

Reflection

Research Report

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Project Wesfort; the challenge of Wesfort

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Research and design

The research accompanying the design is about health environments and was chosen since the project's location was designed as a healing environment. To place Wesfort as a healing environment in a historical context, the subject of the design was broadened by explaining all kinds of health environments, which include both healing and healthy environments. The aim was to answer the question how the health environments of the nineteenth century were fed in terms of economical, technological, political and social parameters.

Due to increasing bad living conditions in the industrialized cities –that were only built to enhance industrial progress- city planners, tycoons and governments started to react. With different intentions the reactors all had in common that they wanted to increase the quality of life, for the benefit of others and themselves. Designing small scale cities and villages, the reactors allowed its citizens to have vegetable gardens, open space and good ventilation in order to enhance the community feeling and the productivity. A famous city planner envisaging a new city in which people can afford to live and work in a green environment was Ebenezer Howard. His Garden City concept did not negate technological progress in order to restore an 'ideal' traditional way of living. On the contrary, instead of separating city and countryside, the qualities of both were merged into a place that reconciles the past with the present.

Wesfort fits this late nineteenth century development since it is a healing environment that enhances both the healing process and the community feeling. Therefore one of the values of Wesfort is the continuation of the landscape that not only tells the story of contributing to the healing process but also to the feeling of living in a community.

The conclusion, which is only a start for the design process, is that Wesfort –and other health environments- have a strong connection with the surrounding, whether it is the country-side or the city. The paradox of both a proximity to and distance from the city makes Wesfort complex and interesting. For the design this paradox became a starting point; a program was chosen that fits both the countryside and urban feeling.

Openness, ventilation and lightness

The second and greatest stage of Wesfort was constituted by both the changing politics and discourse and the (sudden) increase in number of patients located in the leper colony. In 1914 all leper patients from Free State and Transvaal were transferred to Wesfort. This was an increase of 154% patients compared to the situation in 1902. In 1931 the leper colony of Robben Island closed and all patients were transferred to Wesfort. It meant an extra increase of 138%. From now on Wesfort would be the only leper colony in the Union of South Africa (and later in the Republic of South Africa) housing 2000 patients in 1931 (Horwitz, 2006) (image 1).

The sudden increase marks an era in Wesfort that is characterized by functionality. Although it was already present in the Wesfort of Wierda, from the 30s onwards on an urban scale efficiency and effectivity became more present without disregarding the atmosphere of a community. Ventilation, light and shadow and clear floorplans make the buildings fit a hospital. The transition from the dark and cool interior to the bright and hot exterior is gradual. The veranda acts as a mediator, acting both as outside and inside. Windows and doors can be opened making the veranda an extension of the interior.

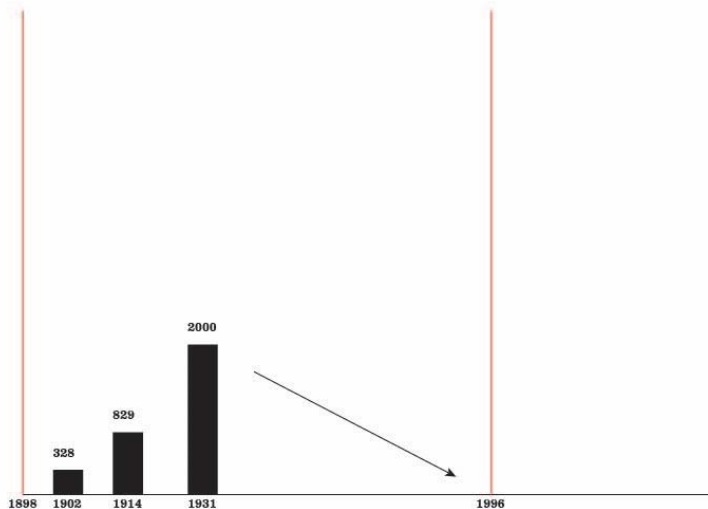


Image 1: Number of inhabitants in Wesfort. Between the opening of the leper colony in 1898 and 1902 (end of the Anglo-Boer war) the number of patients grew to 328. Then the number grew very fast due to the transfer of patients from other colonies (in 1914 and 1931). In a short period of time Wesfort's population was six fold. After 1947 the number of patients decreased until the leper colony closed in 1996. Wesfort turned into an informal settlement. People now live inside the former colony buildings. Around 2015 the number of inhabitants was estimated 5000. Source: according to (Horwitz, 2006)

These buildings capture the essence of one of the most important stages of Wesfort as a health environment. After the closure of Wesfort an informal settlement started to arise. People reused the existing buildings and landscape, only adding their own program and needs.

