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Selling South Africa: Tourism and the Construction of a Post-Apartheid Nation

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Article abstract

South Africa's nationalistic landscape is currently defined by a series of monumental, architectural edifices whose symbolic capital lies in their assumed ability to generate ideological unifications within the country's charged, often fraught, spaces. Yet the failure of these forms to address the tensions and divisions that continue to define South Africa's current socio-political climate raises questions as to whether such architectures are capable of acting in a nationalistic capacity within a country that is still negotiating its contemporary post-Apartheid identity. This paper suggests an alternative built landscape for consideration within discussions of South Africa's current nation-building apparatus, specifically that of tourist space. The unregulated utilization (and exploitation) of structural languages from South Africa's traumatic past allow tourist space to function as a "counter-monument" within the country's contemporary nationalistic environment, provoking uncomfortable but potentially necessary confrontations with the charged elements of South Africa's history as well as their continuity into the present period.

MICHELLE APOTSOS

Selling South Africa: Tourism and the Construction of a Post-Apartheid Nation

Résumé

Le paysage national de l'Afrique du Sud se définit actuellement par une série d'édifices architecturaux monumentaux dont le capital symbolique réside dans l'aptitude qu'on leur attribue de générer une unification idéologique au sein des espaces tendus, voire dangereux, du pays. Cependant, le fait que ces formes ne soient pas parvenues à répondre aux tensions et aux divisions qui continuent de définir le climat sociopolitique actuel de l'Afrique du Sud soulève la question de savoir si de telles architectures sont capables d'avoir un impact national dans un pays qui est toujours en train de négocier son identité contemporaine post-apartheid. Cet article suggère de prendre en considération un autre paysage construit pour discuter de l'appareil actuel d'édification nationale de l'Afrique du Sud, spécifiquement celui de l'espace touristique. L'utilisation non réglementée (et l'exploitation) des langages structurels du passé traumatique de l'Afrique du Sud permettent à l'espace touristique de fonctionner comme un « contre-monument » au sein de l'environnement national contemporain du pays, ce qui provoque des confrontations malaisées, mais potentiellement nécessaires, avec les éléments de tension de l'histoire de l'Afrique du Sud ainsi qu'avec le fait que ces derniers perdurent à l'époque actuelle.

Abstract

South Africa's nationalistic landscape is currently defined by a series of monumental, architectural edifices whose symbolic capital lies in their assumed ability to generate ideological unifications within the country's charged, often fraught, spaces. Yet the failure of these forms to address the tensions and divisions that continue to define South Africa's current socio-political climate raises questions as to whether such architectures are capable of acting in a nationalistic capacity within a country that is still negotiating its contemporary post-Apartheid identity. This paper suggests an alternative built landscape for consideration within discussions of South Africa's current nation-building apparatus, specifically that of tourist space. The unregulated utilization (and exploitation) of structural languages from South Africa's traumatic past allow tourist space to function as a "counter-monument" within the country's contemporary nationalistic environment, provoking uncomfortable but potentially necessary confrontations with the charged elements of South Africa's history as well as their continuity into the present period.

In the two decades following South Africa's first democratic election, the nation has undergone numerous social, cultural, and political transformations towards creating a unified national identity in the face of lingering remnants of Apartheid. The explosive growth of conciliatory spaces including museums, commemorative monuments, heritage sites, and public memorials have attempted to combine the diverse narratives of South Africa's so-called "Rainbow Nation" and shape a new national consciousness by facilitating discussions, confrontations, and reconciliations with the traumatic elements of South Africa's past.¹ Yet in an atmosphere of increased "Afro-pessimism," to quote Sabine Marschall (2008), brought about by two decades of social, political, and economic stagnation, many such spaces have come to be viewed rather skeptically as part of a nationalistic "identikit" (Hocking, 2015). More specifically, they convey a largely one-sided version of South African history as well as an unrealistically utopian vision of contemporary national identity. Thus, the current state of affairs compels a reconsideration of how reflections of the past contribute to ideas about contemporary South African national identity and how such conversations are taking shape (either successfully or unsuccessfully) within the context of the built environment (see Rassool, 2000; McGregor and Schumaker, 2006).

Along these lines, spatial discourses of nationalism, modernity, and heritage seem to be finding ample representation in the country's current tourist environments. Tourism constitutes the fastest growing section of South Africa's economy, composing 8.2% of the country's current GDP (Government of South Africa, 2020). Importantly as well, tourism has been identified as a key element to the country's fiscal solvency not only for its ability to generate foreign revenue but also for its potential to provide socio-economic and cultural empowerment for individuals and communities that have been historically disenfranchised in these areas. To this end, numerous regional and national tourist bodies like the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) have been formulated to not only support various tourist projects broadly, but also encourage tourist experiences that are socially resilient, environmentally sustainable, and locally beneficial—projects, in other words,

that not only support the economy but also aid the contemporary push towards national "unity in diversity,"² or the idea that "South Africa has many identities ... however all are South African" (Department of Arts and Culture, 2013).

