CAPE CRUSADE

Building the Steve Biko Centre’s Library and Archive in South Africa’s Eastern Cape

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During winter 2011, I travelled to South Africa as a Fulbright Senior Specialist for a six-week research project. The Fulbright Program offers short-term residencies to scholars in a variety of fields. Sponsored by the University of Fort Hare (Nelson Mandela’s alma mater), I worked with the Steve Biko Foundation (http://www.sbf.org.za/home/) in both the Eastern Cape and Johannesburg.

Steve Biko (1946–1977) was a South African student leader active in the liberation movement of the 1970s. He is known for developing the concept of “Black Consciousness” and fostering community empowerment for social change. Unfortunately, Biko was brutally murdered by the police while in detention. However, his tragic death focused worldwide attention on the struggle against apartheid. The Steve Biko Foundation, headed by his son Nkosinathi, is dedicated to celebrating his legacy and political consciousness through programs of education, community activism, and youth empowerment.

The Foundation ambitiously resolved to construct the Steve Biko Centre, a cultural heritage institution based in Biko’s hometown, Ginsberg Township (part of King William’s Town on the Eastern Cape). Purposely situated in the heart of the township, its mission is to support community education, employment training, and economic development. Consisting of a museum, auditorium, conference center, commu-
nity garden, Internet café, multimedia lab, and library and archive, it is designed to be not a memorial but rather a locus for civic engagement, public dialogue, and activism. At the time I was brought on board, the library and archive still had no content plan, but Foundation staff definitely wanted it to interact and “talk to” the other component spaces.

My task was to design a three-year strategic plan for the library and archive. What had appealed to the Steve Biko Foundation in my selection was not only my background in libraries and archives, but my performing arts experience. They sought an individual who viewed libraries in the larger context of cultural assets. Apparently, I was their guy!

Fortuitously, I had visited South Africa the previous year for ten days as part of a visiting delegation of archivists through People to People International. Through this incredibly rich and intensive experience, we toured major archives and research collections in the country, and facilitated conversations on the nature of contested collections, repatriated archives, and related issues of preserving cultural heritage. Truthfully, I would never have been able to accomplish this Biko Centre project if I

Figure 7.1. Steve Biko exhibition. ©2011. Kenneth Schlesinger. Used with permission.
hadn't already had a strong network of South African archival contacts. For further preparation, I reviewed Verne Harris's *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, as well as consulted with international archival specialists and South African scholars at U.S. universities.

As with an architect conceptualizing a new space, my first assignment was to have conversations with all the major stakeholders of the Centre. The Biko Foundation administration conducted two days of orientation to give me a big-picture overview of their mission and programs, their process of evaluating other international cultural centers, and their ideas and priorities for the library and archive. In my project plan, the first step was to undertake a needs assessment of the local library and education community.

Public library leaders were generous and eager to meet with me. I visited the small local King William’s Town Library. It had limited and dated print resources and only one Internet terminal, for use by the librarian. However, it contained a large, heavily-used student lounge containing textbooks and curriculum support materials. East London Central Library, located in the large city near King William’s Town, had a medium-sized collection, as well as special collections and resources for people with disabilities.

![Figure 7.2. King William’s Town Public Library. ©2011. Kenneth Schlesinger. Used with permission.](image)
Further, the Foundation arranged meetings with local representatives from Eastern Cape provincial libraries, archives, and curriculum administration. Historically home to both the black intellectual and liberation movements, the Eastern Cape is South Africa’s poorest province. Nationwide unemployment is 28 percent, and the student pass rate of 52 percent on matriculation exams (high school graduation) is the second-lowest in the country (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). Not surprisingly, public school students are greatly underserved by libraries—in many cases, one library must serve ten schools. Notably, the majority of residents in the primarily rural Eastern Cape don’t have access to libraries.

Because there was initial suspicion and distrust of my status as a visiting outsider, these administrative meetings were politically charged. I had to quickly observe and assimilate the business protocols of South Africa. As a consequence, I learned to begin meetings by introducing myself, discussing my background and qualifications, and then outlining my project in the most respectful, inclusive, and transparent way that I could.

