Signs of the Times: Tourism and Public History at Cape Town's Victoria and Alfred Waterfront
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Résumé

Signes des temps : le Victoria and Alfred Waterfront entre tourisme et histoire pour le public. — Cet article étudie les modifications apportées au patrimoine urbain de Cape Town au cours du XXe siècle et examine en particulier les images du passé de cette ville à travers son lieu le plus touristique, le Victoria and Alfred Waterfront. Les auteurs décrivent ensuite leur tentative, avec d'autres membres du Cape Town History Project, d'en présenter une image différente, en plaçant, en des lieux précis, des panneaux explicatifs évoquant l'histoire du site. Cette démarche, dans le contexte du processus de démocratisation de l'Afrique du Sud, a permis d'atténuer les divergences existant entre les représentations du public, des universitaires et des professionnels.

Abstract

This article examines the changing constructions of Cape Town's heritage in the course of the twentieth century, and in particular the images of the city's past at its main tourist venue, the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront. It then describes attempts by the authors and other members of the Cape Town History Project to present alternative images through story boards erected at the site. In the process, the contestation of a variety of public, academic and corporate images were played out against the background of the shift to democracy in South Africa.

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The cover of the latest edition of the best-selling tourist guide, The Reader's Digest Illustrated Guide to Southern Africa (1993) depicts Cape Town's newly developed Victoria and Alfred Waterfront (Fig. 1). The site did not even warrant a mention in the 1985 edition of the Illustrated Guide. At that stage it was a derelict and unprepossessing dockyard, visited only by local shipping enthusiasts. But by 1992 an estimated nine million people visited the area in that year alone which ranked it as the prime tourist venue in South Africa.¹

On the Waterfront, the site's publicity magazine, proudly proclaimed that:

'Only two short years ago the main visitors to the old harbour area were seagulls and alley cats. Today it is almost a mini-city on its own. The Waterfront is no sterile playground for the idle few. It caters for all—from school groups to serious students, from families to wealthy tourists. And it remains a working harbour, alive with the activities of the fishing industry and the boat repair yards. The Waterfront is a splendid introduction to South Africa for the overseas tourist. For here the visitor will discover much of the country's early history, its maritime heritage, its links with Europe, the indigenous arts and crafts, the manufacturing capabilities, some of its culture and its food and wines. All in a single and singularly attractive location.'²

This article examines how this dramatic shift in the focus of tourism and local entertainment in Cape Town has affected the way in which the history of the city is presented and perceived, and assesses our attempt as historians in the Cape Town History Project to intervene in that process.³ The Water-

1. 'Waterfront tops for tourist spots', Cape Times, 9 Jan. 1993. Gold Reef City ranked second with 1 million visitors and the Kruger National Park third, although there was some scepticism at how the Waterfront figures were calculated.
3. The Cape Town History Project (CTHP), at the University of Cape Town, is an academic project funded by the CSD (Council for Scientific Development), whose assistance we gratefully acknowledge. We have always been concerned with the gulf between academic and popular history. In order to overcome it we have engaged in a variety of activities such as public workshops, school days and the making of a video.

front development has strikingly re-focussed not only what visitors do in the city, but also the historical and contemporary images of Cape Town which they encounter and absorb. Our criticism, and that of others, of the type of history which these images present led to a challenge from the Waterfront Company to improve matters. The process was revealing about the different understandings of 'history' on the part of commercial tourism, academic historians and the general public in contemporary South Africa.

Tourism and the Construction of a Cape Town Heritage

An important feature of the Waterfront's publicity and marketing claims in the late 1980s was that it would restore Cape Town's 'heritage'. The notion of 'heritage' is a construction which is reshaped according to the vision of the purveyor. Since tourism is concerned with the marketing of entertainment, it tends to emphasize romantic or nostalgic images and to exclude the seedier realities in which the site may be embedded. This is particularly true of places where the function is primarily commercial rather than educational. The Waterfront Company's concept of heritage draws on a specific idea of Cape Town's past and has a strong resonance in the light of the shifts that had taken place in the experiences and perceptions of visitors to Cape Town in the course of the twentieth century.

Up until the late 1940s, the predominant tourist image of Cape Town was formed by its approach from the sea. Its dual image as both 'The Mother City' and as 'The Gateway to Africa' implied a history which commenced outside the continent and which in turned shaped its hinterland, the rest of the country and even the whole continent. This reflected the experience of the visitors who were the main focus of Cape Town's tourism: those arriving from Europe on passenger liners whose first sight of the town—and of South Africa as a whole—was obtained from Table Bay. Many representations of Cape Town, both in art and in literature, were from the sea, the town itself dwarfed by the landscape of Table Mountain, and by shipping. The approach to the city was furthered through the rituals of disembarkation at the harbour. To the wealthiest visitors aboard the Union-Castle ships between 1900 and the late 1940s, this entrance was extended by transfer of baggage and person in a triumphant procession straight up Adderley Street 'the main thoroughfare of the City where modern edifices of five and six storeys proclaim the commercial prosperity of the

