

THE RIDER MONUMENT: CONTESTED SPACE

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In the *Namibian Weekender* of Friday September 17, 2004, the newspaper solicited for public opinion on the streets of Windhoek asking people what they think about the 'vandalism' or heritage terms the 'defacing' of the equestrian monument (popularly known as the Rider) or Das Reiterdenkmal. Sets of questions were put to the public, asking them who did it (vandalism)? When? And How? According to the newspaper, "...the most burning question is WHY?" Varied answers were extracted from the public, fairly representative of Namibian society's diverse opinions.

One respondent worthy of reciting here is one of the people responsible for designing the monument: "...what went through their minds? What were they really trying to say? This captures the central theme of this opinion piece, that we should be asking ourselves why the defacing happened but what should be done to the monument itself to prevent acts of vandalism as the one under discussion. One doesn't need to look far for the answer to the WHY question because it is already provided by the newspaper in the introduction to the article: That the rider monument is a "...majestic sculpture of a giant

German soldier...surveying the conquered country spread out below his powerful steed..."

Almost fifteen years into independence, ninety years after German colonial rule ended in Namibia and one hundred years after the 1904 - 1908 war to which the rider bears testimony, this monument still celebrates and represents German conquering power, and doing so in a very exclusive and majestic manner. Majestic in terms of sculpture without any visual counter history except for the historical narration displayed in the Alte Feste, itself hidden from public view for those not wishing to enter in there. The monument is also majestic in terms of space, on a hilltop overlooking the city which the Germans of the time claim they 'founded', in front of the old fort (Alte Feste), which is supposedly the first building in Windhoek, just right of parliament, the houses of laws, but also Foreign Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister, OPM and present Cabinet Chambers. Just across the street is the new Bank of Namibia. The monument is also situated on Robert Mugabe Ave, where the new state house is being built. A sign of total control and conquest even in the eyes of the present political other. It's important to keep in mind that the contention in

heritage is more than just about what monuments are erected, but also the spaces they occupy in a given townscape or landscape. The space a monument occupies in a given townscape tells much about its place in the history of that given space. The rider therefore and the period it represents, in terms of space, still occupies a very prime place in Namibian history. *The physical space it occupies can be interpreted as a hill of power politically (Parliament), culturally (museum headquarters) and economically (Bank of Namibia).* We would provide possible suggestions later of what should be done to the monument to make it more appealing to the wider and specifically Namibian public.

Cultural heritage studies and in particular the theory of material culture is fast becoming a recognised social science that aims at unravelling the hidden semantics of cultural landscapes. Cities worldwide adopt a conscious approach of encoding information concerning their history, development and values in landscapes, monuments and gardens. The city of Windhoek has a fair share of monuments commencing in 1896 with the erection of the Witbooi rebellion monument (as it was known then) or the Witbooi campaign (as we know it today) in what

was to become the Zoo Park. Over the following many years more monuments were commissioned and erected. Some gaining national status in the process as they were either proclaimed as such or provisionally proclaimed. Most of the monuments in Windhoek however remain of a local and colonial value. In recent years other monuments of national and international value were unveiled, chief among them is the Heroes Acre National Monument, the provisional proclamation of the Old Location Cemetery and the Augustino Neto Park (inclusive of a street and a bust of Augustino Neto, *the first President of Angola*).

From a heritage practice point of view such monuments function as text that can be deciphered to reveal issues such as social, economic and political situations of the times in which they were unveiled and the continuous invention of new meanings through time and use of the monuments. The use and meanings of monuments is rarely static. New meanings are invented as new generations of city dwellers and visitors interact with the monuments. Our focus in this article is on the use and meaning of the Equestrian monument. The monument has generated a great interest in past especially the recent past (after independence). Newspaper articles abound with suggestions of what should be done to it, *such as relocation, removal from public view or adding captions that will make it more acceptable*. The monument to our view commemorates the "victors" of the 1904-1908 war and in so doing conveniently forgets the political other actors of the same war. It therefore serves to express solidarity and loyalty to the Kaiser's empire by remembering the dead and deliberately forgetting the exterminated.

