

Visual Redress and Transformation at Stellenbosch University

Abstract

The student protests of 2015-2016 at universities across South Africa foregrounded the need for the transformation, decoloniality, and Africanisation of the country's higher education institutions. As laid out in the Transformation Plan, transformation at Stellenbosch University is viewed as systemic transformation. This means that all aspects of university life are involved in this process – including curriculum, space, and people – and that these aspects also influence the transformation of society. In this way, “Transformation is therefore described as transformation of the University and transformation through the University” (Stellenbosch University Transformation Plan, 2019: 3). Transformation is strongly concerned with inclusivity and visual symbolism. Inclusivity in regard to place “refers to social inclusion and changes in both the physical spaces and the foundational institutional culture that facilitate a sense of belong in among students and staff” (Stellenbosch University Transformation Plan, 2019: 4) – it is material and semiotic. Visual symbolism is the intangible (feelings, meaning, etc.) held by the physical (design, buildings, signage, statues, etc.). These are important issues to consider not only regarding Stellenbosch University's exclusionary past but also in the context of South Africa, where many visual symbols to apartheid, colonialism, and exclusion remain.

One of the ways that Stellenbosch University has endeavoured to address these issues is with the Visual Redress Project, whose aim is to change the visual landscape of the university's main campus. This project, in alignment with the Visual Redress Policy (2021), is focused on the removal or contextualisation of sensitive artwork or symbols, the introduction of new visual symbols with African centrality as an outcome, updating campus signage, the naming and renaming of buildings or other spaces, and other such initiatives that create a more inclusive, comfortable, and welcoming environment for all. The objective of this project was to investigate the perceptions of students, staff, and lecturers to the various Visual Redress Projects undertaken on campus (notably the installation of a number of new artworks such as the Women's Circle, Welcome Benches, Die Vlakte map, and Preamble sculpture). The project was interested in understanding the correlation between the transformation of space and its perceived influence on learning and teaching. The project contributed to the discourse around the transformation of higher education in South Africa through a look into the ways that exclusion and injustice are found within Stellenbosch University's visual landscape and how inclusivity could be achieved through the redressing of this landscape. It not only provided insight into Stellenbosch University's Visual Redress transformation efforts and their effect on learning and teaching, but also provided information that can inform future redress initiatives on campuses locally and globally.

References

Stellenbosch University. [n.d.]. Visual Redress. Available: <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/visual-redress> [Accessed 11 June 2021].

Stellenbosch University. [2019]. Stellenbosch University Transformation Plan. Available: [http://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/Documents/TTransformation%20Plan%20\(Update%20May%202019\).pdf](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/Documents/TTransformation%20Plan%20(Update%20May%202019).pdf) [Accessed 10 November 2021]