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4. Compare, for instance, commercial waterfronts like those of Baltimore, San Francisco and Liverpool with educational sites such as Ironbridge or Williamsburg.
5. See the holdings of the William Fehr Collection at Rust en Vreugd and the Castle for examples of paintings. Saunders (1989: section 2) provides numerous examples of such literary descriptions by people who had spent weary months at sea. Let Lady Anne Barnard speak for them all describing Cape Town from the bay: 'nothing could be finer than the coup D'eoul [sic]/...' (Lewin Robinson 1973: 37).
fat years lately experienced' (Handbook... 1905: 195) and through the Company Gardens to the Mount Nelson ‘the Premier Hotel of South Africa’(The South... 1947: 13). These images of the city were clearly focussed on the line between Table Bay and the Mount Nelson, with the harbour as its pivotal point.

Cape Town’s claims as a tourist attraction in the first half of the twentieth century were dominated by prevailing European tastes against which Cape Town measured itself. In the 1890s it tentatively put forward its title to be a modern city, noted for its ‘rustic beauty’ and its excellent communications (De Jong 1983: 2-3). By the 1920s it could more confidently claim to be ‘a region of nature’s richest abundance’ with a ‘salubrious climate’ and ‘exhilarating rural surroundings’, appealing to all ‘who seek a change for restful quiet and health-giving recreation’. Apart from being a home of ‘sedate refinement’, Cape Town was increasingly offered as a major watering place, the ‘Riviera of South Africa’.6

Central to this image was the pier and promenade, without which any modern watering place would be incomplete (Fig. 2). The pier, that English symbol of popular seaside entertainment, was first envisaged in the minds of Capetonians in an extraordinary futuristic painting by James Ford at the end of the nineteenth century.7 It finally reached fruition in November 1913 and rapidly became emblematic of Cape Town’s charms. While this ‘gateway to Africa’ survived, the arrival and departure of the mailboats occurred in an appropriately festive setting. It offered all that European tourists could demand, restaurants, concerts, cinemas, swimming and boating. At night it was thronged.

‘[From the Observation Tower,] the distant mountains, dimly lined against the sky, stand out cold and dark and mysterious but all around you is brightness and vivacity; the sounds of music, and the swish of water as the waves play amongst the network of piles and girders below; the smell of the salt sea as the ozone-laden breeze stimulates you into consciousness that you feel the better for its blowing; [...] Capetown without its Promenade Pier would be unthinkable’ (CTCC 1926: 129-130).

It was this imagery which was remembered with such nostalgia by Capetonians after the pier was demolished in 1938 and which the Waterfront sought to recapture in the 1980s. In one of his reminiscences of old Cape Town George Manuel (1977: front.), a District Six resident, depicted the scene: ‘Cape Town as I like to remember it—with the Pier at the foot of Adderley Street, with the sea literally lapping the City’s doorstep, with Woodstock Beach still intact and unspoilt . . .’

7. The painting, Cape Town in the Twentieth Century, is on loan in the South African National Gallery, Cape Town.
Fig. 1. The modern waterfront development with restored buildings, new restaurants and pleasure boats.

Fig. 2. Cape Town Pier, ca 1925 (Courtesy of the South African Library. Photographer: Blyth Clayton).
Although the activities at the pier remained essentially Eurocentric, its context was not. On the one side, an integral part of the area, was Roggebaai fishing harbour, historically the site of local community fishing; on the other was Woodstock beach, the favourite resort of District Six and Woodstock factory workers. But in the era after the Second World War, drastic changes took place in the focus of leisure and tourism in Cape Town. The prime cause was the reclamation of the foreshore area and the construction of the new Duncan Dock between 1939 and 1945. As a result the old shoreline with its pier, and Roggebaai and Woodstock beaches were destroyed. The foreshore plan, drawn up in 1947 and since stigmatized as Cape Town's greatest planning disaster, cut off Adderley Street and the centre of the city from the shoreline. The newly reclaimed land was the venue of the 1952 Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival, a politically charged and controversial occasion which was actively boycotted by a number of Capetonians for whom it marked the full incorporation of the city into the apartheid state (Rassool & Witz 1993). Forced removals in the 1970s destroyed the central living areas of District Six and many Capetonians were physically driven out of the old city centre. New building on the foreshore provided little for leisure or tourist interest, and the erection of a six-lane high rise freeway physically symbolized the cutting off of the harbour from the town.

Accompanying this was the decline of shipping as the main means of conveying tourists to Cape Town and South Africa. Container bays replaced the passenger wharfs in the Duncan Dock, the customs posts dealt only with commercial and freight goods, and Johannesburg airport supplanted Cape Town harbour as the main entry point into the country for foreign visitors.

