



# Sites of Conscience:

## Connecting Past to Present, Memory to Action

by Sarah Pharaon, Bix Gabriel, and Liz Ševčenko

Struggles over how we remember and represent the past are inextricably linked to struggles over representation and resources in the present. If museums stay completely silent on the issues that are of greatest concern to their communities, will they be rejected as irrelevant and unresponsive? Or is there a way in which sites can serve as forums for their publics to gain historical perspective on the questions that divide them today and discuss how they should be addressed in the future? Today, the idea that museums might serve as agents for social change is no longer revolutionary, but twelve years ago was a different time for museums.

### International Coalition of Sites of Conscience: Beginnings

The Lower East Side is a neighborhood shaped and reshaped by generations of newcomers from around the world. Founded to “promote tolerance and historical perspective,” The Lower East Side Tenement Museum pursued this mission by representing the neighborhood’s diversity, preserving a five story tenement building that was home to more than 7,000 immigrants from over 20 different nations from 1863 to 1935, and telling the stories of families from different backgrounds who lived there at different moments in the past. By 1999, Museum staff found themselves in a neighborhood where nearly 40% of the people living in the immediate vicinity of the Museum were born in one of 37 different countries; 60% spoke a language other than English at home.

Determined to draw connections between immigration past and present, museum staff sought to host dialogues on the enduring questions facing community members in this highly diverse neighborhood. “Good luck with that,”

museum colleagues said, reminding the Tenement Museum that history museums’ core mission was to collect and preserve, not to get involved in controversial issues. Funders apologetically explained, “We don’t support social service agencies,” while actual social service agencies puzzled over how dwelling on the past could help a community deal with the urgent issues it was grappling with. So the Tenement Museum threw a message in a bottle off the shores of Manhattan, in the form of a fax to museums around the world asking if anyone felt similarly that they had a larger social mission.

Eight institutions responded.

Among these institutions were democracy movements, human rights organizations, historic sites and museums, as well as the British National Trust and the National Park Service. Together these nine institutions launched a global movement—the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Today, the Coalition is more than 260 members strong, comprised of historic sites, museums, memorials and memory initiatives in 47 countries.

Not despite, but because of, their widely diverse continents and contexts, the Coalition’s founding members developed a common vision for Sites of Conscience: a conscious effort to connect past to present and memory to action. This pioneering group 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; and 3) share opportunities for public involvement in the issues raised at the site. Following are three examples of these ideals.

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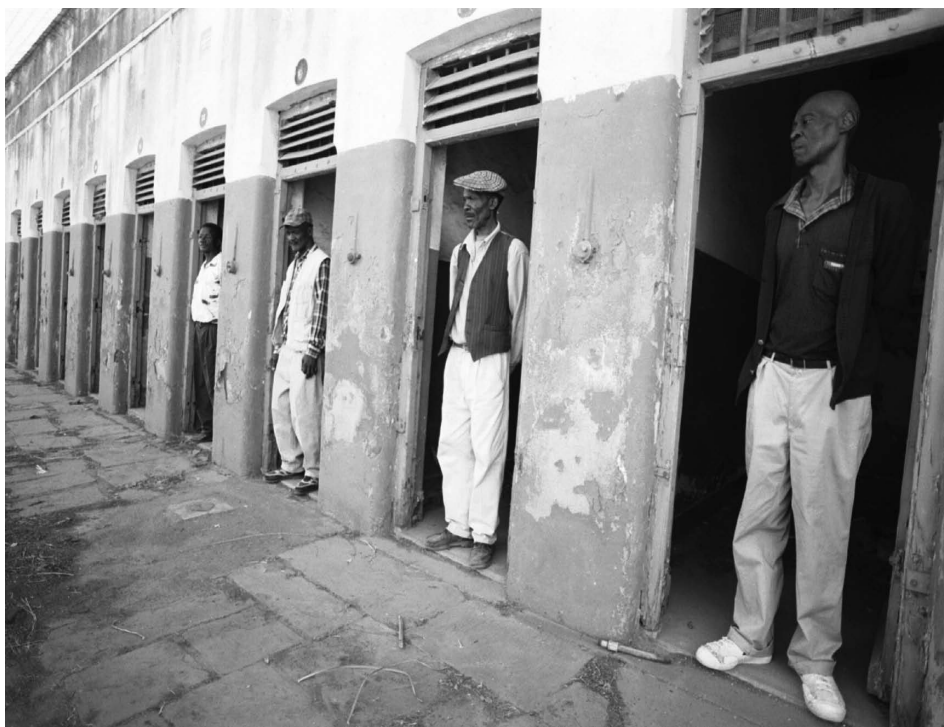
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Ex-prisoners in the doorways of their former cells at Constitution Hill. Photograph by Oscar G.

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### Interpret History Through Site: Constitution Hill

From both a human rights and a heritage perspective, Coalition founders believed in the power of places of past struggle as both irrefutable evidence and irreplaceable emotional experience.

In 1995, the first justices were appointed to the South African Constitutional Court, charged with upholding the nation's new Constitution, a document which contained an entirely new set of values from those of apartheid. The justices chose a site steeped in apartheid history, the Old Fort prison in Johannesburg, and sought to transform it into a space for repairing the wrongs of the past. About the process, Justice Albie Sachs has said, "You cannot deny the energy of a site. It does not disappear, it simply comes out in different ways. You must acknowledge the energy and change it to positive energy." Today, the site is a multi-purpose complex that includes 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.

