

Death of the Cemetery

Burial ground as park route

Erwin Derek Struwig

Death of the Cemetery
Burial ground as park route

2015

BUILDING

Address: Highlands Ridge, South Lane, Johannesburg, 26°11'23.6"S 28°03'34.1"E

Function: Natural Park, Spiritual Route, Chapel, Mortuary and Crematorium

Research field: Heritage and cultural landscape

*Dedicated to Daniel Johannes Struwig
14 November 1927 - 29 August 2009*

Special thanks to my parents Hannes and Erwine Struwig for making everything possible and always believing in me.

I would like to thank Gerrit and Elsa van der Klashorst, Atelier Kremetart, Gert van der Merwe and Pieter Swart for their support throughout the year!

Thank you Derick de Bruyn for your support and for believing in me.

Thank you Lorenzo Nasimbeni for all the late night crits and amazing advice.

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Thank you Gillian van der Klashorst for your constant love and affection and immeasurable advice during those late nights. We make an amazing team. Love you always.

By Erwin Derek Struwig

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Supervisor: Derick de Bruyn
Course Coordinator: Dr. Arthur Barker

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Karlien van Niekerk

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I further state that no part of my thesis has already, or is currently being submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification.

I further declare that the thesis is substantially my own works. Where reference is made to the works of other, the extent to which that work has been used is indicated and fully acknowledged in the text and list of references.

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Erwin Derek Struwig

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The Journey from the Farm

Having grown up on a sugarcane farm on the north coast of Kwa-Zulu Natal, I often found myself wandering the rolling green hills and exploring the remnants of old farming structures, building forts in old run-down sugarcane mills and cooling my feet in the Nonoti River.

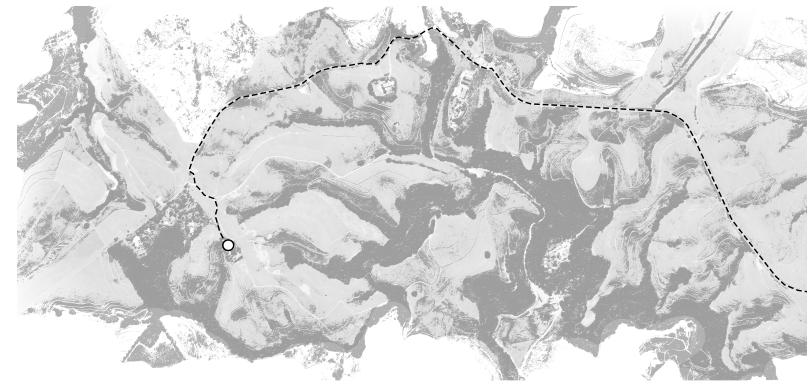
The immense isolation on the farm allowed for hours of solitude and reflection. It allowed for aimless wandering and afternoon jogs with the dogs.

The landscape of the North Coast.

The route on which one travels from Struwig Estates towards the town of Stanger is one of great diversity, constant change, and immense natural beauty.

Perched on top of one of the highest koppies one would find our farm house, surrounded by dense bluegum trees (to guard against runaway farm fires), thick evergreen hedges and an abundance of indigenous plants. Our driveway, lined with beautiful lush green palm trees that rustle in the wind, forms a transition threshold between tar road and estate property.

Driving down along this palm-lined dirt road, an entire world of rolling hills is exposed on your right, and on your left, in close proximity, the neatly ordered lines of sugarcane which form the expansive green fields that cover the hills like fur. At one point this winding road starts to deny one full view of the house, but instead poses a reminder of it by exposing the tips of the bluegum trees.



