

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: MONUMENTS AS METAPHORS

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ABSTRACT

Large artifacts such as buildings, statues and open spaces are patterned through time in particular political, social and economic circumstances. The dialectics of power, domination and resistance that characterised the period in which the artifacts were fashioned can be understood by reading the artifacts as silent texts. If we decipher the grammar, metaphors and the symbolism that is embedded in the large artifacts then we can understand their meaning. By developing tools that can enable us to understand the spatial setting, time and social contexts of monuments, it becomes possible to unravel the puzzle of their extralinguistic character. This paper discusses some of the issues that appear to be communicated through the symbolism of three statues from the University of Cape Town (U.C.T.).

Archaeology concerns itself with the study of artifacts. Historical archaeology, in particular, studies the artifacts about which some written texts exist. One way of getting to the hidden meaning of artifacts is by reading them as silent texts. Such an approach gives the archaeologists an unfair advantage over other disciplines that do not make use of archaeological approaches. Archaeologists try to understand the meaning of objects by placing them into a context. One way of achieving the objective of understanding the meaning of artifacts is by viewing material culture as a set of systems of communication.

Using by Martin Hall's (1993) definition of historical archaeology as "the archaeology of colonialism" it is possible to understand the dialectics of power, domination and resistance. Cape Town being an early site of contact between Europe and Southern Africa offers a variety of material culture that can be studied to answer some questions about domination and resistance. The dominant ideologies of the nineteenth to the twentieth century Cape Town can be understood by studying the symbolic meaning of the City's monuments. This paper discusses some of the interesting issues that are communicated through three statues that represent the three different stages of the development of the University of Cape Town namely, the Cecil John Rhodes statue, "From the Hoerikwagga" figure and the "Alma Mater" sculpture.

The statue of Cecil Rhodes was sculpted by Marion Walgate. It was commissioned in 1934 by the then Governor General, Earl of Clarendon. The statue sits above the rugby fields in the upper campus of the University. It is fixed onto a granite wall (Fig. 1). There is an inscription in both Afrikaans and English that reads:

I DREAM A DREAM/ BY ROCK AND HEATH AND
PINE/ OF EMPIRE NORTHWARDS/ AY ONE LAND/
FROM THE LION'S HEAD TO THE LINE

These words by Rudyard Kipling aptly describe Rhodes' ambitions that will be described in this paper. The statue portrays Rhodes sitting a pondering posture with the chin in the right palm while the elbow rests on his thigh. This posture has prompted comments such as "...his spirit is still brooding over the Cape Flats" by the Cape Argus (November 21/1962) for instance.

The statue is strategically placed facing northwards. It stands on the granite steps that lead to the academic departments and lecture theatres. Less than a metre behind it runs a road that offers vehicular entrance to the upper campus. A survey of photographs dating to pre-1962 reveals that this is not the statue's original position. It used to stand below the rugby field where the current subway is. It was moved during the construction of the subway. During the pre-1962 period an iron fence to the south and wooden fence to the north enclosed the statue. The iron fence resembles what has been suggested to be a typical feature of the Rhodesian house veranda in Zimbabwe by Jackson (1989). Besides the upper campus buildings in the background, part of Table Mountain concludes the spatial setting for the statue. All these features contribute to the statue's expression of Rhodes' inspiration, dreams and aspirations.

It is worthwhile to place the statue into the broader context of the University's conception. One of the pivotal features in architecture and planning is the development of an axis. This has become a very important exercise in field



Fig. 1. The Cecil John Rhodes statue on the upper campus of the University of Cape Town. Photograph: David Worth.

archaeology as well. One has to develop a datum point from which the site and its features can be referred. In the case of the Groote Schuur campus, Solomon, the University's original architect (Phillips 1993) developed the axis. The architect drew an axis that ran up the Japonica walk through the Summerhouse to the Devil's peak (Phillips 1993). 'his shows that from 1901, (when the initial sketches were presented), the Japonica walk, Summerhouse and Devil's peak formed an integral part of the axis from which Solomon's integrative architectural vision would be developed. It is this notion of one whole that makes the post-1962 position of the Rhodes statue very interesting. When the statue was removed from its original position to the new location it was aligned on the axis. The pre-1962 photographs reveal that it was not in the axis. Placing it on the axis, therefore, suggests some interesting interpretations.

