

## Robben Island (South Africa)

No 916

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Robben Island
<i>Location</i>	Western Cape Province
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of South Africa
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

### Justification by State Party

*Robben Island – from incarceration to liberation, from the punishment of the body to the freedom of the spirit.*

Robben Island has a well documented history that dates back to 1488 according to written sources, although occupancy by early Stone Age inhabitants may well be possible, owing to the early link with the South African mainland. This is to be confirmed by archaeological excavation.

The physical remains of the long history of banishment, imprisonment, and human suffering are well documented and are visible through the memories of both residents who are still living as well as in written and graphic sources. The structures on Robben Island date from the earliest occupation by the Dutch colonists, the English occupation with its churches and institutions built to house lepers and the mentally ill, as well as the military installations of World War II, and finally the structures associated with the more recent occupancy by the prison. These structures represent a period of unbroken human habitation from the second half of the 17th century to the present day.

These buildings and structures represent evidence of a society that played a significant role in the development of the southern African region and its links to the “civilized” worlds of Europe and the east. This society has long since disappeared and the remnants on Robben Island, being typical examples of their time, are the only remaining examples still in existence. The more recent buildings are unique in that they represent a time in history that has gained universal symbolism while the residents (the former political prisoners) are still alive. The closeness of this history makes Robben Island and its associated prison structures unique in this international context.

#### Criterion iii

Robben Island is of universal value for the following reasons. “Robben Island is a vital part of South Africa’s collective heritage. How do we reflect the fact that the people of South Africa as a whole, together with the international community, turned one of the world’s most notorious symbols of the resistance of oppression into a world-wide

icon of the universality of human rights, of hope, peace, and reconciliation?” (President Nelson Mandela, Heritage Day, 24 September 1997, Robben Island).

Robben Island has come to represent an outstanding example of a symbol representing the physical embodiment of the triumph of the human spirit over enormous adversity and hardship. The role of Robben Island in the transformation of an oppressed society has come to symbolize the rebirth of democracy in South Africa, a country which has come to be viewed as a unique example of transformation in a world troubled by political uncertainty.

#### Criterion vi

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

### History and Description

#### History

It is possible that Robben Island (often known simply as “The Island”) was occupied by humans before the arrival of the Europeans, since it is the summit of a submerged mountain, linked by an undersea saddle to the coast of Table Bay.

The Cape Peninsula, with Robben Island, fell halfway on sea voyages between Europe and the Orient. The first Europeans to land there were probably members of Vasco de Gama’s fleet, who stopped there in 1498 in search of shelter and supplies. They were followed by a growing number of European ships in the next two centuries, since it offered food, drinkable water, and security from attack by the indigenous people of the Cape.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) first became aware of the potential of the Cape of Good Hope in the mid 17th century, and in 1657 Jan van Riebeeck set up a colony there, formed of VOC officials and free burghers. They were joined in 1688 by French Huguenots following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV. The colonists began a vigorous policy of enslavement of the indigenous peoples and brought them there from other parts of Africa; the population was also augmented with Muslims deported from the East Indies and elsewhere in the Orient.

The potential of Robben Island as a prison was quickly realized by van Riebeeck. First, slaves and prisoners of war were sent there, to cut stone and burn seashells for lime for building the settlement of Cape Town, and they were joined later by others – convicted VOC soldiers and sailors, disaffected Khoisan indigenous people from the mainland, and political and religious (Moslem) leaders from the East Indies.

When the Cape was captured by the British from the Dutch in 1795 and again in 1806, they continued to use the Island as a prison, for military prisoners (mostly white), political prisoners, and criminals (mostly black). A tenth of the prisoners were women, but they were transferred in 1835 to a Cape Town prison. The Island prison was closed in 1846 and a General Infirmary was established, to receive chronically sick, insane, and lepers and relieve pressure on mainland hospitals. (However, the Island was still used on occasion by

the British as a secure place of exile for important political prisoners.) The management of the General Infirmary and the care it provided for its patients (who were racially segregated from the 1860s) were of a low order, and the establishment on the mainland of specialized hospitals for the mentally disturbed and the chronically sick, catering for middle-class patients, resulted in Robben Island becoming the main leper colony in the Cape, with over a thousand inmates. This was finally to close in 1931.

