ENCOUNTERS IN THE DISTRICT SIX MUSEUM

I invite you to observe some of the encounters in the District Six Museum. Some of them might excite you, others might sadden you, some might even puzzle you, but hopefully all of them will make you pause to reflect on what they mean, and invite you to be part of its story and journey. As you observe some of the encounters, you are seated on a bench marked ‘Whites Only’ and you are aware of its alienating strangeness in this intimate context - a throwback to an earlier troubled time in South Africa. You already feel as if you have entered its story.

From the bench your eye is drawn towards the entrance, across the map which covers the main floor of the Museum. It is a quietly powerful centrepiece that authoritatively draws people towards itself. Its faded façade belies its ability to command attention. You observe an elderly couple enter the Museum. They are on their knees on the map, scrutinising the street names as they try to locate the site where their family home was situated before it was destroyed. The woman jumps to her feet and does a spontaneous dance of joy, celebrating the fact that they have found it. The man quietly marks the spot and remains kneeling, lost in thought and possibly in another time.

You recall reading about this map before you came to visit the Museum. You recall that it had been one of the instruments which supported the land restitution process enabled by the Land Restitution Act of 1995. You recall that this was described as a space where claimants met each other, and between reminiscences, were able to verify for each other that they had indeed lived in the area before destruction. You imagine that it must have been a strange feeling, to have the reality of your existence in a particular time and place, verified by others. From the time that the map was laid down, people came to mark their family homes, filled in roads travelled and routes followed; filled in missing buildings and place-markers, their old haunts. No wonder the map seems so worn: thousands of feet must have walked its streets over the seventeen years since its been on the floor. Seventeen year! It was intended to be a way of calling people together for two or three months and seventeen years later it’s still there.

A rowdy group of schoolchildren wearing tags identifying them as ‘white’, ‘coloured’, ‘black’ and ‘Indian’ whizz around the building trying to find information for a project they are working on. They are lost in the task assigned to them and oblivious to the
quizzical stares from visitors. It is clear that they are involved in a role play in which the tags which they have been given, identifies them according to superficial racial classification- a feature of South Africa’s past.

You reflect on the effectiveness of this learning strategy, of creating scenarios for the students to learn through immersing themselves into the ‘shoes of others’. Through this they get to experience the implications of their labels and they explore the need to protest against the classification and to act in solidarity with others beyond their assigned bounded identities in order to effect change. What better way to learn than through immersion.

As they leave, another group of young children arrive. They enter curiously, quietly, seeking out any ‘on’ buttons that will give them access to instant entertainment. They are bustled along to the centre of the map and as they do so they glance towards this curious ‘Whites Only’ bench, not understanding what it could mean. They settle down as the voice of the ex-resident storyteller begins to take them on a journey into his own experience of displacement. He tells them his well-known pigeon story which gives an account of how his homing pigeons did not return to the new home from which they (the pigeons) had been sent. This new home was located in one of the areas created for a specific racial group after the community in which they had lived for generations was bulldozed. Poignantly, the birds return to the destroyed location which they had known as their home. The children are rapt as they reflect on the sense of loss, confusion and displacement of the pigeons. Their senses have been activated; their empathies are with the displaced. You get the sense that, as they leave the building and pass the ‘Whites Only’ sign on the bench on which you are seated, that their glances reveal greater understanding.

Another scenario seems to be emerging as a fair-sized group enters the Museum. They gather on the map and invite all visitors to join them. They identify themselves as ex-residents from the area known as District Six before it was destroyed. As they stand on the map, reminiscences flow freely and the landmarks below their feet serve as evocative markers which recall the past. You get the sense that they might have done this many times before because there is an element of ritual that colours the storytelling, but you are not sure because it feels vibrant, fresh and new. You gather that they have come together to commemorate a day which has special significance for the diasporic community: the day many years ago when the Group Areas Act declared their homes as being set aside for a different racial group. Some remember the day that they received word that they would have to leave; others recall the sad moments as they packed up their belongings; others reflect on the resilience of the dispersed community and call on all present to celebrate the fact that they have a place of memory, that the Land Restitution Act makes it possible for them to return, and that they are able to critique a painful past. Someone seems to have prepared a
leafless-tree planted in a large pot. This is now brought to the centre and participants are invited to call into the present those who had an impact on their lives in the community, to write messages to them on tags and to peg them to the tree. Wonderful singing and some dancing accompanies this act and the result is a lively looking tree which appears to have had its leaves restored. It is moved to a central spot on the map where its presence cannot be ignored, inviting those who were not there to see its animation to ask questions about its origin and purpose.

You see the group now move towards the door, leaving the building and you leave your vantage point on the bench to follow them as a marching band meets them on the street. A few words are spoken about the walk of remembrance that you are about to encounter and the group proceeds, led by the band, stopping at a number of landmarks to listen to a story, a poem, a song, a re-enactment. You observe that the lines between audience and presenters are wonderfully blurred, and although you know that this is not a spontaneous event, it seems to evolve organically. At different times the interaction is led by various people: it is as if they being prompted by invisible cue-cards. Possibly that’s true – the cues being embedded in the built environment, sometimes in remnant traces and other times in their absence.

