

**Sites of Conscience:
Past to Present, Memory to Action**

BIX GABRIEL

International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

A conference in May 2011 at UMass Amherst's Center for Heritage and Society was called *Why Does the Past Matter?* Heritage professionals from around the world gathered to answer this question from different perspectives, sharing their different approaches. A few hundred miles away in New York City, at another conference, scholars from the "memory industry" were essentially debating *Does remembering the past matter?*

These seemingly opposed views and fields might find common ground in the question: *How can we make the past matter?* This was the question that a group of nine leaders from five continents – who represented both venerable historic sites and burgeoning memory initiatives – asked themselves a decade ago. Not only did these leaders come from the fields of memory and heritage – often seen as disparate – but they also came from widely different socio-political contexts and their initiatives were at vastly different stages of development. Plus, the histories they were interpreting ranged from slavery to the holocaust to dictatorships to the lives of immigrant families. But they came together because they were each asking how their places and the histories they were remembering could be most relevant and useful to people in the present. Through their diverse experiences they created a new vision: historic sites and places of memory could be new centers for civic engagement and action on today's most important issues.

But this vision wasn't just an idea plucked out of the air. Some from this group of nine had already witnessed the power of memory to inspire and mobilize people to become involved

in large social justice and social change movements. One of them was Memoria Abierta in Buenos Aires, a coalition of human rights organizations who came together to remember those who were disappeared during the dictatorships. Through their efforts which included mapping and memorializing former detention centers, they had mobilized a groundswell of citizens clamoring for accountability. Others, like the District Six Museum in Cape Town and the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia were born out of their societies' recent histories. For them, their places were powerful means to not only make sense of a fresh and painful past but to forge new legacies arising from these chapters in history. And others like the Slave House in Senegal or The Workhouse in England who remembered more distant histories, were coming to the table with a view towards making their sites more relevant to people today.

This pioneering group launched a global movement – the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. As of this writing, the Coalition is more than 260-members strong, with historic sites, museums, memorials and history / memory initiatives in 47 countries.

Defining the Sites of Conscience approach

Coming from very different contexts and remembering such diverse histories, the founding leaders of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience had the experience to recognize that creating spaces for the public to passively learn about the past would not automatically inspire civic engagement and action. Instead, the history of these places

would need to be consciously harnessed in order to be new forums for dialogue, leading to action. This *conscious* effort to connect past to present and memory to action is the hallmark of Sites of Conscience. The founding members defined Sites of Conscience as initiatives that:

1. interpret history through site;
2. stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote democratic and humanitarian values;
3. and share opportunities for public involvement in the issues raised at the site.

From these fundamental principles, Sites of Conscience around the world have developed a variety of ways to “connect past to present, memory to action.”

But how?

Connecting past to present through personal stories: Few can resist the Diary of Anne Frank. Her personal story literally puts a human face to the terrors of the Holocaust and the great suffering she endured. Though many visitors to museums may not have a direct connection to the Holocaust, a personal story like this helps them to walk in the shoes of those who came before. Moreover, for many survivors of trauma, the opportunity to share their personal stories can be a powerful mechanism for healing. And usually, this remembering is not solely for posterity but for the purpose of education.

Maurice Politi was imprisoned for four years during the Brazilian dictatorship of the 1970s along with thousands of others. Today, as one of the founding members of the



Figure 1: A former prisoner held at Villa Grimaldi leads a tour. [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience]

Núcleo de Preservação da Memória Política (Center for the Preservation of the Political Memory) in São Paulo, the only site remembering the dictatorship currently open to the public in Brazil, he says, “I am proud to be able to have a place where young people who did not experience the dictatorship have the opportunity to learn what happened during this time. And that there is a physical place where we are respected and can tell our stories. In this way, those who were not there can gain a better understanding of the situation and make sure that it will not be repeated.”

At the Villa Grimaldi Peace Park in Chile (Figs. 1 and 2), the site of a former secret detention center under the Pinochet regime, survivors who were once imprisoned and tortured there lead tours of students, sharing their first hand accounts of the place,



Figure 2: Memorial wall at Villa Grimaldi Peace Park. [Corporacion Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi]

and inviting the young people who have no memory of these events to think about what happened then and the legacies they encounter now. But the survivors' association that founded the Peace Park recognized that while sharing personal stories could evoke sympathy, it did not automatically inspire reflection and action on today's issues. So, one of its newest programs, Memory Education and Human Rights is designed specifically to help young people understand the impact of testimonies in the past and today. During their visit to the site, high school students, teachers and survivors explore the history of Villa Grimaldi and discuss the role the personal testimonies of the survivors as *living histories* have had in revealing, rebuilding and preserving Villa Grimaldi. Following the tour, participants learn how to make their own contributions to building historical memory by exploring different techniques and media, such as films and photography, that they can use to gather and share testimonies. As the program concludes,

students are invited to reflect on social concerns today and then use their newly acquired skills to produce a testimony – a record that will capture how the events of today are affecting them, their community and country.