The foreshore development and the ending of the mailship era separated Cape Town from its maritime associations. For many tourists Cape Town now offered few of the seaside attractions which could be found in Durban or in lesser resorts like Port Elizabeth and East London. Its beauty remained a draw and tours up the mountain, round the peninsula or out to the wine farms became standard fare. For the rest its interest was largely directed to the educated middle classes—museums, art galleries and Cape Dutch homes. Although Clifton beach had some cache amongst the young, the temperature of the Atlantic Ocean put off many up-country visitors. Capetonians moved by Group Areas to the Cape Flats swam and fished in False Bay rather than Table Bay. The flea markets of Greenmarket Square, amongst the earliest in the country, somewhat altered Cape Town's appeal for South African youth but it still did not rival Durban as a tourist resort. And with many Capetonians now living so far from the older centre of the town, the focus of shopping and commercial activities shifted to the suburbs.

As a result Cape Town’s tourism between the 1960s and the late 1980s was firmly orientated away from the central city and its shoreline. Tour operators largely ignored a Capetonian past which bore little relation to the sites of visitor interest. Just as much of the old city had been physically destroyed, so representations of that past were removed from public access. The visitor, and the Capetonian, had to search hard to find traces of the pre-war town and the forces that characterized it.

By the late 1980s the city centre was taking on new images and patterns of use which reflected the rapidly changing character and population of greater Cape Town. Most striking was the extension of informal sector activities. Street traders began to edge away from their ‘traditional’ area of the Parade Ground into Adderley Street and the town centre. Relative ease of access by train, bus and taxi from Cape Town’s fast growing townships and squatter settlements led to the expansion of street trading in basic commodities alongside the ‘traditional’ flower sellers. At first opposed by the City Council, by the early 1990s there was a relaxation of controls over street hawking which expanded rapidly. Much of this was resisted by established commercial interests and by more traditionalist Capetonians who resented the ‘take over’ of the centre by new traders representing not only the ‘hippy’ youth culture of Greenmarket Square but also the steady Africanisation of the city. This process had little appeal for conventional tourists.

Influenced by developing concern for the environment in the United States and Britain, the 1970s also brought different forces into play which, while returning to the heritage of the city, still ignored the realities of its Africanisation. City planning initiatives rejected the obsession with freeways which had dominated thinking in the 1950s and began to take account of the need to conserve the environment for the benefit both of residents and tourists. In this context ‘environment’ came to include the built as well as the natural habitat. The preservation of Cape Town’s buildings as the visible manifestation of its unique heritage appeared increasingly on planning agendas.

The case was most trenchantly put by Revel Fox, chairman of the Cape Provincial Institute of Architects in 1974. He argued strongly that the demolition of Cape Town buildings, ‘an important bridge between cultures’, had analogies to burning libraries and destroying museums. More, they were integral to Cape Town’s special identity:

‘If we talk to people in other parts of the country, they tell us, “Well, what is there to come to Cape Town for?” They certainly won’t come for the climate, because there are better climates. There is better sea bathing. […] What we at one time did have

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9. This was reflected, for instance, at a major seminar of the South African Institute of Town and Regional Planning (1974), and a public lecture series (Basset 1978).
to offer that was unique was a rich mosaic of life, which was made up to quite a large extent of the urban fabric of the city and the interaction with it of a very complex and diverse culture—a culture comprised of English, Dutch, French, Malay, and the various hybrid mixes with indigenous peoples, bearing fruit in a new culture: music, literature, artefacts and architecture."

It was precisely the oldest parts of the city which stood in the path of development and were endangered, he pointed out.10

There were two implications of this direction in city planning. The first was the prevalence of architects or building-related professions in the discussions.11 The second associated implication was related to the drive to preservation. By the nature of things buildings, demanding investment in the past and the future, tend to be the physical expression of the wealthier elements of the society. The history of the poor, the builders rather than the occupiers of these buildings, do not usually survive in this form. There are exceptions like that of Bo-Kaap, but they are rare. The result was a drift on the part of planners to preserve a heritage which reflected technological development, aesthetic appeal and success, all associated with white capitalism.

The Construction of Heritage at the Waterfront

It was in this context that the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront Company emerged. On the one hand, in line with conservation ideology, it strove to reverse the trend which took tourists out of central Cape Town. On the other, it confirmed the process which laid emphasis on buildings rather than people.

The idea of developing Cape Town's waterfront as a public venue came as early as 1971 but at that stage activity at the old docks still made public access inconvenient. By the mid-1980s this had changed. Commercial development and privatization was now seen as a desirable option and with the working areas of the Victoria and Alfred Basins in a state of decline, the site was ripe for redevelopment. A suggestion of the University of Cape Town School of Architecture in 1984 that the link with the sea be recreated was taken up by the municipality. Sol Kreiner, the Mayor, formed a steering committee to consider a waterfront scheme, stating that:

10. R. Fox, 'Conservation in the city, the historical process, conservation of urban artefacts, the methods and results' (in SAITRP 1974: 77-79).
11. Names like that of Revel Fox or Gawie Fagan, leading Cape Town architects, or the National Monuments Council, the Simon van der Stel Foundation, the Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa or Historic Homes of South Africa (an Anton Rupert initiative) were prominent in this movement.
As Johannesburg has gold we have a beautiful city as a tourist attraction and we must all work together for a better Cape Town. We have a large cross-section of people who are prepared to sit down and discuss a scheme which will bring back the old city where one can freely walk around, visit the harbour, go for tug rides and learn more about our heritage.  

