

The Liberatory Function of a Museum: The Case of New Brighton's Red Location Museum

Vuyisile Msila

PO Box 392, University of South Africa, Further Teacher Education,
UNISA, 0003, South Africa
E-mail: msilavt@unisa.ac.za

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ABSTRACT The new South African museums built in the last decade have attempted to demystify and challenge the pedestrian and sophistic roles that museums have played in the past. The "old" museums tended to mainly reflect a dominant culture that obscured other cultures and were underpinned by a deliberate agenda to marginalise other cultures. However, "new" museums such as District Six in Cape Town and Hector Peterson Museum in Soweto, Johannesburg are examples of museums that strive to show the other side, tell the society the other stories which include the people's struggle against political injustices and cultural hegemony in South Africa. This article explores the role of the Red Location Museum situated in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. Built on the very site where the historic Red Location's corrugated iron houses stood, the museum bears a testimony of the history of the people. Commenting on this museum, the Lubetkin Prize judges were quoted as saying, "To build a museum of the apartheid era in the midst of the township that acted as a crucible for the struggle is an extraordinary achievement". The article explores the liberatory role played by this museum.

INTRODUCTION

Museums in a Changing Society

Museums today have undergone a shift from their past image. Andermann and Arnold-de Simine (2012) contend that the new museums have renegotiated the processes of narration and the museal codes of communication with the public. These museums are perceived as repositories of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is based on the diversity of the individual contributions of all people and it is the right of each person to enjoy the right to his or her heritage (Jokilehto 2012). Around the world including South Africa, when people speak of this cultural heritage, they also imply human rights. If museums are to be guardians of cultural heritage it means that they will be sites for common dignity and human rights culture. Apart from this human rights culture, the new museums are perceived to have a role in the democratisation process as well.

As a result of these, Anderman and Arnold-de Simine (2012) point out that the new museum is a site from which to redress social inequities. These authors state:

Museums then, are entrusted with a new mission of community formation, making individual and collective audiences recognise them-

selves as subjects of rights and, thus contributing to the democratisation of culture and society. Against the traditional museums' desire for autonomy resistance to change, and disengagement from societal concerns', the new museums actively contribute to 'enhanced community self-determination and increased participation...

(Anderman and Arnold-de Simine 2012: 6).

The above shows that with the use of artefacts, museums play a number of important roles. Adejuwon (2012) also argues that museums hold memories and tell stories through the various objects in their collections that are emblematic to the communities of their origin. The South African museum has many roles to play and among these is redress of past imbalances. Museums have to embrace the transformative ideology as they move towards a nation building agenda. They need to empower (Black) South Africans in particular, to create new value systems for their institutions that meet the needs of the disenfranchised (McGee 2006). Furthermore, McGee states that Black South Africans can and should reshape social memory through museums; to create a lasting democracy. The discussion below looks at the Red Location Museum as an institution of memory. Memory museums are usually museums that reflect past pain (Arnold-de Simine 2012). Williams (2007) refers to

the memorial museum as a kind of museum that is dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind.

This paper will briefly describe the Red Location museum then look at aspects that make it a new Museum with a liberatory function. Human rights, the community's purpose and collective memory will be discussed under different sub-topics.

The Objectives

This is a review paper that focuses on the role of the new museum in post-apartheid South Africa. It does this by focusing on one specific museum, the Red Location Museum situated in Port Elizabeth. The objectives of writing this are:

- ♦ To reveal how the post-apartheid museum seeks to deposit and retrieve memory;
- ♦ To show how museums can symbolically represent the communities wherein they are built;
- ♦ To illustrate how cultural heritage can be used to address issues of democracy and human rights; and
- ♦ To demonstrate how memory can be used to heal a society.

THE REDLOCATION MUSEUM

This museum is situated in a historically Black African area called New Brighton, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. New Brighton is one of the oldest Black areas in Port Elizabeth and the historical Red Location is where the Red Location Museum is situated. The city of Port Elizabeth is found in the Eastern Cape Province, a fairly big province found in the south of the country. The municipality in this area was named in honour of the first South African president, Nelson Mandela as it is referred to as the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality. The city of Port Elizabeth has about 1.5 million people and 58% of these are Black Africans.