Yet the civic aims of such guidelines have been increasingly undermined by the growth of contemporary tourist cultural villages, colonial-era safari lodges, and township experiences, each designed to respond to the often exoticizing imaginaries that visiting clientele, both foreign and domestic, expect from particular tourist experiences in the country. Western romanticism has long positioned African space as a sensual construct or backdrop for fantasies of colonial theatre, ethnographic encounter, and more recently, extreme "third-world" poverty. This constitutes a type of cultural colonization that encapsulates more generally the desire to engage in dramatic encounters with othered landscapes and individuals.

Because of this, the manufacture of recognizable structural forms within contemporary tourist environments buttress these fantasies through the generation of a manufactured "authenticity" that relies on the utilization of excessively stereotyped visual and structural vocabularies towards creating contrived environments that actively market clichéd, nostalgic, and oftentimes fraught relics of the country's history as part of an authentic cultural experience. Thus, in blurring the lines between reality, re-creation, and recreation, these spaces actively position ideas of South African national identity within overtly fabricated, formulaic, immersive environments of commoditized spectacle framed as cultural experience.

Such characterizations find particular purchase in the short-lived African Village accommodation complex (previously named the Shanty Town complex), located on the grounds of the four-star Emoya resort and spa in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State (Fig. 1). Although the complex is no longer actively in service, its re-creation and recreationalization of one of the most infamous relics of the Apartheid regime—the township³—distorts the lived reality of actual township spaces by generating an overtly gritty, immersive simulacrum for the visitor that exploits architectural vocabularies of violence and disenfranchisement towards generating a

spectacle of trauma framed and marketed as an authentic South African cultural experience. As such, this site engages in a politics of representation that demands a consideration about the role of architecture and consumerism within current imaginaries of the “new” South Africa.

The complex itself was built by owner Buks Westraad, who declined to be interviewed for this essay but has noted in the past that he considers township spaces to be “as much a part of our culture as the rustic houses (*hartbeeshuises*) built by the ‘boere’” (*City Press, News 24 South Africa* 2013). Importantly as well, the African Village was built in preparation for South Africa’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup tournament in 2010, which was in itself an exercise in South African nation-building through the unifying lens of sport. As Scarlett Cornelissen and Kamilla Swart note, “sport megaevents are complex affairs which originate from specific sets of economic objectives but which have political and social corollaries that usually extend far beyond the event itself” (Cornelissen and Swart 2006: 1081, qtd. in Freschi 2011: 42). Along these lines, hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup was viewed nationalistically as a mode of “enhancing the prestige and credibility of the South African nation-state and its leadership” (Alegi 2008: 397, qtd. in Freschi 2011: 43) and presenting the nation at “its very best: a modern, prosperous nation friendly to commerce, tourists, and democratic ideals” (Bearak 2010, qtd. in Freschi 2011: 45). To this end, the new sports venues, cultural attractions, transportation infrastructures, and of course tourist accommodations were built in various capitals around the country as “highly visible and permanent reminders of the desire of the nation-state to ‘punch above its weight’” (Freschi 2011: 45) and provide visible traces of a nation on the rise.

Along these lines, many of these constructs, particularly tourist accommodations and the sports venues themselves, represented an exercise in combining global modernism with a contemporary South African celebration of selfhood (Freschi 2011: 42). Mbombela Stadium (Fig. 2), for example, which is located in capital city of Nelspruit in the Mpumalanga Province, was not only intended to embody the sophistication of contemporary South African architecture and technology (the stadium itself was designed by



Cape Town-based R&L Architects Interiors), but was also intended to call to mind “the unique ‘bush’ experience of the region” (Freschi 2011: 52), due to its proximity to the Kruger Park game reserve. As a site “perfectly poised to combine a visit to see Africa’s wildest animals and a game of the 2010 FIFA World Cup” (Bell 2010, qtd. in Freschi 2011: 52), the stadium utilized specific visual codes as gestures towards the region’s various natural attractions. These included exterior support columns whose orange metal matrix and height suggested the form of a giraffe and an interior that featured black and white seats in a pattern resembling zebra stripes. This effect was complimented by an Ndebele-inspired exterior that also rather accidentally seemed to reference the patchwork aesthetic of a township

Fig. 1 (top)
The Emoya Resort and Spa’s African Village accommodation complex, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016.
Photo by author.

Fig. 2 (above)
Mbombela Stadium aerial view with Nelspruit in context, CC BY-SA 4.0, Tadpolefarm.

environment. Through these visual and structural elements, the stadium was intended to represent a sense of regional modern identity that also happened to be tethered to a larger African imaginary. Yet many nonetheless saw the stadium as instead a reflection of “clichéd notions of an ‘African’ aesthetic, predicated on images of wild animals and zig-zag decorative motifs” (Freschi 2011: 48). Art historian Frederico Freschi notes that the stadium itself and the images and imaginaries it plundered in its design were clear nods to a certain type of touristic expectation, the “desire to have stereotyped notions of the ‘African mystique,’ its exoticism and wildness, confirmed” (2011: 52). As such, Freschi and others came to view the general effect of the Mbombela stadium as “both patronizing and banal and ... even backward looking,” a position that has led to a certain impasse with regards to the overall effect of the stadium itself: was it an “authentic response to the need to create a global South African identity” or was it an “egregious example[] of decadent formalism pandering to global capitalism” (2011: 53)?

