

ARCHITECTURAL MEANS OF EXPRESSION IN THE CREATION OF CONTEMPORARY HERITAGE INTERPRETATION CENTRES AND THEIR ROLE IN ENVISIONING HERITAGE. EXAMPLES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

The changes taking place in the modern world also have an influence on the manner and form of protection of cultural heritage. The evolution of the concept of protection of cultural heritage lies in the fact that its meaning has become much wider. Anetta Kępczyńska-Walczak synthesised that heritage is a part of the present and serves contemporary purposes and it is “not all what past generations have left us as an artistic and cultural heritage, but what we want to accept as ours out of it”. Heritage is not an object, but a message included in it, directed to the people and its authenticity is associated with feelings of recipients. It plays also an important role in self-determination of the community¹. The result of this evolution includes the creation of Heritage Interpretation Centres (HIC):

Heritage Interpretation Centres are specially created facilities for evaluation of the cultural and/or natural heritage of a given area and its transformation into an educational, cultural or tourism product. They provide visitors with an insight into a natural park, a specific territory or an event on the basis of a message highlighting what makes it especially unique. Unlike museums, they do not fundamentally aim to collect, preserve and study objects (although they may indeed do this). Instead their essential purpose is to facilitate public appreciation of the value of the specific cultural or natural heritage features, by raising public awareness and providing education. The main presentation strategy tends to be the scenographic exhibition, with technical and audiovisual support to aid and stimulate the discovery process².

¹ Kępczyńska-Walczak A. „Przeszłość architektury wobec ewolucji koncepcji ochrony dziedzictwa kulturowego, zmian społecznych oraz współczesnych problemów historycznych środowiska zurbanizowanego”, in: Przesmycka, Trocka (eds.), *Architektura Przyszłości*. Wrocław: Wydział Architektury. Politechnika Wrocławska. 2014, pp. 99-112.

² Izquierdo Tugas, Pere; Juan Tresserras, Jordi et al. *Heritage Interpretation Centres. The Hicira Book*. Barcelona: Deputacio Barcelona. 2005, p. 41.

HICs apply to a present definition of architecture as the process by which the organisation of activities in space and time is defined and architecture as combined relationships and actions-reactions-in(for) reality in positive synergy with the environment. According to the definition “to relate” is interpreted as to explore and “to propose” as to imagine³. A heritage through a process can also be explored in the contemporary architectural spaces of HICs via architectural and non-architectural means of expression and become a part of the present. In this context architectural means of expression in the creation of contemporary HICs and their role played in heritage envisioning are the subject of the field studies based on examples from South Africa. The research was carried out in a culturally different environment from the European one, which enabled the author to discover other architectural solutions in this matter.

African cultural context

Depending on the location and the type of heritage, each Heritage Interpretation Centre may have its own specific features. Among the factors influencing each HIC, the cultural aspect may have a particular impact on their architecture. In order to understand HICs in a broader cultural perspective, it is worth mentioning some issues shaping the heritage of South Africa:

1. There are three main sources of historical knowledge of Africa: archaeology, palaeontology and oral sources. African heritage refers to the oral society that has relied on word of mouth for its preservation and dissemination and its culture is a communal creation, owned by everyone (e.g. storytelling)⁴.
2. Mixing of uses was the norm in indigenous design. The focus was on human and walking scale tradition of indigenous urban forms (narrow, winding roads separating blocks of buildings)⁵.
3. African system of perception is different from Western European one. The interconnectivity of beings and environments is the crucial element of it⁶.
4. Heritage, reconciliation and nation-building makes South Africa’s current politics of memory⁷ of present multicultural Post-Apartheid society.

³ Gausa, Manuel, Guallart, Vincent et al. *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture*. Barcelona: ACTAR. 2003.

⁴ Strauss, André. “Namibian culture – unity, diversity and tolerance”, in: <http://www.nied.edu.na/publications/journals/journal13/Journal%2013%20Article%201.pdf> (accessed 20.02.2015).

⁵ Asomani-Boateng R. ”Borrowing from the past to sustain the present and the future: indigenous African urban forms, architecture, and sustainable urban development in contemporary Africa”. *Journal of Urbanism*. Vol. 4: 3, 2011, pp. 239-262.

⁶ Kądziela M., Rynkowska-Sachse A. “Re-discovering the African philosophy of the architecture through the other/other’s lens. European-based considerations”, in: Osman, Bruyns, Aigbavboa (eds.), *UIA 2014 Durban Congress Proceedings*. Durban: UIA 2014 Durban. 2014, pp. 552-563.