Firstly, it can be interpreted as a deliberate act of acknowledging the centrality and importance of Rhodes the human being to the University of Cape Town. The statue emphasises the role that Rhodes played in the establishment of the Institution and furthermore acknowledges the fact that the original college was constructed on part of his Groote Schuur estate. In its original position the statue was 'fortified' as described above by an iron and wood fence. In the second aligned location the fence motif is dropped. This allows for a second interpretation. Making the statue more

accessible by not caging it suggests conformity. The present site of the Groote Schuur campus was a cause for contention. Some citizens resisted the building of the University in Rondebosch because it would hinder their access to the beautiful gardens of the Groote Schuur estate (Phillips 1993). The discontentment was, however, resolved by a promise that the area will remain accessible to the general public. Doing away with the enclosure motif is testimony that the promise was still honoured even four decades later. This indicates to some degree the continuity of Solomon's original plan, which emphasised accessibility. One other aspect of Solomon's plan that is conformed to is symmetry. If one draws a line through the Japonica walk to the Devil's peak one recognises that the line will symmetrically divide Rhodes Statue as it does to the Jameson Hall that is behind the statue. Some symbolism can be read from the new location of the statue. As pointed out above, a datum line is of great importance to the field archaeologist because that is where the survey and grid layout of the site is conceived. Placing the statue at the 'heart' of the spatial setting of the University is an unconscious act of immortalising Rhodes. The size of the statue emphasises this reminder. It is one and a half times life size. It broods over the campus 'like a colossus' and petty people pass by it to find themselves honourable an education, decades after the death of Cecil John Rhodes.

The fence that used to enclose the statue created a sacred atmosphere. As people opened the gates on their way to and from the upper campus, they engaged in a process of paying tribute to the individual on whose land their University is built. That the statue remains 'unprotected' can be interpreted as expressing a new value. The piece of art can be consumed by all and is thus open to different interpretations.

Table Mountain and the Cape overawed Cecil Rhodes. He regarded the Cape peninsula as his home. That he saw Cape Town as the most suitable place for educating the young people, who would uphold his aims of creation a Union of South Africa is hinted in his speech to the Congress of the Afrikaner Bond in 1891. Rhodes campaigned at this congress for the establishment of a university that would educate young people from all over South Africa, and even Mashonaland, (present day Zimbabwe). The spatial setting of the statue, with Table Mountain stretching behind it can be read as symbolising Rhodes' dreams. The breadth of the mountain inspired Rhodes' aim of broadening his empire. Historical facts prove that Rhodes nearly achieved his aim by subjugating the indigenous people, especially those of the present-day Zimbabwe and Zambia. These two countries were at one time Rhodes' land known as Southern and Northern Rhodesia. A replica of the statue sat in the Cecil Square (now Africa Unity Square) in the then Salisbury (Harare) until Zimbabwe attained independence. The breadth of Rhodes' dreams and his aim of creating a Cape to Cairo Empire were symbolised by the north orientation of the statue. This aim is further emphasised by the creation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which then

included the present day Malawi.

The interesting question is whether the statue is still meaningful more than sixty years after the Rhodes memorial committee presented it to the University? The bronze statue was sculptured to survive through time by assuming new meanings. Linking the past to the present can create the meanings. The idea of a university as a place of unionisation is still relevant but in a new paradigm. Students from the world over converge to share ideas and cultures. What has changed is the notion of a union. Instead of it being a Union of South Africa and the lands that Rhodes won for 'South Africa', the idea of a union can now be understood as an act of creating a 'rainbow' facade of the institution. The brooding spirit that is apparent on the face of the statue can no longer be seen as a contemplation of colonising lands and consolidating personal fortunes. It express the loss experienced with the changing times. The statue does not express the attitude of the university. Rather, it has been used in the past to express the differing attitudes towards colonialism. At one time some students painted the statue pink as a way of demonstrating their resentment of the 150th celebrations at the university (Cape Argus 14/09/79). In 1996 an advertising agent dressed the statue in jeans and included a placard reading "ANYONE CAN LOOK COOL IN JEANS". Thus the statue is seen as communicating a different message. It can therefore be safely concluded that the Rhodes statue is full of symbolism and its spatial setting is strategic.

The idea of unity is expressed, differently though, by the "From the Hoerikwagga" statue (simply referred to as Horeikwagga in this paper). It was sculptured in metal by Gavin Younge and presented to the University in 1984. The statue stands between the Jameson Memorial Hall and the students union with the Jagger Library as its backdrop. It is a figurine with human features. Its torso is broad and has a small head.

The statue is aimed at appealing to people to ponder for some inspiration. It represents the period before the establishment of the University. The statue pays tribute to the people about whom history is silent. This is suggested by its title, which is claimed to be the indigenous Khoi name for the Table Mountain (Monday Paper 3:36). The statue can be viewed as an effort of preserving what has been lost through the process of education. People refer to Table Mountain by its English name, and it ultimately appears as if an indigenous name for it never existed. This has happened with many aspects of indigenous cultures in Africa. They have been forgotten due to colonial 'civilisation'.