These strategies, in part, served me well when I scheduled appointments to visit special collections at major university archives. Whereas my previous Fulbright experience in Vietnam encouraged me to declare I was visiting as a representative of the U.S. State Department, there was no receptivity to this in South Africa. On the contrary, there exists considerable suspicion of the U.S. government—and of government in general.

Since the mandate in American archives is to provide access to and share documents, I was admittedly shocked when in several significant instances archivists did not show me original documents related to Steve Biko or liberation movements. After our initial interview, I was directed instead to the public access catalog (which I could obtain online) or printed finding aids. Several archivists questioned the need for the Biko Centre to build its own archive, and even stated that it was in competition with their mission.

On the positive side, some supplied contacts to colleagues at related research collections. Another primary exception was the South Africa National Library, whose previous curator had illegally collected an impressive array of anti-apartheid materials, which were banned at the time. Another leading university collection referred me to an individual who had conducted interviews about Biko with prominent colleagues for a biography she had written. She agreed to work cooperatively with the Foundation to make copies of the audiotapes and transcripts available
once she secured releases from subjects. Lastly, colleagues at Mayibuye Archives at the University of Western Cape, home of the Robben Island Archive and probably the most extensive collection of liberation materials in the country, not only provided copies of voluminous finding aids, but agreed to share pertinent records by preparing a proposed Memorandum of Understanding with the Biko Foundation.

Equally critical to the preparation of this strategic plan were visits to major cultural heritage museums in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, and Pretoria. South Africa is blessed with some of the world’s most outstanding museums. To contextualize the proposed library and archive within the country’s cultural history, it was significant to evaluate how museums interpreted their narratives visually, and how successfully they connected to visitors and their local communities. Too numerous to mention and chronicle would be my inspiring sojourns to, among others, the Apartheid Museum (likened to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum), Robben Island (where Mandela was imprisoned), Constitution Hill (site of a notorious prison, now home to the Supreme
Figure 7.4. Mayibuye Archive. ©2010. Kenneth Schlesinger. Used with permission.

Figure 7.5. Apartheid Museum. ©2010. Kenneth Schlesinger. Used with permission.
Court), Hector Pieterson Museum (named after a thirteen-year-old killed in the 1976 Soweto student uprising), the Slave Museum, the Bo-Kaap Museum (Muslim immigration), and the Voortrekker Monument (Afrikaner heritage).

After three weeks, I was invited to the Foundation’s Johannesburg office to present my preliminary findings to the Content Team for the Centre. I introduced them to the library and archive’s mission statement:

The Steve Biko Centre Library supports the information and learning needs of the Eastern Cape community and visitors. It provides both print and online cultural heritage materials related to South African history and civilization, Black Consciousness, and the African diaspora.

Functioning as a teaching library, it fosters research support, independent learning and student success through public and outreach programs. Further, it is committed to partnering with and supporting the information needs of the other programs affiliated with the Steve Biko Centre.

The Archive serves as an onsite and remote resource collecting materials documenting the life, writings, political
engagement, and community development philosophy of Steve Biko. Materials are made available to local and international scholars to support publications, exhibitions, and special projects. The Archive also partners with local schools to introduce students to primary source documents to enhance the curriculum. (Schlesinger, 2011)

It is critical that the library serves the entire Ginsberg Township community—from children in crèches (nursery schools) to pensioners (elderly). Print materials not only have to represent the range of reading levels, but also the breadth of African culture and civilization. The library will collect materials in languages reflecting South Africa and the Eastern Cape, primarily Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, and Zulu. Literacy reinforcement is the foremost priority, followed by the need to promote student success in preparing for matriculation exams. The library should also collect textbook and curricular materials. A related component is to compile a repository of school lesson plans and curriculum development documents to promulgate best practices for teachers.

Since South Africa experiences pronounced digital divide issues, patrons should be welcomed into the library by ten public access Internet terminals and an opportunity to print documents. Study tables in the central portion of the space encourage student group work, surrounded by circulating-book stacks. The back area contains comfortable reading chairs, magazines for browsing, display cases for literary or archival exhibits, and open space for lectures, readings, and children’s groups (the Biko Foundation recently informed me that they will now construct a separate children’s room). Adjacent to this area are the periodicals stacks and a secure archive reading room.