⁷ Marschall, Sabine. *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Amsterdam: ASC Series. 2009, p. 4.

Case Studies

The field studies on HICs are illustrated by three examples from South Africa. These are: Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre – a museum situated in a cultural heritage site and natural landscape, Alexandra Interpretation Centre – a community and cultural centre in a poor district of Johannesburg next to Mandela’s Yard and Freedom Park//hapo Museum – a museum and landscape architecture. The analysis and the personal experience allowed the author to learn the basis of the design process in reference to each heritage site. It was assessed, by means of which architectural and non-architectural factors, the message about the heritage was transmitted or how it was stimulated to be experienced by visitors. The HICs were also analysed in terms of a role played by the architectural means in promoting a heritage and in self-determination of a community.

Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre

Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre (MIC) (Fig. 1), designed to protect UNESCO World Heritage Site, is situated at the confluence of the Limpopo and Sashi rivers in the northern part of South Africa, at Mapungubwe National Park. The archeological site is thought to have been one of the major towns in 10th-13th centuries AD, which played an important role in the Indian Ocean trade in Southern Africa⁸. MIC was designed by Peter Rich who won a competition organised by South African National Parks in 2005. It was decided that a building should be set on a plot away from the archeological site and that artefacts needed to be displayed in a museum in order to educate and inform visitors of the area’s heritage⁹. It looks like a series of triangle surfaces structuring the landscape which are designed around an axis linking the entrance and the archeological site. The design was inspired by the rocky landscape, artefacts from excavations (a triangle in local Venda culture), a khotla (a traditional structure – the idea of meeting under the tree)¹⁰ and by a form of the route-makers found in South African cultures. The analysis of the site and the way it is structured informed the architect how to incorporate the museum’s program and make use of the surrounding as a source of materials for construction.

As a result envisioning of this heritage is stimulated by different architectural means. There is a system of various stairs, terraces, elevated bridges offering a view of the original landscape the ancestors saw for ages. One can experience the sense of interconnectivity of the spaces inside the complex by the informal flow of outside spaces and landscape elements between them. The human-walking scale, the winding routes and the form of cave make this structure resemble the indigenous ones. The play of light and shadow highlight only the most important artefacts inside (Golden Rhino).

⁸ Zamani Project. *Cultural Heritage Sites in Africa. Digital Collection of African Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscape Database*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town. 2014.

⁹ Fagan G. “Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre”. *Architectural Review*. No. 1356. 2010, p. 040.

¹⁰ ibidem, p. 046.



Fig. 1. The Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre

Source: Anna Rynkowska-Sachse.

The structure of the building thanks to its cladding and form, merges naturally into the rocky hill, is linked visually to the archeological site and serves as a look-out point over the site and the Limpopo River. As a result the visitors today can experience the heritage site and its silence as it was 700 years ago.

The message about the heritage was also transmitted through non-architectural means. The tourists are offered game viewing, night drives, guided walks, collection of rock art in the park, accommodation in boats and lodges, Bird Hide, rivers confluence look-out points or resting at a designated picnic place (braai) that all enable them to experience the heritage site as it was a long time ago¹¹. The local community learned about the heritage site by being employed at MIC construction site. They were trained in the manufacture of stabilized earth tiles, which informed them of the abilities of natural materials used by ancestors who developed their culture in symbiosis with nature. MIC, awarded as the Building of the Year 2009 in World Architectural Festival in Barcelona, helps to raise awareness of the vulnerability of the local ecology and the importance of its preservation as world heritage site¹².

¹¹ *Mapungubwe National Park. UNESCO World Heritage Site. World Heritage Landscape.* South African National Parks. 2013.

¹² Fagan, G. op. cit., p. 041.



Fig. 2. Alexandra Interpretation Centre

Source: Anna Rynkowska-Sachse.

