

Graduation Plan

Master of Science, Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences

Westfort; Reliving the Rediscovered



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Studio

Studio Westfort Heritage and Architecture “The challenge of
Westfort, continuing a Shared Built Heritage”

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Position and motivation

'Onze waarneming is beperkt, ons verstand is zeer beperkt, ons hele kunnen is beperkt, maar onze wil: daar is geen grens aan'. - René Gude

It requires good self-knowledge to be able to justify why I made the choices I made. To attempt to answer this question, it's necessary to place it within a broader context. This includes the experiences and events from my past; the sources of my present views. The fascination for the existing and the dialogue with the contemporary is caused by the endless confrontations with history I had in my youth. What you do repeatedly often leads to some kind of appreciation. The choice for Heritage & Architecture was therefore a logical step.

During my years in Delft I realized that dealing with the existing isn't always an obvious task. This is partly due to the different views on heritage. In some cases this, unfortunately, leads to a careless approach on our valuable history. Only when a building or cityscape reaches a monumental status, it's secured. But when this is not the case, the value of the more 'ordinary' building (structures) can be underestimated. This happened in the redevelopment of the station area in Delft, where a large number of 19th century buildings were demolished. These buildings were not part of the 'conservation area' of Delft. This intervention totally changed the charming character of the arrival area by train.

Maintaining the existing in conjunction with new developments is not something new. It has been done for thousands of years. The challenge of modern societies, with the increasing population, is to maintain balance between new developments and existing structures. The increasing complexity of our environment, as a result of the added layers in time, requires a secure approach. It's impossible to preserve everything we inherit, and in order to survive, change is inevitable. I long for an

environment in which architecture, new and historic, are synchronized with each other without losing their own character.

On the other hand it's of general interest that our history is seen as fertile ground for the future. People have always tended to identify with a certain place. In order to create a bond with your environment, you will have to return to that place more often. This will be impossible if an environment is changing too dramatically and too fast. It creates a distance between the user and the environment; one is a spectator rather than a volatile part of the living environment. The will to change is always present, it's a human drive. But it has to be in balance with a critical mind, and we have to be aware of the fact that we don't always have to reinvent the wheel. Learn and appreciate what has already been done and add value through change if needed; the newest layer.

The challenge

'The future of Westfort will be a constant search for a symbiosis between renewal and conservation. What is lost will slowly lose meaning, but to remain relevant, the gates will have to allow change in'.

The former leprosarium Westfort is situated on the western outskirts of Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa. The areas adjacent to Westfort are mostly concatenated residential areas with a moderate range of varied services. Westfort itself is an open oasis within these urban condensations. The village is built on the Witwatersberg ridge and forms the interface between the natural boundary and the urban environment.

Historically Westfort was separated from the urban environment. This was done deliberately as leprosy in that period was a contagious disease and those affected were often ostracized from society. The first layout of the village was built in a year (1898) that the young republic (ZAR) led by president Paul Kruger was seeking for independency and identity, as a movement against the growing British Empire. This resulted in an infinite number of public buildings built in a short period of time, including Westfort. Head of the Department of Public Works was Sytze Wierda, who was born and trained as an engineer in the Netherlands. Westfort functioned as a self-sufficient village, in which the living units were alternated with communal buildings such as churches, hospitals, shops and so on. It was an isolated spot, tightly secured and separated from the outside world. Those who ended up in Westfort most likely stayed there for the rest of their lives. The village continued to serve as leprosy hospital until it was closed down in 1997. After the closure a community formed itself in the historic buildings, which currently consists of 4000 people.

In the previous decades, the area around Westfort has transformed from a rural to an urban area, and it will continue to do so. What does this mean for the future of Westfort? When we compare the original design and purpose of Westfort with the current situation there are parallels, but differences too. New developments are being draped across the historic landscape like a quilt. Some places have left the old character of the village almost intact, on the other hand a major part has changed in the recent decades. The former unambiguous character has been replaced by individual preferences and lead to some extent to fragmentation of the village. Despite the fact that Westfort receives automatic protection from the South African National Heritage Resources Act (buildings and structures over 60 years), the question remains how this will work in practice. The deterioration of the area will continue if no change happens quickly. The unique location, design, and history of Westfort can be a nutritious source for future developments and is worth remembering and continuing.

