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MOHOA Considering the Curious Case of the Satyagraha House, Johannesburg. A Curatorial Critique

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Abstract What can the case of Satyagraha House, the luxury guesthouse and museum complex established on the site of a domestic building briefly inhabited by Mohandas Gandhi from 1908 to 1909, suggest about the complexities attached to heritage and preservation in the contemporary South African context? What can this hybrid museum and guesthouse space offer to advance dialogue around the heritage of modern Africa, which will allow alternatives to the 'traditional' museum to emerge? Equally, when innovative modes of presenting heritage arise as a result of initiatives from outside the country, the need to pay due diligence to local memory and understanding is considered here as being of paramount importance. Failure to do this, as, I argue, has inadvertently taken place at Satyagraha House, will place modern museum practice in South Africa as belonging to the past rather than to the present and future of modern African heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, when applying for a job that would include curating various artifacts from across sub-Saharan Africa, I went to seek the advice of a colleague who worked at the British Museum in London. This move was a mistake on my part. I realized – when the colleague in question described working on an advisory panel in Nairobi designed to train East African museum professionals – that she and I came from entirely different positions. For her, this was simply how the world worked. According to some inherently received and assumed natural order of things, the British curator would inevitably be a valuable asset in providing advisory services for their African counterpart by virtue of the longevity of professional practice vis à vis the later. Whilst it might be a truism that museum practice is very well established in the UK, the idea that this *ipso facto* provides the right for the British curator to 'educate' their African counterpart should not obtain. The shock of encountering this ethos in 2011, as it was at the time, has remained with me. It has also informed the writing of this paper.

Certainly the UK museum and heritage landscape offers insights gained through long-lived museological and heritage practice, and dates back to the founding of Oxford University's originally

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private museum, the Ashmolean, in 1682, and to the establishment of the British Museum in 1753.¹ However, museum practice in the UK is not without its critics, and this disapprobation includes rightly disputed and contentious issues. As I write this paper (September 2021), the question of the British Museum's returning looted Benin bronzes in its collection is once more in the news.² Clearly, longevity does not necessarily always equate to *best* practice.

It is these and other issues related to decoloniality, and also with audience in mind, as well as questions about *whose* archeological and curatorial histories we are sharing when considering modern African heritage, that have informed the writing of this paper. While my focus is the curious case of Satyagraha House, one-time home of Mohandas Gandhi, as discussed below, the building and its contents present as much a vehicle for thinking about a quasi-colonial museal presence in South Africa in the 21st century as they present a site for exploring modern African heritage per se. Satyagraha House is also a site for contested memory in that it gives rise to distinctly different views of its famous occupant. It seeks to explore Africa's experiences of plural modernities whether these be positive or negative, colonial or postcolonial, tangible or intangible, museological or commercial as they arise at one particular site. In discussing Satyagraha House, a site for querying museological praxis and for contemporary debate, I hope to consider dialectic principals attendant on an aspect of museum practice in South Africa; that is, the need to provide a voice for the previously disadvantaged and in doing so consider sensitivities and politics of local history and local memory.

On a warm late summer evening in March 2019, I found myself being guided up the path of a beautifully lamp-lit garden towards the original building within the renovated Satyagraha House complex, in which Gandhi lived from 1908 to 1909, in Orchards, Johannesburg (Figure 1). The air was laden with a heady mix of frangipani and paraffin from the lamps lighting the garden paths. It was nothing if not heavily atmospheric. As Satyagraha's curator in charge of renovation, Lauren Segal emphasizes,

It's a house full of quiet, it's a house full of contemplation. I think if we can bring visitors to Satyagraha House to feel the difference of what Gandhi brought here as a philosophy [vis à vis] the outside world which is mad and full of taxis just outside these walls that would be a great thing. (Living in a Museum, The Satyagraha House, 2011)

The team who restored Satyagraha have been successful in this aim, but had this been at the expense authenticity over ambience I had wondered, that first visit? And, if so, did it matter?

I had been drawn to stay at Gandhi's South African home since the venue proclaimed itself to be at *one and the same time*, museum, and guesthouse; 'We very intentionally designed this exhibition [i.e. the whole, house, displays and guest rooms] so that it looks like a domestic space. It pushes the boundaries of what museum is' (Living in a Museum, The Satyagraha House, 2011).