Alexandra Interpretation Centre

Alexandra Interpretation Centre (AIC) (Fig. 2) is located in the heart of historical township Alexandra, one of the poorest urban communities inhabited by black people in Johannesburg. It is situated at the street intersection and opposite a historical site – Mandela’s Yard – a house that Nelson Mandela rented in the forties at the beginning of his stay in Johannesburg. The objective of the Centre was to draw attention to a place of the national heritage. Today, AIC is a cultural centre housing exhibitions, ideas and events that shaped Alexandra community, and resource archive documenting oral history and heritage. It is also community space for re-discovering the common heritage today. AIC was designed by Peter Rich. The architect consulted organizations working for dissemination of knowledge about Mandela’s Yard and the local community in order to meet their expectations. He carried out cultural studies to learn about the local community and their spaces (style of life, the scale of space, yard and street structure) and as a result he could design a building that would be legible enough for local people to identify with. Today, the architecture of AIC allows the users to discover not only the heritage site but the heritage of the peoples of Alexandra as well. Firstly, the heritage is envisioned by merging of the building space with the space of pedestrian traffic obtained by its structure (a bridge suspended over the road) and by views of the township and Mandela’s Yard through small windows and from a terrace. The visitors look at the conditions in which people live, street life, Mandela’s Yard, a street grid

erected in apartheid. The visual connection between AIC and the surrounding is obtained by spatial progression starting down the main street, proceeding along, passing through the ramp as an extension of the pavement, entering building and zig-zagging on a rough floor through an exhibition. The heritage of the community is stimulated by mixing of uses which was the norm in indigenous design. Therefore AIC's program consists of a shop, a bar, a restaurant, a jazz music archive to honor musicians who came from Alexandra, an exhibition and story-telling space, two open squares outside for formal (social, political events, film screenings, community notice boards) and informal meetings and activities (cutting hair, birthday parties, playing football or observing street life). Unfortunately, AIC doesn't function as it was planned, so its program is in a process of improvement (a built-in concrete seating allowing easy "socialising space" is one of its new elements)¹³. The heritage also plays an important role in forming the local community which is achieved by the open-structure of AIC resembling the neighbouring houses. It means it is prepared for possible future changes, considers the lack of funds, implements materials (multi-coloured transparent corrugated polycarbonate panels) reminiscent of the ones from the surrounding by reference to the corrugated steel roofs. The building is legible in the space, not dominating the district. In this context the architecture of AIC promoted Alexandra and starts to create common grounds for the communities located around to continue their common heritage today. AIC is an example of a museum as a process, which was awarded for its architectural innovation. The heritage was envisioned also by non-architectural means. Highlighting Mandela's Yard attracted tourists¹⁴ and contributed to re-discovering Alexandra's heritage. The local community was stimulated to get involved in the process of creating a common space of a new quality and to discover their common heritage which is being together and building together. It was achieved by taking part in the construction process by supplying and guarding the materials, decorating windows by local artists and children, creating the story telling friendly environment, giving the management to the locals to learn managerial skills they were deprived of in apartheid.

Freedom Park

The complex Freedom Park//hapo Museum (Fig. 3) is situated on a 52-hectare site in a nature reserve on a prominent hill Salvokop overlooking Pretoria. It consists of //hapo Museum as a 'living' Interpretative Centre, and the separate elements emerged in the landscape linked with a spiral path terminating at the top of the hill. The complex is dedicated to reconciliation between peoples of South Africa through the use of history (geological, pre-colonial, colonial, Apartheid and post-Apartheid), culture and spirituality guiding the architectural and landscape interventions.

¹³ An interview 29th July 2014 with Rogan Rich from Peter Rich Architects.

¹⁴ Tourism is promoted by training the local tour guides, orienting local business to tourism market, supporting B&B establishments for tourists, organising exhibitions and meetings on art, culture and Alexandra's heritage, a heritage tour walk providing a secure corridor through Alex. Nieftagodien, Noor. "Public history in Alexandra", in: Silverman, R. (ed.), *Museum as process. Translating Local and Global knowledges*. New York, Routledge. 2014, p. 175.



Fig. 3. Freedom Park

Source: Anna Rynkowska-Sachse.

//hapo Museum was designed by GAPP Architects/Urban Designers, Mashabane Rose Associates and MMA Architects from Johannesburg. It is worth mentioning that “The Design Brief for International Architectural Competition” completed in 2003, but not contracted was an important input into the final design concept. It referred to indigenous African knowledge and culture, the structure concerning the nature of site, cultural sense of place, coherence with the surrounding, Spiral Pathway as a connector of ideas terminating at the top of the hill and a living museum as an active place recording national history, all of which were expressed in innovative architectural ways. It is worth recalling that another design concept by Marquart Architekten with Polish architects Monika and Michał Bernaciak was awarded with distinction at the competition in 2002¹⁵. The consultation process and workshops with various stake holders and communities conducted throughout the country were an important source of information for GAPP architects. In the final design concept the heritage was envisioned by the idea to link all the elements by a spiral path, Mveledzo „to experience our history, to walk where our ancestors

