

**THE SOUND ARCHIVES AT THE DISTRICT SIX MUSEUM:  
A WORK IN PROGRESS**

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South Africa is an anomaly among developing countries. It is both a developed country with good infrastructure and also a country with huge social and economic problems. There is a wide gulf between recipients of development aid on the one hand and skilled professionals on the other. In this assumption lie both the challenges and opportunities for audiovisual preservation. In itemizing the issues, challenges, hurdles and obstacles, my chosen keywords are institutional growth, consciousness and expertise.

The District Six Museum developed almost without evident design since its conception at a conference in 1988. Yet the sound archives, a new project conceived in 1997, had the luxury of being modelled on ethnographic and public sound archives in the USA and elsewhere. The key scholarly disciplines underpinning its work are History, Fine Arts, Social Science and Ethnomusicology.

We need to build an appropriate archival model for this museum-based sound archives. There are a number of considerations. The museum has had a profound effect on heritage work. Our museum is a young institution and is in the grip of what some call the 'Founder syndrome'. It has a very active board of trustees. It is still an institutional 'baby' being weaned by community-based activists, politicians and professional academics. In some cases, there is a direct political, emotional or professional interest in the work of the museum. This creates a wonderful non-bureaucratic atmosphere. But it also means

that as we grow in our preservation capacities we will have to negotiate these realities.

Another challenge is to develop support structures for research-based audiovisual archives. We need to raise consciousness about the value of not only what we have but also what we do. In general, there is a need to develop expertise in areas such as preservation and documentation.

On the other hand, there are opportunities. The District Six Museum provides an object model for other community-based initiatives around the country. I believe we have an opportunity to use the museum's success to champion the cause of audiovisual preservation with fraternal institutions in our region.

Called the Coon Carnival, the end-of-year event was a time for dancing in the streets, with various troops competing for trophies and the public—residents and tourists alike—having a whale of a time. The streets of the old District were turned into rivers of prancing participants, all dressed in their colourful costumes. District Six became (more) alive on these occasions.



I would like to share some of the vision, work in preparation and some of the difficulties we anticipate as we start building a sound archives, an exciting new wing of the District Six Museum.

THE SOUND ARCHIVES AS A MEMORY BOOTH

In 1994, the District Six Museum Foundation opened a small exhibition named *Streets: Retracing District Six*. The exhibition was a working project for the Foundation. One of its essential features was a map on which ex-residents are invited to mark places of remembrance: home, neighbourhood and public space. As Curator Peggy Delport described:

Its form is by design interactive, in that the formal boundaries are open to the inclusion of its audience in the process

Photographs: Cloete Breytenbach



of visual construction . . . [and most importantly] it contains the present-day cues and reconstructions of everyday remembrance.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition attempts to find an ‘interpretative vehicle’ appropriate to the climate of transition and remembrance in South Africa. The basic museological premise, then, is an invitation to ex-residents and those who knew the District to remember and, through remembering, to collaborate in the creation of public memory about the place and its significance.

Moreover, as the exhibition captured the public imagination, ex-residents flooded the organizers with memorabilia from the District: family photographs, bottles, toys, even items of furniture and doors. However, we were not ready for this influx of museum objects. Even so, accepting the deposit had to be part of the spirit of accepting the positive community response with grace.

With *Streets*, the process was key. The depositing of objects is a by-product of that process. Memory is the core organising principle in the ‘collection’ and the key element in the display of objects and dioramas. We have not yet imagined or anticipated other uses for these objects. For example, we may find that depositors place meanings on objects that the museum does not yet have the capacity to document or classify.

Furthermore, the *Streets* exhibition space has also been described as ‘evocative’. It promotes the notion that public memory must be subject to debate and the notion that citizens may participate in that debate.

Now, the problem arises: Should the exhibition become the core of a new museum? If so, how does the museum ‘collect’, dissect and reorganize the memory-laden objects it exhibits? How, in fact, does the museum arrest the engaging interactions that happen every time an ex-resident walks in and recognizes the Hanover Street sign, or the image of the fish market or remembers the Globe Gang, Cissie Gool’s fiery speeches on the Grand Parade, *diba* dance with the Merry Macks or New Year’s Eve with the *nagtroupe*? Or what about ex-residents who carry more painful memories of loss, of domestic abuse, of poverty, of aspirations to live in the suburbs?

Street scene in District Six



Corner of Hanover and Windsor Streets



De Villiers Street, District Six



District Six after the removals



Hanover Street, District Six



*All photographs courtesy the District Six Museum.*

The *Streets* exhibition, in the words of Sandra Prosalendis, its Project Director, needed to be a 'sieve' to capture memories generated in the exhibition space for posterity. From *Streets*, the notion of a 'memory booth' was introduced, a space to integrate with the core exhibition and a space in which to render and capture memory in electronic form.

In one sense, therefore, the proposed sound archives is a holding point of sorts where this bewildering array of reconstructions generated by *Streets* can be arrested until we decide what to do next.

