intended functions of that recreated space were drastically different. The conflict between the ways that the residents of Langa and the heritage production community imagined the museum is indicative of the opposing desires that both groups had for the space – the distinction between popular memory and state-sponsored memorialization.

It is a unique moment to analyze the African Burial Ground; poised on the cusp of transition after 12 years of bitter arguments and rigorous debates, the staff is now preparing for the selection and construction of two spaces - an official "Exterior Memorial" and an "Interpretive Center," including the installation of a variety of artistic tributes. (Taylor 2001) Overseen and financed by the US General Services Administration, the site is managed through a collaboration between the African Burial Ground Project, the National Park Service, and the Office of Public Education and Interpretation for the African Burial Ground (OPEI).

In 1991, as the United States General Services Administration (GSA) began preparations for the construction of a \$300 million federal building, they came across a startling discovery. Digging deep into the city's foundation, they unearthed the remains of 419 of those almost 20,000 African Americans buried in the seven surrounding acres. Led by Mayor David Dinkins, the Congressional Black Caucus, and grassroots community groups, the people of New York were able to temporarily halt construction on the site so that the remains could be exhumed. Much of the protest revolved around what was seen as a desecration of the graves of the ancestors. Although there were many different currents within the African-American community (many of whom identify themselves as 'descendants' of those buried downtown), they did agree on a few points: they wanted "the federal government to stop the excavations, to provide an appropriate memorial and exhibit on the site and proclaim it a national landmark, and to rebury the dead on the site where they had originally lain." (Cantwell 2001:284)

In addition, much of the 'descendent community' was deeply angered the lack of African-Americans on the archaeological team. They were concerned that the "spiritual aspects of the site...not be lost in the face of scientific enquiry," and that "if it was an African find...that it was interpreted from an African point of view." (Cantwell 2001:285) Many African-Americans have traced their political, social, and cultural (if not genetic) roots to the bodies found at 290 Broadway.

The discovery, excavation, and archaeological examination of the African Burial Ground site has sparked what has now stretched into over a decade of fierce conflict and controversy between General Services Administration (GSA) of the US government and various community, cultural, and religious groups in the city. “I am appalled,” said Onaje Muid at a GSA hearing in 1999, “that the federal government built on land that is the ancestral burial land of my people. Those Africans were captive in this country and never had a voice. You must talk about the pain, the degradation. They gave their lives in the most desperate way so that I can be here today. These were human beings, taken from their motherland and forced to endure a kind of hell on earth.” (Officer 1999) All agree, however, that the site has not received the kind of attention or care necessary. “The seat of New York government is resting on the backs of blacks who built the city centuries ago,” argues Sherill D. Wilson, the director of the Office of Public Education and Information for the burial ground. “If it was anybody else, it would have been considered sort of a Holocaust. But it’s ignored, swept under the rug.” (Anderson 2000)

Centrally, the question that plagues both the Africa Burial Ground and the Pass Office projects is one of representation. In the case of the Burial Ground, the African-American community had their cultural history suppressed and erased by centuries of slavery and racism. Left with only the vaguest hints and most tenuous connections to their spiritual and cultural past, many African-Americans have made a conscious effort to reconnect with their African ancestry, no matter how difficult or distant.

This absence leaves the process of memory production in a particular bind: how does one represent visually and architecturally a past that has been submerged below dominant historiography? How, spatially, can such a link be created? Unfortunately, the proposals for the memorial at the burial ground answer these questions by latching onto the most abstracted and

essentialized versions of this history, presenting a transnational, historically displaced and profoundly mythologized presentation of “Africa” in their designs.

In the fall of 2003, the OPEI selected five finalists to compete for the design of the Exterior Memorial, to be erected on the actual site as a “cultural reminder of those who sacrificed their lives for generations to come.” (Wilson 2003). The similarity in form, content and approach of the proposals is striking, but what creates the strongest bond between them is the ways in which they grapple with how to remember spatially such a complex and obscured history. What, they each seem to ask, is the function of institutionalized memorials?

The overwhelming complexity of these questions seems to have left each design team grasping to create a site that at once pays tribute to the sacrifices that were made, and that also offers a space of memory and healing. In doing so, the majority of the finalists have chosen to create a “place memory” that relies on a highly essentialized, at moments almost mythological sense of “Africanness.”

Whatever the outcome of the new memorial, it is clear that it holds a deeply divergent meaning for each concerned party – for the city government it marks the conclusion of a controversial and unpalatable encounter with the underbelly of New York’s history, and for many African-Americans it marks one more step in the long walk towards material reparations for slavery. (Luo 2003) Centrally, the debate over the space revolves around the dynamic relationship between political struggle and memorial building – how a legacy of oppression and resistance is either spoken to or silenced by the official process of memory production, and in turn, how that memory is translated spatially. Moreover, the process of remembering the African Burial Ground is one bound up in the problematics of mourning. How, it asks can a community remember and struggle in the same breath?