Municipal initiatives were forestalled by the Burggraaf Committee established by the government to make recommendations on the development of harbour areas for tourism and commercial enterprise throughout the country. Its report in May 1988 gave the go-ahead for a staged process of redevelopment. The private sector was to take the lead while Transnet (as the Transport Services was renamed) would provide backing by long-term lease of the government-owned harbour land.

Privatization in its peculiarly South African form, in which the state continued to hold the capital assets, moved in. The Victoria and Alfred Waterfront (Pty) Ltd Company was formed in September 1988 as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Transnet, stating its 'philosophy [...] to “let the project evolve over time in response to market forces”', with the Chairman, Brian Kantor appointed by the South African Transport Services as ‘an authority on and enthusiast for privatization’. The managing director, David Jack, previously Cape Town City Planner, was an architect by training, an important factor in shaping the ethos of the Company. Over the past six years the Company has grown apace, and soon planned to raise shares on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. In a comment which revealed much about a Capetonian vision of success, the director of the J. H. Isaacs Property Group, which has developed a large section of the Waterfront, declared that: ‘The Victoria and Alfred Company can give Cape Town the equivalent of three or four gold mines, handled on strictly business lines, using the Disneyland syndrome of thinking and acting big’.

Thinking and acting ‘big’ has certainly dominated the activities of the Waterfront Company. Capital expenditure by 1992 reached R 191.81 million, and is estimated to exceed R 2055 million by the end of the century (V & A WC 1991: 31).

The Waterfront dominates media and public perceptions of commercial and tourist triumphs in Cape Town. It is the benchmark by which all other developments in the region are compared. Moreover the Waterfront has

14. Although Transnet has provided some backing for the most recent development of the Victoria Wharf (VICTORIA & ALFRED WATERFRONT COMPANY 1991: 10).
strikingly transformed the focus of visitor and leisure activities in Cape Town, to the detriment of other parts of the city. Neighbouring Sea Point has declined as a restaurant venue, and the city centre remains deserted at night in contrast to the crowded activities of the Waterfront.

What images of Cape Town are presented at the Waterfront? In the initial proposals made by the V & A Waterfront Company, great stress was laid on ‘restoring’ Cape Town to the sea and on creating a waterfront tourist facility which would draw on the ‘heritage’ of the Capetonian past. The first phase of development around the ‘historic’ Pierhead and Alfred basin area consciously focussed on the ‘recreation’ of the atmosphere of a bygone era. In the words of the award-winning audio-visual display at the Information Centre, once ‘the city was the sea—the sea was the city’. But then ‘the city left the sea—it crept inland, it left the harbour to itself [...] it left behind some of the most beautiful buildings, romantic places [...] left behind the slap of water, the creak of rope, the groan of wood [...] Yet today a clock is being carefully turned back.’

The process by which the harbour fell into decline and was physically isolated from Cape Town by the foreshore reclamation is not explained. The point is rather the quintessential unity of Capetonians with their harbour, a severed unity which the Waterfront development was busily restoring, ‘breathing life and soul back into history’. Most markedly this was apparent in the restoration (and sometimes the construction) of buildings at the Pierhead and on Portswood Ridge in a sturdy ‘Victorian’ style, an emphasis which reflected the focus since the late 1970s on the conservation of buildings.18 But in utilizing this type of image of the ‘old Cape Town’ the Waterfront strongly evoked a sense of nostalgia and romanticization of a past which bore only marginal resemblance to historical reality and which excluded large numbers of Capetonians from its essentially middle-class self-image.19

To a degree, recent development has reinforced this imagery. The Victoria Wharf, erected in 1992 on the existing site of warehouses which were extensively renovated and incorporated, was intended to recreate the atmosphere of a Victorian railway station. ‘To keep the authenticity of an old time working harbour cues were taken from Victorian glass structures, such as London’s Kew Gardens and Crystal Palace, as well as the beautiful Victorian shopping arcades one finds in Europe.’20 But the Victoria Wharf is, simply, a shopping centre with such anchor stores a Pick ’nd Pay supermarket, Clicks and CNA, as well as trendy clothing stores, a fish market and craft stalls.

18. The Port Captain’s building, the Union Castle building and the Harbour Master’s residence have all been restored, while the old Harbour Cafe (Piers restaurant) and the Victoria and Alfred Hotel have been extensively reconstructed.
Increasingly the role of ‘restoring Cape Town’s past heritage’ is giving way to other concerns. Although occasional references are made to ‘historic’ links, new office blocks, planned waterways and housing developments have abandoned the attempt to create an historical ambience. Perhaps the clearest sign of the Waterfront’s new marketing image is its deep involvement in Cape Town’s bid to host the 2004 Olympic Games. Cape Town’s symbolic status as the ‘gateway to Africa’ would be reinforced by hosting the first Olympiad on the continent, and the Waterfront presents itself as the natural focus of welcome and accommodation for the thousands of visitors this would bring. This emphasizes a new future for Cape Town rather than the restoration of its past ‘heritage’.