The project plan also contains an appendix of policies for establishing access and circulation, cataloging software, collection scope, donor and scholar agreements, and similar matters. The intention is to keep annual membership fees and/or book fines low to encourage widespread use. The archive provides a more specialized facility for researchers and scholars, documenting Steve Biko’s brief life, professional contributions, and political philosophy. In addition to formulating cooperative exchange agreements with related repositories, new collections will be actively solicited. Processing interns could be recruited from University of Western Cape’s Museum and Heritage Studies diploma program. Further, a local history archive of Ginsberg Township will be constructed by community members contributing visual materials, artifacts, and documents.
This physical space will be supplemented by outreach, active programming, and professional training programs. The library should exist as its own cultural center with readings, lectures, and writing workshops conducted by local authors. The Centre’s accompanying computer and multimedia labs can be annexed to facilitate information literacy training, Internet instruction, and classes in website design and Photoshop. Community youth can be trained in multimedia technology equipment to record oral history interviews with community elders as an additional archival resource. A proposed bookmobile will travel to outlying rural areas to distribute print books and offer limited access to computer technologies.

Admittedly, the Biko Centre’s Content Team had preconceived and fairly traditional notions about how the library could function. Initially, they were surprised by the plan's emphasis on literacy, software training, and cultural enrichment, particularly how the library and archive were conceived to work in tandem with the computer and multimedia labs. One member, smiling, said, “It’s not quite what we had in mind, but I think it will work.” Then I showed them the budget, which they believed was achievable with additional fundraising.

Before traveling to South Africa, a few leading archival specialists cautioned me about the nature of international archival work, primarily on the financial sustainability and ongoing support for implementation of plans once the residency is completed. I was also advised on the limitations of being an outsider and the necessity to quickly grasp the complexities and behavior mores of a different culture. Even if one is intellectually prepared, there’s no comparison to actually being there on the ground.

From my previous experience, I had learned of South African archives’ uneasy relationship with their U.S. counterparts—joint digitization agreements where American universities somehow expected to assume ownership of the attendant cultural property. One South African librarian characterized this as digital imperialism, as we heard many stories of the contested nature of the nation’s cultural assets, notably sensitive materials from the apartheid era.

On the whole, I cherished this unique opportunity to spend six weeks in a fascinating and stunningly beautiful country with a complex and embattled history. I was proud of my submitted plan—however skeletal—which I believed did justice to honoring Steve Biko’s admirable principles of social justice and community leadership. My South African hosts and the majority of colleagues I encountered were warm, receptive, and supportive.
At the same time, international assignments always contain a fair share of frustration, setbacks, disorientation, and loneliness. Ultimately, it was precisely this dislocation that I welcomed because it fundamentally challenged my overarching intellectual concepts, social constructs, and basic cultural biases. It wasn’t always easy: sometimes it was shoved in my face, but it ultimately proved rewarding for my personal development, professional contributions, and intimate understanding of my role as a citizen on this planet.

In June 2012, I had the opportunity to escort a group of Lehman College students on a ten-day community-service trip to South Africa. Through my network of contacts, I was able to design an intensive visit that combined sightseeing, service learning, and enrichment in cultural heritage about the apartheid era. One of the high points—there were so many!—was having our students meet renowned South African musician Hugh Masekela backstage after one of his wonderful concerts. Students—many of whom had never been outside New York City, let alone the United States—volunteered at Nkosi’s Haven, a residential community for children and their families with AIDS and HIV.

I made arrangements for them to volunteer at Mayibuye Archives, where they processed anti-apartheid posters and T-shirts, as well as documentation of sports activities by the prisoners on Robben Island. When we visited this prison the following day, these materials contextualized and deepened their appreciation of South African history. At the historically black University of Western Cape, they met students who shared their experiences of growing up in postapartheid South Africa. The value of archival materials is that they can be shared, and bring history to life for the next generation.

REFERENCES


RECOMMENDED READING


