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Housing Cape Town's Forgotten Dead: Conflict in the Post-apartheid Public Sphere¹

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'The public sphere was always constituted by conflict'²

Abstract

On 28 May 2008, the Cape Town Partnership Company Executive Officers's newsletter reported on an 'Interfaith ceremony at Prestwich Place [sic]' to 'consecrate' a new ossuary building recently completed in Cape Town's central business district. The announcement placed the Ossuary alongside other Partnership initiatives and events such as the Harvest Festival, the Creative Cape Town initiative, and the upgrading of the Cape Town Station and the Grand Parade managed through the Partnership and the City Improvement District. The building of the Ossuary is intended to memorialise and bring closure to the contestations over the re-emergence of burial spaces in the city that have taken place in Cape Town since 2004. Presented as a successful 'partnership' between the Prestwich Place Project Committee, the City of Cape Town, the South African Heritage Resources Agency, the District Six Museum and Heritage Western Cape, this symbolic act of closure has been hailed a breakthrough in terms of heritage practice by practitioners and city officials alike. In this paper we visit the space of the Ossuary and its associated exhibition in the city, and reflect on the relationship between life space and burial space in Cape Town. Following the official path of the exhibition we pause to attach our own notes – a series of fragmentary interventions which trouble the smooth surface of containment. We use the experience of walking to reflect on the architecture of closure.

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Résumé

Le 28 mai, le bulletin d'information des cadres de direction de la *Cape Town Partnership Company* annonçait une « cérémonie interconfessionnelle à Prestwich Place [sic] » pour « consacrer » un nouvel ossuaire dont la construction venait de s'achever dans le district central des affaires du Cap. L'annonce plaçait l'Ossuaire à côté d'autres initiatives et événements organisés en partenariat, telles que le *Harvest Festival*, l'initiative *Creative Cape Town* et la modernisation de la Gare du Cap et la Grande Parade gérés par le Partenariat et le *City Improvement District*. La construction de l'Ossuaire visait à commémorer et à clore les contestations soulevées par la réapparition de lieux de sépulture dans la ville notée depuis 2004 au Cap. Présenté comme un « partenariat réussi » entre le Prestwich Place Project Committee, la Ville du Cap, la South African Heritage Resources Agency, le District Six Museum and Heritage Western Cape, cet acte symbolique de clôture a été salué comme une percée en ce qui concerne la pratique en matière de patrimoine, de la part des praticiens, tout comme des autorités municipales. Dans cet article, nous visitons l'espace de l'Ossuaire et l'exposition qui y est associée dans la ville, et nous réfléchissons sur la relation entre l'espace de vie et l'espace d'inhumation au Cap. Suivant le parcours officiel de l'exposition, nous marquons un temps d'arrêt pour joindre nos propres notes – une série d'interventions morcelées qui troublent la surface lisse du confinement. Nous mettons à profit l'expérience de la marche pour réfléchir sur l'architecture de la clôture.

In 2007, the City of Cape Town completed a new public building on a small triangle of land in an area of the city called Green Point. This low stone and brick structure is an ossuary, an architect designed space for the storage and memorialization of the skeletal remains of over 2,000 dead who had been discovered and exhumed from a nearby site during the construction of a new luxury apartment block.

For the city, this building represents the resolution of a crisis and the end of a story. It represents closure. Yet this very emphasis on closure suggests that the discovery of the bones opened up something disturbing – an aspect of the city's past which troubles the way in which it frames its future and constructs its identity.

What the discovery of the bones opened up was conflict. Not simply conflict over what to do with the bones but, more seriously, conflict over what it means to inhabit the city, what it means to be a member of a local geographically-defined public and what it means to be a citizen of the new post-apartheid nation. This article traces some of the dimensions of this conflict and how the building in its design and its detailing attempts to act as a compromise and a solution to certain social questions. These questions relate to the formation of the post-apartheid public sphere.

In his paper 'The Public Sphere in 21st Century Africa: Broadening the Horizons of Democratization', Abdul Raufu Mustapha draws attention to an important aspect of Nancy Fraser's revision of Habermas' notion of the public sphere. He writes:

The import of Fraser's criticism is that there was never a *single* public sphere built on rationality, consensus, and accessibility as Habermas presupposes, but a *multiplicity* of public spheres and counterpublics, built on conflict, contestation, and the containment of 'awkward' classes and groups and their preferred modes of cultural and political expression (Mustapha 2008:4).