The museum is the brainchild of the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality. Its brochure describes the museum as a 'factory-styled' structure where space, concrete, oxidised corrugated iron, wood, glass and metal challenge conventional norms of museum design. Figure 1 shows

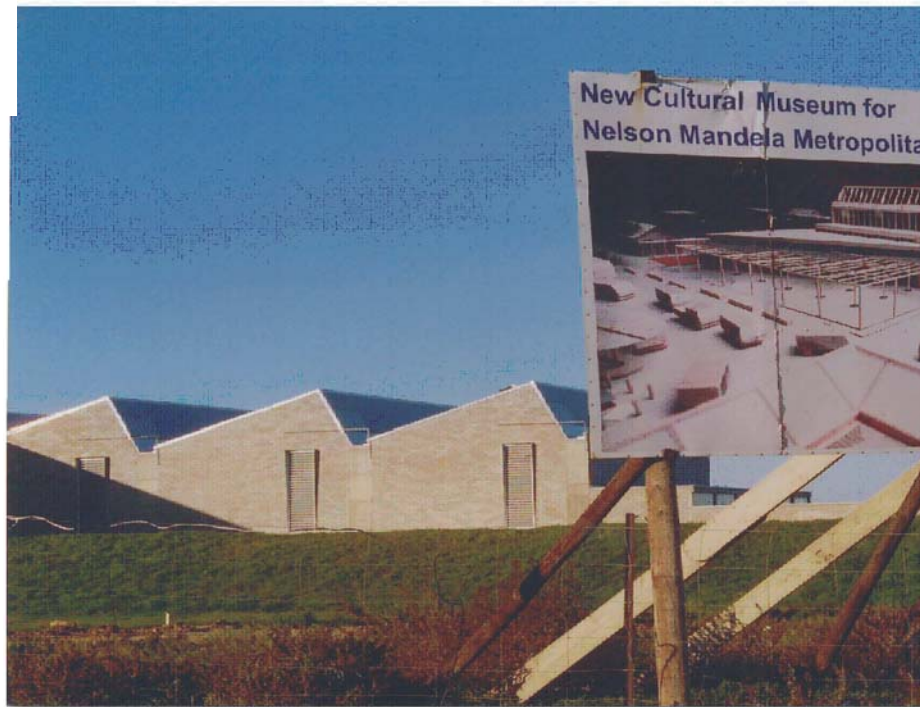


Fig. 1. The rear of the Red Location Museum

this glimpse of the museum's factory style structure. The brochure describes the area where the museum is built:

Red Location became a "hotspot of struggle" against the former Apartheid Regime and many famous political leaders and activists were either born or lived here. A number of significant "first" struggle events were initiated here: The implementation of the Mandela Plan (Street and Area Committees) as well as the first cell of Mkhonto Wesizwe (former military wing of the African National Congress).

Using this background, the research paper explores the potential emancipatory role of this museum. As freedom dawned in South Africa in 1994, there was a conscious effort to establish "relevant structures" that would be amenable to post-Apartheid South Africa. McGee (2006) has argued that the challenge and paradox that people in South Africa experience is that arts have been and still are to a large degree defined by western European epistemologies. "Western Eurocentric models provided the foundation for the professionalisation of the fine arts through exhibitions, artists' and collectors' societies, galleries and museums, education and degree-grant-

ing programs, and the history of art history" (McGee 2006: 181).

THE MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY: A BRIEF LITERATURE STUDY

The new museums' role should be to reflect the cultural heritage of the communities in which they are situated. This is what the Red Location Museum has tried to do. Jokilehto (2012) points out that cultural heritage is based on the diversity of the individual contributions of all the people and it is the right of each individual to enjoy the right of his or her heritage. The community needs to see its own story within the museum. Museums should capture the trauma, the history and heritage of its community. Andermann and Arnold-de Simine (2012) argue that the new museum theory is about decolonising, giving those represented control of their cultural heritage. Furthermore, these authors point out that the museum is one institution that transforms living memory into institutionally constructed and sustained commemorative practices which enact and give substance to a group identity.



Fig. 2. Houses at the Red Location



Fig 3. The Red Location Museum- the front part

The new museums in South Africa such as the Hector Petersen Museum, the Apartheid Museum, District Six, South End and a few others have a particular role to play; telling the story from a certain perspective. Including “the other” that was marginalised for centuries in the South African history has become very vital. Dublin (2007) sheds light on a certain previous divisive South African exhibition which raised pertinent questions. The exhibition entitled, *Miscast* raised issues of cultural ownership such as who has the right to speak for another. The other crucial question posed was, Can a person from one group represent the experiences of another from a different group? As highlighted above, for many decades in South Africa, the little that appeared on indigenous people in museums was captured as seen through the Eurocentric view. According to Dublin (2007) often museums became battlegrounds because they are potentially subject to a wide variety of conflicts of interests and constraints. Debates over who is authorised to speak for who have led to sometimes uneasiness and sometimes robust debates over the politics of representation. The above arguments show that people yearn to create a sense of community and ownership around museums.