Similar questions might be raised with regards to the African Village, one of many accommodation complexes that emerged to meet and capitalize on the rapid influx of visitors into the country during this period. As one of the country’s more radical and controversial tourist experiences to date, the African Village represents an exercise in “shock-itecture,” whose primary motivation circled around slum tourism, known for its promotion of the exploitative consump-

tion of impoverished areas for entertainment or recreational purposes. Along these lines, the African Village attempted to generate a space that enabled international visitors coming in for the World Cup to experience a uniquely South African paradigm of extreme poverty while at the same time maintaining a safe distance from the lived reality of such an environment.

The guest quarters of the African Village complex were composed of thirteen shanties or township-styled “shacks” that could house up to fifty-two people and were organized around a central *braai* (barbeque) area (Fig. 3).⁴ In contrast to the resort’s other luxurious lodgings such as the Basotho Village complex (Fig. 4), which utilizes vaguely nativesque decorative encrustations in the context of a rather straightforward condominium scheme, the African Village complex was based specifically on a type of poverty aesthetic (Fig. 5) characterized by a waste-based sublime that was organized around the patchwork assemblage of found materials, scavenged objects, and debris from the surrounding environment. Importantly, the aesthetic program in the African Village was deployed on both the interior and exterior surfaces of these structures towards creating a fully immersive experience.

The interior spaces of the complex were composed of concrete floors, bore hole water taps marked with signs discouraging individuals from drinking from them, cast iron bed frames, as well as a series of aged, clunky appliances that included a small dilapidated refrigerator and a tea kettle (Figs. 6a and 6b). These infrastructures

Fig. 3 (below)
Overhead view of the accommodation units within the African Village complex, Emoya Hotel and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.

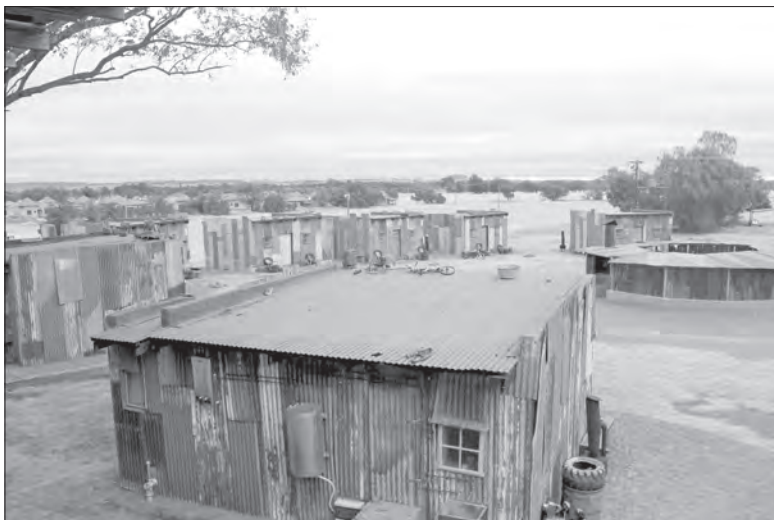


Fig. 4 (above)
The Basotho Village accommodation complex located a short distance from the African Village, Emoya Hotel and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.

were subsequently garnished with decorative folk flourishes including tin-can mobiles, corrugated iron mirrors that were sometimes broken, and decorative bottles containing patchwork metal flowers produced by local artists based in the nearby Manguang township (Figs. 7a, 7b, and 7c). Complementing these interiors were exteriors composed of artfully rusticated corrugated iron / zinc walls, whose pieces were connected to one another in a studiously haphazard manner over a framework of industrial concrete (Fig. 8). There were also donkey boilers (sometimes known as geysers) and exterior long drop effect toilets, as well as tire-based lounge chairs, wooden stump tables, and even the occasional broken-down motorcycle lawn ornament (Fig. 9). Each shanty door was also marked with a block number in an authenticating gesture towards Apartheid-era institutional censuses (Fig. 10).

Collectively, the visual / material program of these units and their rigid compliance to the popular image of what an “authentic” township dwelling should look like, transformed these units into a carefully choreographed landscape defined by a targeted aesthetic of manufactured dereliction. Despite this, however, these spaces maintained a healthy distance from the actualities of township life by incorporating many of the amenities befitting the Emoya resort’s four-star status. The structures themselves adhered to specific sanitation protocols, safety regulations, and quality controls, which effectively underscored the African Village’s curated reality. Guests were given the option of crafting their own experience by either opting for or against having electricity, although luckily “running water and four walls [came] standard” (*eNews Channel Africa* 2013). And should one have opted for electricity, the inclusion of heated floors and Wi-Fi not only reimaged, but also actively mitigated, the lived realities of township dwellings as did the largely unrealistic organization of these units into a classic familial compound configuration located within the bucolic setting of a South African game park.

