

# MONUMENTS AND MEANING MAKING: FREEDOM PARK AND THE BUMPY ROAD TO RECONCILIATION AND NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## *Abstract*

*On Salvokop, just south of Pretoria, a new memorial in the form of an open park (Freedom Park) was established to honour those who had sacrificed their lives in the struggle for freedom and humanity, but also to enhance reconciliation and freedom in South Africa. Although Freedom Park was a welcome addition to the commemoration of a specific chapter in the country's history, it also attracted criticism for excluding the names of former South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers who also perished. It seems that the difference in interpretation of who were the heroes and heroines of the struggle is thwarting the initial noble ideas of commemoration, reconciliation and nation-building. The article focuses on the differences in interpretation and also attempts to analyse Freedom Park's role as part of peace-building in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** Freedom Park; monuments; nation-building; reconciliation; policy makers; SADF soldiers; Salvokop; Voortrekker Monument.

**Slutelwoorde:** Freedom Park; monumente; nasiebou; versoening; beleidsformuleerders; SANW-soldate; Salvokop; Voortrekkermonument.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When Freedom Park rose on the eastern slope of Salvokop, just outside the Pretoria central business district, the newcomer evoked a rather mixed response from the public, although many could associate themselves with its proclaimed goal of nation-building and reconciliation. However, in South Africa's volatile political climate, any peace and reconciliation initiatives are welcomed and Freedom Park's endorsement of the //Hapo concept was noble and could contribute to peace building.

The concept of //Hapo (a Khoi word that literally means "dream") was taken from the proverb "a dream is not a dream until it is shared by the whole community" (Information pamphlet). The overall belief was that, with this noble goal, Freedom

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Park could contribute to the ideals of an inclusive society, reconciliation and nation-building.

However, as most realists have cautioned, any early optimism that Freedom Park would be a “magic cure” to bridge divisions in society, the expectations will have to be tempered and kept within realistic parameters. The history of peace-building in South Africa, against the backdrop of commemorating the past, has proved to be riddled with controversy. As Maré (2007:44-45) points out, the function of memory is complex and when dealing with monuments and memorials as symbols to remind society of past events and future visions, one deals with a communal memory “that always have political and ideological overtones and finds its own meaning in memory”.

Baines (2009:3) also warned that memorials, such as Freedom Park, serve as significant markers of postcolonial society’s reconstruction of the past. The process is fundamentally subjective and political, with a specific and distinct interpretation of the past that acts as a guiding principle towards the goals of reconciliation and nation-building.

Distinctive and subjective interpretations of the past will clearly reveal substantive differences, such as who should claim ownership of the title “freedom fighter”. Will this definition for example exclude soldiers of the former South African Defence Force (SADF) who fought in Namibia, Angola and elsewhere on the African continent? A substantial portion of these SADF soldiers thought that they were conducting a just war “against the evil forces of communism” to keep the subcontinent free from Soviet imperialism (Baines 2009:3).

In the new democratic dispensation, the SADF soldiers found themselves being alienated and stigmatised, because of the decision of the decision makers to exclude their names from the Wall of Names at Freedom Park. However, at the same time the decision makers and management of the Park took the decision to immortalise the Cuban soldiers and Russian advisors who fought alongside SWAPO insurgents (former freedom fighters from South West Africa), by including their names on the Wall of Names (Information pamphlet).

Therefore, in a bizarre political game of musical chairs, yesterday’s terrorists under the old regime have become today’s freedom fighters, while yesterday’s soldiers – who had thought they were fighting a just war – are relegated into oblivion. The decision to work from this controversial premise towards the goal of reconciliation and nation-building understandably attracted scepticism and anger, especially from those who felt alienated by the decision.

## 2. FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY

In the light of these introductory remarks, the focus of the article will be to analyse Freedom Park's role as a significant marker of the reconstruction of South Africa's postcolonial society and also to ascertain its future role in fostering the ideals of reconciliation and nation-building (Baines 2009:3).

