

P4 Reflection Maxwell Linstra

Introduction

The Dutch architect Sytze Wopkes Wierda designs Westfort, during the end of the 19th century. Westfort was located far outside the cities boundaries and it was designed to treat leprosy patients while isolating the community. This was done because of the contagious characteristic of the disease. In addition, racial segregation, which occurred in the 20th century in South Africa known as the Apartheid was also introduced within the boundaries of the leprosy. The patients were segregated into gender and race, and each group had its own share of the colony. About 100 years Westfort has served as a leper colony, but around the year 2000 it has to close its doors and was secluded from electricity and water. But Westfort became reoccupied quickly by new residents who moved into the area and took power into their own hands and Westfort changed from a formal leper colony to an informal settlement into a formal structure. Additionally Pretoria has experienced large expansion development in the last 100 years, causing urban sprawl reaching the always isolated Westfort. New plans show that Westfort will be surrounded by these developments, resulting in a huge change in context of the surroundings of Westfort. In the graduation project Architecture & Heritage we had to find a solution to protect the shared heritage and to re-develop the area so it could withstand the pressure of the expanding city.

The relation between methodical line of approach and the method chosen in this framework

My design project was created to give new life to the green heart of Westfort and connect the three segregated areas of the leprosy. Besides the functions as the connector, the new structure should also be the center for economic, social and knowledge facilities. Keeping in mind that nature was one of the directive principles for Westfort, the design has to be created in co-operation with the existing nature, and leave the green heart and his immediate structures in its value. In my design I developed a multifunctional center that will serve as an example for the generation to come. The main structure of the design consists out of four parts: routing, structure, landscape and volumes, which I will explain in my presentation.

Design

I often start a design project from an extreme concept that I polish to an idea that fits in the area. In the Westfort project I also started with a more extreme idea that lay down the foundation for my concept; the creation of a new center in the green heart, which works as a connector between the three areas of West Fort. This foundation is reflected in the first sketches I made during period one. Besides the fact that I still had a long way to go and I didn't had the touch in my hands to work out the design, the culture historical value of Westfort urged to impose a less heavy draft. Those subsequent periods, I made many different designs that also deviated from the concept. During these periods I slowly began to understand the area and the design started to balance out. To place a new structure in the green heart was a difficult task because not only the built environment had to be taken in account, especially the existing and directive landscape had to be taken care of with respecting its historical values. During this process I became aware that I never made a design that had to be woven into the landscape and had to take account of the slope where it stood. In addition, I also wanted to create a structure that lay down as an new layer on top of the landscape causing no change in the landscape by digging or raising. But this process have lasted to long, so I wasn't ready for my previous period four presentation. My previous design was that too heavy design and became too independent without any connection with the place. During the summer the design is partially changed, making it into a structure where the landscape wanders through and caused the landscape became more dominant compared to the new built volumes. This has had some negative effects on the square meters of the volumes, but with a small change in the program this was fixed. Because of the changes made during the summer break, the final design is built which respects the landscape better and offered the possibility to be used by the people in the way they want.

Cultural History

A large part of an international project is to empathize with the culture and history of the country. Generally, we will have more knowledge about the country or region where we grew up ourselves. This caused a longer time of period to understand the whole context of Westfort and form the relationships with the history of South Africa. The field research in September 2015 that we have done helped in the proces, but by the broad focus we had during that time, there were also aspects of Westfort where little or no attention had been paid to. If we could redo this I'd probably payed more attention to the wastelands located in Westfort, which seem less interesting by the eye compared with the built environment. In addition, the cultural history of Westfort remains very complicated due to the large number of historical layers that it has taken over the years. Combined with the current function as an informal settlement and the changed context, dilemmas are difficult to unravel as outsider. Eventually the research helped me to understand the new context of Westfort. Within the report I researched the history of the low-cost housing in South Africa. Read more about this in "The relation between research and design". In the design project, I have chosen different themes located in the history of Westfort, but also in its surroundings. Segregation was the main topic I have chosen which i have reused as opposed. Where the green heart served as a historical segregation buffer, I used the green heart in my design as a connector between the areas of Westfort. The design aimed at social meeting places that will serve as the connection between the various user groups that I have placed in Westfort.

Technology

The application of technology in a design project in South Africa caused some problems. Especially the fact that thermal bridges didn't had to be necessarily taken into account. This aspect made detailing the Westfort project in my view a more basic architecture that looks simpler but is more difficult to create; perhaps due to lack of exercise. In the design of the volumes I have reused the techniques used in Westfort and applied some adapted techniques to create new architecture that links with the place. In addition, the architecture is designed so i could also be applicable in the area. More expensive and more advanced techniques I avoided, making the design largely buildable by the residents themselves.

The relation between research and design

In September 2015 we traveled with the graduation group to South Africa to do a field study in Westfort. On the way to West Fort we often drove the last few minutes through huge Reconstruction and Development districts (RDP houses). These districts were set up by the African National Congress (ANC) after the abolition of the Apartheid, with the aim to provide housing for the poorest inhabitants of the country. Together with the first analyzes I made about the city Pretoria, I soon found out that the area around Westfort consisted especially out of townships and districts contain RDP houses. Because of this I concluded that the western part of the city was less developed compared with other parts of Pretoria. During the analysis and field research my fascination was attracted by the surroundings area of Westfort. This is why I delved into the history of the low-cost housing in South Africa. In order to link it back to Westfort I formalized the next question; Did the low-cost housing project in the surroundings of West Fort change the context or west Pretoria? And if so, how did thesis rapid urbanizations change the appearance of West Fort? In the report the history of low cost housing in West Pretoria and its underlying ideologies and studies are discussed. Within the report several case studies are discussed starting with the closed mining compounds (1880), Non-European Housing (1947), RDP housing (1994) and the Breaking New Ground Framework (2004). In the conclusion I compare the appearance of Westfort with situation of the case studies, and I discuss the changes that Westfort has witnessed by the arrival of these low-cost housing in its environment. The research report had no direct impact on the design, but has given me a better understanding of the area of Westfort.

The relation between the project and the wider social context

In my design I used an international phenomenon to strengthen my design ideas; the refugee crisis. South Africa has the largest refugee flow in the world and the country is trying to solve this “problem” in many ways. For example there are no refugee centers in South Africa and the administrative centers, where asylum can be requested, shifted to the border. This allows the government to reduce the influx of refugees by returning them quickly to their home country. I found out during the visit to Westfort that a large proportion of the population in Westfort is actually refugees. Therefore I lay down a debatable topic by placing a refugee centre in my design for Westfort. In reality a new policy framework should be developed to achieve this reality. This will be a major point of discussion and it is likely that it leads to resistance as we have seen in Europe. In South Africa, the fear for refugees is already an actuality for an long time and there are several crimes committed due to xenophobia. In my design, I will leave aside the debate and focus on why I think Westfort is a suitable place to use as a center for asylum seekers. However, I am aware that my fictional reality could never be completely applied in the situation of Westfort.