But there is another side to the Waterfront development which strongly affects the kinds of images and responses it evokes. While claiming to ‘restore Cape Town’s heritage’ the project has from the start marked itself out as distinct from the realities of Cape Town, both past and present. The very design of the area sets it apart as a ‘special place’ and a distinct space. Smart buildings, fresh paint, an absence of litter, the Company’s all-pervasive royal blue colours, and the presence of large numbers of special uniformed security guards signal that this is a site far removed from the seediness of the original Cape Town harbour, as well as the more recent informal trading developments of the central city. From the start the Waterfront Company made clear that its trading focus was to be ‘up-market’. Rents are high, ensuring that only ‘quality’ traders can operate in the precinct. Focus is placed on security to address tourist and visitor qualms about wandering the streets of a dangerous contemporary South Africa. Busking is carefully controlled. While street children beg from cars queuing up at the harbour entrance, once inside the special space of the Waterfront security guards ensure that such unsightly reminders of Cape Town’s impoverished outcasts are removed. Groups of ‘suspect’ township shoppers have been followed and challenged.

As a result the Waterfront has acquired a reputation of being a rich person’s place, purposefully setting itself aside from the social and political realities of Cape Town and of South Africa. ‘A subconscious laager mentality’ has been created, suggests one critic, ‘... the Waterfront is Cape Town scrubbed, perfumed and packaged’. This was strikingly demonstrated in an episode that took place at a time of heightened political tension in the aftermath of Chris Hani’s assassination in 1993. A group of Cape

Town mourners travelling to his funeral in Johannesburg got off the special train at Klerksdorp station and ‘advanced on a group of policemen, toyi-toying and singing. Some demanded in Afrikaans, “Where is Eugene Terreblanche?” Others said, “Why don’t you entertain your families at the beach or the Waterfront?”’ In this perception, the Waterfront, like the beach, is a place for those who have removed themselves, or are irrelevant, to the realities of contemporary South Africa.

This has not escaped the attention of the African National Congress. As early as 1992, Basil Davidson, ANC spokesperson on planning, criticized the Waterfront as elitist, failing to reflect the needs of the Cape Town community. And Allan Boesak, leader of the Western Cape ANC, commented in mid-1993 that the Waterfront had been ‘a particularly bad example of old-style planning and thinking [...] it is the symptom of the old apartheid mindset that one of the country’s leading tourist attractions has virtually no representation or involvement from the 80 per cent of the community in which it is based.’ He continued by pointing out that the Waterfront Company had severely neglected the history of the site it occupied (Fig. 3):

‘Robben Island is a symbol of colossal importance to the people of South Africa. The fact is that hundreds of people who fought in the struggle, and many of our national leaders, were taken from a point inside the Waterfront on Quay 5. The jetty is still there today, but how many of the thousands of people who pass by know that. Nothing has been done to commemorate it. In the midst of all the glitz the most significant site stands ignored.’

Boesak was expressing a concern at the representations of the past at the Waterfront which was shared by local historians and commentators. In the same way that the site expurgated the realities of the city around it, so the Cape Town ‘heritage’ which it presented was a sanitized and exclusive vision of the past. If the Waterfront was truly to reflect the heritage of all Capetonians, relevant to the needs of a city and country in the midst of transformation, this representation had to be changed. The question remained whether this would be possible given the control over the site and the limited notion of heritage which the Waterfront Company possessed.

FIG. 3. The Victoria Wharf with Robben Island embarkation building on right.

FIG. 4. The Alfred Basin quayside, ca 1880.
Signing an Alternative Heritage: The Waterfront Story Boards

However in mid-1992 the Company did begin to respond to such criticisms. Previously commissioned public signs explaining the development of the site were now rejected as over-romanticized. The Company’s Education Officer instead invited members of the University’s Cape Town History Project (CTHP) to design a new series of 32 ‘story boards’ to be erected throughout the Pierhead and Victoria and Alfred Basin areas. The group agreed with some misgivings, but with the assurance that a ‘new history’ was required. We also wanted to meet the challenge of doing something practical to address the lack of public representation of key features of the Waterfront and Cape Town’s past and to change the images already existing at the site.

We had several academic objectives. In the past fifteen years, influenced by the new social history’s emphasis on experience ‘from below’, and by aspects of South African urban studies which give consideration to issues of race, class and gender, the study and writing of Cape Town history has taken new shape. This was the focus we wanted to give to the boards thus offering a more total view of the past than currently existed and one which countered the building-oriented emphasis of the Waterfront Company. Above all, we wanted to bring back people to the heart of Cape Town’s history, especially those who are conventionally written out of it. More explicitly, we did not want a celebration of ‘big names’. Secondly, we wanted to place the history of the Waterfront within the context of the larger processes of South African history—the precolonial waterfront, merchant capitalism, the transition to industrialization, immigration, both internal and external, labour control and labour disputes, the decline of world shipping.