The relationship between the concepts of reconciliation and nation-building is sensitive and delicate, because of their conflicting ideological views. The important question is therefore then how the process of reconstruction and nation-building should be approached in post-apartheid South Africa. It is acknowledged that the process of memorialisation is often highly charged and that politics plays a prominent role in the process, which often leads to differences of opinion about past events between competing interests of past events (Baines 2009:3).

In an effort to structure the article, the underpinning methodology will be based on the manner in which policies are generally structured, namely:

- (a) The *intentions* of the policy makers
- (b) The *actions* of the policy makers
- (c) The *impact* of the policy makers (Jackson & Jackson 2003:289).

The communiqués and press releases from Freedom Park, headed by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and his staff, reveal a distinct and specific policy approach to commemorate the past. Freedom Park policies therefore do not differ much from public policies: they emerge from the relationship between historical, geographical and socio-economic conditions which then impacts on elite (political) behaviour (Jackson & Jackson 2003:289).

The methodology of the article is therefore an analysis of Freedom Park's tri-structured policy of intentions, actions and impact to reveal the true intentions of the policy makers. The desired objectives of policy makers can only be judged when they are transformed into actions which can then be analysed and their impact evaluated.

The policies that originate from Freedom Park will over time shift and develop when socio-economic, political and even financial considerations seep into the process. In the article the focus will be to evaluate the policies, specifically against the one overarching aim of reconciliation and nation-building in South Africa.

## 3. THE INTENTION OF FREEDOM PARK'S POLICY MAKERS

However, when Freedom Park was established, the broad intention seemed to be the correction of the gross numerical disparity of monuments in South Africa predominantly reflecting the values and interests of the previous ruling National Party regime. (In this regard Frescura has pointed out that in 1992, of

all the declared monuments by the South African National Monuments Council, a staggering 97%) was reflective of white values and interests (Schonfeldt 2006:217)). The establishment of Freedom Park and the construction of the Ncome Monument at Blood River were therefore legitimate steps to correct this present numerical imbalance and disparity of monuments in South Africa.

The historical intention that spearheaded the establishment of a park to commemorate freedom, and those who fought to obtain it, originated from the activities of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the former Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Tutu articulated the need for a freedom park to pay homage to those who paid with their lives for freedom, *but* also to enhance the process of nation-building in South Africa (added emphasis). (See Doxtader and Salazar 2007:85-89 for his Chairman Foreword and pledge for freedom and nation-building.)

During 2007 the same sentiments and intentions were echoed by the then Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Freedom Park, Ms Peggie Photolo, who also sketched the broader parameters of reconciliation and nation-building to build a new national conscience to heal the nation's wounds. She reiterated that the narrower intention was to honour those that should be honoured and to ensure that they receive "symbolic reparation" for their suffering during the apartheid years which culminated in offering their lives for humanity and freedom (Press Release Freedom Park 2007).

However, the judgement of exactly who suffered during the apartheid years and laid down their lives for humanity and freedom carries the seeds of division and exclusion. The deliberate and calculated decision to exclude a segment of the population, such as the former SADF soldiers, will destroy any hope for inclusiveness and solidarity that could have provided the energy for nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa. This narrow definition therefore implied that only those who opposed and suffered under apartheid laid down their lives for humanity and freedom, and is in itself an exclusive, subjective judgement call, saturated with strong political undertones.

The subjective nature of politics is transcended in the documentation of historical events, because historical writing does not happen in a vacuum and every history is a thing of its time. As Johnson indicated, historiography has always been a site of a political struggle in South Africa and even the best historians have to bear enormous pressure not to indulge in an ever-changing game of praise and blame, but to observe a great deal in silence (Johnson 2004:vii).

The intention of decision makers as to who should be eternalised on the Wall of Names in the name of humanity and freedom will therefore always be riddled by controversy. The undeniable fact is that it will be ultimately a subjective decision which will reflect a specific political orientation.

The succession of communiqués and press releases from Freedom Park since 2007 reveals its intentions, but the distinct shifts of emphasis that occurred over time have seemed to blur the focus. It should be recalled that Freedom Park's original brief was to commemorate and remember the struggle for humanity and freedom, but it should also play a primary role in healing the nation's wounds and unite the diversity of peoples in South Africa. However, their overarching goal *should still be* the elusive ideals of reconciliation and nation-building (added emphasis).

