

Creating a museum community

Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum

In 2009 the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum was named Western Cape Museum of the Year. **Leslie Witz** tells its history of innovative attempts to build a museum belonging to the Lwandle community.



Leslie Witz

Entrance to the Lwandle museum in 2007.

It was over ten years ago that I first heard of the possibility of a museum in Lwandle. A student in the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies (offered by the University of the Western Cape and the Robben Island Museum), Bongani Mgiijima, told me about where he lived and spoke of plans to develop a museum of migrant labour around the last remaining hostel.

I must admit I was highly sceptical at the time. In histories of South Africa and the Western Cape Lwandle hardly features at all. Many people have heard about Langa, Gugulethu, Nyanga, Khayelitsha and Crossroads, but no one spoke or wrote about Lwandle, a township 40 kilometres outside Cape Town, near Somerset West.

Nonetheless the student seemed bright, enthusiastic and determined. He went ahead, together with Charmian Plummer, a

resident of Somerset West who had carried out much community work in Lwandle, with plans to develop the museum. Now there is a migrant labour museum in Lwandle, and in 2009 it was named Museum of the Year by the Western Cape's Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, and on Workers' Day 2010 it celebrated its tenth birthday.

HISTORY OF LWANDLE

Lwandle was set up in 1958 entirely as a labour compound for workers in the municipality of the Strand seaside resort alongside the growing fruit and canning industry around Somerset West. Under the apartheid systems of influx control and the notorious Coloured Labour Preference Policy in the Cape Province, these African male workers were rural migrants and legally constituted as 'temporary sojourners' in the area.

These migrants were accommodated in strictly regimented hostel units, with up to 32 men living in small compartments in one unit. Each hostel unit had a single exit/entrance, communal kitchens and showers, and a bucket system for toilets. For the people who lived in Lwandle this was amaHolweni, the place of halls/hostels for amaGoduka, the migrant workers.

By the mid-1980s the system of apartheid was under severe stress. A combination of limited apartheid reforms and increasing poverty in rural areas combined to increase the numbers of women and children who were coming to live in the hostels, with sometimes up to five people sharing a bed. These people were regarded as 'illegals' by the laws of apartheid and hostel residents were subject to constant harassment and raids as police searched for those who did not have documents required to live in the city.



Lwandle community women ambassadors who promote the activities of the museum re-entering Hostel 33. They had illegally lived in the hostel after the Nationalist government closed it down and moved its male residents to Khayelitsha.

Unable to control the movement of rural people into Lwandle, and pressured by petitions from residents of Strand and Somerset West, the government decided to close down Lwandle and move all its residents to Khayelitsha, the new township that it was developing 25 kilometres outside of Cape Town. The Lwandle Men's Hostel's Association launched a campaign to stop the removal, calling on government instead to dismantle apartheid and 'Unite Families'.

By the time of South Africa's first elections in 1994 the future of Lwandle was still in the balance. But the Government of National Unity, headed by the ANC, altered the situation. Instead of destroying Lwandle it decided to turn the hostels into family homes. Using the shell of the hostels new residential accommodation was provided with showers, separate toilets, a basin, and hot water from solar heating. And, in an extraordinary moment, the executive of the local municipality decided to support a proposal that one hostel, Hostel 33, would be kept intact as a museum.

But there were still people living in Hostel 33 and when they were allocated houses new groups then moved into the hostel. Then the opportunity arose to take occupation of the Old Community Hall nearby the hostel for a museum and the

plans that Mgiijima and others had been developing expanded.

MUSEUM IS LAUNCHED

On 1 May (Workers' Day) 2000 the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum was officially opened by the poet, journalist, and ex-resident of Lwandle, Sandile Dikeni, when he symbolically broke the chains of the past.

The primary aim of the museum, as stated at its opening and which is still central to its mission, is to serve as a reminder of a system of migrant labour. A system of single sex hostels and the control of black workers through an identity document, or pass book, which also controlled their access to employment and residence in urban areas.

The museum deliberately rejects apartheid ideas of community which are based upon racial and sometimes ethnic identities. Instead it seeks to establish Lwandle and all its residents as one museum community. This is evident in all its exhibitions, particularly its permanent exhibition *lombali zekhaya* (Stories of Home).

This permanent exhibition tells the stories of the people who live in Lwandle and their experiences in the hostels. These are stories that tell how Lwandle today is not considered a home by some but merely a place of work. For others it is a permanent home where they want to be buried.