Thirdly, we wanted an integration between text and illustration and between the boards and the waterfront environment. We wanted people to examine the illustrations, not merely to see them as pretty pictures of a romantic past, but to compare them with what they saw around them now. Finally, we wanted to convey the flavour of a waterfront which was not merely picturesque. We wanted to make it clear that this was above all a workplace, dirty, cold, wet and often harsh (Fig. 4). In this we were concerned to avoid the kind of blinkered vision which has accompanied tourist images of Cape Town throughout the twentieth century.

29. The impetus was provided by Sheryl Ozinsky of the Waterfront Company, and the CTHP group included Vivian Bickford-Smith, Bill Nasson, Elizabeth van Heyningen and Nigel Worden. This was our first attempt at cooperation with a business company. Similarly, although the Waterfront Company has had strong links with UCT from its inception, this was probably their first encounter with a department with no experience of a business environment.


31. On the realities of the Waterfront as workplace, see BICKFORD-SMITH et al. 1994.
Fig. 5. Victoria Basin and the Coaling Jetty board.

Fig. 6. The Breakwater Prison board.

Fig. 7. The Docks Location board.
Some boards relate to broad themes, such as 'Cape Town and the Waterfront' showing the ways in which changes in the history of the city affected the docks (and vice versa), 'Docks people', intended as a collage of photographs of traders, builders, sailors, Harbour Board officials and fishermen, or 'Who came to the Waterfront' showing the broad range of immigrants who came through the harbour into Cape Town and its hinterland over the centuries from elsewhere in Africa, Europe, Asia, North America and Australia. Some are on more specific topics relevant to the whole area, such as 'Sailors' or 'Impact of the Second World War'. Many use particular locations to reflect on broader themes. Thus the Ferryman's Tavern is a site for a board on 'Pub Life' in Cape Town as a whole, the Victoria Wharf board describes changes in retailing over the past century, the South Arm of the Victoria Basin is used to comment on the impact of the South African War on the city (Fig. 5). In this way we aimed to challenge the idea that the Waterfront was a special place set apart from the rest of Cape Town.

Other boards relate to particular buildings which we were asked to mark, but attempt to avoid bland descriptions of style, architects and little else. Thus the Port Captain's Office is described as a complex management centre involving the supervision of goods movement, customs and shipping as well as employment of over 5,000 people; we planned to describe the Harbour Cafe as one of the first segregated facilities in Cape Town; the Dock Road Theatre, previously the Power Station, gave the opportunity to refer to the significance of early electrification; the Breakwater Prison board shows the ethnic composition of convicts and the crimes for which they were committed (Fig. 6); the Irvin and Johnson fishing warehouse enabled discussion of changing forms of fishing from individual Roggebaai boats to large scale commercialization; the Rocket Life Saving Station became an illustration of sea wrecks ('Line bringing in crew from Woodstock Beach') and technological change; the Union Castle Building board illustrates life aboard the passenger liners and also the significance of the departure of the weekly mail ships in the rhythm of Cape Town's life in the inter-war years. And the Robben Island embarkation point, a 'grim building', in stark contrast to the cafes and restaurants around it, is used to portray the island and its links to the harbour and city.

Some buildings, which have today disappeared, were identified as a means of pointing out not only where they used to be but also their significance in the wider history of Cape Town. The Chavonnes Battery ('the site on which you are standing was once under water') introduced the VOC32 period and the pre-industrial waterfront as well as harbour defences. The 'Coolie Barracks' and Dock 'Location' buildings provided an opportunity to depict the lives of workers at the harbour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fig. 7).

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32. Generale Vereenigte Geoctroyeerde Nederlandsche Oost Indische Compagnie (The Netherlands East India Company).
Such portrayals have not been unproblematic. There were immediate practical problems. Constraints of space meant that the text had to be concise to the point of over-simplicity. Only English is used, though Afrikaans, Xhosa, French and German translations are to be available in leaflets.

There was also the need for the translation of academic concerns into issues of public interest which are entertaining and interesting without being trivial and merely anecdotal. In this the assumption of most modern South African historians that the need is to ‘give voice’ to the many who have been silenced in our received version of the past had to be taken further. Many hours were spent searching for the right photographs or text which would interest the passing stroller. Several of the boards attempt to interact with the reader, by opening up issues from the images or suggesting links with other parts of the harbour and city which can be seen by the visitor. More ambitious ideas of tape recordings and films were too expensive and had to be abandoned.