Importantly as well, there was a distinctive sense of social hierarchy present in the African Village and within the broader context of the Emoya resort with regards to movement and interaction of staff and guests. The spatial positioning of the complex in relation to the

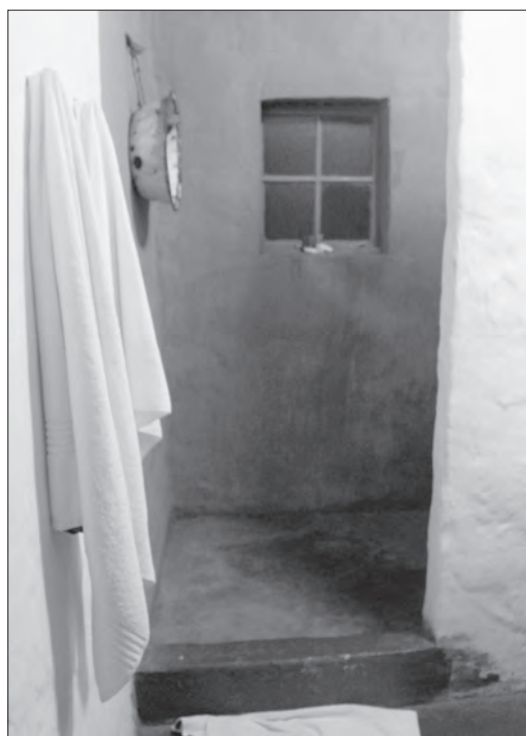


Fig. 5 (top)
Façade view of three accommodation units within the African Village, Emoya Hotel and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.

Figs. 6a, 6b (above)
Interior space of an African Village accommodation unit featuring a rough concrete wash room and a small sitting area, Emoya Hotel and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.



Figs. 7a (above), b (far right), c (right)
Interior decorative flourishes based on a township aesthetic, Emoya Resort and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.



Fig. 8 (right)
Exterior iron / zinc metal cladding over an industrial concrete frame, Emoya Resort and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.

Fig. 9 (below right)
Broken-down motorcycle lawn ornament, Emoya Resort and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.

Fig. 10 (below)
African Village unit featuring an Apartheid-era block or census designation, Emoya Resort and Spa, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.



rest of the resort acted as a mode of strategically choreographing human movement into specific repertoires of action and encounter, particularly between guests and staff. The location of the complex was largely distanced from areas where one might interact casually with Emoya personnel; yet it was also conveniently located near resort amenities such as the restaurant, the *shebeen* or bar (another notable appropriation of a township institution),⁵ a miniature golf course, and a driving range (Figs. 11a and 11b). Thus, this organization also aimed to generate a particular type of performative hierarchy that, in conjunction with one's physical experience of the space, reinforced the power relationships inherent within the spatial and aesthetic strategies deployed within this complex.

Power relationships at the Emoya were expressed in economic terms as well. Despite its claim that the African Village sought to “arouse sympathy for millions of people in South Africa living in poor conditions” (Hewitt 2013), guests were only able to experience the aforementioned “sympathy” to the tune of around \$90 American dollars a night, about a fourth of what most township residents earn annually. In addition, after World Cup clientele eventually dissipated, a majority of those who opted to stay at the Emoya were (and are) white South African families, a group that sits in the top tier of South Africa’s current socio-economic demographic. Among these visitors, the African Village complex was particularly attractive to children according to the Emoya’s public relations administrative staff. Oftentimes, parents would opt to stay in the aforementioned luxurious Basotho Village nearby, while their children took up residence in the African Village, which was described as being similar to a particularly adventurous camping trip. This ascription of child-like whimsy to this environment was reinforced by the fact that, as a game reserve, animals often come wandering in and out of the concession (Fig. 12), which created a somewhat surreal “township safari” experience in which both the accommodations and the animals themselves functioned as fetishized props in the performance of a hybrid South African township-bush experience.

These elements collectively molded the African Village into a type of inverse panopticon in which visitors were given sanction to



Figs. 11a, b (above)

The Emoya’s miniature golf course and shebeen (bar), located adjacent to the African Village, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.

Fig. 12 (below)

An ostrich decides to visit the African Village, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.



actively consume space and occupy imagined bodies through a spatialized experience whose authenticity remained unchallenged by any type of genuine interaction or dialogue. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that experiences such as those offered by the African Village and others have so often been the subjects of heated criticism, typically drawing the charge of promoting poverty or slum tourism, which is notable for its purposeful manipulation of disenfranchised spaces and communities towards enabling their comfortable consumption by an exterior audience.

The term slum, sometimes used interchangeably with squatter settlement or informal settlement, is a pejorative designation associated with the marginal, the ephemeral, and the survival-minded. These terms have often been used interchangeably, connected by the fact that they are all seen to refer to a state of lack and are used to describe a non-negotiated condition of being placeless or dislocated (Dovey and King 2011: 11). Yet in the contemporary period, slums have come to experience a sort of fetishistic popularity through the growth of tourist enterprises surrounding these areas not only in South Africa but around the world. As Booyens and Rogerson note, “international tourists have evolved ‘a taste for slums’ and ... urban poverty tours are a tourism product with visits to slums increasingly a ‘must do’ item on the bucket list of Northern tourists travelling to destinations such as Brazil, India, Kenya, or South Africa” (2019: 52). Building on a practice that began as early as Victorian England, when members of the socio-economic elite would tour the city’s “squalid East

End” (2019: 52), slum tourism maintains numerous problematic dimensions with regards to the power of visibility and its ability to normalize inequity. Some have compared poverty tourism to the reification of colonial-era “patterns of discourse” in which “‘North’ and ‘South’ are specifically reproduced in practices of ‘othering’” (2019: 54). More common is the comparison of poverty tourism with “the organized exploitation of poverty” whereby in “turning people’s lives and miseries into a spectacle, slum tours are inherently exploitative and morally questionable at best” (2019: 55). Supporting this, Nisbett notes that the “normalization, romanticisation, and depoliticization of poverty legitimizes social inequality and diverts attention away from the state and its responsibility for poverty reduction” (Nisbett 2017: 44 qtd. in Booyens and Rogerson 2019: 55).