The rider was commissioned and sculptured in Germany. It was unveiled in 1911 and has since then become synonymous with the cultural landscape in Windhoek. It is one of the most appropriated iconography in Namibia having been used on beer bottles and many other advertisements that were aimed at showing the real South West Africa. Today some visitors (mostly from Germany) view the rider and the public space around it as sacred. This is evidenced by the ritual pilgrimage that they make to it, which is sometimes complemented by lying of wreaths in front of the monument. However, a new pragmatic use of the rider monument has been observed recently.

The monument has been used as a place for expressing protest and dissent. The horse (which forms part of the monument) has been painted in white commercial paint with the words "SLAVE". These words are seen on the left side of the horse (when facing north) that is in public view. On the right side of the horse is an elaborate swastika in white paint. A closer inspection of the monument by Heritage Solutions revealed some earlier writing in red and black paint that reads "I LOVE S.W.A." This scenario raises questions such as who is responsible for "defacing" the monument, when was this done and why? We leave the first two to the National Monuments Council to investigate. Our concern is merely to decode the reasons or the message that is encoded in the act of defacing monuments.

It is not a novel and unique practice to Namibia to express protest on monuments. Our earlier research in South Africa (2001) has shown that the Cecil John Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town was used several times to express dissent and protest especially in the 1970s and 1980s by students who held opposing views to the government of the day. Such expressions included painting the statue pink, daubing it with grease and even painting a swastika on it. The reasoning behind such acts is that monuments by nature communicate many meanings publicly and thus are targets of expressions of opposing views. In so doing the monuments and public spaces assume a new function; that of a public forum where the dialectics of power and resistance are discussed. Our tentative conclusion is the fact that the rider monument is viewed as expressing loyalty to the empire (even long after the decolonisation of the last colony in Africa) the use of the monument to express protest, in this case, articulates the complex processes that are at play as far as ideologies of the past are concerned. One such ideology is the genocide of 1904. It is our contention that it is by no means a coincidence that the horse has been publicly graffitied exactly 100 years after the genocide. Therefore this can be interpreted as opposition to a long gone empire whose effects remain fresh in the memory of Namibians. The rider is a continuous reminder of this empire. In other words a hurting past still haunts Namibia. It is a form of nostalgic dissent or protest in retrospect.

The danger with such a postulation is that it may lead to witch hunting that

will point to a particular group as being the likely authors of the graffiti but our submission is that the author of the words could be anyone who wants to express their opinion about the events of 1904. Are there any lessons to be learned? Perhaps the greatest question here is how safe are Namibian monuments (both new and old)? Does the National Monuments Council have a policy and programme/strategy for monitoring monuments? If so how widely disseminated is it? Are there educational programmes designed for important sites and monuments such as the Heroes Acre so that the youth can learn more about Namibian history and learn not to disfigure monuments? So many questions.

One respondent suggested that "...we should be very proud of this: (that) the Denkmal is still standing." suggesting that a worst scenario could have occurred or might occur. But what should be done to ensure it remains standing? One practical suggestion would be to re-contextualize the monument in terms of meaning, to append new meanings to it through revisiting its inscriptions (the monument still carries the old National Monuments symbol). Currently, the inscription, in the German language, tells only of the German side of the story, with assistance of a bigger display in the German Church just across the street to the north of the monument. The 'political other' is left out, in this case the OvaHerero, the Damara and Nama who were also part of this war. Where are their stor(y)ies? Just on the foot of the Alte Feste, for example, was reportedly a prisoner of war camp, can this be used as a form of landscape re-interpretation in relation to the rider to give voice to the silent/submerged stories of the political other in this representation?

Our contention is that what should be done to the Rider Monument if it has to evade defacing, is a process of transformation in what it represents, to create what one academic referred to as a 'Community of Memory'. A community of memory is a 'shared' recollection of the past that combines celebration with critique. A useful community of memory focuses not only on exemplary lives but also on "suffering received ...and...suffering inflicted". Therefore, it is better not to shoot the people responsible for defacing the monument as one respondent suggests, but to shoot the offensive message the monument carries, the question is how? This is left for debate.