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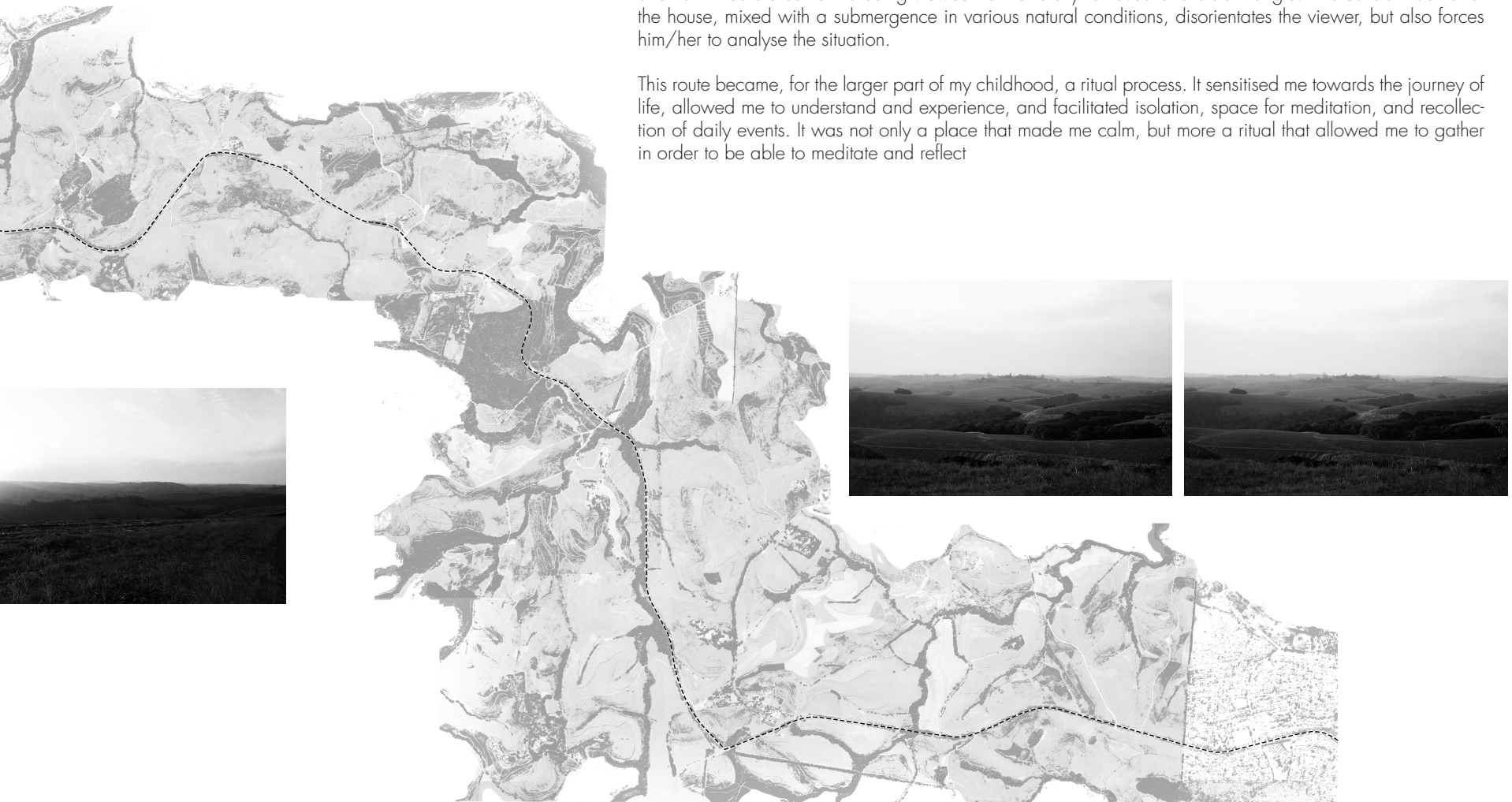


fig 1.1. Image depicting journey from town through rolling hills of sugarcane to Struwig Estates (Author, 2015)

When driving along this winding road one is constantly made aware of the environs through sudden sharp turns which force the car to slow and the driver and passengers to analyse the surroundings. There is constant disorientation when traveling this route; it is also the only route to get to town.

Suddenly and unexpectedly the house and its lush, dense vegetation is visible at a distance. Thus one is reunited with the place from whence you have come. At this specific point the viewer realises that the house and its immediate context is being viewed from a totally removed and distant angle. This constant denial of the house, mixed with a submergence in various natural conditions, disorients the viewer, but also forces him/her to analyse the situation.

This route became, for the larger part of my childhood, a ritual process. It sensitised me towards the journey of life, allowed me to understand and experience, and facilitated isolation, space for meditation, and recollection of daily events. It was not only a place that made me calm, but more a ritual that allowed me to gather in order to be able to meditate and reflect



Introduction

Exploration of Johannesburg

Observation

The author's exploration of Johannesburg started out as curiosity. Opportunity to observe an unknown city. A city known for its constant change. A city he became calm in.

