

SETTING UP THE NELSON MANDELA CENTRE OF MEMORY AND COMMEMORATION

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Abstract

Stories about Mr. Mandela's life and work are scattered around the world. They are to be found in institutions holding collections of archival material, in archival collections in the custody of individuals, in the organizations that Mr. Mandela belongs to or has been closely associated with, and in the interactions that Mr. Mandela has had with countless numbers of people, for instance, as a family member, friend, colleague, anti-apartheid leader, political prisoner, chief negotiator, international statesperson and first democratically elected President of South Africa. Equally significant are the largely untapped stories of ordinary individuals, both from within and outside of South Africa's borders. On 21 September 2004, the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Commemoration Project was launched by the Nelson Mandela Foundation. The Project is planning to invest a significant amount of time and resources into conducting both South African and international audits of Mandela-related materials, with the aim of creating a single web-based portal to the widely scattered "Mandela Archive." This article aims to outline the process of the audits, highlight the issues involved in the development of the web archive, as well as provide details on the development of the database architecture.

Keywords: Centre of Memory and Commemoration, Constitution Hill Heritage Site, Nelson Mandela Foundation, South Africa

Introduction

The article will focus on a recently launched Project of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Commemoration. Establishing an institution befitting of the legacy of Nelson Mandela is an exciting but immense task. I feel deeply privileged to be involved in a Project of this nature.

Being one of South Africa's most recently-established heritage initiatives, it is as important to invest huge amounts of commitment into 'getting things right' from the start. It is for this reason that a commitment to dialogue and partnerships feature as a crucial component of our work, and as an important theme in this presentation. I would like to communicate current thinking around what this Project means, and some of the processes involved in building a Project of this nature. And as an important role player, we welcome the contributions of the archival community.

First, it would be important to mention some of the key factors underlying the Centre of Memory Project.

- The Project takes its cue from its founder, and thus aims to ensure that the stories of those around Mr Mandela and of broader struggles for justice are told and remembered. Mr Mandela has emphasized that the struggles against injustice in South Africa have been waged by millions of South Africans, and not by the actions of a few individuals. Mr Mandela reiterated this at the launch of the Project in September 2004, when he said that,

the work of archives in the South Africa of today is potentially one of the critical contributions to restoration and reconciliation. All of us have a powerful moral obligation to the many voices and stories either marginalized or suppressed during the apartheid era (Mandela 2004).
- The Project is premised on a commitment to access and the sharing of stories and lessons with South Africans, the rest of the continent and the world. To this end, the Project draws on a wide range of partners – big and small – formal and informal – and strives to involve and/or reach the numerous individuals, communities and organisations who have an interest in the life and work of Mr Mandela, and who have an interest in the Project.
- “Mr Mandela exemplifies the belief that freedom is not something that one receives, but instead, it is something that is always in the process of being made” (Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory 2003). We see this in his continued activism in his post-presidential and retirement years, through the programmes of his three Foundations in HIV/AIDS, rural schools education, and others. It is these kinds of programmes and values that the Project seeks to document and promote.

For these reasons, the vision of the Centre of Memory Project is “to tell the stories of a continuing walk to freedom” (Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory 2004).

Conceptualisation of the project

The Project has had to take cognisance of the fact that materials about Mr Mandela’s life, in both moveable and immovable form, are to be found throughout the world. It seeks to find ways to integrate this scattered resource, in different ways:

- By auditing and documenting these materials.
- By co-ordinating the endeavours of the many institutions holding such materials.
- By providing the world with a single automated portal into the collections.
- By putting in place a resource for the safe and professional custody of materials not yet in an archival domain.
- By generating research and training initiatives around Mr Mandela’s legacy.
- By collecting oral histories from the numerous individuals and communities associated with his life and work (Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory 2004).

The Mandela archive

Given this context, it is clear that this Project is confronted with a massive archive that has a broad and evolving definition. We understand this Archive to be located in numerous South African institutions – the National Archives, Robben Island Museum, African National Congress Archives, the Universities of Fort Hare and Witwatersrand, Nelson Mandela Museum, South African History Archive and Brenthurst Library – to name but a few.