The final point is a cairn of stones, which to the eye unfamiliar to the landscape, seems to be in the middle of nowhere. You realise that the stones you had noticed in the hands of some have a very carefully considered purpose: they have been brought from the areas which the displaced people of the District now call ‘home’; they are being placed on the pile of stones as an act of memorialisation on the landscape which in their hearts will always be home, even for those who will not be moving back. Some of the stones have been inscribed with messages from the heart; others are placed down as blanks.

You can’t help noticing that the colour of earth connects the Museum to the land. The pile of rubble in the Museum building; the muted earth colours of the fresco mural on the wall of the Museum; the earth on which you are all standing. The mood seems slightly more sombre as the procession moves back to the building, even the tone and metre of the marching band. Much less talking and reminiscence takes place. Periods of silence engulf the group from time to time.

For a moment you are overwhelmed by the range of encounters which you have both observed and been part of during your visit to the Museum. It has helped you to understand how the movement beyond the between the walled space and the vacant scarred land takes place.
What I have taken you through is a composite of a few occasions at the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, depicted in my story as a one-day encounter. Our Museum is located on the edge of the inner city of Cape Town. It is dedicated to the preservation and animation of the memory of the area known as District Six which is (was) located on the eastern border of the city, just below the slopes of Table Mountain. Officially demarcated as 'District Six' in 1867, the area was already inhabited by that time. It had become home to some of the formerly enslaved people from the city and surrounding areas after legal emancipation in 1834; immigrants arriving through the nearby port settled here; many of the urban poor ended up settling here, and over time the District became known for its rich culture and vibrant community life born of diversity (linguistic, geographic area of origin, economic, etc).

The advent of apartheid (1948) formalised and legalised systems of segregation and inequality which had its origins in the colonial periods at the Cape. The 1950 Group Areas and Population Registration Acts together with other pieces of supporting legislation sounded the start of the end of this and other vibrant areas of residence. District Six was declared a White Group Area. Families were dispersed to areas which had been created for the racial group to which they had been assigned. The vibrant District was no more, and even though there were acts of resistance punctuating the gradual process of removal, it did not result in a wholesale and immediate stop to the destruction.

The spirit of the community cohered them in their dispersion. Some of the cultural traditions became translated into acts of remembrance. With the election of the democratic government, the Land Restitution Act of 1995 was introduced as one the key mechanisms through which people could claim the right to return to places from which they had been removed. Predating that, however, the movement to reclaim District Six and its memory for its people, was started, and a conference known as the ‘Hands Off District Six’ conference of 1989 was a major landmark event. The intention to start a place of memory was initiated here, and after existing as an itinerant movement for a number of years, the District Six Museum was finally launched in its current home, in 1994.

During the earlier days of its existence, one of its main functions was to support the land restitution process. It became a space which actively asserted the rights of ex-residents and their descendants to submit claims for their loss in land rights. Practical support was provided in terms of documentation from the evolving archive and network of ex-residents, providing points of reference for the process of verification. It also served as a backdrop to land restitution meetings, affirming the Museum’s place as a living centre of the movement geared towards redressing the displacement of thousands of people who were forcibly removed to the barren wastelands of the Cape.
Since the formal start of its institutional life, the Museum has made the shift to working with memory in support of the right to reclaim the land, to memory as a right to be claimed in and for itself. Representing not an ‘either-or’ situation, but rather one of being both of the above, with different emphases being required at different points in history. One of the Museum’s patrons, Prof Kader Asmal, passed away a few months ago. ‘Can there be a more important human condition than dignity?’ He challenges in his recently published memoirs¹. ‘Without it we are bitter, downtrodden, unheard, humiliated, embarrassed and disempowered’, he continues. ‘With dignity we are peaceful, collegial, kind, compassionate and even at times cohesive’.

The Museum’s life’s work is premised on the belief that the memory of any people is an important human right, closely tied to a sense of dignity, identity, belonging and general well-being. Asserting that ‘I am’, and ‘I am in relation to a particular time and place, even if that place has been reconfigured’ – is even more important. Reconstruction of memory has the impact of contributing towards the reconstruction of selves who have been battered and broken by circumstances. Mobilising place memory has been a laudable strength of the District Six Museum’s methodology, and has enabled a large corps of people to tap into and claim their relationship to places from which they have been wrenched.

The above walk though a few encounters represents a composite picture of some aspects of this Museum’s work. It reflects the organisation’s commitment to create the conditions for becoming a ‘marketplace of ideas’ expressed through different modalities: performance, music, inscription, games, writing, discussions. It has emerged from a journey of exploration into how to retain and enhance that which makes this Museum vibrant and in some ways, unique.

At this point we feel strengthened in our attempts to focus on democratic and critical citizenship which is based on a strengthened and robust civil society: one that is hopeful while not ignoring the fault-lines; one that recognises the strength represented by diversity and underpinned by a strong sense of solidarity and care. Incrementally and slowly, we continue to work with small groups of varying opinions and orientations, and invite them to engage each other in ways which strengthen different points of view, but does not obliterate or cause them to be drowned out by the most powerful voice.

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