What the controversy generated by the discovery of the bones made explicit was the inadequacy of the conception of the post-apartheid public sphere as a single, homogeneous and inclusive discursive space. Instead, the possibility offered by the discovery of the bones to tell new stories about the city was severely curtailed by an anxiety about the 'awkward' class who chose to represent them and who refused to accept the logic of the dominant public sphere of the city. In the discussions which took place after the discovery of the bones, the discourse of development and public good was evoked as a justification for the exhumation of the bones. Yet, as is frequently the case with disputes over bones and the proper use of land in which they have been interred, this appeal to the public good was accompanied by privatisation and the reduction of individual access to a place which potentially held special historical and spiritual significance. Exhumations in the name of development have occurred worldwide and have generated a range of local resistances aimed at limiting public authorities' power to determine the reconfiguration of cities. Within the context of the extension of global capitalism in South Africa, these interventions have proved in some ways minor irritations, yet they have drawn attention to the power of the dead to mobilise a range of different publics in the post-apartheid public sphere.

Life Space and Burial Space in the Public sphere

In her influential paper, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', Nancy Fraser revisits the argument presented by Jurgen Habermas on the 'bourgeois public sphere' (Fraser 1993:518). The public sphere, she claims, is as an area in social life where people can come together and freely discuss and identify societal problems and through these discussions influence political action (Fraser, 1993: 519).

'According to Habermas,' Fraser explains, 'the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest"' (Fraser 1993:521). The public sphere in this formulation is regarded as a mediator between the 'private sphere' and

the 'sphere of public authority' where the private sphere is civil society and the sphere of public authority is the state and the ruling class (Fraser 1993:521). Habermas suggests three institutional criteria that are precondition for the emergence of the new public sphere – a disregard for status, the domain of common concern, and inclusivity (Habermas 1962). Habermas' work proposes that there exists a single public sphere and this public sphere is open and free, accessible to everyone, without regard to class, gender or race.

Fraser looks at the idea of hegemonic dominance and exclusion and argues that there were always a number of significant exclusions. The bourgeois public sphere in fact discriminated against women and lower social strata of society. The bourgeois coffee houses and clubs of the eighteenth century were hardly places of the free exchange of discourse between equals as they were not accessible to everyone. For Fraser, what is at stake is not so much the public sphere as a space of free discursive exchange but rather how closely stratified publics are tied to institutions of decision-making.

Writing about the position of women in Habermas' conception of the public sphere, Fraser argues that: 'the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public's claim to be *the* public. The bourgeois public was never *the* public' (Fraser 1993:522-3). In fact, the opposite was the case. Fraser notes that: '...virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counter-publics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics and working-class publics' (Fraser 1993:523).

Fraser's idea of 'significant exclusions' is useful when applied to Cape Town's recent disputes over burial grounds. For heritage managers and other professionals the presence of bones and their associated symbolism of material remnants were reminders of colonial violence in the city. For a liberal public sphere as Habermas conceived it, this uneasy presence disrupted ideas of a more romantic colonial history of public space-making, in which Cape Town's quaint and nostalgic buildings and early settlements have been celebrated as 'heritage'. For those whose histories are more precisely linked to histories of dispossession and displacement in the colonial city, the bones confirmed the presence of another competing, repressed public sphere – a counter-public.

For Fraser 'the problem is not only that Habermas idealises the liberal public sphere but also that he fails to examine other, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres. Or rather it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealising the

liberal public sphere” (Fraser 1993:522). The exclusions and conflicts that emerge though what Fraser terms ‘a revisionist view’ of Habermas’ conception constitute a ‘gestalt switch that alters the very meaning of the public sphere’ (Fraser 1993:523).

It is now widely accepted that the colonial powers and the apartheid state aspired to hegemonic dominance and exclusion. Control was exercised subtly through cultural means as well as forcefully. Political and economic power rested on a mixture of consent and coercion. Fraser asserts that ‘we can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealised utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule’ (Fraser 1993:523). The public sphere was really a way for bourgeois men to see themselves as ‘a ‘universal class’ and to assert their fitness to govern (Fraser 1993:114). In post-apartheid South Africa, there is an acute awareness of extremely exclusive and limited nature of the inherited public sphere. Mustapha notes that the Parliament itself has drawn attention to the fact that ‘there are “two South Africas”, one well resourced and the other poor and marginalized’ (Mustapha 2008:6). Yet while this conception recognizes the importance of inherited inequalities in limiting access to the public sphere, it does not adequately acknowledge the more subtle exclusions which determine both what and in what way various concerns might enter the public sphere.