The idea of museums creating a kind of community has become crucial. In South Africa, museums have a task of empowering as well as leading to some form of nation building. Crooke (2007: 170) writes:

The concern to make museums relevant to the “community” has swiftly moved to combining museums with some of the key social policy issues, such as tackling exclusion. Furthermore, away from museum debate and government policy, rural and urban groups are coming together to explore their history and heritage and forming their own exhibitions and collections. The relationship that is developing between the community and the museum, either by groups becoming more actively interested in heritage activity, encourages us to investigate the meaning and consequences of this relationship and what it may inform us about the role of museums today.

In this context the definition of the term, *community*, is linked to geographically defined communities. Sandell (2002) states that within this category museums can be considered to contribute to regeneration and renewal initiatives for the deprived. Sandell also points out that specif-

ic outcomes include enhanced community “self-determination and increased participation in decision-making processes and democratic structures.” Engaging the community in the museum is to bring it closer to the people, demystify it and ensure that the community understands the identity with what the museums should stand for. Crooke (2007) states that engagement with the concept of *community* is prompting the museum to revisit its space and question its identity, role and social worth. Crooke adds that encouraging community participation in museum activity is often linked to the idea of democratising history and the museum space. Community needs to embrace values that would promote the development of new history and assertiveness of accepting new voices and new interpretations.

The design and architecture are two other important elements in linking the museum to the communities. Rectanus (2007:389) states that museum architecture has become a critical factor in creating links in communities; physically, symbolically, functionally and experientially. Rectanus explains this by stating that the physical presence of the museum contributes to a distinctive sense of the local by drawing upon artefacts, artists, and audiences from diverse global contexts how participate in the life of the museum. The museum structure has become a signifier for communicating and marketing the museums’ image (see Fig. 3). Thirdly new building and annexation projects provide additional space for exhibitions, collections or support services. Simpson (2006) points out that community support is an essential component of a successful and culturally dynamic community museum that will contribute the indigenous life. The latter redress is required in South African museums where museums in the past modelled Eurocentric values that undermined the local and indigenous. Simpson says that by failing to address community values and needs, these museums may not have served indigenous communities well. Simpson adds that for museums to thrive, they must reflect the cultural and spiritual values of the community.

THE RED LOCATION MUSEUM: A MODEL OF A MUSEUM BORNE OUT OF HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Arnold-de Simine (2012: 15) argues the new museums define themselves not as sites of aca-

demic and institutional history but as spaces of memory “exemplifying the shift from a perceived authoritative master discourse on the past to the paradigm of memory which supposedly allows for a wider range of stories about the past”. The Red Location Museum exemplifies this too; it tells many stories that would have been marginalised by the traditional museum. The structure tells a story as one enters it. In fact, Arnold-de Simine refers to such museums as narrative museum. Arnold-de Simine says that the story becomes the object of the exhibition hence the objects are associated to the history to which they are attached. The Eric Dorfman site (2011) describes the narrative museum as one which helps the audiences to seek something deeper within the objects and to move beyond the physical. Again right from the moment of entering the Red Location Museum there is the glaring idea of a story told.

When one enters the museum, feelings of poignancy and hurt are ignited as one is reminded of the battles of apartheid years. Yet there is also a sense of celebration; a mood that says, “People have victored over injustice-at last”. In one of the rooms, capital punishment of the past is graphically illustrated. In the room there are documents of people who were tried in South Africa during the struggle years. As one enters that room, one sees a towering and handsome image of a struggle stalwart Vuyisile Mini who became a martyr when he was hanged by apartheid government in 1964. Three large hangman’s nooses hang ominously from the roof and these are certain to move one emotionally. One is certainly moved when the museum guide narrates Vuyisile Mini’s story. He was a South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) member when he was executed for “terrorism” in March 1964. Mini is remembered the songs he composed, his powerful bass voice and the spirit of no surrender that he instilled in his comrades. After his execution there was an international outcry and clemency appeals by President Nasser of the United Arab Republic.