Yet the use of townships as an architectural and cultural template for the African Village is not only provocative because it plays into a contemporary tourism fade of the so-called “third world,” but also because townships maintain an infamous history in South Africa as one of the most iconic and infamous tools used by the Apartheid government from the late 1940s to the early 1990s to enact violence and oppression on the country’s non-white population. The formalization of townships by the Apartheid regime on the peripheries of major urban centers allowed the separation of non-white urban workers from the primarily white urban centers and the containment of these workers within a space that would prevent their political unification and subsequent empowerment. In addition, these areas were tightly controlled and organized, largely according to an approach to temporary workforce housing developed by architects and planners working out of the University of Witwatersrand based on Le Corbusier’s *Ville Contemporaine* (1922), which seemed to provide a sustainable solution for “the positive yet controlled movement of a black population as temporary labor” (Findley and Ogbu 2011). One result of this approach would be the formulation of the now-iconic township matchbox house (Fig. 13), named so because of its uniform rectangular shape and size. Constructed in evenly spaced rows, these homes were deployed as a mode of making township design not only orderly but also

Fig. 13
Row of mid-20th
century matchbox
houses built in the
Sharpville District,
Soweto, South Africa,
2016. Photo by author.



transparent and easily surveilled.

The groundswell of discontentment that emerged in the 70s and 80s, however, catalyzed by events such as the shooting of Hector Pieterse in 1976 and the death of Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, while in police custody in 1977, would eventually generate widespread revolutionary momentum—much of which emerged from township spaces across the country. In addition, the unchecked growth of informal dwelling structures within township areas between the years 1960 and 1983 increasingly dissolved their tightly regulated legibility, leading to the ultimate dissolution of their Apartheid-enforced layout. Through the active sabotage of their rigid spatial order and the subsequent concealment of the evolving landscape, townships would play a large role in strengthening anti-Apartheid movements by essentially loosening the government's organizational grip on these areas by the late 1980s. The dissolution of Apartheid in the early 1990s, followed by the election of Nelson Mandela as the nation's first democratically elected leader in 1994, would be the eventual result.

Townships would subsequently assume a new identity in the immediate post-Apartheid period as a result of South Africa's evolving sense of self and the desire of the new independence-era government to generate symbols of national identity in material form. The period of the early 1990s when nationalistic fervor was at its height thus became a period notable for the implementation of numerous broad-based initiatives designed to promote both a unified national heritage and rectify deep-seated socio-economic inequities that had informed South African national space for centuries. Manifestations of this independence-era optimism most immediately emerged in the form of post-1994 memorial and commemorative spaces designed to embody South Africa's aspirational vision as a Rainbow Nation, a descriptor first used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe South Africa's emergence onto the global stage in 1994. Spaces like the Walter Sisulu Square in Kliptown (Fig. 14), named after South African anti-Apartheid activist Walter Sisulu,⁶ and new museum institutions like the now-iconic Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg (Fig. 15), designed by Mashabane Rose and Associates,⁷ became structural manifestations of



this nation-building agenda.

Likewise, a number of social amelioration projects were introduced in the early 1990s towards “redress[ing] the imbalances of the past and re-direct[ing] economic development” through a focus on sustainable people-driven approaches to eliminating poverty, improving infrastructure, and perhaps most importantly, constructing affordable housing for the millions still living in informal shelters (Bailey 2017: 1). Townships, thus, became the primary focus of a strategic plan to generate sustainable housing developments for a vast segment of the population. In 1994, the newly empowered ANC (African National Congress) introduced the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), which focused on the utilization of public resources and input to generate sustainable solutions to the problems of contemporary living. As

Fig. 14 (top)
studioMAS, Walter
Sisulu Square,
Kliptown, Soweto,
South Africa, 2016.
Photo by author.

Fig. 15 (above)
Mashabane Rose
and Associates,
Apartheid Museum,
Johannesburg, South
Africa, 2016. Photo by
author.

one of the flagship social programs of the new government, RDP was not only seen as a mode of building an equitable society through public housing, but also more broadly as an approach to socio-economic inequity through which “the country could take up an effective role within the world community” (Bailey 2017: 2). South Africa’s first social housing project, known colloquially as RDP housing (Fig. 16) and then later GEAR (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution) housing, would end up accommodating a little less than half of the estimated 12.5 million South Africans in need of official housing between 1994 and 2001, which in actuality was no small feat.