However, the communiqués and press releases that originate from Freedom Park are difficult to reconcile with their original intent and overall goals:

1. 11 January 2007: Ms Peggie Photolo emphasised that the core theme of Freedom Park was to honour the struggle for humanity and freedom. She reiterated that the Wall of Names will commemorate those who laid down their lives in this regard, and that the aim of the Park will be a symbolic reparation process. Photolo reiterated that Freedom Park is conducting a process to collect the names of the SADF soldiers who died during the war/struggle on the basis of inclusivity and representivity. However, she also explained that this process will be debated and the decision (about an inclusive version of the history) should emerge from a national and public process (Press Release Freedom Park 2007).
2. 7 May 2007: The twentieth anniversary of the bombing of Cosatu House was held at Freedom Park, and Dr Serote, the CEO of Freedom Park, declared that the park was about celebrating and commemorating the heroes and heroines that gave their lives for freedom. He reiterated that Freedom Park was also about reconciliation and nation-building, but emphasised that South Africa should forgive, but not forget (Press Release Freedom Park 2007).
3. 4 November 2009: In a briefing to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, Serote declared that Freedom Park was a park for the freedom of Africa. A question was directed to him about inclusivity and the fact that there would be two walls for fallen soldiers, one at the Voortrekker Monument and the other the Wall of Names at Freedom Park. The concern was that this situation would create the impression of two South Africa's. In his answer Serote referred to a discussion that he had with the CEO of the Voortrekker Monument, General Gert Opperman, during which he emphasised to him that the SADF soldiers' "duty was to kill". He then explained that he had asked Opperman if he would include the names of the people who had been killed by the soldiers on his wall, but the answer was negative (Parliament Monitoring Group 2009).
4. 10 May 2010: In a media release Serote announced that Freedom Park would host Ambassadors and High Commissioners from various African countries to discuss sustainable partnerships to promote African heritage, culture and partnerships. Serote declared that: "Our aim with this initiative is to strengthen

the framework of African solidarity...The ties that bind us together span country borders and unite our brothers and sisters into a global community. Today marks another step on the route amongst our fellow African countries. If we are to realise the ideals of Pan-Africanism, we are to explore our shared roots” (Press Release Freedom Park 2010).

The announcement by Serote on 10 May 2010 presented a significant shift in Freedom Park’s focus from a national goal to a broad pan-African vision.

#### **4. THE ACTIONS OF THE FREEDOM PARK POLICY MAKERS**

The actions of the management of Freedom Park could analytically be subdivided into two categories, firstly the decision on the spatial placement of the monument, and secondly the layout and specific features of the park.

##### **(a) The geographical and spatial placement of Freedom Park**

The ultimate decision where to geographically establish Freedom Park seemed to be taken on the basis of strong ideological motives: the present series of monuments and forts south of Pretoria was a strong underlying inducement for deciding where to establish the new freedom park. Maré (2007:44-45) refers to this strategy as “the postcolonial ethos that post-apartheid monuments should be in the proximity of a colonial monument”. This positioning of Freedom Park had therefore seemed to be a deliberate action to act as a counterbalance to the surrounding (colonial) monuments and forts and therefore to take its (rightful) place as part of the historical entrance to the capital city.

However, in the process of scoring political points, the opportunity to utilise a historical spiritual home as a heritage site was overlooked. In the Pretoria area the only site with a strong historical heritage component is the Wonderboom area, north of Wonderboompoort. Anthropological evidence indicated that local tribes for centuries attributed religious and sacred meaning to the Wonderboom and its surrounding area during the pre-colonial period. The Magaliesberg ridge above the Wonderboom furthermore offered a unique elevated spot to erect a park which would in addition allow for a symbolic link with a sacred heritage site.

However, in spite of this sentiment, Salvokop, north of Elandsport, was preferred as a location. This was clearly a political decision which bypassed the symbolic status that the Wonderboom area could have offered. Salvokop, above the Railway Station, is not a heritage site and does not display a physical pre-colonial heritage link in the same manner as Wonderboom. On the contrary, Salvokop has a strong link with the old Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, because the hill was used to signal the arrival of mail from Kimberley and Natal. After the British occupation in 1900 the area fell under military control and was re-named Salvokop, because of

the 25-pounder gun that fired salutes on special occasions to visiting and departing dignitaries (Andrews & Ploeger 1989:58).