A number of recent disputes concerning burial grounds can be used to illustrate the subtle way in which exclusion and marginalisation operate at the level of the city. A recent issue of the *Journal for Islamic Studies* documents a dispute that occurred between an Anglican Church School, St Cyprian’s, and a diverse group opposing the school’s proposed development of a portion of land believed possibly to contain burial sites of Muslim followers of Sayyid Abdul Malik. What this dispute revealed was the fact that while Muslims were not formally excluded from the public sphere, the discursive practices of the structures designed to mediate issues relating to city development could not accommodate a public which resisted bracketing off not only its religious and cultural identity but also its history. Abdulkader Tayob explains that: ‘Muslims were not necessarily unique in their experience of marginalization in the apartheid city in particular, and the colonial city in general. Nevertheless, the particular role and meaning of a Muslim public cannot be dissociated from this marginal history and location. In terms of sheer numeral representation, and a history of marginalization through slavery, colonialism and apartheid, the Muslim public engaged the public from a weaker position’ (Tayob 2004/5:82). If, as Fraser contends, the bourgeois conception of the public sphere requires a bracketing of inequalities of status, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of the dominant groups in

society and the disadvantage of subordinates. As Fraser points out, 'social inequalities among the interlocutors' which are merely bracketed and not eliminated continue to affect the way in which both individuals and groups are able to assert their opinions within the public sphere (Fraser 1993:524).

As material sites which are both private, personal and emotionally-charged and public, institutionalized and part of the planned space of the city, burial grounds present an interesting challenge to the discursive space of the public sphere. They are public spaces, domains of common concern, yet their purpose and significance is simultaneously public and private. In post-apartheid South Africa, many burial places have become incorporated into heritage and tourist initiatives. Freedom Routes and memorials to struggle heroes, for example, have been constructed around and between grave sites, where visitor publics are taken as part of the tourist experience. At the same time, a different type of figuring of heritage has emerged through the need to address and acknowledge histories of colonial violence and trauma that certain burial spaces represent. Public space, we suggest, enters into considerations of public spheres in concrete ways as well as through the public imagination.

Private Property and Public Space

One of the things that emerge in disputes over burial sites is the conflictual nature of the relationship between private property and public space in the reconfiguring of the city of Cape Town in post-apartheid South Africa. This ossuary, named the New Prestwich Memorial Building, provides a useful focus for addressing some of the complex ways in which 'human remains' emerge as one of the loci for the public expression of resistance to a globalising developer-driven property market in post-apartheid South Africa. The bones to be housed in this ossuary, though themselves mute, have set in motion an ongoing and frequently hostile set of conversations in which the new dimensions of South Africa's public sphere are being negotiated.

Our reading of the New Prestwich Memorial Building sees it as a surface within the city of Cape Town that requires decoding.³ It was built to make material reparation for the city's 'emergency exhumation', before public consultation, of skeletal remains from a building site in Green Point. The area of Green Point, previously known as District One, is adjacent to the city centre. During the 1960s, District One was one of the sites in which forced removals took place as part of implementation of the apartheid Group Areas Act. The small residential dwellings were replaced with light industrial structures, predominantly warehouses. In the post-apartheid period, the prime location of this site close to the redeveloped Waterfront and the city centre has meant that it has become a desirable neighbourhood for shops,

restaurants and luxury accommodation (Murray 2004/5:55). The bones, variously reported to number in the thousands, were discovered during the building of a luxury new apartment block called The Rockwell and became the centre of an immense city-wide dispute.⁴

These unnamed and unmarked dead became the tangible signs of the city's displacement of so many others, both living and dead. They highlighted the city's sedimentation in an unreconstructed colonial past and its fantasized participation in a global future. They came to stand for everything which is overlooked, hidden, elided and displaced in the construction of the new global tourist city of Cape Town.⁵

The 'Ossuary' at the New Prestwich Memorial

Like almost all public memorials, The New Prestwich Memorial Building contains a guide in the form of an exhibition of images and texts. In these, the building is described as an Interpretative Centre. The exhibition includes a series of displays that describe the history of the area. These contain maps, provide quotations from archival sources, offer information about early plans and developments in the city, and describe from archival sources everyday life in District One (Malan 2004/5:28). The exhibition also includes a board describing the history of the dispute itself.

The exhibition, following the genre of such guides, manages the experience of the space. It consigns the bones respectfully but decisively to the realm of heritage. Our investigation of the ossuary emerges out of our own deliberate attempt to engage with the site as a landscape in history – incomplete, troubling and under construction. Remembering the texts written about the dispute, conversations heard and overheard, television, newspaper and magazine coverage, colloquia we had attended, we walked from the now completed though not fully occupied Rockwell across the road and down three blocks to the site of the Ossuary and we noted the elements in the visual landscape that alerted us to the work being done by this combination of material substances and design. We attempted to read what the building was saying, what it was concealing and how it interacted with the city surrounding it. We reflected on what role it was performing and to what extent was it closing down public debate through the structuring of public space.