Yet numerous problems would come to afflict this program. For one, many RDP housing units were located a fair distance from resources including stores, schools, and health services, leading to issues of accessibility. Likewise,

infrastructural elements including sanitation, electricity, and roads were not established in collaboration with the housing itself, making living in these spaces far less feasible (Bailey 2017: 2). The quality of these homes was also a major complaint both because of the poor materials used to build as well as the rampant corruption among the companies contracted to build these units. In response, the Department of Human Settlements would develop a National Housing Rectification Program in 2012 which was designed to persecute corrupt contractors and fix defective units to the standard set by the South African National Bureau of Standards and the National Home Builder Registration Council. Yet for many, this move was futile in the long run. As a representative from the Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA, an advocate for the rights of township shackdwellers noted: “The RDP came and went and we remained impoverished ...” (qtd. in Bailey 2017: 4).

Similar issues would affect the country’s heritage program as well, as the social and economic reverberations of Apartheid’s traumatic legacy continued to be felt in the decades following independence. Not only were economic divides continuing to shape the contours of the country’s demographics, but there was also deep disagreement with regards to what South Africa’s national heritage and character should encompass moving forward. Aspirational themes like pluralism, which were adopted full-stop at the birth of South African independence as a marker of a democratic society, increasingly ran up against tensions and anxieties associated with its usage during the Apartheid regime as a method of “encourag[ing] fragmentation and ... oppos[ing] a holistic view of culture” (Martin 1996: 3). Likewise, the growth of heritage sites and archives as unifying institutions were saddled with fraught historical baggage like the Historical Monuments Commission of 1934, which actively preserved and protected the built landscapes of both Boer settlers and colonists, and the later National Monuments Act of 1969, which promoted the conservation of monuments exalting white Afrikaner segregationist and nationalistic ideologies. Such histories not only overshadowed emergent initiatives but also cast suspicion on policies associated with them such as the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999,

Fig. 16 (below)
RDP / GEAR housing
complexes under
construction, Kliptown,
Soweto, South Africa,
2016. Photo by author.

Fig. 17 (bottom)
View of Kliptown, one
of the oldest and most
historic neighborhoods
in Soweto, South Africa,
2016. Photo by author.



which aimed to give voice to previously marginalized histories as a “program of nation building” and education (Delmont 2004: 30). In addition, certain ideologies, and the sites and monuments associated with them, came to be viewed as subtle modes of establishing authority over the country’s past through narratives that had the potential to silence certain segments of the population whose histories and contemporary realities ran counter to the chosen discourse.⁸ The overarching fear remaining in the contemporary period with regards to these movements can be summarized in German historian Martin Broszat’s approach to monuments in that they “may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations” (Broszat 1988 qtd. in Young 1992: 272).

Thus, for many, South Africa’s newly established commemorative spaces have come to represent in stark fashion the biases and divisions that continue to inform South African reality in uncomfortable and awkward ways, in direct contrast to the “pageantry” of an idealized union (Furman 2017) that many post-Apartheid South African national monuments have struggled to craft. Likewise, townships themselves continue to exist as largely socio-politically depressed areas, currently housing over half of South Africa’s poor urban population and stretching out in ever-growing makeshift sprawls on the edges of major urban areas like Johannesburg and Cape Town (Fig. 17). Often composed of diverse structural types, these spaces are defined by a lack of state-sponsored infrastructure, which has led to problems with crime in addition to major sanitation crises and public health epidemics such as tuberculosis and HIV. In addition, their lack of connection to sanctioned government operations has also generated a number of stereotypes in South African society that brand these spaces as illegitimate, even parasitic sites of illegal dwelling. In particular, these spaces are said to tax already overburdened settlements like Soweto (Johannesburg), Mitchell’s Plain (Cape Town), and Manguang (Bloemfontein), and contribute to the ideological subversion of South Africa as a developed, progressive democratic society. Further, South Africa’s townships have come to be associated with other global environments including the favelas of Brazil and the bidonvilles

of Algeria under the aforementioned umbrella category of slum.

In the face of these setbacks with regard to the country’s social and heritage-based agenda, sites like the African Village and others have come to fill this void predominantly due to their reality as blunt symbolic instruments that shoe-horn the historical, cultural, and national legacies of a country into singular legible environments—legible in the sense that tourist environments perhaps more than any other genre of built environment are intimately responsive to the political, cultural, and socio-economic currents of society.⁹ Because of this, these sites are able to engage in numerous strategies of representation and identity construction that evolve over time and in reaction to socio-political, cultural, and economic ebbs and flows, continuously filtering, renovating, and repurposing history and reality through calculated structural vocabularies that are framed as programs of cultural symbols. Through their engagement with this type of problematic cultural authorship, defined as it is by the manipulation of representation, such sites can also paradoxically participate in the development of contemporary national codes, particularly as read by an incoming tourist audience (Jones 2006: 550). Sites like the African Village capitalize on the symbolic capital of historically-embedded environments like the township and, by coding it as a uniquely South African landscape, position it as an inherent part of South African identity writ large and thus a key aspect of an authentic South African experience. In addition, as a spatial symbol of extreme poverty, inequity, and disenfranchisement, the township maintains the symbolic authority to stand as a structural representation of South Africa’s problematic social, political, and cultural realities, able to activate various traumatic and oppressive historical narratives and frame them as integral parts of the nation’s heritage. To this end, tourist sites like the African Village potentially function as litmus tests for how a country sees its history, its past traumas and oppressions, and its current reality within visualizations and conceptualizations of national culture and identity. As a fundamentally economic enterprise that keeps a heavy finger on the pulse of the South African contemporary condition, tourist sites like the African Village embody “architecture’s capacity to represent

abstract values materially, and indeed often literally ‘in concrete,’ providing a tangible focus for identity discourses of many kinds (Jones 2006: 550).

