

SITES OF CONSCIENCE: CREATIVE SPACES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

By Silvia Fernández, Program Director, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

I sit here today representing the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#), a global Network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives working together to promote cultures of human rights and democracy by engaging the public in a critical reflection of the past.

As part of my presentation, I will give a quick overview of who we are, how we operate, and how historical sites can serve as **catalysts for innovation and creativity in the plight of human rights and social change**.

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is constituted by over 180 historic sites, museums and memory initiatives in 51 countries. The Coalition has a Secretariat office located in the USA, six regional networks (Russia, Asia, Africa, Europe, Middle East and North Africa, and Latin America) and one thematic network, the Immigration network, with its roots in the USA and expanding to other regions.

Coalition's members remember very different histories and work in very different contexts, however, they all share a common belief and a common commitment to **activating their history to evoke conscience and inspire action today**. This conscious effort to connect past to present and memory to action is the hallmark of Sites of Conscience.

Sites of Conscience take a fundamental instinct - memory - and develop it as a well-planned tactic for the promotion of human rights.

This new approach to human rights and social change began in 1999, when 9 leaders in the fields of heritage and human rights from the USA, Senegal, Argentina, Bangladesh, the Czech Republic, the

United Kingdom and Russia, came together to give **a new meaning to historic museums and sites of memory.**

Despite their inherent differences, the group had a common vision and a common recognition.

Their vision? To transform historic sites into active centers for civic engagement and social change.

Their recognition? While historic places are significant markers of either celebration or violence, there is nothing inherent in a historic site that ensures public participation or draws connections between remembering a past atrocity and fighting a contemporary human rights abuse. While “Never Again” has been a mantra of memorials from Berlin to Buenos Aires, this group recognized that historic places have to be **intentionally activated** in order to have a significant impact in society. It is only through a process of active programming and interpretation that places of memory can become centers for the promotion of human rights.

To this new kind of social institution, the group named it a **Site of Conscience.**

By definition, a Site of Conscience

1. interprets history through the place itself;
2. develops programs that invite the public to discuss the past and its contemporary legacies today, and
3. helps people get involved in the issues that matter most now.

Under this common understanding, Sites of Conscience experiment with a diversity of strategies and tools to engage their public on a critical reflection of the past and on an understanding of today’s most pressing social issues. In this way, Sites of Conscience become laboratories for innovation and creativity on how to transform their spaces into active agents of positive social change.

At the core of Sites of Conscience is a methodology centered around three main powers:

- The power of place
- The power of personal stories
- The power of dialogue

How these three powers are “activated” vary considerably among Sites. However, despite the differences in pedagogical approaches, cultural contexts, or concepts of dialogue, Sites of Conscience agree on developing programs that ultimately **foster interaction, reflection and public engagement.**

Rooted in their local communities, Sites of Conscience turn to their own cultural traditions to develop tools and programs specific to their contexts – whether it is theater, visual arts, music, exhibit design or dance.

Combining different disciplines – history/heritage/human rights/education/art/memory – Sites of Conscience bring together different groups of society with different backgrounds and expertise. In doing so, Sites of Conscience not only are centers for experimentation, but also for collaboration and community-building.

Recognizing that the legacies of human rights abuse are not static, Sites of Conscience are constantly faced with the need to evolve and adapt to changing times; to turn to creativity and new mediums in order to remain relevant in society, and to offer evolving dialogues for the newer generations while preserving the memory and the voices of the past.

The past 14 years have produced an impressive portfolio of cutting-edge tools, strategies and innovative projects that aim to empower the individual and contribute to building a society that is critical and active against violence.

Today, I will showcase one of these projects. However, in Chile, there are seven Sites of Conscience (Paine Memorial, Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi, Comité de Derechos Humanos NIDO 20, el Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Estadio Nacional, Casa Memoria Jose Domingo Cañas) that I encourage you to visit and experience directly.

Since 2010, the Coalition has partnered with victims groups and leading human rights and arts organizations to develop memory initiatives in Kenya and Liberia to support post-conflict peace and reconciliation efforts.

A particularly effective project is **Body Mapping**, a method in which survivors write and draw their experiences of trauma and conflict on a life-size representation of their body.

During the body-mapping workshops participants visually share and narrate their life histories through the sketches of their bodies and representations of their goals, support systems, bodily traumas and points of strength.