Our article is imagined not as a systematic analysis of the site or an exhaustive survey of the issues relating to heritage, transformation and the city that the events surrounding the bones made visible. Instead, we consider the ossuary as a material intervention within the imaginary space of the public sphere. In its physical structure, its genre, its formal interpretation of space, the building suggests a particular mode of imagining the social configuration of the city.

Our argument in the following sections of this article is structured around six concepts – words, images or phrases – that we found at the site, part of the written text through which the official guide directs the visitor's interpretation of the landscape. These words, images and phrases appeared to us to mark moments of intense symbolisation, signifiers in which the ideological work of the architect and the authors of the exhibition became most visible. They represent points of entry into this heavily symbolically overlaid landscape.⁶ Removed from their comfortable position in various disciplinary modes of description, these words become interpretative devices through which it might be possible to open up cracks in the surface not only of the memorial itself but also of the city as a whole (Shepherd and Ernsten 2007:221). They are: Gateway; Engraved Palimpsest; Mirrors; Visitors' Book; Rock, Brick, Concrete; and Closed.⁷ Through exploring these concepts, we suggest, that public space has become a new arena in which negotiations about the post-apartheid public sphere are taking place.

Gateways and the Promise of the Public Sphere

In the period post-1994, municipalities, much like many other institutions in South African cities, have been through a period of transformation, focusing on 'restructuring'. New urban policies have been drafted aimed at enabling local authorities to govern cities in a more equitable manner (Parnell 2007). However, these local authorities have been slow to implement new policies. In Cape Town, in particular, a city wracked by political infighting and changes in governance, the period of transformation has seen city management in disarray. It is within this context that applications were made by a developer to build new luxury apartments in Prestwich Street, in the fast gentrifying area of Green Point. The official in charge of 'heritage' signed a demolition order for a warehouse in an area that was well known to archaeologists and historians to contain sites of burial (Shepherd and Ernsten 2007:216).

The ensuing public dispute over the proposed development at Prestwich Street therefore started with a legal claim by the developer against the city over the granting of this demolition order (Malan 2003). The impact of the exposure of the bones in the media, followed by the public participation process required by the South African Heritage Agency, provoked the formation of a group of activists motivating around the slogan of 'Hands off Prestwich Street'. Throughout the more visible process of dispute in which Hands Off Prestwich Street Group became vocal about the 'bones' of Prestwich Street, another battle was being fought over the property rights of the developer against the city council, which the developer ultimately won after a lengthy process of appeal (Shepherd and Ernsten 2007:220-221). The Prestwich Memorial was ultimately built, as an 'act of conciliation',

on a small piece of land nearby which belonged to the City Council. The awkward triangular piece of ground (which contains an electrical sub-station, around which the memorial is built) has been reconceptualised as a 'Gateway' (Prestwich Memorial 2007:exhibit).

In the display devoted to the building itself, the architect, Lucien Le Grange, uses this term to describe the building. He writes 'Perceived as a series of walls into which – and behind which – the recovered skeletal remains are stored, the building constitutes a strong edge along Somerset road and, in so doing, defines a 'gateway' into the Green Point precinct (Le Grange 2007:exhibit).' Reading this allows the great black grid-work that covers the large sliding doors at the front and the rear and even the side of the building to come into focus. Not only does this provide the building with impressive if perhaps somewhat unnecessary security, it also signifies a gate.

On our visit we entered through a small side entrance concealed behind a small brick extension. In order to enter, our guide had to shift slightly a pile of things belonging to the workers who are currently maintaining the grounds. They had placed their things here because it appeared so secluded, so out of the way of general traffic. Once inside the structure became even clearer. If all three sliding doors and grid-work frames were slid back it would be possible for a small crowd to walk through the building, in one end and out the other. In one of the displays, 'About the exhibition', the openness of this space is emphasised (Prestwich Memorial 2007:exhibit). The displays currently situated in the space between the doors are described as temporary, able to be moved aside if the occasion demands it. The building makes itself available for symbolic ritual in the abstract by maintaining a degree of blankness, a certain, careful neutrality.

Yet what would be the significance of passing through this 'Gateway'? What is the significance of a gate which is not attached to a wall or an impassable boundary of some kind? Does the presence of the gateway imply a boundary, invisible possibly but one which the city wishes to map, mark and control. A gateway implies an invitation to enter, an opening. The imagined gateway created by the ossuary building invites in the public. But it does this in a particular way. Like the imagined public sphere in which the class, race and gender of participants are 'bracketed off', the public space created by the ossuary brackets off the differences of those who come to visit it. As a public space, it constructs a notion of the public not as undifferentiated but as composed of members who can leave those differences behind as they enter the studiously neutral and modern space of the exhibition area.

