

STAGE 1 HERITAGE IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE NORTHERN BREAKWATER AND HARBOUR WALL, MURRAY'S BAY HARBOUR, ROBBEN ISLAND

Prepared for

Planning Partners

September 2002



Prepared by

Tim Hart

Archaeology Contracts Office

Department of Archaeology
University of Cape Town
Private Bag
Rondebosch
7701

Phone (021) 650 2357

Fax (021) 650 2352

Email tjg@age.uct.ac.za

CONTENTS

1	Introduction.....	3
1.1	Conservation context	4
2	Background history of Murray’s Bay Harbour	4
3	Proposed work on the breakwater	5
3.1	Site inspection of the affected area.....	5
4	Anticipated impacts and mitigation.....	6
4.1	Railway removal.....	7
4.2	Removal and repositioning of armour blocks.....	7
4.3	Establishment of yard.....	7
4.4	Disturbance of the seabed	8
4.5	Change of sense of place/ambience.....	8
5	Murray Harbour – Extension of breakwaters and T Jetties.....	9
	Jetties.....	9
	Dredging.....	10
6	Legal issues	10
7	Conclusion.....	10

1 Introduction

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was commissioned by the Planning Partners to conduct an initial heritage impact assessment of Murray's Bay Harbour northern harbour wall and breakwater situated at Robben Island World Heritage site. Degeneration of the wall and breakwater will require extensive repairs to ensure its continued serviceability. The island as well as a zone of one nautical mile around it was declared a National Monument in terms of the old National Monuments Act of 1969 as amended, and is currently a declared World Heritage site.

According to the Robben Island Conservation and Use Plan (discussion document)¹ the harbour precinct (Figure 1) has particular significance, as this was the portal to the island and the prison since after WW2 through the apartheid period. Today, Murray's Bay Harbour has a greatly changed role providing berthing for the tourist and supply ferries that service the island. The symbolic and historical significance of the harbour area is inextricably linked with the built fabric of the place. Impacts to fabric can impact the intangible qualities – ambience and sense of place that are critical to maintaining authenticity and significance. Previous studies have commented how slow but cumulative impacts from unplanned and poorly conceived *ad hoc* changes can change the character of a place such as Murray's Bay Harbour over time. Yet a harbour by virtue of being a facility that has to hold up against the harshest conditions of sea and weather will require maintenance and is not an asset that can be "mothballed" like other structures on the island. The challenge is to carry out the necessary maintenance in a way that minimises impacts to the complex heritage that Robben Island represents.



¹ Le Grange, L, Baumann, N and Hart, T. 2000 Robben island conservation and use plan – discussion document. Prepared for Robben Island Museum.

1.1 Conservation context

The high conservation status of Robben Island is not purely based on unique aesthetic or environmental qualities, or age and rarity of the artefacts or buildings that exist there.

Robben Island's notorious history commenced even before the Cape was taken over by the Dutch East India Company with attempts to use the island as a place to maroon criminals. Because of its physical isolation it was an ideal place to banish people who resisted the status quo, or were undesirable on account of their physical health and mental status. It is considered to be a unique site on account of its history and its use as a place of punishment and isolation for more than 300 years. It symbolises the struggle of people over adversity within this country and the world at large, and is thus considered to be a place of international significance.

The person-made environment of Robben Island, is as one would expect of a prison island, humble and physically un-impressive, yet despite this, it represents in various forms almost every kind of activity that has taken place there. The conservation policy is essentially non-intervention. This means that even the unsightly and often environmentally undesirable aspects of the island are retained in full awareness that "sanitising" the island will destroy a heritage of misuse and environmental unconcern that characterised its past management. This is a matter that has been the subject of deep thought by the Island's Heritage and Environmental departments whose task is to achieve a balance between sound environmental practice and the conservation of *negative*² heritage. It is for this reason that every aspect of the Island's built environment (no matter its age and appearance) needs careful consideration before it is changed in any way.