So what might be said to be the work that tourist environments like the African Village do in the contemporary period and in the context of South Africa national identity? For one, hyper-exploitative spaces like the African Village simulate a built environment that has shaped and continues to define the contours of lived reality of many in South Africa in the contemporary period. As such, spaces like the African Village establish a simulacrum of experience that spectacularizes the contemporary socio-political mechanics of contemporary South African reality, particularly with regards to different positions of power and authority that exist within diverse social, political, and economic spheres in South African society (Dovey and King 2011: 26). In addition, the production of such questionable, fraught spaces within tourist environments like the African Village also underscore architecture’s symbolic currency or economy as a form able to provoke uncomfortable and uncanny (even as they are fundamentally artificial) experiences for an audience. This enables sites like African Village to elide the persistent state of uncertainty in which a majority of South African citizens exist as the lingering remnants of an oppressive past continue to inform the lived reality of those in the present.

Yet this is not to say that all township-based tourism enterprises engage in purposeful acts of exploitation. Beyond the African Village, there are numerous contemporary tourist offerings addressing townships in South Africa that attempt to move in the direction of framing township experiences as a mode of elevating awareness of the impacts of imperial institutions like colonialism and capitalism while also encouraging “both equitable and ethical” tourism practices that:

would have several benefits to both tourists and residents inter alia, forge bonds of solidarity between visitors and those visited, promote mutual understanding, enhance the self-sufficiency and self-determination of local communities, and maximize local economic, cultural, and social impacts. (Booyens and Rogerson 2019: 53)

Experiences including township homestays, walking and cycling tours, music and art demonstrations, and the opportunity to experience food and “drinkatainment” (Booyens and Rogerson 2019: 54) are positioned as experiences that “assist tourists to understand poverty by situating it within a politics of place, and in the context of neoliberalism” (Nisbett 2017: 44 qtd. in Booyens and Rogerson 2019: 54). In addition, by enabling connections with the reality of township life and the experiences of residents who in this case are able to control their representation, these types of tourist experiences give township environments the agency to resist their collapse into singular, reductionist narratives. This agency is strengthening by provoking visitors to engage in exercises of self-reflection towards recognizing the nature of “their assumptions, worldviews, attitudes and behaviours” and “interrogating personal misconceptions and allowing self-transformation; embracing ambivalence, complexity and uncertainty; and, critiquing own and others’ tourism behaviours” (Mkono 2016: 208, 217 qtd. in Booyens and Rogerson 2019: 55). Townships thus transform from sites of exhibition to sites of self-fashioning, pushing back against the role of Apartheid-era strategies of township production that would use space to construct the individual rather than the other way around. The modes through which contemporary township citizens have actively claimed ownership over township space through the launch of tourism projects that showcase unique blends of ingenuity and individual representation, reveal a pride of place that many residents feel with regards to their lived environment. Importantly as well, it is a pride that speaks to the fact that while most residents within township communities may live in a state of poverty and disenfranchisement, they are in no way defined by it.

Yet in turning back to the African Village within this realm of interpretation, there exists a stark contrast between the reality of the township as a dynamic living space and its construction within the African Village as a museumified, exhibitionary tableaux. The African Village essentially exists as an “anesthetization of poverty” (Sanyal 2015), a modified township simulation that absorbs the biases, assumptions, and romanticized notions applied to it and reflects back a reaffirmation of these same

biases, unproblematized and without blemish, to the tourist eye (Dovey and King 2011: 24). Indeed, it exists as a type of Barthesian myth in which specific spatial languages that have been embedded within popular imaginings of South Africa, poverty, and other large-scale stereotypical apparatuses are deployed towards creating a “definitive hallucinatory space of the colonial imagination” (Van Eeden 2004: 18). As a purpose-built faux accommodation, the African Village has taken the vernacular of township environments as a template towards generating a landscape that cannot function beyond its capacity as a tourist attraction due to its elision of the realities of township living and identity, which in turn renders it innocuous (Van Eeden 2004: 20). In this way, spaces like the African Village engage in an insidious displacement of reality that subjugates an animate environment in favour of its own presence. Instead of acknowledging reality, it begins to do the actual work of reality for tourist stakeholders, discharging individuals from the obligation of recognizing false simulation, and/or their privilege in the face of it, and crafting representation along the lines of a manufactured authenticity. Important to note at this point as well is the obvious fact that authenticity here is a subjective component; yet it is a component that, in the case of the African Village, has not been in any way assessed by any of the individuals for whom township living defines a major aspect of their structural and geographic reality. As an emblematic landscape, the African Village in many ways thus becomes incapable of referencing events or environments beyond itself, resulting in a landscape that “motion[s] endlessly to its own gesture to [township history and space]... forever trying to [represent landscapes] it never actually knew” (Young 1992: 273).