There is a power play suggested by the location of the statue. As described above, the statue is dwarfed by some buildings that are symbols of interaction between European forms of architecture and vernacular landscape. This further emphasises the question of unity discussed above. The location of the statue expresses harmony. If the Hoerikwagga is seen as representing the totality of the indigenous way of life, then the fact that its location suggests no conflict between European education (as represented by the

Library), religions that are foreign to the pre-colonial Cape (represented by the Jewish society housed in the student's union) describing the *modus operandi* of the University. It is therefore safe to assert that the Hoerikwagga celebrates a legacy of prehistoric existence and that such an existence plays a crucial role in our understanding and embracing of new ideas and challenges of the modern world.

One other monument that communicates a different message is the Alma Mater that is at the education building. It heralds a new era. The monument is a caryatid, a figure that is used in architecture, a column for supporting structures. It stands holding some geometric emblems in its hands. On its head rests a chameleon while another one is half way climbing up the mast. This statue although named the "Alma Mater or Bounteous Mother" (Monday Paper 15(32): 1), has no plaque or inscription that would suggest that it represents particular interests. It stands in front of the education building facing west. The sculptor, Bruce Amott, was commissioned by the University's Works of Art committee. The Works of Art Committee suggests the idea of a sculpture that celebrates the nurturing tradition of the university. Normally, the committee goes only as far as suggesting the parameters and funding the works but does not stipulate what they should be. This procedure was followed for the Hoerikwagga statue. The committee commissions an artist in terms of guidelines dating to the early 1980s, which stipulate that one percent of the total cost of every new building, or extensive refurbishment should be set aside for art. In cases where the piece of art is presented to the University, such as the Rhodes statue, the committee will consider whether or not the reasons for presentation ties in with the University ethos.

The Alma Mater statue is symbolic in that it is the only female monument in the University. When it is read in its time context, the monument expresses a sense of transformation. Being female, the statue acts as a metaphor of a challenge to the existing male dominant facade of the university society. It may not have been a mere coincidence that the monument was unveiled only a week after the installation of the first black female Vice Chancellor of the University. It may be argued, therefore, that this particular monument heralds a new era.

The chameleon on its head suggests that change, although at times necessary, should be approached at a slow and cautious pace. That the chameleon has already reached the top may be taken to symbolise the members of the academic fraternity who have achieved academic distinction. Such academics are viewed by their students as role models. Thus by facing downwards the chameleon suggests an act of beckoning and encouraging those who wish to attain academic excellence. It emphasises that the route to academic excellence is slow and tedious but achievable at the same time. It may be safely argued that the chameleon is a symbol of willingness to change with the times. Given the general political climate of South Africa, the chameleons on the statue appear to be communicating the university's readiness to accept the challenges of the "rainbow nation".

This monument is a silent expression of unity. That there is no plaque defining it suggests that any member of the University community can associate themselves with it. In other words it is through big silent artefacts such as this one that the notion of racial unity can be embraced and expressed.

The location of the monument is very interesting as it raises many suggestions. It stands in front of the education building, which is the central area of the whole Groote Schuur campus. The strategic location and its symbolism suggest unity. The unison agenda is expressed in both the cultural and social landscape in which it was placed. As has been argued above, the monument embraces the multiraciality of the University of Cape Town, and therefore, by locating it at the centre of the campus stresses that for transformation to succeed it has to be sought and expressed in all spheres of the institution. That it is oriented to the summerhouse appears to be emphasising the importance that the past plays in determining the future.

The height of the statue coupled with its location raises the question of prerogative elevation. The sculpture has an imposing height of 2,5 metres. This suggests the hierarchical order of the university society. It has a height that is analogous to the highest court in Biblical Athens - the Areopagus. Does this mean that the woman in the university has suddenly been elevated to royal dignity and social pre-eminence? If this is the case then the statue is a symbol of authority. As suggested already the sculpture is seen as a metaphor which challenges the patriarchal attitudes of society in general. In this case, then the statue heralds an era of elimination by substitution.

Worth commenting on is the style category in which the sculpture falls. In figural art, the size, shape and style of a piece operate to express an intended message (Cole 1989). The message can be intended or implied, that is, we have both the displayed and the metaphoric messages. That the monument is made in a naturalistic style, that is, it is complex and volumetric (Cole 1989) is a statement that expresses the complexity of the notion of transformation.

An attempt at interpreting monuments should take into account the social interpretation of some features in real life. The elongated neck shows the dignity of a woman. Thus in this context the statue can be viewed as an attempt at remodelling the way women are perceived in the society. The well-plaited hair symbolises the presentibility and dignity of a woman. Dignity, presentibility and responsibility are all qualities of a communal leader. The statue challenges the traditional male leadership trend and unequivocally asserts that women have leadership qualities as well.

