

Digital History and Virtual Heritage in the New South Africa:
The *Soweto '76* Archive

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The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) and the Hector Pieterse Memorial & Museum (HPMM) have proposed a transatlantic digital collaboration to create the *Cultural Heritage Platform*, an extensible web interface and toolset for the detailed study and conservation of historic resources. We further propose an extensive technical training and support program for curators and staff at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg; The District Six Museum, Cape Town; Red Location, Port Elizabeth; and Kliptown, Johannesburg, enabling them to populate the digital archive with content from their collections. This joint effort would create a core “digital cultural heritage trail” that could be further extended to other related South African museums and that would allow students, teachers, and the general public from anywhere in the world to explore digital recreations of some of the most important places in the struggle against apartheid.

The *Soweto '76* project began in early 2006 as a collaboration between the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) and the Hector Pieterse Memorial & Museum (HPMM), Johannesburg, South Africa. The initial scope of the project included the digitization and preservation of the archival collections of the Museum with the intention of providing on-line access to its holdings for broad public use. Due to a lack of available resources for their care and preservation, these holdings were considered endangered, and the MITH project team began the process of digitizing them in 2006. By early 2007 the team determined that the material in the archive could best be presented in an interactive 3D virtual environment with social networking functionality. Such an environment would stimulate critical historical dialogue, raising questions about the nature and construction of historical narratives in newly developing democracies. In addition, the online archive would make the materials in it broadly available to scholars interested in researching the history of Soweto and the student movement against Apartheid. Currently *Soweto '76* is completing the digitization of its holdings including oral history interviews, video interviews, historic photographs, commemorative memorabilia, maps, and other material artifacts. A collection of over 200 South African newspaper articles from the period 1976-1980 has also been digitized and transcribed as part of the archive. The project staff has recently started the process of “tagging” text, image, video, and audio files from already digitized collections.

As MITH developed the *Soweto '76* software design interface, they strove to make their work as generalizable and as reusable as possible. It soon became apparent that the interface might be applied to other archives to create a larger cultural heritage platform for historic sites. Such a large, multi-institutional digital archive is integral to the project we

are now proposing.

In addition to providing access to archival materials extant in collections such as those of HPMM, our database interface will allow users to explore historically accurate recreations of heritage spaces in South Africa, and to access digital artifacts related to each particular space/place. This focus on place is important because so much of the critical urban fabric of places such as Soweto, District Six, or Red Location was erased during the apartheid era. Under the post-apartheid Mandela and Mbeki governments there has been an assumed connection between urban redevelopment and heritage programs, particularly if they promote foreign tourism. As some scholars have argued, “political transformations can create new urban political identities, but the politics of tourism can give cash value to the memorializing of select pasts.”¹ Over a decade of democracy has brought massive reforms and advances across the heritage industry, but there remains a lack of understanding regarding the cultural significance of Black heritage resources in South Africa’s still isolated townships. Unfortunately, much of the physically extant heritage does not easily lend itself to the traditional standards of what is considered “architecturally significant” or “visually impressive.” Much of the history of the anti-apartheid movement took place in the townships among what many heritage professionals would consider to be “the mundane” and ordinary structures and environments of the poor. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a different set of criteria and strategies for documenting and preserving these important sites.

Once the Soweto interface is complete, other cultural heritage institutions in South Africa concerned with human rights and social justice can be added easily to the digital heritage trail, as long as they conform to our metadata standards. Each additional institution thus will not only make its own content visible to the world, but will also enrich the collectively searchable content of the archive as a whole. In this way we hope to create a “Digital Heritage Trail” that connects the cultural institutions in South Africa together in virtual space.

Of course, creating the XML files that comprise each digital object can be demanding work, especially for those whose technical skills are not highly developed. For this reason, we will also provide access to the Ajax XML Encoder (AXE), developed in 2007-2008 at MITH (originally for the *Soweto '76* project) with funding from a National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Startup grant. This tool allows non-technical users to describe or “tag” text, image, video, and audio files using an intuitive Web-based interface. Graduate students working on the Soweto project have already successfully used the tool, and a public beta version has been made available. Because our interface will be open source and our metadata standards will be readily available, they will be adaptable for the collections of other cultural heritage institutions in South Africa and around the world.

Institutional Partners

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Website

<http://www.soweto76archive.org/3d/video/>

¹ Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 147.