The collection of hills further north from Salvokop that rise steeply above the surrounding open veldt already housed three important historical sites and can rightly be described as an Afrikaner heritage site. Two of the hills, Fort Klapperkop and Fort Schanskop, were constructed shortly before the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) together with two forts south of Pretoria, as part of a defence ring around Pretoria. The Voortrekker Monument was later built during the 1930s and 1940s on the furthest point of the west-east axis on a hill later christened Monument Hill. Between the Union Buildings, on Meintjes Kop, and the Voortrekker Monument, on Monument Hill, a strong spatial link was established which has reflected the Afrikaner domination of the pre-democratic era.

The decision to erect Freedom Park on Salvokop was never argued from a symbolic or heritage site angle, but was rooted in a political desire to visually and spatially oppose the Afrikaner heritage site. In this equation, Freedom Park was intended to provide an elevated and spatial presence and to create a balance with its counterparts of the colonial era. The location of Freedom Park serves to break the visual link between the Voortrekker Monument and the Union Buildings, with its historical and symbolic connection with the power base of Afrikaner Nationalism. (There were even earlier suggestions that Freedom Park should expropriate and occupy the lower level of the Voortrekker Monument (Maré 2007:44-45)). However, in the end sanity prevailed and Salvokop was chosen as the site and the park was built on the eastern slope.)

The symbolic contrast between the three structures could not be more conflicting and forms spatially a bizarre triangle which opponents immediately acted upon. Sayagues writes that this visual and spatial triangle represents a conflict between democracy (Union Buildings), freedom (Freedom Park) and oppression and white supremacy (Voortrekker Monument) (Sayagues 2010). In this equation, Sayagues describes the Voortrekker Monument as commemorating the struggles of the Afrikaner settlers, descended from whites, who created apartheid and then proceeds to describe the Monument as “fortress-like, evil house of Mordor, stark example of fascist architecture”. In contrast, Freedom Park is described as “a striking visual opposite to the Monument with [its] open, energetic sign drawn by the reed poles” (Sayagues 2010).

When political opportunism is cast aside and the situation within a democratic South Africa is analysed, the negative aspects of the placement of Freedom Park on Salvokop immediately surface. The location of the two symbols of nation-building, the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park, intrinsically generates conflicting emotions that detract from the initial goal of reconciliation and the fostering of

nation-building. This ideal was cast aside in favour of the strategic and political placing of Freedom Park as part of a colonial reconstruction process.

This duplication of monuments, which are intrinsically conflicting, forms part of Maré's assessment that such a strategy is part of a postcolonial ethos that post-apartheid monuments should be in the proximity of a "colonial monument" (Maré 2007:44-45). In this manner the strategy detracts from the potential value of both monuments, which produce very little social capital and as a unit contribute little towards nation-building.

A further noteworthy exponent of this strategy was the placement of the Ncome Monument at the historical site of Blood River, directly opposite the ox wagon laager. During the inauguration of the Ncome Monument, the Inkatha Freedom Party's (IFP's) Lionel Mtshali argued that the monument will correct the current imbalances as far as the portrayal of the events at Blood River/Ncome is concerned: it has in the past exclusively symbolised Afrikaner domination, and now (the new Ncome Monument) will promote reconciliation and nation-building (Schonfeldt 2006:217).

However, none of the values of reconciliation and nation-building are architecturally and visually present in the outline and placement of the two monuments at Blood River/Ncome River. The newly erected Ncome Monument's shape and position is predominately one of architectural aggression, because it was built in the form of Shaka's attack formation, consisting of a head or chest with protruding arms that are used to encircle the enemy. The museum building is round to represent a chest and the extending walls point to the "enemy" across the river: the bronze ox wagon laager of the Voortrekker defenders. The shields and spears on the front wall, representing particular regiments, contribute to the image of an advancing and attacking military force and not surprisingly face the laager to perpetually re-enact the battle scene (Schonfeldt 2006:217).