The township not only evokes violent and traumatic histories but also represents massive, extreme forms of socio-economic disenfranchisement. There is the danger that the commodification of environments like the township could potentially sanitize these histories and realities towards making them more digestible and benign to a contemporary populace through the process of consumerism. Not only do sites like the African Village freeze histories and memories within a predefined genre of structural and narrative articulation (ignoring the fact that such

environments and their histories are protean events with their own material and conceptual arcs) but also establish a hierarchy of consumptive visuality informed by conditions of either seeing/consuming versus being seen/consumed. As such, in reducing township spaces to artless structural stereotypes, the African Village “distorts, mystifies, obfuscates, and mythologizes culture and history, fashioning a kitsch simulacrum in their stead...” and in turn, develops the capacity to “perpetuate ideological constructs” (Van Eeden 2004: 20, 33).

As such, accommodations like the African Village become exhibitionary environments that enable incoming tourists to transform the township as a spatial genre into a theatrical space where the performance of disempowerment and poverty is enacted for outsiders. The so-called spatial realities of the township life are collapsed into a digestible South African cultural experience package for a largely wealthy clientele. From this position, tourists are able to casually observe or inhabit a township environment as a relic unearthed for their enjoyment without risking potential exposure to unsanctioned native agents and the subsequent contamination of one’s sanitized culture.

Thus with regards to the so-called work that experiences like the African Village and others do in the contemporary period with regards to South African national space, through their strategic distortion and commodification of national histories and legacies, these sites engage in subversive representation with regards to ideas of authenticity and spaces of national performance. Using symbolically saturated environments, sites like the African Village divest such symbols—architectural, visual, material—of their original history towards making them “relative to a subject” (Baudrillard 1994: 7). This is one of the reasons that the African Village itself is so evocative. Colonial fantasies, ethnographic encounters, and more recently, spectacles of poverty, violence, and trauma have increasingly come to function as the descriptive visual and spatial vocabularies of authentic cultural experience in contemporary South Africa. Through the creation of structural environments that actively evoke spectacles of encounter for a consumption-oriented audience, such environments come to function as spatial traces of the contours of South African history

and identity. Not only are they suggestive of a type of perverse authenticity, but they also transform themselves into an inadvertent toolkit for the illustration and allocation of national type. In doing so, they also subsequently venture beyond the triumphant rhetoric spatialized by South Africa's idealized monument-building program to locate ideas of contemporary South African cultural experience within structural vocabularies of violence, spectacle, and consumer display through a strategic architectural experience.

Notes

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1. For more on the intersections of national monumental spaces with post-Apartheid political discourse, see Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994), Coombes (2003), Delmont (2004), Freschi (2007), and Rassool (2000).
2. "Unity in diversity" was a philosophy first introduced by the Apartheid government in 1981 as part of their independence celebrations from Great Britain and later embedded into the preamble of South Africa's 1996 constitution as a fundamental element of post-Apartheid South African national identity.
3. As a type of settlement, "township" has been used to identify different types of communities in different societies, although most tend to be notably non-urban and potentially part of a larger administrative unit, such as a county. Within South Africa, however, the township occupies a very specific socio-political space as a residential area in which non-white citizens were confined so as to be separate from white communities during the Apartheid regime. It is a landscape that continues to house a vast majority of South Africa's current urban poor (see Mahajan 2014).
4. It should be noted that attempts to identify and contact the developers / architects / contractors responsible for the African Village complex have been largely unsuccessful. Neither the Free State Provincial Archives Repository nor the Department of Public Works nor the Manguang Metropolitan Municipality have been able to find this information and the staff at the Emoya were likewise uninformed. Numerous attempts to contact Mr. Westraad have been unsuccessful. Data pieced together from various sources seem to indicate that the L2B development firm entered into a contractual agreement with the Emoya to construct 80 accommodation units in the early 2000s, although it is unclear whether those units were part of the African Village complex or the Basotho complex. Other developers have worked in additional capacities at the Emoya including Felix Kramer, the building contractor responsible for constructing the platform on which an aircraft purchased by Westraad currently sits in the process of renovation. Likewise, Westraad also has a relationship with Devostep LTD., who have been engaged to build a series of villas on the property as well.
5. A *shebeen* is an unlicensed establishment that sells alcoholic beverages and can take any number of structural forms ranging from private residences and backrooms to makeshift structures on various street corners.
6. Walter Sisulu was also member of the African National Congress and would eventually serve as Secretary-General and Deputy President of the organization.
7. Mashabane Rose and Associates also played a role in the development of the Hector Pieterse Memorial Museum, the Robben Island Millennium Museum, and Pretoria's Freedom Park.
8. The now-iconic Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg is one such institution that has come under fire recently for promoting institutionally mediated memory. The museum opened in 2001 as a space intended to commemorate a

“difficult past,” which is defined by Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002: 58) as a past characterized by an inherent “moral trauma” that generates largely contrary desires among different stakeholders to either remember and commemorate or forget and erase. The museum’s program attempts to generate narrative not through dialogue and debate, but through what Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi term “overarching consensus,” in which a great degree of mediation and control

is exercised over both the form and the content of the space (2008: 58).

9. Other similar types of tourist experiences currently offered in South Africa that have come to occupy a similar type of sensationalistic national space include various cultural villages, safari lodging experiences, settler frontier resorts, and even various ecologically-g geared sites, all of whom pull from specific, almost mythologized aspects of a South African national identity.

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