2 Background history of Murray's Bay Harbour

According to Riley³ Murray's Bay Harbour was named after John Murray, a whale fisherman who had a concession in the area between 1806 and 1820. The area where the harbour is today was originally a sheltered bay and landing area. It was close to here that the Dutch East India Company established its first structures on the island (circa 1654) to be followed in later years by a permanent outpost and prison. For most of the early occupation of the island in the 17th and 18th centuries, "the landing place" as it was known, was the focus of settlement. At the beginning of the British occupation of the Cape John Murray used the abandoned Dutch East India Company buildings as a base for his whaling operation. During the 19th and early 20th centuries the bulk of human habitation became concentrated on the southeast end of the island where it was serviced by a series of jetties. The Faure Jetty built in 1896 survives to this day.

The impending threat of war led to Robben Island being reserved for military purposes in 1936 and plans were put in place to fortify the island. These measures eventually included construction of an airstrip, pill boxes, machine gun posts, the mounting of three 9.2 inch (Robben Island Battery) and two 6 inch (Cornelia Battery) coastal artillery pieces, as well as an anti-aircraft battery. Supporting infrastructure included underground bunkers and magazines, an underground power station, observation

² Term borrowed from Prof L. Meskell to describe heritage that is important in that it represents wrong doings or negative aspects of the past.

³ Riley, P. 1993 Robben Island Conservation Survey. Unpublished report, National Monuments Council.

posts, command posts and barracks. The construction and maintenance of these defences required the building of a harbour and upgrading of the island transport system.

Construction of the Murray Bay harbour commenced in 1940.⁴ This involved a substantial reclamation of a large portion of Murray Bay, and the building of two breakwaters to create a sheltered harbour, the basis of that which exists today. It is highly probable that the extensive construction work that took place during WW2 resulted in the destruction of much of the early archaeology of Murray's Bay.

The harbour saw further development in 1956-1957 after the war with the establishment of a small naval base (SAS Robben Island). According to Riley, further changes were made between 1987-1889, however there are likely to have been various other undocumented changes made while the harbour serviced the Department of Prisons during the apartheid era. Dates scratched in the cement of the existing armour blocks indicate extensive repairs took place in 1981.

During the apartheid period, prison labour was used to cast the concrete blocks at a work area that was situated close to the rubbish dump.⁵ The prisoners who were responsible for this task were known as the "*blok span*".⁶

3 Proposed work on the breakwater

Severe degeneration of the fabric of the northern breakwater has necessitated virtual rebuilding. The existing armour blocks (made on the island) are of inferior quality and not reinforced. Many have cracked and others have been shifted from their original positions by wave action. In addition to extensive reconstruction, new armour blocks will be placed along the exterior of the breakwater, while older ones which are still useable will be repositioned along the inside of the breakwater.



3.1 Site inspection of the affected area

The area was visited in order to make an assessment of possible impacts to heritage. The following observations were made.

The northern breakwater is constructed from rubble fill, square concrete wave breakers and capped with concrete. The landward section of the breakwater still contains the remains of a "cape gauge" railway, fishplates and hard wood sleepers (Figure 3). This has been badly eroded on the breakwater and is unlikely to survive for many more years unless intervention takes place. The railway continues inland in an easterly direction into thick bush close to the penguin colony walkway. The railway line was

⁴ Deacon, H, eds. The island. A history of Robben Island 1488-1990.

⁵ Halkett, D.J. pers comm. Casting area identified during archaeological examination of rubbish dump.

⁶ Deacon, H. Pers comm.

used by cranes working alongside the quays and may have been more extensive during the war years to assist with transportation of building materials.

An initial inspection of the existing concrete armour blocks has revealed several construction phases. The earliest identified phase is signified by the date of 1941 engraved on many of the older blocks (Figure 3). Newer blocks of similar size cast on the island signify a more recent phase. Many of these bear the date 1981. Graffiti scratched into the blocks before they cured bears peoples' names, and various comments, some of which are political in character (Figure 4).