The idea of gateways in current planning discourses in Cape Town perhaps also seeks to express nostalgia for a different, older ordering of space, as defined by the colonial city, neatly bounded between the outer streets of

Buitengracht and Buitenkant Streets. It suggests a city on a different scale, designed for pedestrian mobility not the standardised road system of the motor vehicle. The reinscribing of 'gateways' in the city suggests the desire to express the existence of variation within the city, of non-homogeneous space, a sense of passage through from one space to another. In the case of the Prestwich Memorial space, the transition from the 'old city' to Green Point is not clear as both are irrevocably marked by a landscape of modernity with high-rise buildings forming a continuity that defies this neat distinction which might have been there once.

Once inside the building, on the left and the right, outside of this public space, the bones are housed. Peering through another low, black grid structure we see only concrete shelves. No boxes are visible. Le Grange describes the space in this way: 'The storage area – or ossuary – is made up of linear spaces which ramp down into the earth and include timber shelving system for the storage of some 4500 boxes of skeletal remains' (Orange Kloof CID publicity 2008).

This functional storage space invites contrast with more traditional modes of housing the dead. Graves, mausoleums, cemeteries are traditionally sites of aesthetic excess: elaborately carved gravestones, mosaic tiles of startling blue, colour, cloth, flowers, beauty and transience, alongside the enduring memorialisation of marble or stone. This functional modern space does not invite a personal response. There is no room for flowers, candles or incense or for small personal rituals of symbolic remembrance.⁸ Despite its apparent openness, it is formal space. The bones are to be locked away from the prying eyes of academics but also away from the public. The public here as a category includes both those who have identified them as ancestors whether actual or symbolic (Gosling 2005:6) and those who as tourists or visitors might simply be passing through. The space imposes a certain uniformity on the relation between those entering the space and the bones housed within it. No one, entering as a member of the public, is given special status in relation to the bones. In the formal arrangement of space, everyone encounters them in the same way.

The gateway is one prominent structural metaphor used by the architect, but it is not the only one. If in one sense the building is the marker of a boundary, in another it is a rewriting of space, or a writing over of space, what Le Grange describes as an 'engraved palimpsest' (Le Grange 2007:exhibit).

'Engraved Palimpsest' as Metaphor for Overlaying Meaning in the Making of Public Space

The term palimpsest has been used twice in relation to the Prestwich case. First to describe the site by academics Nick Shepherd and Christian Ernsten, and again by Lucien Le Grange, the architect who designed the Prestwich Memorial (Shepherd and Ernsten 2007:215; Le Grange 2007:exhibit). Reading the architect's panel in the exhibition, he refers to using the notion of an 'engraved palimpsest' as a conceptual starting point for the design of the building.

The metaphor of the engraved palimpsest seemed to have special significance for this site but, on reflection, it became clear that this concept has been used in two different senses. In Shepherd and Ernsten's paper in 'Desire Lines, Space Memory and Identity in the Postapartheid City', they appear to be using the word in reference to the notion of a manuscript which has been overwritten, where previous layers have been rubbed off to make room for the present text, but that markings or traces remain of the earlier wording (Shepherd and Ernsten 2007:215). This analogy of cities constructed through layering and overlays enables their interpretation of the archaeology of the site.

In the architect's reference to the term he alludes to an 'engraved palimpsest', invoking another meaning, where a brass plate can be termed a palimpsest, with a new inscription written on the reverse side of a previously engraved plate.⁹ The distinction may be subtle and both are useful tools for analogy but there are pointed differences. In the first sense, the notion of overlaying and overwriting allows for a reading of the site that does not preclude previous writings, although these may be faded and obscured by the current text which is dominant and immediately legible. In the second sense, the notion appears to imply the reversal and perhaps the denial from sight of the previous insertion, as a new message is engraved onto the landscape.

What does this say about disciplinary approaches to engagement with sites of memory and memorialisation? Archaeologists and architects are two of the major sets of professional and disciplinary players who work formally with heritage in contemporary South African cities (as opposed to, for instance, poets and artists). They are both often charged with tasks beyond their disciplinary boundaries – wh10¹⁰ – architects are often placed in the position of interpreters of places, and asked to do much more than build buildings (Murray 2006:5). This extension of the role of the 'expert' has a particular effect on the way knowledge and opinion circulates within the public sphere. In a subtle way, specialized knowledge of one field has

given certain members of the public authority to make statements and reorientate discussions within the public sphere even beyond the range of their disciplinary knowledge.¹¹

What emerges at the Prestwich Memorial (rather than on site) is an authoritative interpretation which has turned the metaphorical brass plate around and attempts to inscribe or 'engrave' new sets of interpretation into the fabric of the city.¹² Perhaps it is at this level that the building reflects an architecture of closure, and has become seemingly impossible for people to accept, despite the architect's best intentions?

