



REVITALIZING MAISON DES ESCLAVES

Maison des Esclaves

Maison des Esclaves, on Gorée Island in Senegal, is both a founding member of the Coalition and a central participant in the African Regional Network. The museum is a major part of Senegalese identity and, as a critical part of the Gorée Island UNESCO World Heritage Site, is an international destination: thousands of Senegalese students visit the site each year, as well as three quarters of all international tourists to Senegal.

The site is unique in that it provides an alternative view to the traditional narratives told about the transatlantic slave trade. Whereas other sites in Africa capture the large-scale, almost corporate nature of the industry, Maison des Esclaves tells personal stories of a private home and the role of its owners in both local business and the slave trade. One of the site's assets is that it tells a very intimate narrative – of the slave trade as a cottage industry undertaken by private individuals.



Project Background

Today, Maison des Esclaves struggles to meet the needs of its growing international, domestic and local visitorship. In March 2015, through funding from the Ford Foundation, the Coalition traveled to Gorée Island to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment of Maison des Esclaves. The needs assessment included interviews with key stakeholders on and off Gorée Island, observations and recordings of over a dozen Maison des Esclaves tours, an extensive assessment of the physical conditions and historic architecture of Maison des Esclaves and Gorée Island, significant research on the history of the site, and visits to other historic sites and museums on Gorée Island and in Dakar. The needs assessment resulted in a three-year plan to support the site's development into a regional and global center for excellence on visitor engagement on issues concerning freedom, migration, and slavery past and present, positioning it to become a repository of knowledge and experience on the transatlantic slave trade.



Project Objectives

As a result of the needs assessment, the Coalition received significant funding from the Ford Foundation and the Senegalese Ministry of Culture and Communication to facilitate the three-year revitalization project at Maison des Esclaves. The Coalition is working closely with site staff, local stakeholders and consultants to support Maison des Esclaves' development into a dynamic site for learning and a catalyst for dialogue on slavery. Following are the core components of the revitalization plan:

Expand the museum's areas for engaging visitors.

A central challenge for Maison des Esclaves is its lack of adequate space for visitor and group arrival, exhibits, public programming and offices. To address this need, the Ministry of Culture of Senegal has offered an adjacent building, Maison Albis. The additional space will improve visitor flow and experience, educational quality and visitation capacity. Maison des Esclaves staff members envision Maison Albis ultimately housing a library and offices.

Refine content to reflect today's understanding of the house and the transatlantic slave trade.

The Coalition is partnering with Maison des Esclaves staff and other experts to ensure that the museum's permanent exhibition is updated based on recent research. Since the museum's founding, its programs have presented a composite "sketch" of elements common at many West African slave trade holding facilities – rather than a more precise site-based interpretation. In the decades since the site's opening, historical and archaeological research has deepened knowledge about Maison des Esclaves, Gorée Island, and the transatlantic slave trade. New interpretation introduces the signares, the powerful women of both Gorée and Saint-Louis. The exhibit shares what is known and unknown about the house itself, and uses a UNESCO-based framework to provide a greater understanding of the transatlantic trade. In addition to refining historical content, the spaces provided by Maison Albis create opportunities for visitors to learn about contemporary slavery and to find ways to take direct action. The house and its Door of No Return continue to be a place of memory and pilgrimage.

Replace dated exhibitions to align with refocused content.

New exhibitions combine both accessible content and engaging physical design. A key part of the planning for the new exhibitions has been formative evaluative conversations with visitors (Senegalese, Africans from the diaspora, and white Europeans and Americans) and Senegalese students, to understand what knowledge they bring to the site, what questions they have, and how both content and design can connect effectively with all audiences. The Scientific Advisory Committee has also reviewed the plans for updated exhibitions. The Coalition is leading the effort to redesign and refocus these exhibitions. We will offer assistance to Maison des Esclaves staff and guides in using Sites of Conscience Dialogue Methodology to interpret the difficult and emotionally charged nature of the exhibitions. Effectively trained tour guides can help connect scholarship, site content and visitors' personal experiences to foster individual and collective learning. This learning then can inspire sustained, "action-oriented" dialogue on contemporary issues to help visitors understand how they can prevent human rights abuses. In October 2018, a prototype exhibition was installed. A feedback station provides ongoing opportunities for visitors' perspective. The exact date for the final installation of the exhibitions is dependent on the progress of the construction work.



Transform the site into a global hub for dialogue on slavery and its contemporary legacies.

The Coalition is unique in its ability to promote discourse on historical and contemporary struggles for human rights at places of memory. For this project, the Coalition is fostering collaboration with its African Regional Sites of Conscience Network and members in other regions that focus on slavery. This regional support enables Maison des Esclaves to incorporate best practices in interpreting slavery while integrating the site into the broader landscape of slavery sites, positioning it to become a vibrant center for public engagement and a repository of knowledge on the global slave trade.

Conduct necessary restoration and repairs to maintain Maison des Esclaves and Maison Albis.

Maison des Esclaves is in good physical condition. However, there are immediate and near-term concerns that are being addressed to maintain a safe, stable building for visitors. Maison Albis, a critical component of this project, is undergoing significant repair work to serve as a support space for the mission of Maison des Esclaves. The Coalition is working with a local architect and contractors to conduct necessary repairs to both buildings.

Moving Forward

For more information, including how you might get involved, please contact Elizabeth Silkes, Executive Director, at esilkes@sitesofconscience.org or +1.646.397.4270.

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