Other aspects of the harbour precinct, which are physically close to proposed construction area, are the old Royal Cape Yacht camping facilities. This consists of an ablution block, barbecue facilities, a vibracrete wall enclosure and alien trees (Figure 5).

Little by way of artefactual material was noted; however a steel gate (possibly originating from the high security prison) lies in the open close to a pile of disused armour blocks (Figure 6)



4 Anticipated impacts and mitigation

The implications of the proposed work are that much of the original fabric of the breakwater will be impacted by the envisaged action. Specific impacts are listed below and summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

4.1 Railway removal

Removal of the railway on the landward end of the breakwater will result in the destruction fabric dating to the WW2 period at the harbour and the disturbance of the only visible remaining section of railway on the island.

Mitigation:

- Casting a section of track into the concrete surface of the breakwater will help acknowledge past events, and to some extent also alleviate the condition of the existing track, which is eroding and badly corroded.

4.2 Removal and repositioning of armour blocks

The required repairs will necessitate the removal and repositioning of existing armour blocks (many with engraving). Broken armour blocks will be used as fill material. This will result in the loss of original fabric (1941) and will potentially result in the loss of engraved armour blocks made by Robben Island prisoners during the apartheid era.

Mitigation:

- Before construction work begins the inscriptions on the armour blocks must be photographically recorded (digital and analogue), and the words transcribed in a documentary record.
- Engraved armour blocks to be set aside for conservation and possible display must be identified and marked for careful removal (to be stockpiled within the harbour precinct at the convenience of RIM).
- A programme should be established in collaboration with the museum to identify and collect the oral testimonies of ex-prisoners who worked on the “blok span”.

4.3 Establishment of yard

The establishment of a construction yard on the flat land adjacent to the harbour is unlikely to have any permanent physical impacts as this area has been traditionally used as a staging point for various construction activities on the island. There will be naturally increased local noise levels and visual impacts of a temporary nature.

Mitigation:

- Activities associated with the yard must not impact on any of the structures associated with the yacht club.
- The steel gate, which has been abandoned in the area must be retrieved and handed over to the Museum Heritage Department.

- The yard and working area must be clearly demarcated to minimise encroaching on the bus stops and tourist areas.

4.4 Disturbance of the seabed

There is a possibility that maritime artefacts and other objects thrown into the harbour will be inundated. There are unconfirmed reports that the barrels of two 6-inch breech loading naval guns from the Cornelia Battery were disposed of in or near the harbour. Retrieval of these will be a positive outcome.

Mitigation

- The seabed adjacent to the breakwater needs to be subject to a survey by maritime archaeologists before construction work begins. Any objects or materials must be collected and passed on the Heritage Department for curation.
- The gun barrels, if located will have to be raised with the assistance of a crane capable of lifting up to 16 metric tons.

4.5 Change of sense of place/ambience

Heavier modern armour blocks will be used to reinforce the exterior of the breakwater. This has the potential to alter the look of the place. It must be acknowledged that the harbour is a working facility that must continue to function to serve the island. For safety reasons and the well being of the island it is important that the best contemporary materials be used to achieve this. The breakwater has seen several phases of change and maintenance since its construction, and while the harbour remains in active use, this will continue to be the case. Moderate changes to the look of the breakwater are impacts that are both necessary and inevitable.

Mitigation

- If at all possible, it would be desirable to try and retain the appearance breakwater by ensuring that the new armour blocks do not extend excessively higher than those in place at present. However, this must not be done at the expense of structural integrity/safety.