By observing and analysing Johannesburg over an extended period, certain conditions have become visible. Through the characterisation of specific pockets within the city, a better understanding of the nature of the city was developed. This characterisation of fragmented pockets within the city gave rise to a completely unique model, one that can be compared to an archipelago of some sorts. Johannesburg is a fragmented city established through fantasy and opportunity. The idea of "uitvalgrond" was explored as a way of understanding various conditions – conditions that allow architecture to play a crucial role to add meaning and strength to them. The ridge along which Johannesburg was formed played an extremely important role in the development of the city, not only from a historical viewpoint but also a current one. One characteristic of great importance which was identified was that of isolation, a characteristic which can be linked to the Witwatersrand, especially Yeoville Ridge.

The ruination of derelict apartments and ritualistic plinths fills the voids within the dense urban context. Constant decay forms an integral part in understanding the absence of social integration. (Buildings degrade back into the landscape from whence they once came).

The natural terraces formed by the Yeoville and Highlands koppies form an integral punctum point for the gateway created between Ponte City and Gordon Terrace. This area, like Ponte City, is steeped in mysterious tales of ruination and decay, prosperity and development (Judin 1999).

The site under investigation is located on the fringes of the Johannesburg Central Business District (CBD), opposite Ponte City along Joe Slovo Drive. Along the Highlands Ridge, which forms the highest koppie in Johannesburg, lies the suburb of Yeoville, the gateway to the inner city, once known as the bohemian centre of South Africa. Initially established as a sanctuary for the rich to escape the smoke-filled mining town of Doornfontein, the Highlands Ridge opposite Ponte City is an area of rich daily ritual and event, from which life sprawls into neighbouring Hillbrow and Berea (Jansen 2012).

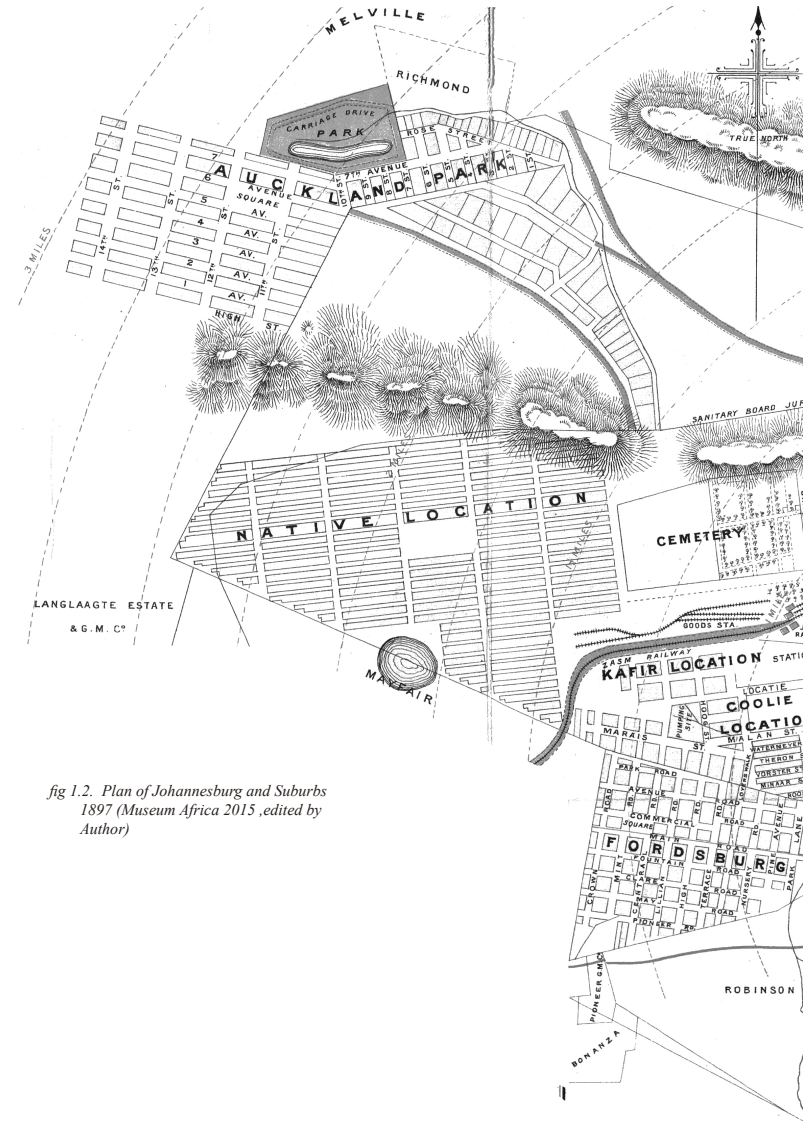


fig 1.2. Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs 1897 (Museum Africa 2015, edited by Author)