Offering multiple perspectives on the past and present: Whose stories to tell? This is an ongoing debate and challenge of every memorial in every society. Efforts to memorialize the 9/11 attacks have been fraught with delays partially because of the challenges in addressing this question. Many argue that places of memory are hallowed ground for victims and their stories need to be primary. For others, creating a public space for open dialogue requires the presentation of multiple perspectives so that people today can understand the complexity of the past, and relate to it in the present. But others feel that efforts to embrace all viewpoints and historical perspectives can end up including views that cast doubt on the facts of what happened in the past, such as Holocaust deniers, as well as shut down any productive dialogue because the facts themselves are called in to question.

In South Africa, Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted on humanizing perpetrators as well as victims. Perhaps echoing this mandate, Constitution Hill, a formerly notorious prison and now the site of South Africa's Constitutional Court shares the history of this site as experienced by many different groups of people – including those who worked there as warders [Figs. 3 and 4]. Sitting on a hill in the heart of Johannesburg, the Old Fort



Figure 3: An exhibit at Constitution Hill invites visitors to reflect on and share their ideas on the question *Who is a criminal*. [Constitution Hill | Photo Guto Bussab]

or Gandhi alongside ordinary people who were found to have broken the smallest of apartheid laws like not carrying their identification card, as well as people who committed acts still considered criminal in South Africa today, such as murder or robbery. In 1995, this prison was selected as the site of the new Constitutional Court and today is a multi-purpose complex that included portions of the prison preserved as a Museum, the new Constitutional Court, and offices of NGOs addressing social problems that are legacies of the apartheid era.

In developing the site, people with diverse direct experiences – prisoners and guards; men and women; organized political activists and “ordinary” criminals who, intentionally or unintentionally, ran afoul of apartheid laws – were invited to return to the site and share their experiences and their visions for the site. Building from this, the site’s



Figure 4: A *lekgotla* at Constitution Hill in the outdoor plaza between the Court and the prison Museum. [Constitution Hill]

history is interpreted through many different stories and a series of questions that remain urgent for South Africans today. For example, one of the prison's first exhibits entitled *Who is a Criminal* profiles representatives of the range of people incarcerated in the Old Fort and asks visitors to reflect on which of these people they believed to be rightfully convicted. In this way, they open debate about visions of justice in the new South Africa. Are citizens obliged to obey the laws of the state, no matter how unjust? Are they in fact obliged to transgress unjust laws? Or by what means should citizens oppose laws they believe to be unfair? Who should decide what is just and what is unjust, and how? Different types of visitors were invited to respond to these questions in different ways: by posting a written response on a wall of the exhibit; or by participating in *lekgotla*¹ group dialogues in the outdoor plaza

between the Court and the prison Museum – between the old and the new visions of justice.

Creating a space for open dialogue across difference: Though their approaches are very different, at the core of Sites of Conscience is our methodology to create spaces where people can have an open exchange about the past and the present and be inspired to take action. Using open-ended questions with no right or wrong answer, Sites of Conscience invite people into *open dialogue* – starting with questions on what they have seen/experienced at the site, leading to questions of how this connects with their present-day realities and finally, to how their realities are challenged. This open dialogue is one of the most critical pieces because it is through dialogue that people start to confront each other’s different experiences and opinions. Challenging different points of view in a safe and inclusive space is meant to mimic how life in a democracy could look like, where we may not always end up with the “right answer”, but through the experience of discussing and disagreeing with each other, we can decide how to live and work together as best as possible.

New York City’s Lower East Side is a neighborhood that mirrors the challenges and triumphs of living with differences. Shaped and reshaped by generations of immigrants from every corner of the world, today, nearly 40% of the people living in the neighborhood were born in one of 37 different countries; 60% speak a language other than English at home. In these packed streets and cramped apartments, identities and cultures have blended, mixed, and clashed every day for nearly



Figure 5: A restored apartment at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. [Lower East Side Tenement Museum | Photo Battman Studios]

300 years. The Lower East Side Museum is a tenement building at 97 Orchard Street that an estimated 7,000 immigrants from over 20 different nations called home between 1863 and 1935. The Museum’s founders recognized that this site had great potential to contribute to an interest in and respect for difference – in the most literal sense, to explore how diverse people live together. So the museum carefully researched who lived in the building at different moments in time, and recreated these immigrant families’ apartments to look as they did when they lived there. Visitors to the Museum now tour the tiny apartments and learn about the everyday life of the family that lived in that apartment – how they lived and worked, what rights and benefits they had, and what struggles they encountered. Visitors are then invited to draw connections between the building’s history and their own



Figure 5: Visitors engage in open dialogue on immigration past and present at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. [Lower East Side Tenement Museum | Photo Keiko Niwa]

personal experiences, and then discuss questions that we are still facing today: What does it mean to be American? Who gets to decide? The Museum works to avoid dictating specific contemporary lessons of the past, to avoid instrumentalizing history for particular conclusions. Instead, the Museum tries to serve as a catalyst for ongoing, changing discussion on deliberately open questions like, what does it mean to be a citizen? Who should be allowed to come in to the country, and who should decide?

