



WESTFORT WORK INCUBATOR

a historical leper colony in transition

Reflection

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The biggest challenge of my graduation project was to stay close to the main goal, “the red line”. By site visits, observation and first analyses, goals and aims were set in the beginning of the project. These were the first thoughts about the assignment.

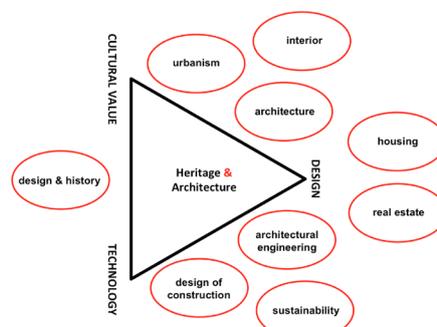
The graduation project *The Challenge of Westfort, Continuing a Shared Built Heritage* falls under the chair of Heritage and Architecture (H&A). The historical site is decaying swiftly. Several buildings, amongst which some of the most characteristic, have been destroyed. This even happened during the period of the graduation project. The challenge is complex and can not be solved with a simple renovation of the buildings. As in every H&A project there are many aspects and values to be taken into account (see image 1 and 2). The sensitive (Dutch shared) heritage value of the site, the picturesque and protected ridge landscape, the issues of the illegal inhabitants that took possession of the site and the surrounding developments are some of the main issues specific for Westfort. The challenge has a complex and large framework ranging from the smallest building detail, to the surrounding urban developments and the national context of South Africa. Also to be taken into account is the history of the site and the Dutch connection.

The further I came into the project, the more information I gathered. Analysing and keeping options open continued until far into the project. All of this to get to an ultimate idea and design that would touch all the aspects within the framework of the assignment (and hopefully beyond). Together with the need to ‘build’ something on the site, this process led into a search for a suitable function for the site and appropriate design. The aim for the function was to create a place that would stimulate entrepreneurship and make a connection between entrepreneur, inhabitant and visitor. The design assignment was to make a building / intervention on the oldest part of Westfort and react on the theme of separation & connection. Before I came to my final design I made a wide range of designs. For the function you can distinguish five topics that I wanted to touch with my design: entrepreneurship, education, housing, community and visitors. I made several designs in which the focus laid on one / or more of these topics. For example large vocational schools. To reach my design aim, I placed the focus on the following topics: the cluster, the field and the border. The aim was to make a connection and stimulate the main pedestrian route in Westfort. This resulted at one point into a building complex that was excavated in the field. Beside, the extensive elaboration of side aspects such as water systems distracted me from the main project

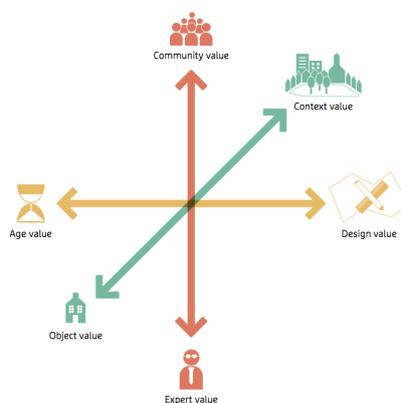
objective. These (megalomaniac) ideas and designs might have fulfilled the needs of the city and the country, but lost touch with the specificities of the site and my first intentions. The phenomenon of “*Analysis Paralysis*” certainly happened to me. Personally the biggest challenges have been to stay close to the main idea, distinguish main issues from side issues and make decisions.

The main goal of my project is twofold. It exists of a functional part and a design part. Both stand in relation to the meaning and structure of Westfort; the historical, the contemporary and future developments. The functional challenge was to find a programme that would react on the issues within the community of Westfort, the surrounding area (taking in account the future developments), Pretoria and the national issues. On top of that the function had to fit the characteristics of Westfort.

The +/- 4.000 illegal inhabitants of Westfort have to deal with many problems and live in squalor on a daily basis. In spite of all this, many positive initiatives have emerged within the informal community. Ranging from community meetings (for example for music, religious service and community issues), to childcare, small entrepreneurs and even an organisation that cares about the historical values of Westfort. An important fact is that these initiatives arise from the



1. Triangle Heritage & Architecture. (Inauguration prof. Wessel de Jonge, TU Delft, 10 jun. 2016)



2. The dimensions of cultural value. (SteenhuisMeurs, Heritage Based Design, TU Delft, 2016, p. 34)

inhabitants themselves, they are genuine. However, Westfort does not offer a sustainable organisational and physical infrastructure. Crime and safety are daily uncertainties. There is still a long way to go to improve the situation. By *formalising the informal* this goal can be reached.