Others still consider Lwandle as one of two (or even three) homes. Home in the exhibition is definitely not an ethnic rural space or homeland where the planners of apartheid wanted to place migrant workers.

There are several other exhibitions at the museum which expand on the legacies of migrant labour and the stories of the people of Lwandle, past and present.

David Goldblatt's photographs, *The Transported of KwaNdebele* taken between 1983 and 1984, document the daily eight-hour bus journey of the people of KwaNdebele, the apartheid 'homeland' of the Ndebele, to and from their jobs in Pretoria.

Artist Gavin Young's installation *Workman's Compensation* consists of wheelbarrows containing things that were used by hostel residents. *Abavelisi Banjingqi yaseLwandle* (Lwandle Designers) explores the influences and processes of the many clothing designers in Lwandle, their innovation and creativity. While an exhibition of art works by local youth, *Ingingqi eye phantili* (Community on the Move), visually depicts the theme 'Belonging and Migrancy in the Cape'.

The highlight for many visitors is the walking tour of Lwandle conducted by the museum's guides, all residents of Lwandle. The walk is an opportunity to learn more about the migrant labour system with the focal point a visit to Hostel 33.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Although the Lwandle Museum portrays Lwandle and its historical legacies in its exhibitions and through its activities, it continually struggles to make residents of Lwandle into a museum community.

For many living in Lwandle the idea of a museum is a new one as most museums in South Africa are in or near central urban areas. A museum which collects and displays things is of little interest to local

people beyond being for immediate use. People questioned why it was necessary to have a museum when their most pressing needs are for housing, employment, health and educational facilities.

Associated with this is the questioning of why we should preserve old buildings as a reminder of the days of apartheid when there is a need now to provide new and better accommodation. So, it is not surprising that many Lwandle residents see the museum as something not for themselves but for tourists.

In all its activities the museum therefore attempts to build a museum community. Two of these attempts are very important.

The first involves preserving Hostel 33 as a visual reminder of the migrant labour system. After years of sometimes difficult negotiations, alternative accommodation was found for residents of the hostel and in 2007 Hostel 33 finally became part of the museum.

On 18 August 2007 a group of women from Lwandle formally opened the doors to Hostel 33 and re-enacted elements of their lives from those times. Afterwards, they returned to the Old Community Hall and, with the assistance of photographs from their younger years, told stories of when they had lived in the hostels. It was a day of remembrances and celebrations.

In 2009 plans to develop Hostel 33 took a massive step forward when the museum, in an international competition, won an award from the US Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund. The museum is now restoring the hostel in close consultation with community members, particularly immediate neighbours, so that it serves as a memorial to the migrant labour system. The National Heritage Council and the National



Lotteries Board have also allocated funds for this project.

At a museum workshop at the beginning of 2009 there were indications that Lwandle people's interest in preserving these memories is shifting. Community members turned up in large numbers and spoke with enthusiasm about how they would go about preserving Hostel 33 and the stories of their lives in the hostels of Lwandle.

A second major project that brings together heritage preservation and community involvement is a series of oral history projects that the museum has conducted over the past few years. This it has done together with the District Six Museum, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and schools in the area. The emphasis is on programmes that allow the youth to recover memories of lives under apartheid from their elders.

An important outcome of this project was an exhibition co-hosted with the District Six Museum called *Youth perspectives on migrant labour system and forced removal in the Western Cape* and the publication of a book by the museum and the IJR titled *Community on the Move*. The book provides a resource for schools and communities on how to develop oral history projects that are linked to artistic production, photography and performance.

Despite financial crises and threats of closure, the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum has through its committed staff and board, which includes ex-hostel dwellers, the local ward councillor, youth from Lwandle and academics from the University of the Western Cape, built an institution which has redefined the traditional role and tasks of a museum. Today the museum is managed by another graduate of the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies, Lunga Smile.

The museum has played a big role in creating and sustaining structured relationships across communities in the Western Cape. Most importantly over the past ten years the museum has made a significant contribution in turning a place, which under apartheid was a place of hostels for male migrant labourers, into a community. **LB**

Leslie Witz is chair of the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum Board. The museum is open from Monday to Saturday from 9.30am-4pm on weekdays and 9am-12pm on Saturdays. For more information contact 021 8456119 or go to the website www.lwandle.com. To follow and comment on the restoration of Hostel 33 go to <http://hostel33.blogspot.com>