There were also design problems. One issue was that of balance between text and illustration. Pictures sometimes dominate and even subvert the meaning of the board. On the Irvin Johnson board a jolly but inappropriate drawing of whaling in Table Bay overwhelms the story of the fishing industry. A desire for tidy symmetry meant that the board on ‘Docks People’, intended as a collage, emerged as a neatly ordered arrangement, ironically structured roughly on racial and class lines with the identified ‘big names’ on side and the unidentified workers on the other. Text was sometimes scattered and misplaced.

A further issue is the spatial context in which the boards appear. They are intended to follow a sequence, covering a broadly chronological progression, and each is numbered. But it was also recognized that although some visitors would follow the ‘historical walk’ (possibly using the accompanying booklet) most would only look at the occasional board as they passed. Each board thus needs to be self-contained. They are not set in a ‘special place’ such as an interpretive centre, in which visitors enter with expectations of ‘reading and learning’. Rather they have to compete with the contrasting and vibrant events and images of the wider Waterfront. Moreover an unexpressed but fairly evident distaste for the subject-matter of some boards, notably the later ones dealing with racism, led the Waterfront Company to install several in relatively isolated places.

There are omissions in the topics we have dealt with. Women at the waterfront is one. While harbours are certainly male-centred spaces, women are not entirely absent. A major occupation, of course, is prostitution but how overt should references be? We compromised with a board on ‘Black Sophie’ who kept a Bree Street bordello and left the implications to the readers. A different omission concerned the linking of the Alfred and Victoria Basin developments with the later foreshore expansion. Geographically the placement of such boards was impossible since the Duncan
dock cannot be seen from the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront. We added a short paragraph describing post-war construction, ‘not part of the Waterfront’ the Company complained.

We anticipated some objections from the Waterfront Company. Above all, we suspected that they might be uneasy about politically-sensitive themes. In the event, after circulating a somewhat elaborate presentation from committee to committee, criticism came from directions we had not entirely anticipated. The inclusion of previously hidden voices has not been challenged. The Robben Island board was modified to avoid reference to the ‘grim building’ of the Department of Correctional Services from which the Robben Island ferry departs, clearly an affront to the aesthetic vision of the Waterfront Company which would prefer to see it demolished. In tune with environmental concerns there was also a demand for more mention of the penguins and other animal life on the island, but the role of the island as leper station and prison was unquestioned. Presentation of the convicts, migrant workers and docks location was not questioned. There was some musing as to why Tiyo Soga was mentioned as a guest at the opening of the original breakwater, but this was silenced by the sponsor’s comment that ‘it’s important to show Africans’. Clearly the Waterfront Company does accept the need to say something about such key players in the harbour past.

Throughout there was a suggestion that the boards should be ‘cheerful’ and ‘not so gloomy’, a reflection on the dominant ethos of ‘entertainment’ and escapism, nostalgic or otherwise, which the Waterfront so strongly represents. Thus a board on the period since the Second World War, depicting apartheid in Cape Town through the story of black American sailors from the USS Roosevelt, who were refused shore leave in 1967 and the subsequent bypassing of South African ports by the US Navy, was modified to add ‘upbeat’ comments about the harbour in recent decades.

But other kinds of references have attracted more direct objections. A board about the Harbour Cafe was troublesome. Reference to the fact that it was one of the first segregated public facilities in Cape Town was removed, partially for fear of offending the existing owners of the Pier Edge restaurant and cafe now housed in the building, but also because it was thought to be too ‘negative’. This we might have anticipated but other references, to us innocuous, were also challenged. The Waterfront Company cut out our description of the takeover of the restaurant by a private company in 1907, a move which ‘was resented by other traders who were squeezed out of the harbour’. This allusion to business malpractice was unacceptable. There were similar problems with the Irvin & Johnson fishing board which told how monopoly practices were objected to by Afrikaner nationalists in the 1940s. In an ironic misunderstanding, this was explained by ‘the need not to offend Afrikaners’. Attempts to point out that the sole reference to Afrikaner nationalism in the boards was in fact a positive one made no headway, although the sponsors, Agfa, raised no such objections and approved of the texts in their original form.
However the divergence between academic and corporate concerns became more sharply apparent after the boards were erected. The I & J Company strongly objected to the fishing board. Its claims that there were factual inaccuracies were easily countered by our hard evidence, but it was clear that their greater concern was with the overall image that the board gave them in a very public place. In particular, they objected to the implications of statements such as ‘Commercialized fishing displaced poor fishing communities’ and ‘Declining fish stocks and foreign competition has weakened the industry’ which they believe defame its good name and business reputation and its standing within the community at large.

In retrospect it was a mistake to head the board ‘Irvin and Johnson’ when in fact we had used their presence in the Alfred Basin as a peg on which to discuss the broader theme of changes in the Table Bay fishing industry over 200 years. The Waterfront Company has taken the board down, but a revised text has been submitted which removes some of the direct allusions to Irvin and Johnson, without compromising on the issue of large-scale commercial fishing companies replacing local fishing communities. It remains to be seen whether it will be accepted.