As mentioned before, the main theme of the project is separation & connection. This covers the function which is about making a connection between groups that are now separated due to the apartheid infrastructure that is still present till this day. It is about making a connection between the inhabitants and entrepreneurs of Westfort and the surrounding neighbourhoods and visitors from outside Westfort. It also relates to the design. The unique layout of Westfort is based on the idea of separation. From the perspectives of the 19th century thinking about leprosy and the ideal *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR)* society. This resulted into a range of areas and clusters with each its own character and atmosphere separated by large pieces of land. The problem is that the neglect of the open space and destroying of plants, trees and even buildings that structured Westfort, fades this characteristics away. The unique lay out, based on separation, is the main characteristic of Westfort and offers many opportunities for the future. However, the theme of separation is very sensitive in contemporary South Africa because of the apartheid ideologies it was based on. Contemporary South African public design is all about making 'bridges'. Overcoming the divided urban set up and architecture that was created in the past and is still very present in South Africa today. By bringing back the clear borders between the different areas on Westfort, the positive qualities are emphasised. By making connections over these borders, the areas are opened. By making these connections in the same visual language of Westfort this is done on a subtle way. Creating a subtle but clear tension between separation and connection.

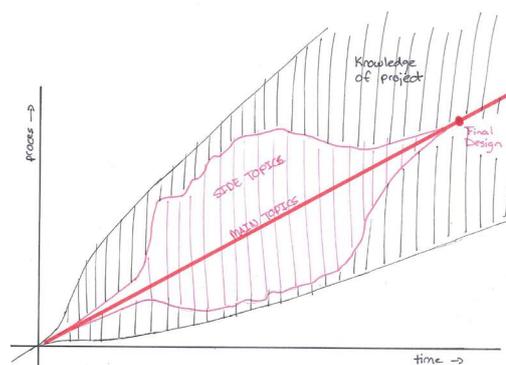
Sub topics are: improving the environment for the entrepreneurial initiatives; reducing unemployment; improving housing; attracting visitors; improving social and public spaces and the connection with future surrounding developments. Targeting three groups; inhabitants; entrepreneurs and visitors. All three will need each other to improve the situation in Westfort.

The challenge lay in coming up with a design that would strengthen the unique characteristics of the 19th century structure of the former leper colony. Remarkable for Westfort is that this structure permeated in all expansions (far into the 20th century). *Separation, structure and symmetry* and

informal pedestrian routes are the characteristic keystones of Westfort. Resulting in a unique sequence of areas with their own atmosphere. 'Transition through the areas' fascinated me from the beginning. This started already by the journey through Pretoria to Westfort by car. On site I made a series of photos along the main pedestrian route through Westfort. The challenge for the design is how these characteristics of Westfort can go together with the current informal settlement and a new, open public function. There is a lot of tension between the former ideologies of the ZAR, the 19th century leper colony architecture, the apartheid regime and the contemporary free, open and diverse South Africa.

This tension has also been the topic of my research. I researched how the cultural and political ideologies of the ZAR and contemporary SA were reflected in their public architecture. Therefore I researched two governmental buildings of each period. These buildings express most explicitly the ideologies of a nation. The research gave a good insight in what both nations found important and what and who they represented in their architecture and how. This led to a better understanding of what is characteristic for the ZAR architecture and structure in Westfort and what is important in contemporary South African architecture.

Next to the obligatory research and analyses, I have made more analyses, such as; investigation into ways of education and employment in South Africa. Site visits to schools and community centers in Cape Town contributed to a better understanding of the assignment. An observation of the behavior of the inhabitants of Westfort, and the neighbouring suburb Lotusgarden, led into a better insight into the needs its inhabitants. This additional research has led me to a better understanding of the complex assignment. It contributed in a better understanding of why previous ideas and designs do not work. By looking closely to the site and its needs, the final design shows that small interventions can have a large impact.



3. Scheme of design process. (Own image, 05-2016)