It is to be found in the files of former instruments of the apartheid government, such as the Departments of Prison Services, Justice and National Intelligence. International governments and organisations, broadcasting and print media organisations, archives of international anti-apartheid organisations all contain significant content in relation to the Mandela Archive. Many documents are still in the possession of individuals.

We find this archive in the stories that have been told through the many different sites that Mr Mandela has been associated with (his birthplace, Robben Island, Pollsmoor Prison, Victor Verster Prison and others). Mr Mandela has generated his own archive – letters written to close comrades and friends, personal diaries and notes, speeches written, as well as carefully documented thoughts on political processes.

It is an archive that continues to be created – through the work of his three Foundations – the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation. And Mr Mandela's continued interactions with people, for example through the 466/64 HIV/AIDS campaign, has generated powerful narratives around issues that are deeply relevant to society today. These are some of the components that help to define and shape the Mandela Archive.

Dissemination

The project is developing three different user interfaces, all of which are equally important, and which are currently in different phases of development.

- A physical interface – where the general public and researchers can view those materials that are physically housed with the Centre of Memory Project.
- A virtual interface – an online guide to the Mandela Archive, which will assist researchers in locating materials that are scattered in different places.
- A public programming interface – where the Centre develops resources that can be taken out to communities, and creates dialogue around the Mandela Legacy.

The physical interface

Mandela House, the office complex of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, is the current site of the Centre of Memory Project. However, feasibility initiatives

conducted over the last 18 months have concluded that Mandela House is not an appropriate physical home for the Project. As a means of opening up a physical space to the general public, the Nelson Mandela Foundation has entered into a partnership with the Johannesburg Development Agency that will see the Centre housed in the new Visitor Centre at the Constitution Hill Heritage site early in 2007.

The virtual interface

During the last 10 months, the Project initiated an audit of materials about Mr Mandela's life, located in different places in South Africa and abroad. The scope of the audit includes Mr Mandela's:

- Childhood years in Mvezo and Qunu.
- Life in Johannesburg as a young lawyer.
- Beginnings of political activism and joining the African National Congress (ANC).
- Early leadership role in the ANC, particularly the ANC Youth League.
- Political imprisonment of 27 years on Robben Island, in Pollsmoor and in Victor Verster Prisons, and campaigns for his release from prison.
- Role in the South African negotiation process.
- Release from prison.
- Presidency of the African National Congress, and of the first democratically-elected government of South Africa.
- Role in various international peace processes during his presidential and post-presidential years.
- Engagement with contemporary societal issues in his post-presidential years, particularly through the work of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation.

The ultimate aim is to provide a single access point to these materials, by means of computer technology and the Internet. As a starting point, the Project is building a searchable database that describes the holdings, extent, dates, media formats, location and access to materials located in different places. The database provides links to finding aids, reference information and key contacts where they exist, and has the capacity to incorporate or provide links to digital images. Currently, the database is fully functional, and at this early stage includes Mandela-related materials located in key South African and selected international institutions (United Nations, National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., Schomburg Centre, and others). More focused work on the survey is planned for the remainder of 2005 and for 2006.

At the same time, plans are underway to make this database web accessible in the near future, and ultimately to include it in a comprehensive web portal on the Mandela Archive. Also planned for inclusion in this portal are a database of publications and productions, a database of historical sites and their significance, and a database of materials about broader anti-apartheid movement campaigns and activities.

The public programming interface

The public programming interface has been kick-started with two exhibitions (*466/64: A Prisoner Working in the Garden* and *Izipho: Madiba's Gifts*), a Mandela Legacy series of comics and a book on Mr Mandela's Prison Archive (to be published in November this year). All of these initiatives are and will be the products of partnerships with different stakeholders and interested parties. And all of these initiatives are targeted to reach as wide an audience as possible. In the case of the comic series, thousands will be sent to schools across South Africa while the rest will be distributed as newspapers' supplements, thus reaching many people who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to engage with the stories being generated by this Project.

Another component of public programming is a "Memory for Justice" initiative to be started this year. It has been designed as an annual conference, and international initiative around the concept of "Memory for Justice". Its aim is to encourage discussion around how archives engage with different societal contexts.