The theme of the graduation studio is about valuing heritage that is connected to the Netherlands. More specific, the studio tries to document a site that has been neglected by authorities and is being threatened. An urban sprawl approaching from all directions except the north surround Wesfort. The contrast cannot be any bigger. The location chosen for the graduation project (and explained above) encapsulate all stages of Wesfort's development. The location proved in can house the different stages. Almost nothing has been demolished; instead almost everything was reused or slightly adapted to new circumstances. The studio tries to find the possibilities of a heritage site, more specific it tries to continue the resilience that is present in the heritage.

Method

This graduation studio is dealing with heritage and the valuing of the existing built environment. One way of approaching heritage is with the use of the themes design, culture and technology. To be analysed separately, the themes are constant interconnected with each other, influencing each other in order to find a route that allows the designer to react on the heritage that is present. It is research by design.

Another way of approaching the valuing of heritage is by dissect the material, form and structure of a building, decompose it into the essential parts of the building's significance, history, use and place. Again the parts cannot be seen separately. Altogether they form a frame that makes us able to value the building. Remarkable things and unique elements submerge.

Since Wesfort has been neglected, since the site is located on the other side of the world and since Wesfort consists of many layers, the importance of understanding the place is present. During the design and research process several routes have been taken which together form the research by design approach. Understanding Wesfort is done by making several scenarios for the place, allowing the site to be approached from different directions. Gradually the essence and importance of the place is being formed making it easier to justify an intervention. Perhaps it can be stated that the capability of Wesfort to be intervened is a quality and value that allows many forms of program (from different students) to take place.

Since the research allowed it to focus on a particular element of the project's location a line of approach was set. With different scenarios the essence of Wesfort –as valued with the help of the research's results- was being emphasized.

One of the major characteristics of Wesfort is the informality, this essence should be part of the journey –not the result per se. These contradictions, the formal layout of a health environment and the informal use nowadays, makes the approaching difficult. From any angle Wesfort can be valued and continued. However, as it appeared in the design process, the ability of a site to be approached from many directions makes it valuable and special.

Wesfort was named after the nearby fort. And like a fort the site is difficult to capture. It does not mean the future of Wesfort is uncertain, it means once captured Wesfort can be a stronghold for its surrounding, capable of adding value.

Wider social context

Wesfort was built during the time of the Boer Republic. Dutch architects and engineers were asked to build a nation that could compete with the rest of the world; the discovery of gold and diamonds made this possible. The wealth underground was expressed in the architecture on the surface. Buildings inspired by the neo-Renaissance architecture in the Netherlands created a unique architecture in South-Africa; Wilhelmiens. Today, the function of Wesfort has changed. An informal community houses the old buildings of the former leper colony. But even today the connection between the Netherlands and the site is present. In collaboration with the *Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed* the site is being rediscovered. Due to the project the importance of the site is being mapped in the form of design proposals that continue and therefore underline the values of the site.

Not only the city of Tshwane but all of South Africa is focussing part of its economy of the services. Services are about social interaction, about providing people their needs. More specific, in Pretoria the services are mainly formed by the presence of the government and its executive branch. In the trias politica it is the part that executes the program designed by the government (and controlled by the legislative and juridical powers).

As one of the three capitals Pretoria can give an example of showing the importance of serving. Another economic branch that is growing in South Africa is tourism. Again it is about social interaction and hospitality. This is one of the reasons of adding the program of a school for hospitality to Wesfort. It also fits the old program which was about taking care for patients. This time the patients will be guests, tourists and businessmen. The school allows people from Lotus Garden and Wesfort to contribute to the South African economy. The aim is to make Wesfort a satellite again, contributing to the South African economy and progress, while continuing the uniqueness of the site.

Horwitz, S. (2006). Leprosy in South Africa: A Case Study of Wesfort Leper Institution, 1898-1948. *African Studies*, 65(2).