The technique provides a safe vehicle through which people share traumatic experiences with each other, building support for victims' rights and for the inclusion of memorialization processes in official truth and reconciliation recommendations.

The following pictures and reflections are from one of our latest workshops held in April 2012 in Nairobi in partnership with Coalition’s members TICAH – the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (Kenya), PeaceNet (Kenya) and Human Rights Media Center (South Africa).

I must begin by saying that Body Mapping is both an artistic and a group therapy technique.

Body-mapping programs are structured as “five-day residential workshops [carefully] designed to build community and trust by creating safe spaces for sharing, reflection, truth-telling, healing and artistic expression.”¹

Our 2012 workshop brought together eleven Kenyan men and women who had survived torture in the Nyayo House Detention Center during the 1980s and 1990s. “The participants were selected by the coordinator of an informal Kenyan group of torture survivors.”²

Given the traumatic experiences of the participants, creating a safe space is particularly critical in a body-mapping workshop. A ritual is used to clearly delineate the rules of interaction during the workshop as well as to include the establishment and reinforcement of ground rules ensuring

¹ Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya’s Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others.”

² Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya’s Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others.”

confidentiality and trust. Stories told and fears exposed during the workshop are not to be shared outside the group.³

“While each body-mapping workshop is different, all workshops offer a mix of discussion, quiet painting time, sharing, and listening. Each day of the workshop includes some time on the floor drawing the body maps, and some time in plenary discussion.”⁴

Once introductions are made and ground rules established, participants work in pairs to help each other trace the outline of their body. Once it is traced, participants work individually and with support from the group to fill their outlines with symbols, drawings and words. While each body map is the story of one individual’s journey and has one artist in charge of what goes onto the canvas, the workshop is a collective experience and some participants want help from others. The goal is that each participant alone remains in charge of determining what goes onto their body map and that

³ Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya’s Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others.”

⁴ Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya’s Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others.”

the body map is expression of the life journey that has challenged, hurt, encouraged, or healed each person individually. ⁵

Parallel to drawing the body maps, the group participates in sessions strategically facilitated to help participants reflect on their strengths, the symbols of their strength, and the areas of the body where these symbols would most appropriately be placed. During these sessions, participants are also encouraged to reflect on the physical and emotional effects of trauma and on how to show these on the body maps. Most body maps have both literal representations (for example broken bones) and symbolic representations (like barbed wire around the heart).⁶

At the end of the workshop, each body map is hanged on the wall and each participant is invited to introduce his or her body map, explaining it to the group and sharing how they felt painting it and how they feel now sharing it with others.

⁵ Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya’s Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others.”

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The group collectively decides any follow-up activities they wish to undertake, whether or not they want to leave their body maps with the workshop facilitators for possible future exhibitions or take them with them. All these decisions are discussed and agreed upon within the group.⁷

At the Coalition, we have found the Body Mapping technique to be effective in:

1 – allowing participants to make the journey from a past of repression and violence to envision a future of peace and justice

2 – recognizing and supporting victims

3 – allowing multiple interpretations and representations (collective and personal) of past events, and creating a public historical record that can educate future generations through exhibits, publications and intergenerational dialogues

4 – fostering dialogues between survivors and others supporting mechanisms for reconciliation.

The Coalition trains local rights activists to use Body Mapping to activate potential Sites of Conscience in Liberia, Kenya and other post-conflict settings.

⁷ Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya’s Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others.”

I would like to thank TICAH for conducting this evaluation and report, which is facilitating knowledge-sharing and allowing others to use body mapping for similar purposes.

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience exists to support initiatives like Body Mapping.

In order to do that, we connect and share experiences, resources and tools among our members. We provide technical, financial, and promotional support, facilitate peer to peer exchanges, and organize workshops, trainings and conferences.

I would like to summarize who we are with a quote from Margarita Romero, former President of the Corporacion Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi:

"Sites of Conscience must not only educate about the past but also create new cultures of public engagement that promote critical thinking and the participation of the newer generations."

Finally, I feel the responsibility of asking that each of you, in your capacity, support these initiatives whether it is by visiting them, collaborating with them, establishing partnerships, or ensuring that they do not disappear from our societies.

For a list of member sites by country, please visit our website: www.sitesofconscience.org.

Thank you for your attention.