Mirrors: Imperfect and Distorted Reflections of the City's Publics

As with many modernist buildings, the idea dominates.¹³ The building is a very authoritative gesture. It takes control of the bones, the public, and the symbolism. It leaves nothing to chance. It does this in part with mirrors. In place of windows, the building has polished bronzed mirrors. Approaching the locked structure to look inside, you are instead confronted with your own image. This is not without a certain everyday usefulness. At least two passers-by paused, as we approached, to consult their own reflection in these surfaces. Yet, at the same time, it contributes to the impression given by the building that it is fully defended. It is not possible to see inside, to catch a glimpse of the interior.

The inconclusiveness and polarity of the public debate that resulted in the Ossuary project is also evident in the making of the exhibition, the building and its associated public space. The polished and new quality of the building, its gardens and the exhibition conceals the breakdown in the partnership set up to guide the composition of its contents and form. According to Bonnita Bennet and the Prestwich Committee, the City of Cape Town – beset with its own fractious political rivalry with the Provincial Government – went ahead without consulting its partners and produced the exhibition.¹⁴

Le Grange notes that: 'Within selected openings in this wall, mirrored glass windows (which in time will be engraved with names and inscriptions) have been introduced to allow for moments of (literal and figurative) reflection by passers-by.'¹⁵ The building itself is designed to induce reflection. The word performs the useful operation of blurring the distinction between two very different ideas: one, the literal reflection of an image and two, the notion of intellectual reflection, of thinking something over. The two do not necessarily go together. In fact seeing your own image as you approach the building operates less to induct you into the landscape of the dead than to remind you that the building has not forgotten you. It has its eye on you and is watching you pass.

Ultimately, these mirrors will be literal representations of the 'engraved palimpsest', a surface which will be written over with names and inscriptions. The effect will be a superimposition of enduring writing on the transient image of the passer-by. Yet these surfaces remain blank, suggesting a hesitation in making this enduring statement of purpose. What names and inscriptions can legitimately overlay all passers-by; can be written on the public of the city as a whole? The mirrors reflect individuals approaching or leaving the building and, in doing this, both reveal and conceal something about the nature of the public. They reveal the multiplicity of individuals who might be hailed by the building as members of its public. They miss the fact that these individuals are not all equally available to be addressed in this particular way. The city is composed of multiple publics whose members articulate their sense of belonging in different ways.¹⁶ The building which through its mirrors accosts all passersby equally cannot account for individuals who already belong to a public or counter public, who are no longer simply individuals. It cannot identify who might be drawn from contemplating her own reflection to reflecting and who might make the transition from passer-by to visitor?

The Visitors' Book: Recording and Knowing in the Making of a Museum

Inside the Ossuary building there is a large, thick leather bound book which is a record of visitors to the Ossuary. It is perhaps the most material artefact in the space, perched in the dark unlit space of the empty reception desk, surrounded by old bits of take-away food – a plastic spoon, some polystyrene containers and plastic wrappers – somehow juxtaposing (after Lefebvre) the lived space with the formal aspirations of recording the building's own history of visitors to the place.¹⁷ The book is designed in a traditional way, reminiscent of those found in the halls of country houses of wealthy landed gentry, which is in direct contrast to the clean modern lines of the building and the installation which houses the exhibition in its main space. It is a curiosity that invites scrutiny.

Yet, somehow, it is also a point of tension. The caretaker who lets visitors into the building via a back service entrance – 'until the building is formally opened' – insists anxiously that you have to sign the book if you wish to view the exhibition beyond. We were drawn to paging through the book, curiously in search of who had been there before us, and of who course who had not. The newness and relative emptiness of the book, juxtaposed against its thickness, suggests a slippage between aspirations for the space and actual visitation. Most of the entries were recorded at two official events, accompanied by a few random visits by members of the

public with an interest in the space such as ourselves, an archaeologist, museum practitioners, academics and the like.¹⁸ The visitors' book emphasises that people entering this space do not own it. They are temporary and transient. Invited to enter this public space as guests, they are at the same time reminded of their status. The book with its conventional format – name, address and small additional space for comment – is a request for engagement but the genre permits only engagement of a particular kind. The narrow column in the book reflects the narrow parameters within which engagement is encouraged in this space.