Partnerships

I would like to mention some examples of the kinds of partnerships that the Project has been involved in. In the latter part of 2004 and early 2005, the Project together with the Department of Arts and Culture, the National Cultural History Museum and the Nelson Mandela Museum facilitated the formal donation of Mr Mandela's presidential gifts to the State. The collection includes Honorary Fellowships, Freedom of the City Awards, Honorary Citizenships, Honorary Degrees, Peace and Human Rights Awards, Literary Awards, Media Awards and Orders of Merit from more than fifty countries around the world. Amongst these are one of only thirteen existing facsimiles of the Salisbury Magna Carta, and the official Presidential Medallion commemorating President Mandela's inauguration in 1994. Project staff were involved in drafting the donation agreement, in cataloguing the gifts that were transferred and ensuring their safe transfer to Mthatha, and in the planning of a signing ceremony officiated by former President Mandela, and the Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr Pallo Jordan. This partnership sees all of the gifts received by Mr Mandela during his Presidential years (1994 – 1999) being housed at the Nelson Mandela Museum in Mthatha. In Mr Mandela's words,

by formally and legally donating them to the national Department of Arts and Culture, we are asking not only that they be kept safe by the state, but also that they be used in such a way that South Africans will be able to see and enjoy them (Mandela 2005).

A second example of the work of partnership is the exhibition, *466/64: A Prisoner Working in the Garden*, a joint endeavour of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the National Archives of South Africa and the Constitution Hill Heritage Project. For the first time, materials from Mr Mandela's prison files covering his incarceration as a political prisoner for 27 years, and created primarily by the Robben Island

Prison Authorities (Department of Prison Services) and the Department of Justice have been placed into the public domain. It includes copies of letters sent to family and friends, censored letters, confiscated letters, medical records, visitor records and a significant part of the original manuscript of Mr Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. The state meticulously documented every aspect of Mr Mandela's prison life, as well as references to him in the world outside.

Most of these files are still closed to the public under existing legislation. However, with Mr Mandela's permission and the input of his close confidantes, this exhibition represents the beginning of a process to open this prison archive. It has placed a number of these documents into the public domain, and gives us a sense of the inner workings of the prison system, Mr Mandela's leadership as the spokesperson for prisoners in the isolation section on Robben Island, his role in initiating the South African negotiation processes, and the deeply personal stories recorded in his letters to family and friends.

The exhibition also draws on Mr Mandela's personal archive, such as calendars kept during his prison years, in which he records his visits, state of health, legal consultations, meetings with prison officials, books read and films watched, dreams, events happening in the outside world, and much more. The exhibition opened at Mandela House in September 2004, and has since been moved to the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg.

A third example of partnership has seen a huge consignment of duplicate materials from the British Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives being shipped to South Africa from the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. The duplicates are being sorted, and will be made available to interested institutions in South Africa.

Finally, the Project is also making important contributions to initiatives of other organisations – such as a Mandela authorised portrait book, being published by a New Zealand-based publisher. It has worked closely with the publishers, legal advisors, and the team of researchers in South Africa.

Governance

Last but not least, governance is of critical importance to the Project. To this end, a Project Steering Committee has been appointed, as a sub-committee of the Nelson Mandela Foundation council, to advise on policy and strategy issues. Members of the Steering Committee are Professor Njabulo Ndebele (Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town), Mr Ahmed Kathrada (close friend and comrade of Mr Mandela's), Dr Pallo Jordan (Minister of Arts and Culture), Dr Andre Odendaal (former Director of the Robben Island Museum), Dr Heiko Roehl (GTZ consultant to the Nelson Mandela Foundation), Mr John Samuel (CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation) and two Foundation staff members.

In addition, the Project has initiated a Dialogue Forum with representation from more than 16 potential partner organisations in South Africa. Participants include the National Archives, Robben Island Museum, African National Congress Archives, South African Broadcasting Corporation, University of Witwatersrand, and others. These structures not only aim to ensure different levels of accountability, but it is about a commitment to consultation, sharing resources, avoiding duplication, and ensuring that the Project is part of a broader family of institutions.

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Endnotes

1. This paper is a reworked version of a paper presented at the XVIII BIENNIAL Eastern and Southern Africa Regional of Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) General Conference on Archives and Records in the Information Society: The African Agenda, Botswana, Gaborone, 25-29 July 2005.