The intended meaning of the figure becomes more clear when the values attached to it by its patrons are considered. The media plays a vital role in reinforcing these official values. In the case of the "Bounteous Mother" the Monday Paper Volume 15(32), has been responsible for explaining how the bronze sculpture should be understood. It is seen as a symbol of the 'normalisation' of the education system in South Africa and celebrates its (education) future. The

aspects of the 'normalisation' have been discussed above. It is worth emphasising, though, that the process of normalisation goes deeper than assuring equal opportunities to males and females or between the historically disadvantaged and the advantaged. A complete transformation involves a complete overhaul of the education system from primary to tertiary. The monument 'declares', furtively, that such a transformation should be ignited at the "academic blast furnaces"- universities.

Icons are made in certain political climates and are usually commissioned to support the value systems of a given political era. Most figures at University of Cape Town represent people who have contributed to the institution's birth and development. The Alma Mater, however, does not have facial features that resemble any known person. It is very easy to identify Rhodes, Baxter or Jagger for example. The lack of idiosyncratic features marks the difference between art and real life. It is a common aspect of African art (Cole 1989). The Alma Mater is not a portrait image. These silent qualities of the statue are vital for the production of an infinite variety of meanings that can be attached to the statue. The inner realities of life become alive through the visual conventions of this sculpture.

It may be safe, therefore, to argue that the university, being in a politically changing society needs to consider transforming policies that pertain to all its departments. These are challenges that the university is currently grappling with. This change cannot come overnight lest it be superficial and hence less durable. In this light the monument can be viewed as an expression of unity and transformation.

There are many causes of change of meaning of artefacts through time. The three artefacts discussed here illustrate two major causes: Translocation and Appropriation. It is appreciated that translocation is a form of appropriation but due to the effect it has on the change of meaning it is elevated to the same status with appropriation in this paper. The term appropriation is used, here, to refer to the process of adopting an icon and finding new use for it in such a way that in the final analysis the artifact acquires a new meaning. The Hoerikwagga, for example, was appropriated by the University of Cape Town press as its logo. The act gave the artifact not only a new meaning but new value as well. It is an example of a mentality whereby appropriating an icon that is seen as representing that which is African is perceived as being politically correct. The same happens to the Lydenburg Heads that Hall (1996) discusses in "Transgressing Boundaries". Some form of appropriation of the Hoerikwagga was interpreted as criminal in 1984. Some students daubed the sculpture and a reward of R500 was set aside by the university administration for information that would lead to the prosecution of the culprits. The issue was open to debate on how people should react to art. It is interesting to note that appropriating monuments to send messages or responses has been the most common form of appropriation at University of Cape Town. The war memorial that stands directly behind the

Rhodes statue was painted with Chris Hani's dates of birth and death after his assassination in 1993. The war memorial is supposed to commemorate the two World Wars. Besides being painted pink in 1974 and dressed in jeans in 1996, the Rhodes statue was twice smeared with grease and had a German swastika outlined in pink in 1997. Some words were written in a coded language below it. The "Bounteous Mother" may escape such responses because it is fixed onto a column that is six metres high. Whether such responses are misappropriations or not is a question of ethics but one thing is unmistakably clear, that is, appropriation is an identity statement.

Can artifacts be viewed as silent forms of communication, that is, as a combination of signs and symbols that create meaning? In response to Martin Hall's paper on the Lydenburg Heads, Patricia Davison (1996) argues that the terms "signs" and "symbols" cannot allow themselves to be unclear because they would not communicate the intended message. This is true if signs are defined as symbols or marks that represent some form of communication that convey information such as instructions. But that will be giving the term a fixed function. In the context of material culture, however, signs are not necessarily fixed in function but rather generate various meanings through time and space. They are perceived as suggestive rather than authentic markers. When their spatial, social and time context is understood, forms of material culture generate a variety of meanings that in most cases are infinite. Interpretation of material culture, thus, elevates signs to the state of being extralinguistic. This state enables signs to operate independently of the fixedness that Davison's argument appears to suggest. Such flexibility allows for interpretations as discussed above.

The paper is an argument that archaeology is equipped to decode meanings by placing the artifact in its physical, social and time context. This paper has attempted to show that monuments celebrate a particular phenomenon that is relative to time and space. The general idea that seems to run through the three statues discussed in this paper is that the formative years of many forms of life play a critical role in shaping its future. The paper has argued that artifacts of history can be investigated just as those of prehistory to extract the silent information about the world in which they were manufactured.

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