In the absence of any institutional management of the space, the visitors book becomes a sort of awkward anti-symbol – it is a material form of recording the presence of its public but it is also perhaps an attempt at knowing – knowing in the absence of remembering, as there is no one there to receive memory.

Rock, Stone, Brick, Concrete: Material Investments and Symbolic Value

The building is designed to emphasise authenticity not sacredness. In order to indicate that the space departs from the everyday world of the street, the architects have marked the landscape with a rock at the furthest point of this landscape and at two other points, creating a triangular frame for the building itself. The rock, a piece of Malmesbury Shale Stone, serves the purpose of indicating but not being an enduring ground for inscription. It is not a headstone, yet it makes a subtle allusion to the tradition of headstones. The building itself is built partly from stock bricks and partly from the same stone. Le Grange explains that: 'The external stock brick walls which have an outer skin of Malmesbury Shale stone, retrieved and quarried from the excavations in the V&A waterfront, resonate with the way cemetery boundary walls were built in the past.'¹⁹ The building material itself is invested with symbolic value.

In describing the work of an architect who restores for himself an old farmhouse on 'Ile de France', Jean Baudrillard comments on this modern fascination with the old and the 'authentic'. The architect, in rebuilding his 'ruin' uses some old stones and tiles from the original house in order to invest the new with 'symbolic foundations'.

Baudrillard writes: 'Rather as a church does not become a genuinely sacred place until a few bones or relics have been enshrined in it, so this architect cannot feel at home (in the strongest sense: he cannot thoroughly rid himself of a particular kind of anxiety) until he can sense the infinitesimal yet sublime presence within his brand new walls of an old stone that bears witness to past generations.'²⁰

In a similar way, the architect of the Ossuary appears to feel a kind of anxiety associated with the modernity of the building. Tradition and history, disassociated from any particular tradition or particular history, are accorded a place through the presence of the stones themselves, mute witnesses to some abstract yet symbolically valuable past. The use of stone excavated from the site of the Waterfront invests this modern structure with authentic value and makes an apparently material connection with the past. It suggests continuity, distracting attention away from the awkward fact that this is precisely what the unexpected discovery of the bones gives lie to. The city (as opposed to particular communities within the city) with its innumerable displacements has no 'authentic' public, no continuity, no tradition it is able to draw on to house these bones. Instead, the parts must make up for the lack in the whole. The stones are called upon to bear witness to past generations, but they do so discretely and tastefully. In fact they are so in keeping with the dominant aesthetic of 'naturalness', antiquing and authenticity, that it is barely possible to distinguish the Ossuary building from some others in the gradually gentrifying District One, where new buildings often gesture to the industrial aesthetics of their predecessors.²¹

Leaving, we are mistaken for tourists by some street people who have been congregating in the space between the ossuary and the church, not quite on Ossuary grounds. They greet us most politely: 'Welcome to the Mother, the most beautiful city in the whole world.' What marks us as tourists – our interest in this 'interpretative centre', our camera, our whiteness?

Closed: The End of the Dispute?

Although some heritage practitioners have claimed that the ossuary has brought 'closure' to the dispute over the final resting place of the bones, the building itself seems to reflect an anxious attempt to mediate between openness and inclusivity and formality, closure and exclusivity.²² It is in one sense a literal bracketing off of the city, a formal statement of the limits of the city's willingness to engage with divergent interests of the multiple publics which inhabit its streets and suburbs. Yet the completion of the building has not ended the dispute which continues to haunt [sic] the city. Despite the confident claims of institutional collaboration made in the exhibition text, the building project for the Prestwich Memorial has become the central object of another unresolved argument over the custodianship of the bones that were disturbed and eventually exhumed out of sight for the Rockwell to be built.²³

What appears to be at play here is no longer simply the tensions between the profit-driven desires of private development and the 'communities of memory' of those dispossessed in Cape Town, but rather the constitution

through conflict of the domain and parameters of the post-apartheid public sphere. If in this case the confident methods of conventional heritage practice and modes of interpretation have overwritten the more open discourses of interpretation advocated by the Prestwich Committee and the District Six Museum, what has also been established is the strength and durability of counter publics.²⁴ The building and its associated exhibition that were intended to unlock the historical tensions and bring closure to the trauma and argument have perhaps simply concretised the dispute.