This clear lack of reconciliatory initiative and imagination on the part of both the monuments at Blood River and Ncome River is striking and makes very little contribution to the ideal of nation-building. The situation with Freedom Park and the Voortrekker Monument is similar in that this strategy still maintains "the matter of our and their history", now visually eternalised in two opposing monuments. The restoration of the historical and political balance would have been better served if the whole approach had been better planned and coordinated in a comprehensive and all-inclusive manner. A single monument at Blood River, with a bridge as a symbol of unity spanning the river to integrate the history of the battle, would be preferable to enhance unity in a divided country. A museum, administered by a single body, could then have displayed the opposing interpretations to visitors in a harmonious manner.

### **(b) The writing on the wall**

The selective policy regarding the inclusion of names of those who had fallen in the name of freedom on the Wall of Names has created strong divisions, thwarting any hope of achieving the ultimate aim of reconciliation and nation-building. As Baines indicates, the decision to exclude the names of former fallen SADF soldiers from the Wall of Names “suggests that the relationship between reconciliation and nation-building is a fraught one” and “that memorialisation is a highly charged political process that will ultimately lead to contestation between competing interpretation of past events” (Baines 2009:331).

The exclusion of names of fallen SADF soldiers and the inclusion of the names of Cuban soldiers who assisted SWAPO insurgents just add oil to the fire. The opposition against this policy was spearheaded by a civil society group, AfriForum. Their spokesperson, Kallie Kriel, stated: “What is of critical importance now, is that the mutual recognition and respect for the history of all South African communities should be developed and nurtured” (<<http://71.18.120.210/article.php?ID=9993>>).

The one sided, subjective handling of history by Freedom Park’s policy framer actually achieves the opposite and the implications of this will be the subject of discussion in the next subsection.

## **5. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FREEDOM PARK POLICIES**

The actions and intentions of Freedom Park’s policies are still to a certain extent shrouded in mystery and controversy. Clearly the lofty ideals of reconciliation and nation-building, envisaged by many, seemed to be subservient to the postcolonial society’s policy, interpretation and reconstruction of the past. On the surface it seemed that those who spearheaded Freedom Park were driven by political considerations and that reconciliation and nation-building had been downgraded to a lesser priority. The overriding policy and its intended implications seemed to be to correct the wrongs of the past and then to counteract with a subjective interpretation and even a personalised creation of South Africa’s history.

The policy will certainly follow the dictum that “winners get to write the history, while losers are likely to be relegated to the margins of society” (Baines 2009:331). The unfortunate aspect is that in the process the two sides are progressively drifting further apart with the initial divisions greater than ever. In his 2007 Day of Reconciliation speech, Serote, the former CEO of Freedom Park, steadfastly maintained a conciliatory approach, referring to “the joining of hands and working towards a brighter future to alleviate the impact of divisions on future generations” (Freedom Park Press Release 2010).

However, in a contradictory move, Serote had broadened Freedom Park's vision from a national focus to a continental vision of freedom and solidarity. In a media release on 10 May 2010, during the hosting of the Ambassadors and High Commissioners from various African countries, he declared that the focus of the Park was sustainable partnerships to promote Africa's heritage, culture and partnerships. Serote declared on this occasion that the aim was to strengthen the framework of African solidarity and to unite (Africa's) brothers and sisters into a global community based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism to explore common roots (Freedom Park Press Release 2010).

How should this broader approach of Pan-Africanism and black solidarity be interpreted, and how are we to know if this direction change has now replaced Tutu's vision of nation-building and a rainbow nation? This direction change has the potential to alienate non-traditionalists and Westerners even further, especially in the light of the difficulty to be compatible with the spiritual dimension which is being created at Freedom Park.

The specific spiritual dimension that Freedom Park is trying to achieve presents another exclusive approach to nation-building. The lay-out of Freedom Park reflects a unique culture, heritage and spirituality which is symbolised by different areas such as an eternal flame and spiritual places and references as "to walk where (your) ancestors have walked" (Information pamphlet. Freedom Park).