Inspiring action: They came, they saw, they left. Sure, they left inspired but did they do something? This is the challenge that many Sites of Conscience face: how can the experience of the visitor at the site translate into productive action on present-day issues? In February 2011, an article in the New York Times described how the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

would be revising its core exhibitions to address its newer goal of teaching to inspire action today. In the article, the director of the Museum, Piotr Cywinski was quoted as saying, “To me the whole educational system regarding the Holocaust, which really got under way during the 1990s, served its purpose in terms of supplying facts and information. But there is another level of education, a level of awareness about the meaning of those facts. It’s not enough to cry. Empathy is noble, but it’s not enough.” How can we engage visitors, especially young people, to move from empathy to action? And what type of action are we seeking to inspire?

The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago is the former home of and dynamic memorial to social reformer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jane Addams (1860-1935) and other social reformers whose work influenced US national and international public policy. The Museum has dedicated itself to drawing connections between the progressive reform efforts of the Hull-House activists and today’s contemporary social justice issues. One of its newer projects *Unfinished Business* intentionally draws connections between Hull-House’s history and the unfinished nature of social reform and change. It links one of the major areas of reform that the Hull-House residents battled for – juvenile justice and protection – with today’s prison industrial complex through an exhibit that illustrates the history of Hull-House activism around incarceration and youth imprisonment accompanied by activity stations where visitors are invited to take action on these issues today. One of the most successful actions that visitors have embraced

is the invitation to write poems on postcards and send them to prisoners currently being held in solitary confinement at a maximum security prison. Visitors can choose a poem to copy from one of the books provided by the Museum or write their own poem. The postcards are on view for other visitors to read for a short while before the Museum mails them to the prisoners. At the Hull-House Museum, this type of action, though political, is in keeping with the ethos and the history of the site – where political reform and action was sought and fought for in the past and continues to be striven for in the present.

Ongoing debate: what do we mean by action anyway?

As diverse as they are, Sites of Conscience share a common commitment to connecting “past to present, memory to action”. But there is little consensus on what types of action visitors should be invited to take. In some cases, Sites that are managed by the state, such as Ellis Island which is run by the US National Park Service, a federal government entity, are restricted from encouraging any action that might be viewed as political. In other cases, Sites believe that by prescribing a particular course of action they risk alienating visitors who disagree with that type of action. And some Sites of Conscience in the Coalition argue that if the goal is to invite open dialogue across difference, then visitors should not be expected to agree with each other and therefore, should be encouraged to take action in their own way. Some Sites strongly disagree with this approach, arguing that leaving it to the visitor to decide

opens the door to actions that are antithetical to what the Site stands for.

These debates are unresolved and ongoing. They are also healthy and the foundation of what defines the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience – as much as visitors need spaces to debate pressing issues they face, so too do Sites need spaces for productive debate on the issues that face the field. The Coalition as an international peer-network provides such a space. And from the experiences of the Sites, directions on this debate have emerged:

- Use the history of the Site as a guide to define the actions visitors can take: This approach on the one-hand reinforces the link between the contemporary and the historic and on the other, provides a seamless experience for the visitor, where the action corresponds with the overall experience of the site. It also allows the Site to suggest actions that ring truest to the lessons of history that it remembers.
- Define what action means: Is action a physical act or could it be mean something else? For instance, some Sites of Conscience design activities for young people where how they respond to one another, not only physically but verbally and with respect and empathy in their behavior, is what matters. And another action that many Sites of Conscience seek to inspire is an intellectual and cognitive one. “The action I’d like? I just want people to stop and think *before* they act”, says one Site director.

- Decide when the action matters most: Should the action take place on-site or is the action more effective in a real-world context? For example, making a pledge at a Site can be a powerful commitment towards taking action in the future. But actualizing the pledge can be a challenge for many visitors if they are not given the practical tools on how they might confront future abuses. Some Sites aim for a series of actions, some on-site and others much after the visitor has left. These actions are of course, impossible to track. But they do happen. Staff at some Sites have described visitors returning to the Site with other friends and family, not only because they had a powerful experience at the site, but because they took part in an action that they wanted others to be part of. Other Sites report anecdotes from teachers describing their students' actions or behavior long after their site visit, but ascribing them to the experience at the site.

Memory to action, action for memory

Memory to action is more than a slogan for Sites of Conscience. It is a choice, a commitment and a practice. It requires risk-taking, hard work, and investing financially in programs that don't have an immediate pay-off. For the 260-plus members of the International Coalition the value of helping tens of millions of people around the world make sense of the past and find ways to positively impact life in the present is irrefutable – and immeasurable. But as more and more museums and historic

sites are realizing, there is a more direct outcome of this approach. For every visitor who comes to a Site of Conscience, the memory they take with them will be not of the past, but of their experience at the Site today. In other words, the actions of the Sites and the actions at the Sites form the basis of visitors' memories for tomorrow. Thus, 'connecting past to present, memory to action' is both a promise and a challenge: as interpreters of the past, we can shape not only how people experience history today, but also how they remember and thus act tomorrow. Isn't our mandate then to make the experience not just inspiring, but unforgettable?

Notes

1. *Lekgotla* is a Botswana word referring to a pre-colonial form of democratic deliberation, in which villagers gather under a shady tree to address issues they are facing.