The representations of slavery and memory that are predominant in the memorials vocalize the inherent complexity of addressing New York's political past architecturally, and it is at this point that the community experience and the memorial proposals diverge. The question of reparations for slavery has been spliced by community activists into the debate about the future of the site, making the Burial Ground a vehicle with which to address the multiple and intertwined concerns of the African-American community. In doing so, they have reified its position as an ongoing site of struggle, both historical and forward-looking in its conceptualization. It is being used as a launching point for a larger social movement, while serving as a medium through which to address and connect past atrocities and the future struggles for freedom. Regardless of what the city decides to place on the third of a block that has been allotted to the memorial, members of the African-American community(ies) have appropriated the space from the beginning, reclaiming the landscape through ritual and protest in order to address the spiritual, political, and emotional residue of slavery.

Where the community's use of the site points temporally in multiple directions, the memorial proposals create an endpoint, translating a site of struggle into a site of memorialization, relegating that struggle to the past through an explicit manipulation of the space. With the completion of this memorial, it will appear to many that the legacy of slavery has been done justice, that we as a city and a nation are now ready to move on, yet James Young reminds us that the danger exists that "once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember" (Young 2000:94)

As the controversies swirling around the Pass Office and the African Burial Ground clearly illustrate, our material and spatial surroundings are one of the most complex repositories of culture and history that we have available. Far from existing solely in the architectural or material realm, the places we live in are shot through with history, both reflecting and creating the conditions under

which we interact. Moreover, the racial order that dominates much of the social and political arena in the US and South Africa is in a constant and symbiotic relationship with the prevailing spatial order.

Both of these memorial spaces are defined by the stark difference in which the state and the ‘community’ address the process of sanctification. This break between community and state interests illustrates a rupture between community efforts at dealing with the trauma of apartheid violence and state attempts at nation building, a conflict between nationalist desire and popular memory.

The “moment of danger” that figures so prominently in the work of Walter Benjamin, has trailed behind every step of the memorial process at both sites; at all moments, the risk that the political and cultural legacy of both places would be absorbed into the network of hegemonic space has been balanced precariously with the popular claim to the “right to the city.” In the moments in which the “abstract space” of the city were at their least stable - when the seams of social production were revealed - a unique opportunity emerged: a liminal moment of ‘illumination.’ The excavation of the African Burial Ground was unmistakably a ‘moment of danger,’ in which the both the “content of the tradition” - the history of the enslaved - and its “receivers” - the African-American community – were directly confronted with the possibility of becoming the “tool of the ruling class.” (Benjamin 1986)

In the case of the African Burial Ground and the Pass Office, this moment of crisis appeared during the separation between the physio-historical reality of the sites and the prevailing collective understanding of self and society – how the city imagines it’s present reality. That is to say – the Pass Office was commonly understood to be fundamentally an *apartheid* space, emblematic of a particular historical and ideological period in South Africa. In the post-apartheid climate, the cultural framework that gave the Pass Office its particular logic has disappeared from the official

discourse, thus initiating a rupture between what the site actually is/symbolizes and the new post apartheid national identity. To leave such a space alone would be impossible, it had to be transformed into a site of memorialization, placed into a cultural logic of the past, external to both apartheid and post-apartheid ideology, thus alleviating the crisis that emerged.

This moment of dialectical recognition was immediately accompanied by a vital choice about the future of the site, a liminal space in which, for a brief period in time, the meaning of the sites was up for grabs. In no uncertain terms, the state's moral and political legitimacy was under attack. Their solution was an ossification of the racial and spatial order. Whether conscious or not, the pattern of the city and federal activities following the discovery of the site indicated a strong desire to diffuse the political significance of the Burial Ground in order to bring it into alignment with contemporary modes of conceptualizing slavery and New York's history. With the opportunity for a radical and potentially transformative shift in racial politics in New York in front of them, the city opted against using the burial ground as springboard for reconciliation and reparations, instead putting their effort towards reburying as much of the site as possible, and with it an invaluable yet fleeting opportunity to fundamentally alter how we understand our history.

- Anderson, M. 2000. "Under City Hall: Bones of New York's Past," vol. 2004: Archaeology (<http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/cityhall/index.html>).
- Benjamin, W. 1986. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*. Edited by H. Arendt, pp. 253-264. New York: Schocken Books.
- Cantwell, A. M. D. d. W. 2001. *Unearthing Gotham*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Japha, D. a. J., Vivienne. 1998. "Langa: The Evolution of a Cape Town Township (Paper Presentation)." *International Conference on Urbanization and Housing, Goa, India, 1998*.
- Luo, M. 2003. "City's Role In Slavery is Recalled At Rites," in *New York Times*, Late Edition East Coast edition, pp. B.3. New York.
- Morara, S. 2003. "Personal Interview 5.03.03." Seapoint, Cape Town.
- Officer, D. A. 1999. "Uproar and protest at African Burial Ground Meeting," in *New York Amsterdam News*, pp. 4. New York.
- Robinson, B. 2003. "Personal Interview." Rondebosch, Cape Town.
- Silinga, A. 2003. "Personal Interview 5.02.03." Langa, Cape Town.
- Taylor, C. 2001. *The African Burial Ground: "Return to the past to build the future"*. African Burial Ground/US General Services Administration.
- Wilson, S. 2003. UPDATE: Newsletter of the N.Y. African Burial Ground. 3(9).