



IMAGINING THE MODERN PAST

Oscar Hemer



Remembering modernity may seem like a paradox. Modern amnesia is perhaps an adequate description of our contemporary predicament. How can we remember something we are still immersed in? Why is it important to try?

The *Memories of Modernity* project started in 2005 as an experimental, collaborative venture between academic and artistic institutions in Durban, South Africa and Malmö, Sweden. Its fundamental assumption has been that looking back and reviewing our recent modern pasts may enable us to imagine and shape a different future. And moreover, that by doing so, we might discover unexpected similarities between two apparently completely different societies like South Africa and Sweden – or, more specifically, the cities of Durban and Malmö.

The most important and most difficult premise for the project is its very idea of combining artistic and academic approaches. Of exploring ways of exchanging academic and artistic experience, making the different practices shed light on each other – and perhaps even rethinking methodologies altogether. An experiment.

Four Swedish and four South African artists on the one hand, and a group of Communication for Development Master students, from Sweden and South Africa but also from many other parts of the world, have been engaged in the process. The project's activities included two workshop seminars, held in Malmö (June 2006) and Durban (November 2006), with the participation of scholars such as Sarat Maharaj, Kevin Robins, Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, Bheki Peterson, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Maurice Vambe, among others. One tangible result of the process is the art exhibition *Houses of Modernity*, which had its premiere at Durban Art Gallery in April 2007 and will re-open at Malmö Museum in November 2007.

This issue of *Glocal Times* introduces four articles based on some of the presentations from the Durban workshop held in November 2006. Written by Michael Chapman, Franco Frescura, Ingrid Elam and myself, they focus on literature as reflection and testimony, in Sweden and South Africa, and on the architecture of apartheid in a both literal and symbolic sense.

But what do *memories of modernity* have to do with *communication for development*? Memory does not only invoke the modern past, in Sweden

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closely linked to rapid industrialization and the social democratic model, in South Africa to the dark era of apartheid and its equally rational but racist welfare society. It also invokes the pending present; books and albums made for the children of parents dying of AIDS; preservation and recovery of cultural heritage. Whose heritage is being preserved? Which values will prevail? How can media and art contribute to processes of transcultural communication and reconciliation?

These questions have informed the *Memories of Modernity* project, and I believe that they are of crucial concern for ComDev theory and practice.

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