The term *Satyagraha* means 'truth force' and indicates the concept of non-violent resistance that Gandhi developed at the time of occupying the house: how might the 'truth' be told at the site? Given



Figure 1. House at night with lamplit garden. Photograph: Harriet McKay. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the context, the home of the Mahatma for whom, in his own words, ‘there is no higher god than truth’ (Berkley Centre), how might the various narratives that the house enshrined be played out, I wanted to know? The curator in me had worried over the propriety of allowing guests to live among museum contents. How might authenticity be maintained in this instance? For one thing, given that by 1908, Gandhi’s devotion to a strict asceticism was coming to the fore, how might an accurately curated environment also accommodate the paying guest?

The original rondavel style building that now houses the museum rooms at Satyagraha was designed in 1907 by his close friend the German architect Hermann Kallenbach. Gandhi and Kallenbach occupied the house between 1908 and 1909. It was not until just over a century later that the house took on its present status as museum and guesthouse. In 2011, following its purchase by the French tourism company Voyages Du Monde, the restored house and new outlying buildings opened to the public as bookable accommodation and museum. Its website announces:

Renovations overseen by a team comprising an historian, a curator, an architect, two interior designers, and their respective teams, have restored the original spirit of the house, bringing back an important page in the history of both South Africa and Mohandas Gandhi. The Satyagraha House is now a registered part of the country’s historical heritage and presents an innovative accommodation concept linking guesthouse to museum.
(Satyagraha House, 2011)

In fact, I would argue that little of what is traditionally understood to be ‘museum’ is actually present. While the original house does have explanatory displays and didactic information (Figures 2 and 3), its contents are neither strictly authentic nor site specific. The attic room in which Gandhi slept and which is viewable, has been dressed with a suitable and literally, low-key floor mattress and modest furnishings (the round, wire-framed spectacles, carefully placed on the bookstand by the bed to my mind a rather theatrical element of set-dressing). Elsewhere around the house, according to its website, furniture and fittings were sourced during renovations and purchased from Indian antique vendors.

In a film on the Satyagraha House website, project historian Erik Itzkin comments ‘We wanted to take it [the house] back to what it was like when Gandhi was here’ (The Satyagraha House, 2011), but how far has this been possible? Whilst Roco Bosman, renovation team architect, acknowledges that the big challenge was ‘to respect history, make sure that the original authenticity of the architecture remains clear and remains undistorted’ (Architecture and Design, A Restored Sobriety, The Satyagraha House, 2011), tantalizing glimpses of original interiors presumably associated with Gandhi appear in the same film but are not discussed in terms of provenance nor as sources used during restoration.

At Satyagraha, the interior designer of the team has been at least as important as the curator and archeologist in realizing the project, one senses; all is very beautiful.³ Indeed it comes as no surprise that the house received at least as much, if not more attention from the interior decor media, as far I have discovered, as it did museological interest. To stay at the house is to find oneself in a centerfold for the glossy South African interior decoration magazine *Visi* (Figure 4).⁴ Segal discusses this approach on the Satyagraha website commenting that;



Figure 2. A museum room with collection items including portraits and a spinning wheel. Photograph: Dawn Bradnick Jorgensen, 2017. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the challenges of this project were about the teamwork; how we were going to come together, the architect, the interior designer and the museum to make sure that nothing looked out of place and that everything would blend together in perfect harmony. Because of the thought given to all the rooms and how they have been designed, I think [visitors] will feel that they are living something of Gandhi's philosophy when they come here.

(Living in a Museum, The Satyagraha House, 2011)

But here too lies a fundamental contradiction. That which might traditionally be understood as 'museum' vis à vis 'guesthouse' and the problems of reconciling the two in the Satyagraha context emerges through interviews with the interior designers. Having visited various of Gandhi's ashrams in India, including the Mani Bhavan ashram, Mumbai,⁵ the interior designers on the Voyages du Monde team, Amit Zadock and Christine Peuch, reveal something that I would argue is a contradiction in terms of meeting authenticity and modern guesthouse requirements, 'The instructions were sobriety and simplicity, great simplicity and a mix of Indian and South African furniture, with very little interior decoration, so everything was very pure, very simple' (Architecture and Design, A Restored Sobriety, The Satyagraha House, 2011). In fact, to my eyes, as mentioned above, the interiors of this extraordinary house are nothing if not 'designerly'. More than this, the deliberate minimalism of the interiors at Satyagraha speak to me of an aesthetic trope which so often, in design journals published around the world, speaks of luxury and expense, a far cry from an absence of design that was Gandhian aestheticism.



