

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1// PROPOSED CONTEXT

Hidden in the western outskirts of Pretoria lies Fort Daspoortrand, which was later renamed by the British as Westfort (Van Vollenhoven 1998:25). This majestic fort was built in 1898 and forms part of a larger family of military fortifications that was established on the surrounding ridges of Pretoria, in order to protect and resist the unwelcome British forces from both the north and south (Saggacci 2015:40).

Also hidden and just a stone's throw away from the old fort, remnants of the original Westfort Leper Institution are still intact at the foot of the Witwatersberg ridge. Established in 1886 as the former Daspoort Hospital, this site proved its flexibility in response to the immediate needs of greater society. In 1902, the site was programmed to accommodate the Pretoria Leper Asylum, later renamed the Westfort Leper Institution, as a segregated and self-sustaining community for those who were cursed with this incurable disease (Breed & Grünewald 2013:54).

Just before the outbreak of World War II, the fort was dismantled, stripped down for its steel and left to fall into ruin. In 1997, long after the realization that leprosy was not contagious, the institution was closed down and has since become home to roughly 5 000 informal settlers who illegally occupy the buildings, and have taken ownership of the site as well as its heritage fabric (Grünewald 2012:16).

Given the state of the current built fabric of both the fort and the institution, there is no question that it is in desperate need of attention. Not only is the fort vulnerable to both vandalism and natural processes of decay, but it remains hidden and forgotten, which is detrimental to its historical memory and heritage value (Van Vollenhoven 1998:25).

Being part of a network of the fortification endeavour, Fort West is unique (compared to its counterparts) as it was designed by French contractors with a different approach to the design. This fort was bigger, more elaborate in its details, structure and materiality, and faced both north and south to protect the western portals of Pretoria.

Sharing only a name, the fort and the institution were never intended to be affiliated, but will hereafter be referred to as the 'Westfort precinct'. Today they are both associated with a sensitive and forgotten historical past which is slowly disappearing in the abandoned landscape of Pretoria West.

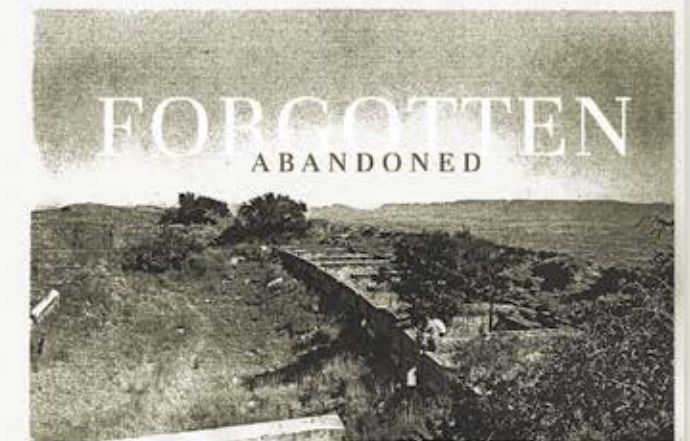
According to a heritage survey on the historical value of the leprosy institution, Naudé (2012:2) states that the site is of exceptional cultural significance as an institution which was the only one of its kind in South Africa. It is also recommended that the Westfort precinct be considered as a single entity and re-purposed accordingly.

Archaeologists, heritage specialists and other patrons have advocated for the restoration of Westfort Leper Institution as well as the adjoining fort as part of the city's unique history, and recommend that it should be preserved as a place of remembrance (Delpont 2015:43).

The main driver in this detrimental process of ruination is perhaps the pressures of a changing society. In order to rehabilitate or reprogramme our heritage fabric it is critical to first determine its heritage value. This valuation should consider our collective heritage but, more importantly, the future value of this rich heritage precinct.

Figure 1.1: Collage of historical photographs of Westfort as a ruin (Van Vollenhoven:1998:45)

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1.2// THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

It is argued in this dissertation that, with the progression of time, the function of heritage fabric changes and, with that, its inherent value.

Given the stark conditions of this significant cultural landscape, it is as if Westfort has ceased to exist. Its intention to protect was no longer valued by society and since then, left alarming traces of ruination and isolation. As emphasized by the heritage impact assessment, the Westfort precinct is vulnerable to both developmental pressures and its current illegal inhabitants who have taken ownership of the site in the fight for survival (Naudé 2012:2).

1.3// THE RESEARCH QUESTION

How can Westfort be rehabilitated in order to protect its heritage significance, secure its future value, and introduce continuity through the experiential interpretation of our collective South African heritage?

1.4// RESEARCH INTENTIONS

In light of the problem statement and research question, this dissertation will briefly reflect on the following theoretical premises in order to identify an appropriate architectural response.

Heritage perspectives

There is no question that Westfort is in desperate need of attention in securing its future value. It is often assumed that the authorities of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality are to blame for the ruination and negligence concerning heritage artefacts, but perhaps the real issue originates from a difference in heritage perspectives.

Inherent value is greatly determined by the perspective and interpretation of our collective heritage; yet, our current South African society still tends to contest and segregate heritage according to cultural DNA, which leads to exemption from protecting the greater whole (Clarke & Kuipers 2015:14).

The identity of place

The differences in our cultural identities are highly influential in understanding the identity of place. Architect and theorist Neal Leach (2002:3) believes that one way of establishing a desired image of place is to first understand how people identify with their environment.

Leach (2002:3) further argues that this identification process is not a fixed condition but rather an active, shared process which is motivated by a need to belong. It is therefore valuable to first ensure a sense of belonging and continuity within our multicultural context that is not detrimental to the authenticity of place.

Heritage management

If the inherent value of our South African heritage artefacts is to a great extent determined by our collective society, it is then critical to reflect on the different valuation criteria. Alois Riegl's essay on the formulation of values-based preservation is worthy for its method of interpreting the value of neglected heritage artefacts (Lamparkos 2014:426).

Both the fort and the institution are valued for their unique contribution to South African heritage, and conform to heritage legislation such as the 1999 National Heritage Resources Act (Act No. 25 of 1999) which serves to protect and preserve our cultural heritage.

Experiential potential

It is suggested in this dissertation that in many conservation projects, often the existing or new architectural fabric becomes static or outdated and should rather resonate with a more holistic objective: preserving and designing for our collective and continuous heritage.

As a critique on heritage conservation approaches, there is still a need for celebrating the experiential qualities of a place which greatly influence its future value. The ideal is that the architectural intervention should allow for a more holistic and engaging experience that respects the historical value but also anticipates change.

Heritage narration

The ongoing contestation and documentation of South African heritage is part of the transformation process in building the nation. The art of storytelling and testimony is valued for its capacity to enable and encourage equal participation in this transformative process (Wieder 2004:23).

In order to include all South Africans in a participatory process of narration, it is critical to consider different methods of narration to ensure continuity, and potentially secure the future value of our collective heritage.

Figure 1.2: Photograph of the entry portal at Westfort taken in 1987 (Van Volenhoven:1998)