Table 1 Duration, intensity and probability of impacts

Action	Extent	Duration	Intensity	Probability
Removal of railway	Local	Permanent	Medium	Certain
Removal of armour blocks	Local	Permanent	Medium	Certain
Establishment of yard	Local	Temporary	Low	Certain
Disturbance of seabed	Local	Permanent	Low	Probable
Change of sense of place/ambience	Local	Permanent	Low	Probable

Table 2 Significance and mitigation of impacts

Action	Significance	Without mitigation	With mitigation	Mitigation	Confidence
Removal of railway	Medium	Negative	Neutral - positive	Re-establish section of track	High
Removal of armour blocks	Medium	Negative	Positive	Conserve engraved blocks, photograph, record oral testimonies	High
Establishment of yard	Low	Negative (short term only)	N/a	Secure yard with barrier, avoid yacht club area	High
Disturbance of seabed	Low	Negative	Positive	Maritime archaeological dive survey, rescue of objects	Medium
Change of sense of place/ambience	Low	Negative	Neutral	Make changes as low key as possible without compromising structural integrity/safety	Medium

5 Murray Harbour – Extension of breakwaters and T Jetties

There is not doubt that Murray Bay Harbour is an important place in that it was the point at which prisoners arrived at and left the island. At the same time, it is an essential service area that needs to be maintained and kept safe. Furthermore, the popularity of the island as a tourist destination has placed a demand on the harbour in excess of that for which it is intended – namely frequent ferry arrivals and departures, disembarkation of civilians (including disabled) who are not necessarily accustomed to sea travel.

Jetties

Construction of the jetties to facilitate safe embarkation of passengers is a necessity, yet their presence, more than extension of the breakwaters, will contribute more heavily to the sense of change to the harbour area, as it is the passenger landing area that is symbolically one of the most significant on the island. It is requested that the following considerations be taken into account:

- What must be avoided at all costs is to create a “mini-waterfront” or pleasure boat basin look as this will serious erode, the somewhat utilitarian and sombre qualities that are the essence of Murray Bay Harbour.

- Even the erection of brightly coloured shade awnings, no matter how impermanent they may be, will have a major impact on the character of the place.
- Tourists will make demands for “more comfort”, however, the symbolic meaning of Robben Island must underlie any decisions to change the place. It must be remembered at all times that Robben Island is a Museum and authenticity is paramount in terms of maintaining its meaning.

Dredging

Items relating to WW2 and the prison period may have been disposed of in the harbour. An archaeologist and/or RIM staff should be on hand to inspect the tailings if the engineering method used allows.

6 Legal issues

Robben Island’s status as a National Monument has been downgraded to that of a Provincial Heritage Site as a result of the technical requirements of the implementation of the new National Heritage Resources Act of 1999. The onus is on sites previously declared National Monuments to re-apply for grade 1 status as National Heritage Sites. In the case of Robben Island, the upgrade application has not yet been finalised which means that Robben Island is governed by the “not yet established” Provincial Heritage Resources Agency. It is important to note that while the island remains a protected site, no permits can be officially granted to make any changes or alterations to any part of the Island until such time that the Island re-achieves National Heritage Site status and/or the Provincial Heritage Authority is established by local government. The current legislative impasse may result in delays to obtaining official permits to alter the breakwater. Ways round this problem will have to be explored with SAHRA.

7 Conclusion

Both breakwaters at Murray’s Bay Harbour are an element of the harbour precinct that have important symbolic value in terms of this history of the Island. Yet the breakwater, the railway line and the engraved blocks are finite and their ultimate destiny is to corrode, crack and become washed away by the Atlantic storms. The harbour itself is not only a heritage site but also a working place that services the needs of the island on a daily basis. It needs to be maintained at fairly frequent intervals to remain serviceable.

It is inappropriate to suggest that non-intervention policy be applied, as the breakwater has no functional future without maintenance, and the heritage it does represent, will in time fall victim to natural forces. This report supports applications put forward to SAHRA to make the necessary repairs, provided this is done sensitively and takes into the consideration mitigation measures proposed in this report and any others that may be required by the Robben Island Museum.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Shaun Davis (RIM) and Harriet Deacon (consulting historian to RIM) for their comments.



This image displayed on the wall of the quay at Murray's Bay harbour shows, besides the prisoners, a railway set into the surface (no longer existing) as well as a railway mounted steam crane in the left background.