The site development team began by

inviting people with diverse direct experiences—prisoners and guards, both male and female; political activists; and "ordinary" criminals who, intentionally or unintentionally, ran afoul of apartheid law—to return to the site and share their experiences. Survivors gathered in small groups to walk through the different spaces of the Old Fort and describe their memories of how these spaces appeared, how they were used, and how they felt. Survivors also discussed their visions for how the site should be developed in the future—how its story should be told to the next generation, and how it could be used to inspire this generation to repair the wrongs of the past.

Building from this, the site's 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 exhibitions 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 believe 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?

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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 exhibition; or by participating in *lekgotla*<sup>1</sup> group dialogues in the outdoor plaza between the Court and the prison museum—between the old and the new visions of justice.

When the Court was deliberating on whether to legalize gay marriage, for example, the museum developed an exhibition on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) communities under apartheid, and their continuing struggles in South African society today. It also offered *lekgotla* programs for both students and adults through which people divided on the issue of gay marriage—and gay rights more broadly—could debate whether and how the issue fit with their vision of justice in the new South Africa. Thus a place of historic injustice has been transformed into a living memorial and active site for redefining justice.

### **Stimulate Dialogue and Promote Humanitarian Values: Gulag Museum at Perm-36**

The founding members of the Coalition felt strongly that sites should serve not as a conclusive statement that the past is safely behind us, but as spaces for open and dynamic debate about how a society should move forward, including how to address lingering legacies of past events.

At the heart of the Sites of Conscience

is the idea of “stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues.” The Coalition’s accreditation criteria elaborate that “We believe it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of a site and its contemporary implications, and to inspire citizens to be more aware



*The watchtower at the Gulag Museum at Perm-36. Courtesy of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.*

and involved in the most pressing issues affecting them. To that end, Sites of Conscience should provide a forum for open discussion of pressing contemporary

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issues among diverse publics.” Guidelines further suggest that sites “draw explicit connections to contemporary issues...; raise multiple perspectives on an issue ...; and inspire and promote dialogue among diverse publics...a process of sharing ideas... for the purposes of collective learning.”

Four hours from Perm, Russia, in a remote village, lie the barracks and barbed wire of Perm-36, part of the vast system of Gulag camps used to harness labor and

control the population during the Soviet era. Perm-36 was in use from the Stalinist period through the 1980s, holding high profile political dissidents and ordinary citizens. A pioneering group of human rights activists and historians rescued the camp from deliberate destruction to create the Gulag Museum at Perm 36.

Today, staff members bring students through the cells and work yards to learn about the human experience of living there and how the camp fit in to the larger system of Soviet repression. The museum works with students to help them interview their own families to learn of their experience during the Soviet period, often opening conversations for the first time. Using their family history along with the history of the camp, students define their vision of democracy and propose how they can promote it.

The Museum also provides an opportunity for students to learn broad human rights concepts and collectively engage in a discussion on personal definitions of human rights issues through its “I Have the Right Club.” In one exercise, students are asked to write or draw their associations with the word “freedom” on a large piece of construction paper and pin it up on a wall. Students then explore each others’ concepts of the word freedom, identify their role in promoting their idea of freedom, and debate what it takes to support and protect those visions of freedom. By encouraging students to define human rights personally and collectively, Perm-36, once famed for its jailing of political dissidents and ordinary citizens, is reshaped as a site that welcomes dialogue and promotes humanitarian values.

But the power of historic sites is not inherent; it must be harnessed as a conscious tactic in the service of civic engagement.



Postcards for prisoners at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum. Photo by Lauren Meranda. Courtesy Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.

### Share Opportunities for Public Involvement: Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

Coalition members share a belief “that places of memory have special power to inspire human connection to larger issues, and therefore to move people to participate in addressing these issues.” Typically, Sites of Conscience promote active engagement instead of specific actions, stating that “...to protect their effectiveness as open forums, Sites of Conscience should not prescribe a specific course of action to their visitors.” However, there are noted exceptions to this, particularly at sites memorialized in no small part because of the inspiring actions that took place there.

For example, the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago is the former home of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jane Addams (1860-1935) and the one-time residence or gathering place of innumerable social reformers. 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.

The recently renovated museum opens up the never-before-exhibited second floor of the Hull home and includes the exhibition, *Unfinished Business*, which intentionally draws connections between Hull-House's history and the “unfinished” nature of social reform and change.

One of the most successful actions that visitors have embraced is the invitation to participate in an effort that encourages people to send poetry of their own creation or published poems they find inspiring to inmates held in solitary confinement. Visitors to the exhibition have the opportunity to send poems on pre-addressed postcards to prisoners currently being held at TAMMS Maximum Security Prison in Southern Illinois.

Completed postcards are on view for other visitors to read for a short time before the museum mails them to prisoners. These postcards ultimately comprise one of the only forms of contact the prisoners have with the outside world. At the Hull-House Museum, this type of action is in keeping with the ethos and the history of the site where political reform and action were sought and fought for.

### Harnessing the Power of Historic Sites

From nine to over 260 in twelve years, Sites of Conscience seek to serve as significant new tools for building lasting cultures of human rights and democracy. By initiating new conversations about contemporary issues through a historical lens, places of memory can become new centers for democracy in action. But the power of historic sites is not inherent; it must be harnessed as a conscious tactic in the service of civic engagement. Sites of Conscience play this critical role. ✨

### Footnote:

<sup>1</sup> “*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.

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***Want to get your museum, historic site, or initiative involved with the Coalition? Visit [www.sitesofconscience.org/join-us](http://www.sitesofconscience.org/join-us) or email [coalition@sitesofconscience.org](mailto:coalition@sitesofconscience.org) to learn more.***

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