Plans to turn the Island into a holiday resort foundered with the approach of World War II, and it was declared to be “reserved for military purposes” in 1936. It became the first point of defence against an attack on Table Bay, equipped with harbour facilities and heavy coastal artillery. After the war it continued in use for training, and in 1951 was taken over by the South African Marine Corps and then the South African Navy.

In 1959 the Island was claimed by the Prisons Department as a maximum security prison for political prisoners sentenced by the Apartheid regime, as well as ordinary criminals, all of them black. The first criminals landed there in 1961, and in the next year they were followed by the first political prisoners. Many were to be sent there in the years that followed, mostly leaders of the African National Congress and Pan African Congress; the most celebrated of the prisoners on Robben Island was Nelson Mandela, who was incarcerated there for some twenty years. During the 1960s and early 1970s the isolation of the Island and the notoriously cruel regime of its staff made it the most feared prison in South Africa. The last political prisoners left the island in 1991 and the prison closed down finally in 1996, and since that time it has been developed as a museum.

#### *Description*

Robben Island is a low-lying rocky outcrop covering 475ha and situated 9.3km north of the mainland. It has a Mediterranean climate, and is exposed to violent winter gales and tides that make its northern and western sides virtually uninhabitable. There is, not surprisingly, a number of historic shipwrecks along this inhospitable coast.

Settlement has concentrated on the southern and eastern coasts of the island. It is characterized by discontinuity, resulting from its episodic history. A determining factor has been the lack of drinking water; that from boreholes is brackish and so rainwater has been collected for drinking.

The earliest features of human occupation are the abandoned quarries for slate (on the south of the island) and limestone (in the centre), which date from the mid 17th century. Limestone is still quarried occasionally for road metalling on the island. No remains survive of the groups of buildings erected in the late 1600s at the northern end of the island, known only from contemporary drawings.

In 1806-8 a new settlement was built at the southern end of the island to accommodate the British prison. This is the nucleus of the existing administrative area, known as “The Village,” which houses the Museum with offices, meeting rooms, community facilities, shop, etc. Some of the buildings, such as the clubhouse (formerly the Medical Superintendent’s House) of 1840 and the former Anglican parsonage (1846), have retained some good contemporary detailing inside and outside. The Anglican Church, built with convict labour in 1841, is an early example of Cape Gothic style, plastered and painted white on the exterior. It has a

plain interior with a balcony of teak, which was also used for the altar, pulpit, pews, and roof structure.

The small lighthouse on Minto’s Hill in the southern part of the island was built in 1864. It is an 18m high round-section masonry tower with a fine cast-iron circular staircase linking the internal floors and the lantern.

Between the village and the harbour slightly to the north known as Murray’s Bay there is the small Church of the Good Shepherd (generally known as the Lepers Church), built by the lepers themselves in 1895 to the designs of the distinguished architect Sir Herbert Baker. It is all that remains of the male leper hospital demolished in 1931. It is at present not in use but there are plans to carry out urgent repair work and reconsecrate it for services. Surrounding it are leper graves, now half hidden in the grass.

The present harbour at Murray’s Bay was built during World War II, along with extensive fortifications and other military structures, including gun emplacements, underground magazines, observation towers, barracks, and coastal batteries. The military structures here, like those in other parts of the island, are now derelict, as is the airstrip in the centre of the island.

Just to the north of the maximum security prison is the Kramat, a monument built in 1967 on the site where Hadjie Mattarm, a Muslim holy man exiled by the VOC from the East Indies to Robben Island in 1744, was buried. He died in 1755 and his tomb became a place of pilgrimage for the Muslim community of the Cape. It is a simple domed building built in slate from the island.

Construction of the maximum security prison of the Apartheid period began in the 1960s. The buildings are stark and functional, constructed of stone from the island. Outside the main enclosure there are service, storage, and reception buildings.

### **Management and Protection**

#### *Legal status*

The Island is a national monument as defined in the National Monuments Act (No 28 of 1969). Interventions of any kind on national monuments require authorization by the National Monuments Council.

The Cultural Institutions Act (No 29 of 1969) establishes the criteria by which such institutions are created and managed. Robben Island is a declared cultural institution under this statute.

Under the terms of the Environmental Conservation Act (No 73 of 1989), certain infrastructural activities and changes in land use on the island require environmental impact assessments to be carried out.

#### *Management*

The entire Island and all the properties on it are state property, with the exception of the Church of the Good Shepherd and a small area round it, which belongs to the Church of the Province of South Africa. The state also owns a buffer zone consisting of the waters 1 nautical mile around the Island.

