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THE CHANGING CONTEXT: NEW POLICIES AND PROCESSES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN  
HERITAGE SECTOR

[A paper presented on behalf of Themba Wakashe at Mayibuye Centre,  
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Honourable Chair, distinguished guests and esteemed colleagues, may I start by sincerely apologising for my absence today. I am sure it would have been a pleasure to meet with you and share some ideas, concerns and our aspirations about the new policies and processes that are taking place in our country today. Perhaps the only advantage I have at this moment is that I am not there to answer some of those difficult and sometimes thorny questions that every beurocrat would like to duck! Needless to say is that in most cases, it is precisely such questions which make us to pause a little and reflect on our policies and their impact on our everyday life.

I would like to begin by noting two notions that tend to plague our discussions about heritage and policy development. The first notion tends to be romantic and looks at heritage through the past tense - as a history and culture that has shaped nations, their identities and destiny. Of course, the issues of contemporary culture and heritage are accorded less status and at times relegated to the level of "subcultures". What places South Africa at the centre of these debates

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is that the contemporary is the issue. We are presently examining that past with all its distortions and confronting the challenges it presents to us. One of those challenges pertains to policy and its development. The democratic processes which continue to shape our country today have given us one clear lesson, and that is, the shaping of policy is not the prerogative of the technocrats. The notion that every man and woman is not interested in the intricacies and technicalities of policy development has been discarded.

One of the most rewarding experiences I have had recently was to visit the villages of Mvezo and Qunu in the Eastern Cape (which is where the President was born and raised) and listened to men and women defining in precise terms the heritage they want to reclaim and the contemporary which they want to preserve. They touched on both the cultural and natural sites as well as exposing us to the living traditions of the area. This scenario is just one of many where South Africans are impacting on policy in varied fields such as the land, education, housing, health and culture.

The new policies of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology are laid out in our recently launched White Paper on arts and culture. They are informed by values such as equity, access to and participation in the cultural expression of our country as a whole. Like every other sector of our society, heritage has been fundamentally affected by our past. The distribution of the public funds, the shaping of the heritage landscape in areas such as monuments and historical sites, the establishment and maintenance of the infrastructure associated with heritage are a testimony to the legacy which are redressing. Needless to say, the context under which we are functioning

is emotionally charged, and it touches at the core of what it is to be a South African. Today's questions do not focus on the stale rhetoric: what are we going to do with the Taal Monument in Paarl or the Voortrekkershoogte in Pretoria. There are no hidden bulldozers or hammers waiting to demolish any of our monuments or museums! The real issue on the table is in what shape and form are we going to maintain the existing heritage landscape and in what manner are we going to integrate into the national system what has been left out in the past.

Another equation which needs to be factored into this context is how do we value each other's cultural identity? How do we define ourselves and how do we want to be seen by the outside world? This puts us further in the debate because we have what I call grand gestures and signals. These are reflected in our submission to the list of World Heritage Sites. But what is also key to us are the internal gestures which must begin to reflect to ourselves, that is, who we are as South Africans. As I mentioned earlier, the first step achieved so far has been the launch of the White Paper. The second and the most challenging is translating that into the realm of everyday life for all of us. We are currently working jointly with the National Monuments Council, the provinces, and other interested parties in drafting a new heritage bill for the country. We envisage that it will be a comprehensive bill and it will go a long way in assisting us in redressing the lopsidedness of the present situation.

Another interesting factor in this changing context pertains to our ambivalence and perhaps the paranoia in the heritage sector towards international partners. Unlike, say, the performing arts, the heritage sector was effectively isolated from the international trends and networks. For example, the sweeping changes that have occurred in the museum sector worldwide still need to impact on us. However, the skills and infrastructure that exist in our institutions is still enviable to many other countries. But before I get carried away, the ambivalence I referred to can be sensed precisely in our attitude that although we need credible partners, there is little they can teach us because the South African situation is unique in the world. Every part of the world is unique to itself and in this sense South Africa is no exception. There is an inherent danger that this sentiment can, in some cases, be perceived as South African arrogance. Unfortunately, this "uniqueness" does at times get reinforced in the international circles. The danger is that we might wallow in it and wake up too late.

Perhaps paranoia is too strong a word, but as a person trained in the arts, at times I tend to be a little more passionate in my delivery. But the point I am trying to raise is that, at least among ourselves as South Africans, we are sensitive to outside influence and the potential to be dominated. I suppose with the experience we have, we do not take lightly the issues of domination and subversion of our identities. However, this should not be an impediment. We must engage the international community as equals and partners in the preservation and promotion of the world heritage.

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The context is changing not only for the professionals in the heritage sector but for all of us including an audience like us which academic. I am not about to bash academics. I used to be one myself before I joined public service. What I want to highlight is that the task of transformation requires all of us to be involved. I was recently at the South African Museum Association conference in Kimberley and I was rather surprised or even disappointed by the marked absence of academics in a conference of that nature. I nearly did the unthinkable - turning to be a soapy romantic that yearned for the 80s when the academics and their institutions were actively involved in fighting for a just and democratic society. I want to appeal to you again to be actively involved and assist in translating those ideals and aspirations into reality. The absence of trained and skilled black majority in the heritage sector is of major concern to us. We all care about our heritage, we want it to reflect our country as it is in its composition and variedness. We need to train and empower all sectors of our society. The task that is facing us is huge and the present skills and cultural diversity in this sector still leaves a lot to be desired.

This summary of our context is not by any means comprehensive but I thought I would share some of my perceptions and concerns on what informs my views towards policies and processes that we need to embark upon. Our agenda is to transform the heritage sector on equitable basis, create conditions for all South Africans to feel free to participate and shape the destiny of this sector. We are doing this in consultation with the professional bodies and institutions, the general public, our colleagues in government and our partners abroad. We want to ensure effective and efficient use of our limited resources. We want to further

widen access to our heritage and to promote the sense of ownership to all our communities. The situation is also fragile. Our heritage institutions have been underfunded for some time and have not received the attention they deserve. It is our duty as the government Department tasked with arts and culture to give them that attention. At present there is a dynamic communication between ourselves as the Department and our heritage institutions. It is constructive, focused and will, in my opinion, produce the vision, the leadership, the programmes and projects which are necessary for our heritage sector.

I might as well add that this attention invokes accountability to the public, performance evaluation on mutually agreed criteria, reconceptualisation of our heritage sector to present a nationally coherent structure designed to serve all the people of this country on equitable basis. I thank you.