¹⁵ The main idea was to discover the heritage by passing through a huge wall that cuts the hill and defines the existing conflict in SA. The Wall is a physical barrier between black and white citizens. The park’s design is based on an idea of a journey to the top while experiencing natural environment and going through the elements placed in the Wall. Finally, the walk stops on the top of the hill at the meeting point – the connection between two divided sides of the hill: white and black people, *Description of the Design by Marquart Architekten* received by courtesy of Marquart Architekten, 03.2014.

have walked and to learn about our shared heritage as brothers and sisters”¹⁶. The path as a process guides the multicultural nation on a healing route through ongoing dialogues and interpretation. //hapo Museum, located at the foot of the hill, forms the primary entrance to Freedom Park and the start of the pathway into it. It was designed to blend into the landscape, as a series of abstract ‘boulders’, with story-telling spaces resembling the ones on the hill. Its interior and exterior surfaces are copper-cladded, which will fade and merge with the natural landscape. Each of the seven epoche is depicted in a separate boulder dating back some 3.6 billion years to the present-day and the visitors experience them in layers. The spacial progression through the museum is like a movement through a cave-like spaces with natural light used to dramatize its forms¹⁷. The play of light and darkness are used to convey the narrative of the physical, social and belief-system evolution in this part of the world. The exhibitions are structured around social spaces that allow live interpretation, performance, storytelling, including a selection of cultural and historical objects that can be handled, discussed and used in practice. The idea of ‘boulders’ and ‘cave’ (that is what the typical African landscape is all about) gives form to traditional idea of healing and indigenous knowledge systems. The message about the heritage is discovered outside the museum in along the Mveledzo path. The visitors are taken on a contemplative journey in the natural landscape between the elements derived from African tradition and culture: Isivane as a sacred space, S’khumbuto as the main memorial and Moshate a high-level hospitality suite, Uitspanplek as a resting place, Tiva as a water point – a sign of leaving the sacred area¹⁸. The architecture of Freedom Park promotes the heritage site visually as a result of its location (strengthened by a ring of steel “reeds” up to 30 m high) and internationally thanks to the Award of Merit and the Award for Excellence announced by South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) during the International Congress of Architects (UIA) held in Durban in 2014. In daily life, the stimulation of envisioning the heritage is obtained by guided walks and by cultural events (the first ever Storytelling Festival), national events, debates transmitted to the local, national and international audience.

Summary

The analysis and the personal experience allowed the author to understand the basis of the design, architectural and non-architectural solutions in the heritage envisioning and to perceive HICs in a broader cultural perspective other than the European one. The analysis showed that a heritage can stimulate exploration of a heritage embodied in contemporary architecture and its discovery by the local community. It was obtained by creation of the space for events evoking interest in

¹⁶ *Freedom Park. A heritage destination*. Johannesburg: An agency of the Department of Arts and Culture. 2014.

¹⁷ <http://www.archdaily.com/297713/freedom-park-phase-2-gapp-mashabane-rose-architects-mma/> (accessed: 20.02.2015).

¹⁸ *Freedom Park. A heritage destination...*

a heritage (e.g. story-telling, performances) and by involving the local community in the construction process (natural materials used by ancestors, being together and building together). Highlighting a heritage can also help to re-discover landscape and ecology as a common heritage to be preserved, which is derived from African system of perception (interconnectivity of beings and environments). The analysis showed that South African perception of a heritage begins from geological processes that shaped the Earth and thus, the idea of 'cave' is often used to stimulate the discovery of the past. Finally, a heritage can be promoted by outstanding architecture of HIC, which becomes a source of pride and prestige to the national and international audience providing added-value to a heritage site.

Conclusions

Firstly, each Heritage Interpretation Centre interprets the heritage as a process which is in line with the new definition of architecture also being a process. In reference to architecture HIC can be a process of discovery by architectural means of expression and use of what has been discovered in the present. Secondly, if a heritage is not an object but a message included in it, directed to the people and its authenticity is associated with feelings of recipients¹⁹, it should take into account each visitor's system of perception. In this case the author, as an European is not prepared cognitively for understanding African system of perception²⁰, so the analysis led only to a conclusion that a heritage envisioning, especially in HICs, must be considered in reference to various systems of perception at different levels – local, national and international. Finally, the author can assume that the role played by architectural means of expression in a heritage envisioning in HICs among others is to help stimulate exploration, experience and imagination process of the heritage, which is achieved differently in various cultural environments.

¹⁹ Krępczyńska-Walczak A. pp. 99-112.

²⁰ Kądziała M. p. 559.