The Robben Island Council, established under the provisions of the Cultural Institutions Act, consists of eighteen people

appointed by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology; half the members are former political prisoners and half specialists with relevant expertise. It is responsible for policy development and financial issues.

On-site management and conservation are delegated to the Director of the Robben Island Museum. The future development of the Island will be in accordance with the development framework laid out in the Cabinet recommendations of 4 September 1996. This provided for the Island to be “run as a site museum, where the total environment is preserved in an integrated way, in line with modern international conservation approaches ... and the ex-political prison be converted into a Museum of the Freedom Struggle in South Africa.” The Council was required “to initiate a systematic and broadly participative planning process, facilitated by a suitably qualified agency, for the long-term development and multi-purpose use of Robben Island.”

The Island is managed according to a Property Management Agreement between the Museum, the National Monuments Council, and the Department of Public Works. It sets out detailed maintenance schedules relating to the man-made heritage and the natural environment.

An integrated environmental management approach, including an environmental policy, environmental management plan, and environmental management systems, is currently being developed, with the aid of a grant from the Government of Norway. It is to be developed in a series of phases; the first phase, completion of the draft system, is now in place and the entire process will be completed by the end of 2000.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

Systematic conservation of the Island as an element of cultural heritage has only begun during the present decade. Before that time, structures were dismantled or allowed to decay into ruins as successive phases in the use of the Island came to an end. Now that it has become a museum, systematic conservation will be implemented under the agreements and plans listed in the preceding section.

### *Authenticity*

Precisely because it has followed an historical trajectory that has involved several changes of use without conscious conservation efforts directed at preservation, the authenticity of the Island is total.

## **Evaluation**

### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Robben Island in February 1999.

### *Qualities*

The symbolic value of Robben Island lies in its sombre history, as a prison and a hospital for unfortunates who were sequestered as being socially undesirable. This came to an end in the 1990s when the inhumane Apartheid regime was rejected by the South African people and the political

prisoners who had been incarcerated on the Island received their freedom after many years.

### *Comparative analysis*

It is difficult to find an exact parallel for Robben Island among the penitentiary islands of the period of European colonization. Norfolk Island off the coast of Australia was used for criminals transported from Britain in the 19th century, and Devil’s Island off the coast of French Guyana served a similar purpose, whilst the island of Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay is the archetypal convict island, but none of these filled the political role of Robben Island under Dutch and British colonial rule, and in particular in the later 20th century (the imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus on Devil’s Island was an isolated political act). The early history of St Helena as a stop-off point for ships travelling between Europe and the Orient paralleled that of the Island, but it was only once used to house a political prisoner, albeit one of the most illustrious.

### *ICOMOS comments*

The ICOMOS mission report commented on the state of conservation of certain structures that were referred to only summarily in the nomination dossier.

The Old Jail, which is one of the most important landmarks in the recent history of Robben Island, known to the prisoners as the “hell hole,” is scarcely mentioned in the dossier. It appears to have been completely neglected and is an a dilapidated state.

In the New Jail, the A and C Sections are both in a very bad state of repair, with badly cracked walls, collapsing ceilings, and corroded metalwork. This is accordance with the stated policy of maintaining “the exact state as it was found when transfer from the Department of Correctional Services to the newly established Robben Island Museum took place.” The intended “air of abandonment and hopelessness” has without doubt been achieved, but without some conservation interventions the decay can only continue, with the result that the entire structures will eventually collapse.

So far as the B Section, where the leading political prisoners were confined, is concerned, it is stated that it “should be presented as it was during the height of its occupation by South Africa’s most famous political prisoners.” It is arguable that this is in fact not the case, since certain changes made after the departure of the political prisoners, such as repainting in colour of walls originally in “prison grey.” It is understood that this section was originally U-shaped in plan, but sections of the walls have been blocked, giving a different appearance.

## **Brief description**

Robben Island was used at various times between the 17th century and the 20th century as a prison, a hospital for socially unacceptable groups, and a military base. Its buildings, and in particular those of the late 20th century maximum security prison for political prisoners, testify to the way in which democracy and freedom triumphed over oppression and racialism.

**Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and vi*:

*Criterion iii* The buildings of Robben Island bear eloquent testimony to its sombre history.

*Criterion vi* Robben Island and its prison buildings symbolize the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom, and of democracy over oppression.

ICOMOS, September 1999