The site is enclosed by various barriers, natural and man-made – firstly the ridge to the south of the site, secondly one of the main arterials into Johannesburg (Joe Slovo Drive), and thirdly the large water reservoir and water towers that populate the top of the ridge (Smithers 2013).

These three elements play a crucial role in establishing the isolated nature of the site.

The site also finds itself host to followers of various spiritual beliefs who make use of the top terrace of the ridge to perform spiritual rituals. This uitvalgrond is also a popular destination for people seeking panoramic views of Johannesburg or even solitude (Smithers 2013).

Appropriation by humans has allowed this landscape to be experienced on a more intimate level, a level of being that forms part of everyday Johannesburg.

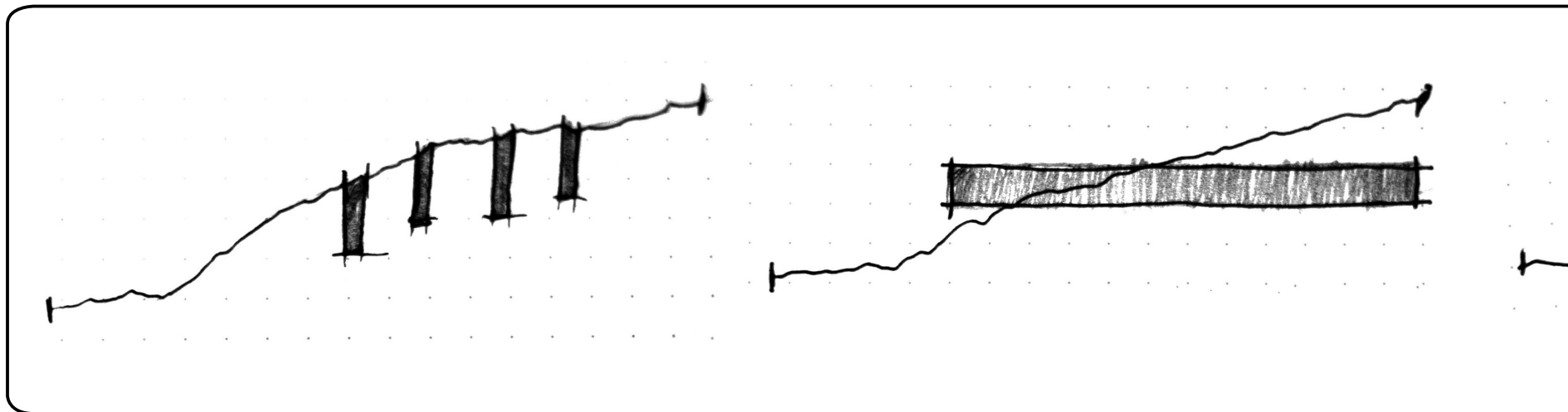
Problematic

The post-apartheid city has a fragmented history that disconnects the dweller and observer from its identity. It is a city where pilgrimage to isolated destinations forms part of the intrinsic cycle of the city. Yeoville can be described as such an isolated site. Today Yeoville is an eyesore that suffers from urban decay, and a lack of infrastructure and long-term investment. The natural ridge and rituals on site beg for a mediation between man-made built environment and natural environment. Through this understanding of Yeoville Ridge and the events taking place in the area, death was explored.

Death and its relation to daily life, how dwellers are affected by it, and how architecture can form a mediating platform for the events and rituals connected with it, were investigated. These issues are directly relevant on a global scale, as large metropolitan cities are facing an increasing mortality rate, which results in a lack of space and inadequate methods of burial (Leuta & Green 2011). The city of Johannesburg has since its beginning constructed 35 cemeteries and 3 crematoria, of which 27 cemeteries are full and cannot accommodate 3rd burials, and the 3 crematoria cannot accommodate the drastically increasing interest in cremation (Johannesburg City Parks 2008).