Figure 3. A modern room with low sofas and a series of framed photographs and documents on the walls. Photograph: Dawn Bradnick Jorgensen, 2017. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

I highlight these juxtapositions because according to my UK-based heritage training, authenticity and therefore supposed sanctity of the building/object is key. But, to return to the opening remarks of this paper, how much does this curious mix matter for heritage and modern curatorial approaches in South Africa? Satyagraha House is of interest to me not just because of the subject matter, nor indeed as it is such a visually stunning experience, but because it causes me to reflect on my prejudices and assumptions.

Might it not be appropriate that the house in which the Mahatma began to think about decolonisation – the house occupied by him in the years shortly before South Africa's own independence from Britain – offer an alternative approach for modern African curatorial approaches? Income and maintenance, preservation, education, and information are all provided by Satyagraha's mixed status. Above all, a building that is important to the histories of three countries on three separate continents, India, the UK, and South Africa, has been preserved where it might otherwise not have been. In thinking through these issues, it is useful to invoke the German cultural commentator Andreas Huyssen's insightful thoughts on the nature of 'museum' here:

Fundamentally dialectical, the museum serves both as burial chamber of the past—with all that entails in terms of decay, erosion, forgetting—as site of possible resurrections, however mediated and contaminated in the eyes of the beholder. No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and confirms



Figure 4. A view of a modern hotel bedroom with simple furnishings. Photograph: Dawn Bradnick Jorgensen, 2017. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory. (Huysen, 1995, cited in Coombes)

I have not managed to resolve for myself questions around the probity of the Satyagraha House approach. What I do feel, though, is that in the end my uncertainty lies not over matters of centred or decentred curatorial approaches but in a more universal theme. On the one hand, so long as the public is nowhere misled, or misinformed as to evidence and authenticity, then I increasingly tend towards viewing the initiative positively.

On the other hand, imperatives relating to interpretation are critical. The house can be read as providing a counter-narrative to that famously written by early 19th century English Romantic poet John Keats' sentiment that 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty'.⁶ To do its job as a museum in Johannesburg, does Satyagraha House, this monument to truth, and exemplar of exceptional interior decoration, need to speak rather more loudly, of 'the ugly'? Of apartheid as a vicious regime based upon lies and deceptions? Indeed, the extent to which 'truth-force' is present through Satyagraha's museum commentary on Gandhian philosophy is a salient question.

During the northern hemisphere summers of 2019 and 2020, against the background of South Africa's Rhodes Must Fall movement and the toppling of statues to Confederate generals in the US,

also gathering momentum in the UK was the desire to remove statues of British slave-traders from their pedestals around the country.⁷ Rather less well known in Europe, and in Britain, were the calls to remove statues of Gandhi. The African continent is ahead of the curve on this account, a monument to Gandhi removed in 2019, covertly, from its site at the University of Ghana amidst protests centred on the young Gandhi's documented racism towards his black African compatriots. It might also come as a surprise to British and French visitors to Satyagraha House that the Gandhi whom they revere as *the* voice of non-violent political protest had been keen to join the British fight against the Zulu nation in 1906.⁸ Although, according to commentator Pieter Friedrich, Gandhi's autobiography determinedly places him on the side of the Zulu, as follows,⁹

from his battlefield reports, we discover the following . . . on July 3, Gandhi says, 'we had a narrow escape' when 'we met a Kaffir who did not wear the loyal badge' . . . On July 10th, after 'narrowly escaping' from a Zulu who did not wear 'the loyal badge', 'We finished the day . . . with no Kaffirs to fight'. (Friedrich)

It would be disingenuous of me not to consider Gandhi's British education and training as having been a likely contributor to his anti-African standpoint and to his position that the Indian populations he worked with in South Africa were superior to their 'African' compatriots. Indeed, this mindset accords only too well with the racial hierarchy theories of Victorian Britain.¹⁰ Whatever the origins of his views, Gandhi's writing from the early 20th century, for example, appears peppered with the use of the word 'kaffir', a term recognized across Africa for its repugnance.