These problems reveal the main divergence between corporate and academic images of history. To us, the explanation of broader social and economic forces in Cape Town’s past was paramount. To both the Waterfront and the Irvin and Johnson Companies, public ‘image’, and in particular issues of business practice and reputation are more important. References to, or even perceived implications of, past practices which have resonances with contemporary criticism of business are taboo. However mention of past injustices or inequalities which have no relation to existing players at the Waterfront were accepted, if not always enthusiastically, as necessary. Indeed the kudos of incorporating a ‘new’ history has directly benefitted the image of the Waterfront Company. And in the business world, image is all important.

The boards were only gradually erected over a period of several months between January and May 1994 but were given some publicity in the local press. The official opening was considerably enlivened by actors portraying a series of characters from the boards that ranged from Sir George Grey to dockside prostitutes. Such public entertainment demonstrated the priorities of popular presentation at the site.

It is too early to be able to offer an adequate assessment of the impact of the boards on visitors. The accompanying booklet, and translations into languages other than English are not yet available. However some early comments have been encouraging. Schoolteachers have especially welcomed the boards as a means of structuring visits for their pupils. The Waterfront is becoming a popular site for visits from township schools in

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particular, although the limited nature of interaction provided means that material more specifically orientated for children is required. Some tour operators anxious to redress the imbalances of the information conventionally provided for tourists and locals in Cape Town have welcomed ‘alternative’ perspectives of the kind provided by the boards. One person who used to regularly visit Robben Island’s political prisoners commented that the board about the island was a poignant reminder of the significance of a special place which is otherwise overwhelmed by commercialism.

A casual observation, however, is that very few individuals visiting the Waterfront, particularly those in the newer areas of development, pause between their shopping to examine the boards. New views, or indeed any views, cannot be forced on the passer-by. Despite attempts to be interactive and visually interesting, the boards remain static and require a conscious effort on the part of the visitor. Nonetheless, it is certainly no longer the case that the Waterfront site entirely fails to represent to its many visitors any of the historical realities of the site it occupies, even if the prevailing ethos of its buildings and commercial activities still predominate over them.

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This case study raises important issues for South African historians concerned with the public representation of the past at a time of political transformation. Much attention has been paid to the role of museums, monuments and other state institutions. With the altered character of the state, different considerations are likely to predominate but this does not mean that a state-controlled interpretation of the past will disappear. The hallowed ground of Robben Island is likely to be a measure of the sensitivity of new government to the complexity of the South African past.

However perhaps as significant is the control over the past by private companies who tend, not surprisingly, to see the world in their own image. Concern over corporate presentation and marketing considerations which emphasize ‘positive’ impressions inevitably take precedence over the interests of the historian to give full representation of the past. History under this kind of control rarely perceives the need to recover and preserve the varieties of human experience, bad as well as good. And heritage is interpreted as aesthetic physical environment rather than as human consciousness.

34. Communication from the Cape Town-based Community Action Group on Tourism.
Prior to the 1994 elections, some state institutions looked to privatization for protection against a new government and its policies. For instance some attempts were made to privatize Groot Constantia, an ereplek (‘place of honour’) of settler history, to prevent it falling into unsympathetic government hands (Worden 1993). And with a shortage of funds, more and more historical sites are likely to move into private ownership. The Cape Town Waterfront is only one of the more evident examples of the way in which private company interpretations and priorities mould the constructions of the past presented to the visitor and tourist.

If South Africa is to become a genuinely democratic society, in which the ‘lost’ history of the ruled shares equal place with that of the rulers, it is one of the responsibilities of trained historians to bring their concerns into the public arena. In Cape Town especially, but more generally within South Africa, tourism is set to expand. Where tourist images of Cape Town have been romanticized, sanitized and exclusive, new views and new materials must be presented, which need to draw from the riches of recent South African revisionist historiography. The relationships and tensions between such public, corporate and academic concerns require concerted attention and the Waterfront’s representations of the past to visitors is in this respect an important test case.37

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37. For other examples of privately-owned South African sites which present historical images to the public and which have attracted the attention of academics, see KROS (1993); HAMILTON & PRESTON-WHYTE (1992); HALL (1995). This last example may be of more applicability to the Waterfront than previously imagined, given recently announced plans by Sol Kerzner to build a new Sun International Hotel there which will be both ‘with a Cape style in keeping with the rest of the Waterfront’ and “complementary” to the Lost City’ (‘Sol’s dream hotel for Waterfront’, Sunday Times Cape Metro, 29 May 1994).
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ABSTRACT

This article examines the changing constructions of Cape Town’s heritage in the course of the twentieth century, and in particular the images of the city’s past at its main tourist venue, the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront. It then describes attempts by the authors and other members of the Cape Town History Project to present alternative images through story boards erected at the site. In the process, the contestation of a variety of public, academic and corporate images were played out against the background of the shift to democracy in South Africa.

SUMMARY


Key Words/Mots-clés: South Africa/République d’Afrique du Sud, Cape Town/Cape Town, public history/histoire pour le public, heritage/patrimoine culturel, town planning/urbanisme.