The main challenge for a worthy and sustainable future of Westfort and its surroundings is to find a balanced vision, taking into account the needs and possibilities of the current situation (community, meaning of the area within the city etc.), in co-operation with the existing and including its history. The solution is probably not searching for the best approach to conservation but rather ensuring that the use and function of the area has a sustained and lasting character, making the continued existence of Westfort evident.

Research questions

'In what way does the architecture at the time of the ZAR compare to the 19th century contemporary architectural developments in the Netherlands?'

- What social developments characterized the 19th century in the Netherlands?
- In what way has this influenced the development of architecture?
- In what extent does this relate to the architecture of Westfort?

Design assignment

As already mentioned, Westfort should be placed within a broader framework. An integral use has to be found where different elements of society are represented; to create a scenario where the current use of Westfort and the meaning of Westfort on a larger scale form an interaction with the existing built structures.

Within Westfort there are plenty of local initiatives to be found that reflect the needs of the area. It's morally unacceptable to completely ignore the current inhabitants. The conceptual framework, from which action should be taken, should be based on the interests of various parties with the locals, being the biggest source of inspiration and executive power, as the constant factor.

A fitting durable use of Westfort is, in my opinion, one that connects to the problems concerning orphans; supporting the most vulnerable part of the population from an early stage and assisting in further development.

'West Fort as an integrated center for the care and development of (vulnerable) children'.

This way you create prospects for the people and the environment. This main function will be

accompanied by several supporting purposes. The center of the institution will be combined with a public area, consisting of education (primary school, training programme for care mothers, sharing of practical knowledge of the current residents), housing for the orphans/staff and recreation. My focus for the design will be on the northern part of this center.

Methodology

The research and analysis combined with the value assessment will constitute the first step towards the design. The next step after starting the analysis and research was to discover the area by mapping:

- Cross-sections of the area, 'walk' through the area.
- Diagrams, searching for relations/connections.
- Studying photographs and maps.
- Modeling the existing situation.

After this I searched for an appropriate program, according to literature on children's villages and schools in South Africa. This information helped me to take further steps to the preliminary design. This mainly consists of:

- Investigative physical models and 3d modeling. Understanding the sense of the spatial layout of the place and integrating the functions.

The research is primarily focused to place Westfort within a historical framework. The debate on 'style' of the 19th century will be critically analyzed, providing clarity on 'the appearance of architecture' of Westfort. The research will be linked to the value assessment of the area.

Relevance

The importance of this project is two-sided; on the one hand it comprises a public interest and on the other hand, a more personal relevance. Firstly, Westfort takes part in the mutual heritage program. The goal of the co-operation between the UP Pretoria, TU Delft, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, city of Tshwane and the Department of Public Works of South-Africa is to achieve the general objective of promoting international relations. Shared cultural heritage provide ample opportunities for international cooperation. Furthermore, this cooperation contributes to peace and security in the world and solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character. International cooperation can be both bilateral and multilateral, and takes place between authorities/institutions or individuals. As a result, diplomatic, professional and personal relationships can be strengthened and enriched. International cooperation promotes a dialogue and deepens the understanding of cultural identity and the interconnectedness of people. In addition, there are two more specific objectives that relate to the sustainable conservation of the heritage and the importance of the meaning of the Netherlands to the outside world.

A use of Westfort as integrated center fits well within this broader vision, by:

- creating a safe and stimulating environment, as a positive resource for future developments in Westfort and surroundings;
- creating opportunities for a benevolent part of the present inhabitants of Westfort, by offering employment and the opportunity to stay in the area of Westfort;
- Contributing to the lasting sustainable nature of the function, since it is a permanent and deeply rooted problem. It is possible to keep a hold on the future of

Westfort, because it's 'owned' by one overarching client;

- It being an overarching importance (human) for the involved parties, making financing the project more feasible with subsidies.
- Making it a good investment for the prosperity of the country in the future.

Personally, this studio creates more awareness of how I am trained here as an (western-oriented) architect. It will give me insight into which elements of the profession are universal and to what extent you have to adapt to a foreign culture. What will be my attitude towards this particular architecture/culture? A similar dilemma occurred when the Dutch architects of the 19th century arrived in South Africa.

Time planning

[illegible]

Literature

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