In October 2018, writing for The Heritage Portal (an online news and information platform for the heritage sector), Itzkin (2019) commented that Gandhi 'was on trial again',

In a test of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's reputation and approval rating in South Africa, a motion to remove the name and statue of the Indian leader from the city centre was debated in recent weeks by the Johannesburg City Council, the country's largest municipality. The motion called for the removal of the bronze statue at Gandhi Square – sculpted by Tinka Christopher, it depicts Gandhi as a young activist lawyer in his legal gown – and the re-naming of the site after Sophie de Bruyn, a well-known anti-apartheid activist.

Is the misunderstanding, or perhaps more properly, the lack of understanding, that has seen a French tourist agency create a monument to a contested figure in South Africa a modern day – though benign – repetition of the colonial injustices visited upon the country by its former British colonizers? Commentary in one of the films on the Satyagraha website almost appears to protest too much,

Concerning the building but also our partners we trusted the various encounters we would make. All these people [house staff] were recruited on purely human and personality criteria. Then eventually we had almost every group from South Africa. There are Zulus, Sotho and Xhosa. . . so it is a real African [environment] with a natural representation of most of the ethnic groups which was not planned at all.
(*The making of a unique house, The Satyagraha House, 2011*)

CONCLUSION

By way of offering a rounding up of the thoughts presented here, I am reminded of Annie Coombs seminal work on the reshaping of the museum and heritage landscape following the advent of democracy in 1994. In *History After Apartheid* (2003), Coombes writes of the text and her aim to discuss the new narratives needed as South Africa's museumscape transitioned to representing a democratic society. She posits,

Many commentators have written about the shortcomings of the new dispensation. . . . But it seems to me that if nothing else, the South African debates on history and heritage, on 'truth' and lies, and on memory and make-believe, demonstrate the health and vitality of a political culture of critique and counter critique that was forged in the most difficult of circumstances and whose main protagonists have often paid dearly for their beliefs . . . the contested histories [discussed in the text] are not just the internal debates among a small elite but concern a much larger public than might normally be the case.

Almost 30 years into Democracy, whatever the 'rights' or 'wrongs' of the Satyagraha case, it is surely of value that space exists within the dialogue around museological and curatorial practice in South Africa, which allows alternatives to the 'traditional' museum to emerge. It is equally valuable, if not essential, however, that when innovative modes of presenting heritage arise as a result of initiatives from outside the country, the need to pay due diligence to local memory and understanding is considered as being of paramount importance. Failure to do so, as I argue has inadvertently taken place at Satyagraha House, will place modern heritage and museum practice in South Africa as belonging to the past rather than to the present and future of modern African heritage. Even salient questions of museological accuracy and authenticity, this issue, in any location in the South African context, must not be ignored in the modern museum. However, all this being said, I write as a British museum curator and academic commenting on the practices of a former colony. Can there ever be a situation in which this in itself is not deeply problematic? **END**

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest have arisen in the research and writing of the above paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in JSTOR at <https://www.jstor.org/>.

NOTES

1. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is named after the British antiquary Elias Ashmole who gifted his collection to Oxford University in 1682. The museum opened its doors to the public and became Britain's first museum the following year. The British Museum, in London, opened to the public in 1759.
2. The British Museum's bronzes were plundered by British troops in 1897 from the Kingdom of Benin in what is now modern-day Nigeria.
3. I reached out to the museum designer on the project, Lauren Segal to better understand decisions that were made as to what to include in the common spaces and guest rooms of the house but was unfortunately unable to make contact with her.
4. The stunning house aesthetic is also beautifully captured by the blogger Dawn Jorgensen on her site, *The Incidental Tourist* (Jorgensen, 2017).
5. Gandhi's base in Mumbai, now a museum, visitor centre and library.
6. This phrase is taken from Keats' 1819 poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.
7. For example, the statue to Edward Colston (1636–1731), Bristol merchant and slave trader, was toppled as part of a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Bristol, UK, in June 2020.
8. Led by Bambatha kaMancinza (ca. 1860–1906) the Bambatha Uprising (known in the UK as the Zulu Rebellion) was a revolt against British rule and taxation in Natal.
9. Friedrich quotes Gandhi as using the wholly unacceptable word 'Kaffir', which I also retain here as providing insight into the latter's mindset at that time and in line with my commentary below, p. 9.
10. Supported by pseudoscientific ideas, these theories were deployed in support of notions of racial inferiority or superiority in Victorian Britain and across its Empire.

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