The case of the Prestwich development and the subsequent exhumations have, however, occasioned the production of new knowledges in post-apartheid Cape Town, through which not only heritage practice but the established scientific and historical epistemologies of the colonial and post-apartheid city are beginning to be rewritten.²⁵ It has also given rise to new projects which seek to re-imagine the city and to consciously formulate publics which do not permit the continued dominance of the categories of apartheid.²⁶

In preparing to write this article we performed the role of visitor but also observed this performance. We both were and were not the readers to whom the exhibition was addressed. In refusing to be the ideal readers, in choosing instead perversely to pay close attention to the way in which the ossuary understood and described itself and to juxtapose the highly organised public space created with the complex unruly history, we sought to trouble the narrative closure promised by the Interpretative Centre. Instead, we have looked away from the bones at the landscape of the dead constructed to administer them. As Crain Soudien has suggested: ‘...the establishment of the ossuary building to house the bones of people whose names we will never know, is an incomplete culmination, a failed conclusion, and a lost opportunity for reimagining Cape Town’.²⁷

The solidity of the rock and brick structure conceals a strangely fissured edifice – one which struggles to assert its moral authority in the face of the intense skepticism of the interested public.

NB

Since our visit to the Prestwich Memorial in early 2009, new developments have taken place at the site as part of Cape Town’s 2010 FIFA World Cup initiative. The contested memorial space, which happened to be situated along the fan walk, has been reinvented as a commercial venture, in which a local coffee trader has established a brand name coffee shop named TRUTH. The bones, subordinated to economic logic, become the relics which add authenticity and uniqueness to the business of coffee, the name reflecting the hyperbolic claims of consumption to incorporate everything, even the dead.

Notes

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2. Fraser, p.61.
3. For example, Abdulkader Tayob focuses most directly on the St Cyprian's dispute, analysing the different layers of meaning and misunderstandings which emerge as a Muslim public enters and contests the post-apartheid public sphere (Tayob, A, 2004/05) 'Muslim Public Claiming Heritage in Post-Apartheid Cape Town', in *Journal for Islamic Studies*, Special Edition: Burial Grounds: Sacred Sites and Heritage in Post-Apartheid Cape Town, Vol24 & 25, 78-104.
4. Gosling 2005. Bailey, 2005: 6. Staff Reporter, 2005: 5 refer.
5. Jonker 2005: 7.
6. For an earlier version of this argument, see Green, L. and Murray, N., 2009 'Notes for a Guide to the Ossuary', in *African Studies*, 68, 3 December 2009, pp. 370- 386.
7. For a detailed discussion of the history of the dispute, see Shepherd and Ernsten 2007: 216-221.
8. Baderoon G. 2004. The underside of the picturesque: meanings of Muslim burial in Cape Town, South Africa. *Arab World Geographer* 7. 4 (winter).
9. Le Grange 2007: exhibit.
10. This has been discussed at length by Legassick and Rassool, 2000, and in relation to Prestwich Street in particular by Shepherd and Ernsten, 2007: 215-231.
11. See, for instance, the discussion in Hall, M., forthcoming 2009.
12. Le Grange 2007: exhibit.
13. Bryant 2004: 73.
14. Bonita Bennett, Director of the District Six Museum and Prestwich Committee member, Comments Centre for African Studies Colloquium, September 2007.
15. Le Grange 2007: exhibit.
16. See, for instance, the discussion by Ababe Zegeye about the way in which various groups perceive their relation to the state in post-apartheid South Africa: 'While the middle class has become more conscious of their shared 'South African' nationality, 'class, ethnic, gender, generational, religious, neighbourhood and political identifications all increased by significant proportions' between 1997 and 1999 especially among African and coloured respondents' (Zegeye, quoted in Mustapha 2008, 6).
17. Lefebvre 1996:38.
18. Orange Kloof CID publicity, 2008.

19. Le Grange 2007: exhibit.
20. Baudrillard 2005: 82.
21. Green and Murray 2004/5: 11, 16.
22. Perscom between heritage practitioner Andrew Bermann and Prestwich committee member Rev Terry Lester, UCT 2007.
23. www.therockwell.co.za, site accessed 11h00 26 August 2008.
24. Bonita Bennett, Director of the District Six Museum and Prestwich Committee member, Comments Centre for African Studies Colloquium, September 2007.
25. Amongst others Jonker 2005; Shepherd 2007; Shepherd and Eernsten 2007; Malan 2004/5; Green and Murray 2004/5; Weeder 2006; Henri, Y and Grunebaum H, 2004.
26. Crain Soudien, in describing projects developed by the District Six Museum around the Prestwich Street dispute, suggests that: 'solidarity with the dead of Prestwich Street took District Sixers and the Museum into the mysteries of the past significantly beyond their comprehension. It required them to think of solidarity in ways that extended their own identities beyond the limits of their apartheid and postapartheid past.' (2008: 29).
27. Crain Soudien Stakeholder meeting to discuss the Rustenburg Burial Ground, UCT, 30 May 2009.

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