Ben Turouk, Mini’s previous co-accused in the 1956 treason trial was serving a three year term in Pretoria Central Prison at the trial of Mini’s execution. He recalled the last moments of Mini and his two fellow martyrs, Wilson Khayinga and Zinakile Mkhabela. In the African National Congress’ *Sechaba Journal* Turouk was quoted as saying:

The last evening was devastatingly sad as the heroic occupants of the death cells communicated to the prison in gentle melancholy song that their end was near... It was late at night when the singing ceased, and the prison fell into uneasy silence. I was already awake when the singing began again in the early morning... Soon after, I heard the door of their cell being opened. Murmuring voices reached my straining ears, and then the three martyrs broke into a final poignant melody which seemed to fill the whole prison with sound and then gradually faded away into the distant depths of the condemned section.

This account is relived sadly by the playing of a remade recorded voice of Vuyisile Mini. The museum becomes a trauma site when one looks at the hangman's nooses. Viola (2012) when talking about the dead people in a museum space, states that they make the visitor move between different meanings. Viola (2012: 50) contends:

In this dynamic movement of meanings, the perspectives of victim, persecutor, and spectator can become superimposed: as visitors we cannot remain purely 'outside observers' ...we are paradoxically, located in a kind of middle ground where the gaze of the persecutor met that of the persecuted. We empathise with the suffering and pain of the victims exposed to our naked gaze, sometimes to the point of feeling actual physical discomfort.

In one visit the researcher could not help not noticing the horror in the eyes of a couple of school children as they heard the history of the man they saw on the wall. The nooses are menacing in front of the huge Mini portrait. Then there is a wall that reflects many pictures of Langa massacre in Uitenhage. Uitenhage is a small town not far from where the museum is situated. On the 21st of March 1985 many people were killed as they were commemorating 21st March in Sharpsville 1960; where people defied and left home their passes or official identity documents for Blacks (referred to as *dompas*). On Monday, March 21, 1960 the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) called on Black Africans to leave their passes at home and to surrender to the police (Roux 1972). About 10 000 people surrounded Sharpsville police station and they demanded to be arrested for not carrying passes. Then drama ensued:

"The police opened fire", said a newspaper report. "Volley after volley of .303 bullets and

stun gun bursts" tore into the crowd. "The hordes began to waver- as scores of people fell before the hail of bullets. Soon, they were routed. They fled quickly that hundreds of shoes, trousers, jackets-and even chairs -were left behind. ... Two truckloads of bodies were taken to the mortuary. (Roux 1972: 406)

The tragic incident in 1985 in Langa, Uitenhage happened when people were commemorating the day above. As one moves near the walls bearing the huge pictures of the Langa Massacre there are sounds of weeping people and wailing women recorded sounds that bring the incident to reality. The sense of memory is strong and captured by visual and the aural.

Perhaps another effective aspect about the museum on the replicas of the original Red Location houses, originally built as part of the soldiers' barracks during the First World War, in 1902. The examples of these original houses can be seen in Figure 2 and Figure 4. After the soldiers evacuated the houses many migrant workers, men who came from "Black homelands" occupied them as they arrived to come and work in the city of Port Elizabeth. These men came alone, without their families to stay in the corrugated houses. The memory boxes in the museum reflect the few valued items that the migrant workers brought to the city from their homelands. These were items that would remind them of their homes. The replica houses also reflect the history of the political struggle where the spaces under the floor were used as rendezvous for secret meetings.

It was also in the Red Location that the late Rivonia Treason trialist, Raymond Mhlaba led a group of people to protest in the New Brighton station; they defiantly went to the *Whites Only* side. It was the wintry morning of 26 June 1952 when Mhlaba led 30 volunteers through the "Europeans Only" entrance of New Brighton Station. The volunteers were accompanied by a crowd singing the song, 'what have we done, we African people?' the twenty five men and three women were all wearing Congress armbands and shouting, "*Mayibuye iAfrica!*" (Africa must come back!) (Benson 1985). The defiers had all intended to refuse to pay fines and go to prison. Roux (1973) writes that a newspaper report on 25 July stated that 32 defiance women had been sentenced for using the Europeans Only entrance at the New Brighton station near the Red Location. All these form part of the collective

memory used by the people within the museum's space.