However, the fundamental question is which identity is being represented at Freedom Park, and whether this identity has a broad, all-inclusive and diverse aim of a rainbow nation or a narrower ethnic application. If reconciliation and nation-building were indeed Freedom Park's aim, then the existing presence of symbols and rituals is hardly representative of the broader diversified South African community.

The problem is that the current recreation of spirituality and symbolism has no historical and traditional link with the specific area which creates the impression that the symbols were forced and not spontaneous. The reference to "walk where your ancestors have walked" could not be anything else than figurative, because the area was never historically a heritage site.

Freedom Park's geographic position, in clear view of the central business district of a First World city and with the sound of heavy traffic, negates the spirituality that the Park could have reflected. The sanctity and serenity that Wonderboom could have provided, with its abundance of secluded spaces, away from city noises, were therefore sadly bypassed for the sake of scoring political points.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND FINAL ASSESSMENT

The intention to establish a park to commemorate the battle for freedom in South Africa was a noble initiative and long overdue in a country where monuments and statues overwhelmingly represent white interests and neglect the struggle of black people for self-determination. The memorialisation of those who fell in the struggle for freedom was therefore welcomed, especially in light of the noble intention to interconnect it with the broader goal of reconciliation and nation-building in South Africa.

However, after almost a decade, it seems that subsequent events and political agendas are threatening to derail the original intentions of this noble project. Ongoing controversy about Freedom Park's exclusiveness and level of political behaviour is clearly suffocating its potential. It seems that the continued criticism of the Park's inclusiveness has resulted in a lukewarm response by visitors, who are voting with their feet and staying away.

The present leaning towards Pan-Africanism and the alienation of whites, especially Afrikaners, is a far cry from Freedom Park's initial goals as reflected in a 2007 press release: "Our guiding principle is creating inclusivity and ownership amongst the nation to ensure that every South African is able to identify with the Park and what it represents" (Freedom Park Press Release 2010).

Serote's token gesture to decide that two Boer Generals of note, Christiaan de Wet and Koos de la Rey, should be included in the Hall is too little too late. He then immediately neutralises this positive move by instructing the Afrikaans newspaper, *Beeld*, not to refer to Freedom Park as "Vryheidspark", because no such park exists in the first place (*Beeld*, June 2010).

The fact is that Freedom Park has cost more than 57 million rand, a bill that was footed by the taxpayer. On 31 March 2009 Freedom Park progressed from a trust to a council and a cultural institution and it seems with escalating costs, such as a 35% increase in operating costs in 2009, that its dependency on the state and the National Lottery Board will increase in future. It will therefore be a monumental task to put the park on a sound financial basis. The grim reality is that the visitors to Freedom Park are a mere trickle in contrast with the Voortrekker Monument, where overseas visitors arrive in their droves. The average number of visitors to the Voortrekker Monument exceeds 200 000 per annum, which amounts to about 17 000 visitors per month (<[www.thesouthafricanguide.com](http://www.thesouthafricanguide.com)>), a number that was substantially higher during the Soccer World Cup. In comparison, Freedom Park, in spite of the fact that thousands of visitors from Africa and the world congregated in June in Pretoria and Johannesburg for the 2010 Soccer World Cup, attracted a mere 3 000 visitors, which on average was a disappointing 120 visitors per day (*Beeld*, June 2010)

The only way to rectify the situation is to adopt a business plan for Freedom Park and to substantially downplay the perception that it is a park belonging to and representing the views of the ruling party. It is time to acknowledge the diversity of South African society, and in a joint project with the Voortrekker Monument, to develop a holistic encompassing initiative to present an inclusive face to its citizens and visitors to the country. In this manner a substantial portion of the visitors to the Voortrekker Monument in future will also pay entrance fees to visit Freedom Park.

The present group of policy makers and politicians can learn a lot from the example that was set by former president Nelson Mandela. He spoke during 2002 when the statue of Danie Theron, Afrikaner hero of the Anglo-Boer War, was unveiled on Schanskop. Mandela reiterated that we should share each other's heritage in this country because we have a common destiny (*Rapport*, September 2010).

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