The issue is further heightened by the fact that Johannesburg's mortality rate has surpassed its birth rate (Moodley 2007). The site in question allows architecture to address this issue in the form of unconventional burial methods, whilst retaining the condition of the site and addressing the conditions of event and ritual. By designing architecture of such a programmatic nature on an area of land that is viewed as a gateway pillar to the city, one is given the opportunity to sensitively address this issue as part of everyday life.

fig 1.3. Concept sketches showing development of architectural intention in relation to the ridge
(by Author, 2015)

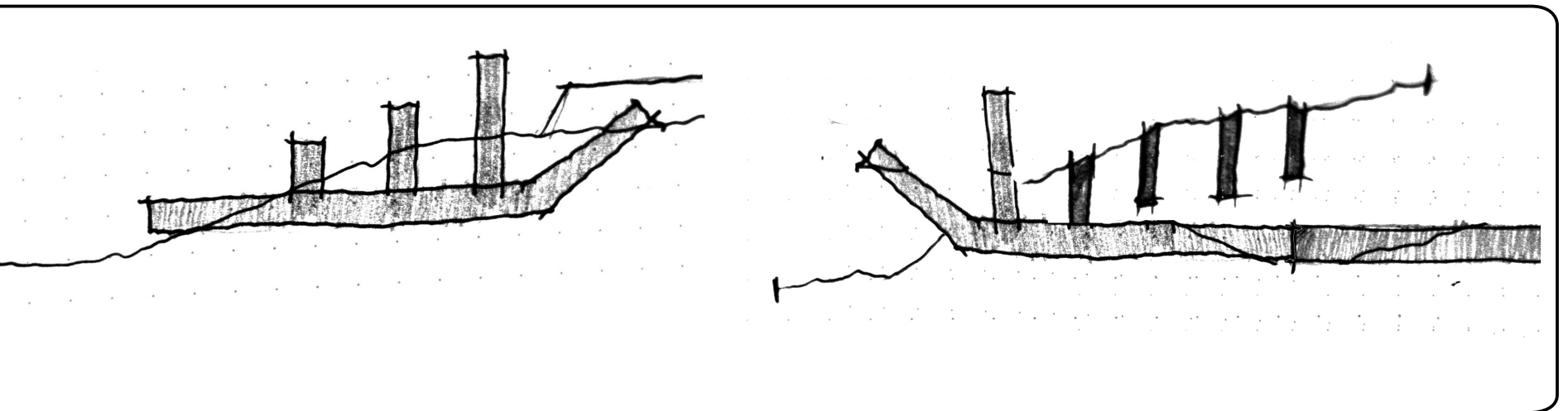


Intention

The architectural intention is to create a public space that exposes the rituals of the everyday through subtle insertions into the Koppie, to challenge the presence of Ponte City as a monument and reminder of past power, and to explore the isolated nature of the Highlands/Yeoville Koppie and the bodies which isolate the site (Judin 1999).

The above will be achieved through exploring event-driven architecture, and understanding ritual and activity currently taking place in Yeoville. The incision into the landscape will act as a mediator between ritualistic events within the landscape and the harsh urban conditions, posing as a subterranean monument delving into the geomorphology and history of an invisible city (Abraham 1982).

By experiencing the city in an unbiased manner, one is able to view situations differently and with a fresh mind. Exploring and understanding event and ritual within the city allow for a more connected feeling between the dweller and the identified pockets. Current conditions within the isolated pockets will be enhanced. By enriching existing conditions, a stronger built fabric, networks and connections can be established.



Hypothesis

By exploring the abovementioned rituals and events related to everyday Johannesburg, by understanding the conditions identified within the isolated pocket of Yeoville Koppie, and by looking at issues that not only the city of Johannesburg, but also similar cities worldwide, face, one is able to investigate more specific programmatic approaches relevant to the concept of uivalgrond and its identified characteristics.

Through the exploration of an inner city burial ground, the typology of a cemetery and crematorium will be developed into a contextually relevant program that addresses previously mentioned issues relating to burial space and ritualistic events connected to death (Johannesburg City Parks 2008).