Community Using Collective Memory

Memory is one crucial aspect utilised in museums to ignite experiences that will affect the users. During apartheid years, especially from 1960 to the 1980s, many cultural museums were established essentially to celebrate the triumphs of White South Africans (Dominy 2004). However, memory in the current alternative museums is meant to bring about experiences that would be liberating. The alternative museums such as the Red Location Museum above are supposed to ensure that users reflect a more liberating and meaningful history. Memory is used by those who strive for democracy to come to terms with the past as they build a future. The idea of embracing community museums can lead to collective memory. Deegan (2001) argues that a process needs to be found through which collective memory of the country could engage in recognising the tragedy of the past. She adds that it is only by looking back that a nation would be able to move towards normalised multiracial co-existence. The Museums can play a crucial role while starting off the memories there would be debates raised about issues as well. Community museums should promote healthy discussions as people embrace democracy and a new future. The museums also need to strive for success where the society not succeeded. The South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC's) leader, Kollapen was quoted as saying, "the Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused on the excesses of apartheid, it never really began a conversation between ordinary South Africans." Furthermore, Kollapen said that very little was asked of White South Africans during the reconciliation and transformation processes (News 24 2008). The use of history and memory in the museum would ensure that the ordinary South Africans take charge of history as they engage with the past events.

Much oral history in the museum is based on subjective accounts of people. Coombes (2003) points out that all memory is unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness as well as shared social processes. Any comprehension of the representation of remembrances and of the past must take into account both contexts

(Coombes 2003). Arguably, there is a need for South Africans to use memory in the museums, understand and bring resolve to the trauma before moving towards the future as matured citizens. Many political activists in South Africa, although they are scarred by political repression, they have insisted on the productiveness of their years in detention and necessity of working toward a constructive future (Coombes 2003). The traumatic memory and experience that can be ignited by the hangman's nooses (in Red Location Museum) can actually result to a positive consequence; it can show the user what freedom means. It can sensitize them in some way that many people sacrificed, became martyrs for the freedom. These can be both empowering and emancipatory memories. The user is empowered through the understanding of history and it will be liberating as the users will understand their own purpose in history. In this case the memory is linked to freedom from bondage.

MEMORY AND FREEDOM

As highlighted above, the Red Location Museum has tried to portray the traumatic memory experiences visually and aurally. The wailing echoes behind the Langa Massacre wall of remembrance are not only sad but haunting and traumatic. Coming to terms with that memory is important for people yearning for freedom. Coombes (2003) points out that all memory is both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness. The museum is an example of an institution that represents the history of the people. Coombes (2003) states that a history of the "people" which was a strategy for redressing the absences and "structural violence of the official national histories circulating under apartheid". The memory is crucial in the redress of these absences. Again, the researcher listened to a group of different visitors' conversations. One group of middle aged men looked at the photographs of the Langa Massacre and they were recalling events of the tragedy:

"I was here and I wore a black beret like this one on the day of this big funeral in Jabavu Stadium."

"Mhle's cousin was crushed by a police van right around this area".

Then another elderly woman listening to a freedom song smiled dreamily as she said, "We

used to sing that song in Emlotheni when the Congress convened meetings there. We would lift our thumbs and fists chanting, Bhasop'indod'emnyama Velefutha (Beware of the Black man Verwoerd!)" (Of course Verwoerd was one of the most instrumental architects of apartheid, who was a Prime Minister of the Republic in the early 1960s).

Kavanagh (1999:2) points out that:

When people visit museums, they can do no other but bring their life histories and memories with them, maybe not ostentatiously nor even consciously, yet within reach. Personal memories may be stored by the images, objects or words made visible and may dominate over any "formal" history offered.

Visitors in museums construct own meanings. On another visit the researcher observed another group of about 15 young people who listened attentively as the adults related stories of the past utilising memory. The young were witnessing a combination of history, heritage and memory all enacted in a powerful enriching encounter. The Red Location Museum has the ability to explore memory as collective stories help recreate the past. The young discover the past and understand the future. The museum answers a number of questions that might otherwise not be easily comprehended. The adults who relate the stories also discover part of themselves as they relate their own biographies. Many tend to understand their past with much empowerment.

The above reflect the opportunity of liberating the mind by the museum. Kavanagh (1999:3) cites Sheldon Annis who pointed out that museums embody three forms of symbolic space:

- ♦ They provide something formal in an intellectual sense
- ♦ Museums provide "social spaces"
- ♦ They also provide "dream spaces"

On social spaces, Kavanagh (1999) explains that these are spaces which people engage with regardless of the nature of exhibits. Visiting the museum tightens the bonds between people; "Part of that bonding is promoted through the sharing of the experience of the visit and in particular through exchange of personal and collective memories" (Kavanagh 1999:3).