*A Sound Archives as Generator of Knowledge*

Another founding vision imagines the sound archives in an activist role, helping to stimulate the production of new knowledge. In this scheme, the archives may become the engine of a documentation project from which new constructions of public history may emerge. It may, for example, produce rigorous documentation of the much abused *klopse* carnival or on *marimba* bands in Cape Town. It may seek to redress the 'colouredist' bias in representations of District Six and other sites in the Cape Peninsula by, for example, seeking out the stories of Africans in Cape Town. It may seek to document the migration of musical influences between the Cape and the hinterland: places such as Kimberly, Namaqualand, Mozambique, being examples. It may seek to document the rich spectrum of public political life. In all these possibilities, the sound archives may be a common denominator providing an audiovisual record accompanied by rigorous documentation.

One of our challenges will be to develop strong relationships with professional academic institutions and individuals. As eminent sound archivist Anthony Seeger reminds us, field recordings are invaluable source materials for sound archives all over the globe. Academic field recordings are uniquely valuable and often systematic; their content is unconstrained by commercial markets or paying audiences, their use is unregulated by international copyright law and they are usually an integral part of a research strategy.<sup>2</sup>

However, any knowledge-production project involving sound archives requires us to rescue them from their imperial and colonial

past. Sound archives have been attached mostly to the project of ethnomusicology. They have helped shape both the best labours as well as the worst crimes committed by the disciplines of colonial Historiography, Ethnology, Ethnography and Anthropology. They have rendered assistance to the intellectual enterprises of cultural imperialism. Sound archives have been tools in the grand intellectual labours of a small army of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists in the quest to document and define the mostly non-literate cultures of exotic places.

Now, in a postcolonial world, sound archives would strive to shirk this affiliation with the colonial past. They seek to immerse themselves in local communities, embrace a more empowering methodology and, in the process, perhaps draw on the best that ethnography, oral history and ethnomusicology have to offer. The sound archives may become a powerful tool of the emerging museum intellectual, activist or volunteer. It can help empower communities to own their audiovisual heritage. It can enable communities of the Third World to enter negotiations about ownership of heritage materials. It may promote the skills necessary to work international copyright law to the benefit of local communities and towards the goal of repatriating heritage materials.

Sound archives can become memory banks for emerging communities united by common experiences of oppression and marginalization. In establishing the District Six Museum, community interests gestured to reclaim the right to remember District Six. The desire to redevelop it was a driving force behind its establishment as was the desire to assert the underclasses of the Cape Flats as a material, political and cultural presence in the Cape Town city bowl.

The museum members speak of its mission to usurp the organs of classification and representation. Museum Trustee Crain Soudien talks about District Sixers being able to retain control of their own modes of description. They have been able to 'speak themselves.' Among them have been articulate raconteurs, self-taught historians, novelists, painters and indeed very ordinary men and women for whom the memory of the District was so precious.<sup>3</sup> Many are actively



1998 Interior of the District Six Museum, with details of the Buckingham Palace Exhibition



1996 Interior of the District Six Museum, detailing the Sports Exhibition



1996 Interior of the District Six Museum, detailing the Sports Exhibition



1995 Interior of the District Six Museum, with detail of the street map of District Six which ex-residents use to mark the places where they lived and frequented, when visiting the Museum. The map forms part of the Museum's permanent exhibition entitled *Streets*.



*Photographs: Tina Smith courtesy the District Six Museum*

involved in the ongoing restitution process in District Six. Therefore, a sound archives will become a heritage resource at the disposal of this community of District Sixers. It will bank their memories as individuals and groups and wield this cultural knowledge in new ways.

The District Six story lends itself to the collection of audiovisual heritage. It is richly evocative as an archetype of urban living. It is invoked regularly in images of the Western Cape. For example, District Six is afforded symbolic significance in black South African literature and performance culture. Names such as Richard Rive, Alex La Guma, Abdullah Ibrahim, Basil Coetzee, Moses Kotane and Gerhard Sekoto are associated in various guises, with the District. District Six is also synonymous with carnival, with dance bands, religious music, variety shows, public politics and public intellectuals. District Six promises to reveal a rich amalgam of urban working-class living, of the deracialization of the city bowl in Cape Town, of the gradual repression of slavery in living memory, of gay life . . . the list goes on. There is a wealth of human experience to explore.

District Six also lends itself to historical mythmaking. It is a convenient template for exploring the 'identity conundrum' in South Africa. While it was predominantly a model of urban working-class living, it was also a different place to different people. To some, it may have been a place of petty colour prejudice. Ask artist and former Robben Islander, Lionel Davis, about that. It may have been a place of betrayal to others, of identity swapping, a place where one often hears of petty prejudice between denominations, religions or languages. For this reason, a sound archives can hold multiple versions of the past. It can indeed become an engine for enriching public knowledge about past and present.

#### *Sound Archives and Community*

The museum's sound archives will serve as a memory bank for a local community. Its bias will be towards experience and perspective of the underclasses and the marginalized. It will also hold up a mirror to overt and covert forms of power in the city. Its key mission will be to document lived experiences of community, of tradition and change, of working life, of life among Cape Town's underclasses using tools of

perspective and representation which invite participation by its very subjects.