The intention is to challenge the norms related to cemeteries, burial typologies and commemorative architecture in the South African context.

Mediation

By establishing a connection between the dweller and the city one is able to strengthen an already existing relationship. Through making this metaphysical connection between dweller and city, an opportunity is created to further understand the relationship between the death of the city dweller, and how the dweller experiences architecture that acts as a mediator between life, death, dweller and city.

The isolated nature of the Yeoville Koppie should be fully understood from a historical and contemporary viewpoint; therefore the isolated and spiritual nature of the Koppie should be preserved and respected.

The architecture will be used as a mediator between life and death in the city, establishing a relationship between ritual events relating to death and ritual events relating to the everyday of Johannesburg.

It will also mediate between the built (man-made fabric) of the city alongside the un-built (natural fauna) of the world's largest man-made forest.

Memory

Historic and present memory will be connected. This connection should not necessarily be of a physical nature but could be metaphysical, as the isolated and spiritual nature of Yeoville Koppie should be respected and kept intact.

Ritual

Ritual within the landscape would be explored through mapping and sketches. Ritual in the everyday life of a dweller in Johannesburg should be understood. Reasons for these rituals should also be understood.

Observation

The Yeoville Koppie lies on the threshold upon entering Johannesburg from Joe Slovo Drive, calling to mind the gateway when entering Pretoria between UNISA and the Freedom Park Monument. A parallel could be drawn here so as to discover how this pattern prevails within the South African context, and how it has relevance in Johannesburg.

The aim of this project is not to act as a template for burial design, but rather as a vessel for understanding the related complexities and struggles, in order to challenge an age-old tradition that can no longer be accommodated due to increased rates of mortality and lack of space. Along with this it should also be made clear how ritual and memory play a large role in adding relevance to the architectural intent.

Project Vision

The vision of the project is to act as a medium where the architecture relating to ritual can be strengthened and deeper relevance gained. This dissertation will also challenge the boundary between the natural landscape and the built landscape – how Ponte City is seen as a monument within Johannesburg and how the relationship between it and the proposed thesis project can be used as a tool to create contextually relevant and spatial architecture. How architecture and its remains suggest stories of human fate, both real and imaginary, will also be investigated.

Theoretical Approach

The literature study will focus on seven aspects which will inform the outcome of the dissertation:

- o The theory of Cemetery as garden, cemetery as urban space
- o Architecture at the funeral: Between Nature and Artefact
- o Architecture, nature and the constructed site
- o Materiality and its relation to weathering in time.
- o Memory and its relation to burial space (death) and architecture, and how it can act as a tool for creating relevant architecture within the context of Yeoville Ridge and Johannesburg
- o Experiential and Referential time
- o Buildings are geological agents

Research Methodology

The suburb of Yeoville is shrouded in personal tales of nostalgia. The isolated site opposite Ponte City along the ridge is rich in history and forgotten memories. The interest here lies with the geomorphology of the site in close relation to its historical context and evolution, and the development of the dense urban fabric. The research methodology will be approached in a number of ways. These methods of research will relate directly to the previously mentioned proposal.

Sketches from memory

By sketching various images of the site from memory one might be able to observe and relate to the intrinsic nature of the site. This method of exploration and observation allows one to delve into memory as well as the ritual of accessing such an isolated and dangerous site.

Photographic site study

A photographic film study will be undertaken in order to document rituals on site as well as changing weather patterns that result from the geographic location of the ridge. Also, a study will be undertaken in order to depict the relationship between man-made and natural within the city of Johannesburg, and more so within the Yeoville and Highlands Koppie area.

Mapping

Physical site mapping will be undertaken in order to develop a more intrinsic understanding of the site and its immediate surrounds. Psychogeographic mapping techniques will be used to create various physical and metaphysical maps. This should inform and help develop the programmatic as well as architectural response.

Precedent Studies

Precedent studies of intended and completed projects of relevance will be researched in order to inform and understand the architectural concept.

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| 1. | Igualada Cemetery | - Enric Miralles | - Cemetery & Route |
| 2. | Leça Swimming Pools | - Álvaro Siza | - Route |
| 3. | Double Negative | - Michael Heizer | - Geomorphology |
| 4. | Water Temple | - Tadao Ando | - Geometry |
| 5. | Woodlands Crematorium | - Johan Celsin | - Crematorium |