It is the power of memory in the Red Location Museum that enables the visitors to learn even more. When people confront their emotions, they tend not to forget easily. Kavanagh (1999:13) points out that museums are places

where memories and histories meet and this can be an emotional experience. Furthermore, Kavanagh avers that feeling something leads to the motivation to learn something. Young people visiting the museum express the hunger to know more about the past they had never seen. The older people understand some of the things better. The other important potential role of the Red Location Museum is its important role to help in the Africanisation of the society.

THE RED LOCATION MUSEUM AND AFRICANISATION

For many critics the freedom in Africa cannot be complete unless Africans also start seeing the need for an *African Reawakening*. There is a need for African museums to be perceived developing not only African art but the African ways of life as well. Adewujon (2012) points out that art constitutes a body of material put together to transform an idea from the mind into real or physical form. Furthermore, this author argues that for centuries African art was not recognised by the West art but as curios of primitive extract. The topical issue on the agenda today is the move towards an African Renaissance and many institutions are also looking at the possibilities of ensuring that the African side is exposed. The Red Location also has an agenda even if it is covert to reflect an Africanised visage to the people. People need to see from the perspective of the Africans, a museum set to show certain African ideals. Higgs and Van Wyk (2007) opine that African Renaissance enhances educational discourse in Africa. Furthermore, they trace the emergence of African Renaissance to numerous attempts to reassert distinctively African ways of thinking and of relating to the world.

Makgoba et al. (1999) also define African Renaissance as an important aspect in tracing the roots of the awakening of African values. They aver that the African Renaissance is a unique opportunity for Africans to define themselves and their agenda according to their own realities and taking in to account realities of the world around them. "It is about Africans being agents of our own history and masters of our destiny" (Makgoba et al. 1999). The African continent requires encapsulating ways of thinking that uphold African values in various structures of the society. Transforming education in Africa would be truly meaningful if Africans realise the

importance of that which belongs to the Continent as they utilise the Western knowledge systems. "The call for an African Renaissance in educational discourse, therefore, seeks to demonstrate, how indigenous African knowledge systems can be tapped as a foundational resource for the socio-educational transformation of the African Continent, and also how indigenous knowledge systems can be politically and economically liberating" (Higgs and Van Wyk 2007).

The Red Location Museum, as a community museum has utilised the voice of the African by ensuring that the stories are told from an African perspective. Moving around the museum one can see that the story teller or the memory reflected is that of an African. The story behind the Langa massacre for example is clearly an expression of an African history by an African. Culture and arts are among the important elements that Africans need to stress in their quest for a democratic society based on African values. Chinweizu (1975) wrote that Africans have the challenge of history among other things. They have to use political initiatives freedom has restored to us to gain total political and economic sovereignty, to reconstruct African society and to promote a renaissance in African arts. Biko also goes on to bewail the destruction of struc-

tures built in the African society by colonialism and imperialism. He contends that not only was the Native's brain emptied but the history was deliberately distorted as well. As history was destroyed so was the culture:

No longer was reference made to African culture, it became barbarism... Religious practices and customs were referred to as superstition...No wonder the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. So negative is the image presented to him that he tends to find solace only in close identification with the white society. (Biko 1987:29)

Africanisation of culture should mean negotiating with history and extracting the best from Africa despite the colonial encounter. Africanisation in culture means dispelling the myths of racial inferiority highlighted in many European accounts where the African past was portrayed. Africanisation in culture also implies the awareness of dangers of using the West as a yardstick when looking at modernity.

Chinweizu (1975) once pointed out that Africans have a challenge of history. He opined that they need to use political initiatives freedom has restored to them to gain total political and economic sovereignty, to reconstruct African society and to promote a renaissance in African arts.



Fig. 4. Part of the historical Red Location where people lived

Furthermore, Chinweizu has written that people cannot speak of a renaissance when in every department of the arts there is a lifeless mimesis saturated with moribund versions of western modernity.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

From the discussion above, one can see the role of the new museum such as the Red Location in society. The museum is meant to use memory to shape a society that was once broken by divisions. The new post-apartheid museum seeks to collect the past and use that fruitfully within its space. The Red Location is an example of a museum that uses its space and artefacts to stimulate various aspects such as emotions, intellect and senses. At the same time an individual is educated in the process. As people confront the trauma of apartheid society they learn to value the present. The memory is used to heal a society once ravaged by hate and suspicion. In fact, many other new museums in South Africa engage with the past, making people understand where they come from. Effective new museums will help in forging new identities and building closely-knit communities that preserve the beginnings of their journey and cherish the vista of the path for future generations.

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