The District Six Museum has been both praised and criticized for its humble displays; for its rough-and-ready feel, its amateur family photos, low-budget techniques such as creative photocopying in its dioramas and for the free arrangement of objects, maps and cloths. The *Streets* exhibition particularly gave rise to a style that is patently District Six for which artists such as Tina Smith and Peggy Delpont can take much credit. This unique style helps define the museum's community appeal and hence its claim to authenticity.

Then how, in the digital age, does such a humble museum intend to harness a high-tech operation such as a sound archives? This will be a great technological challenge. The sound archives project takes its central idea from the museum's commitment to community. A community sound archives must define and understand its community and prepare to collect the audiovisual heritage of that community and to provide access to that heritage. We have the opportunity to also harness the democratic potential and the preservation properties of digital technologies such as audio CD and CD-ROM, perhaps even DVD.

Community-based sound archives have a long-term role and mostly aim to outlive their depositors. They have a long-term view of the future of their communities and hence they 'bank' public memory for future use. Occasionally, this can have significant consequences. For example, in Australia, a sound archives has been used in the process of settling Aboriginal land claims. The people who own and have the right to perform certain traditional songs depicting actual places in history also own the land from which these songs come.<sup>4</sup>

Community-based sound archives promise to promote greater intellectual control over cultural resources. New archiving initiatives are gaining momentum, both in West Africa and in places like Zambia where the Nayume Museum in Western Province is undertaking an ambitious project to document the traditional musics of rural Zambia. The growing popularity of traditional or world music has provided impetus for support and funding of such initiatives from Europe and the USA. While on a recent visit to the Archives of Traditional Music

in Bloomington, Indiana, I was briefly introduced to an elderly Senegalese scholar. He was visiting the university campus after 20 years, coming to repatriate his field recordings of Senegalese music produced while he was a student of ethnomusicology. Senegal now had a sound archives worthy of his precious charge!

However, there is also room for caution. Community archives can be ghettoized as places where short-term community needs take precedence over long-term preservation. This stereotype is evident in the movie *Watermelon Woman*. Director Cheryl Dunye plays a lesbian activist/filmmaker researching the life history of a forgotten African American screen actress of the 1940s: the Watermelon Woman of the title.<sup>5</sup> In a key moment, Cheryl's character shuffles into a community lesbian information archives (provocatively acronymed as CLIT). The capricious archivist throws down an archival box containing jumbled piles of photographs and papers and walks away, leaving our unscrupulous protagonist to raid the box and disappear with a few photographic and documentary gems.

This is a humorous reference to community initiatives where accessibility may be given precedence over preservation and provenance. This scene raises an important question for community-based archives. How do we balance short-term community needs with the need to preserve? We are certainly not the first archives to confront this question.

At District Six, we have made glaring mistakes in staging our first exhibitions. The *Streets* exhibition might have been meant to highlight the District Six land restitution case; accessioning and professional standards of description were not a priority. They have now become areas of concern as the District Six Museum Foundation, established to raise funds for the *Streets* exhibition, slowly metamorphoses into a museum, a process which has taken at least four years and may take a few more.

However, being a community archives does not mean we can shirk our responsibilities to our depositors. With this new archival initiative, we have spent 18 months in preparation, developing a knowledge base and systems that will enable us to acquit our task with the luxury

of planning and with institutional hindsight. The serious business of research and collecting, public access and preservation will start in the year 2000 when the archives opens to the public.

We are also committed to work in tandem with related initiatives. We believe it is important to draw on the services of the National Archives and the National Film, Video and Sound Archive. We also believe that sound archives need to coordinate collection policies and strategies so that scarce resources are not duplicated. We have in our region at least the Mayibuye Center, the Western Cape Oral History Project and the CAMA to name a few. Each has a unique institutional mission.

Finally, we see our sound archives as a work in progress within a very exciting museum project. Its identity, as I have tried to describe here, is still up for discussion. I leave you to ponder the question: In which proportions will we be a memory booth, a knowledge generator and a service to an emerging inner city community and a larger community of interests?

#### *Notes*

- 1 Peggy Delport, 'Signposts for Retrieval: A visual framework for enabling memory of place and time', in Pauli Tapani Karjalainen and Pauline von Bonsdorff (eds.), *Place and Embodiment*, University of Helsinki, 1997, pp. 44-57.
- 2 Anthony Seeger, 'The role of sound archives in ethnomusicology today', *Ethnomusicology* 1986, p. 277.
- 3 Crain Soudien, 'District Six and its uses in the non-racial discussion' (unpublished mimeograph), p. 5.
- 4 Grace Koch, 'Songs, land rights and archives in Australia' in *Cultural Survival Quarterly: World Report on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities*, Winter 1997, pp. 38-41. An example is the Rain Dreaming or Akwelye songs of the Kaytetye people of Barrow Creek, Northern Territory.
- 5 The actress is a fiction; she never existed. Cheryl's search for archival records is an indicator of authenticity in this film in which a fictitious trail of evidence leads to the actress's uncovered 'past'. She achieves realism through her discovery of fragments of 'evidence' in archives and from 'oral' recollections by other characters.



Give a man a guitar and he will entertain anyone who cares to stop and listen. *Photograph: Cloete Breytenbach*