The work of museums: The implications of a human rights museology

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Federation of International Human Rights Museums Conference
International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, U.K.

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Human rights museums

Museum of Genocide Victims  
Vilnius, Lithuania, 1992

Museo de la memoria y los derechos humanos  
Santiago, Chile, 2010
Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Winnipeg, Canada
Founded in 2008, to be opened in 2012
Future Site of...
Emplacement futur du...

THE CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
MUSÉE CANADIEN DES DROITS DE LA PERSONNE

"The World's Largest Human Rights Centre"
« Le plus grand centre des droits de la personne au monde »

"A Home for Canada's Stories"
« Un centre qui abritera les histoires canadiennes »

"A Journey of Hope"
« Le chemin de l'espoir »

www.canadianmuseumforhumanrights.com
Defining the purposes of a human rights museology
Missions

Objective 1

Education, dissemination of knowledge and documentation as primary goals, while also encouraging moral reflection about civic duty and citizen behaviour.
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• By inciting social activism
Missions

Cape Town Holocaust Centre

Encouraging social activism and a greater individual responsibility to building the community.

SAHF 2011
Missions

Objective 2

Education and memorialization
Missions

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

“A living memorial to the Holocaust, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, promote human dignity, and prevent genocide. A public-private partnership, federal support guarantees the Museum’s permanence, and its far-reaching educational programs and global impact are made possible by donors nationwide.”

Web site 2011
Missions

Objective 3

Museum collections (photographs and weapons, for example) may conceivably be used as evidence to help bring the perpetrators of genocide and other legal transgressions to justice.
Missions

Tuol Sleng Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1980
A call to focus on the issue of human rights

*Human rights shape political society, so as to shape human beings, so as to realize the possibilities of human nature, which provided the basis for these rights in the first place.*

New purposes require a reassessment of responsibilities

• Engage in active campaigns?

• What pedagogical models?

• Ethical and moral issues?

• Define human rights?
Museological Hurdles

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1. No single agreed-upon definition of human rights;

2. Vague legal language can be interpreted differently by various judicial and other bodies;

3. Museum representations have the potential to contribute to interpretations that can influence the legal status of a right in the future.
Unique Position of the Museum

With its doors open to the public…

but its walls supported by the state
Contentious Terrain

Human rights are the concrete result of historical and social development. They mirror the struggles and concerns of the dominant social groups in society at a particular time as these groups organise and reorganise to maintain their position. At the same time, rights formulation and articulation reflect, albeit in a subordinate position, the resistance of the dominated as they strive to change the status quo. Human rights, therefore, like any other systemised regime of articulated ideas, is a contested terrain.

Issa Shivji (1999)
Contentious Terrain

• Ethical and moral implications
• New modes of practice
• The work of social change
• Requires constant re-evaluation of mission and methods
Thinking Pedagogy Widely

• Different ways people might engage with subject matter

• A productive space for thinking