

LESSONS FROM ROBBEN ISLAND RECONCILIATION AND CONSERVATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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"While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument of our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness; a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old"

Ahmed Kathrada (Prison no. 468/64, imprisoned for 26 years)

The Heritage Policy document of the South African Institute of Architects was drafted on Robben Island by the Regional Heritage Representatives. In recognition of complex cultural landscapes in South Africa and the role of the built environment within those landscapes, the Heritage Policy document, named the "Robben Island Heritage Vision" relates the aims of the Constitution of South Africa, particularly the Bill of Rights dealing with the environment to the management of those complex cultural landscapes.

This paper will examine the areas of South Africa most effected by the apartheid regime and the positive contribution conservation projects have made in those areas.

Western Cape, Cape Town District Six Museum & Stepping Stones Creche

Eastern Cape, Port Elizabeth Red Location Apartheid Museum

Gauteng, Johannesburg Workers' Library and Museum in Newtown
Constitutional Court, sited at the Old Fort in Braamfontein

KwaZulu-Natal, Durban Inanda Freedom Trail, Gandhi's House at Phoenix Settlement,
Inanda Seminary, John Dube's house.
Kwa-Muhle Apartheid Museum

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This paper is titled “Lessons from Robben Island” as the Heritage Policy document of the South African Institute of Architects was drafted on Robben Island by the Regional Heritage Representatives. In recognition of complex cultural landscapes in South Africa and the role of the built environment within those landscapes, the Heritage Policy document, named the “Robben Island Heritage Vision” relates the aims of the Constitution of South Africa, particularly the Bill of Rights dealing with the environment to the management of those complex cultural landscapes.

The paper will examine the areas of South Africa most effected by the apartheid regime and the positive contribution conservation projects have made in those areas.

To understand the context of conservation in South Africa, it is necessary to have an overview of apartheid and the devastating effect it had on the country. The history we were taught at white segregated schools is not the true history of the development of South Africa. White settlers in the form of the Dutch came to South Africa in 1652. The area around Cape Town was developed as a re-fuelling post for Dutch sailors on their way to trade for spices in India. We were taught that the black people of South Africa reached our country at the same time, driven by fierce tribes from central Africa. The only indigenous people were considered to be the Koi.

The subsequent discovery of Mapungubwe has proved that a very sophisticated tribe of African people, numbering approximately nine thousand, lived in an area in the bushveld at the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers close to the present day borders of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe between 1000 and 1300 AD. The remains of this forgotten kingdom were undiscovered for seven centuries until an archaeological student from the University of Pretoria discovered their remains in 1933. The archaeological site revealed that the people were those of the Iron Age. Iron, copper and gold artefacts were discovered, used for practical and decorative purposes as well as for trade. Pottery, wood, ivory, bone, ostrich eggshells and the shells of snails and freshwater mussels indicate that many other materials were used and that the people traded with cultures as far away as East Africa, Persia, Egypt, India and China. Although efforts are now being made to declare the area as a world heritage site, the proof that this civilisation existed was not made public to the people of South Africa.(1).

From the time that white settlers came to South Africa, many wars were waged with the indigenous people, and although the African kingdoms lost land and cattle they were still independent some 200 years after the arrival of the first settlers. The arrival of the British military forces in South Africa at the beginning of the 19th century exacerbated the oppression of African people. After the Anglo Boer War, the civil war fought from 1899 to 1902, the power of the African kingdoms had been broken and they had been brought under the control of the colonial government. (2).

The Union of South Africa was established on 31 May 1910, bringing with it further loss of freedom, land and dignity which had begun in previous decades. This led to the formation of the South African Native National Congress in 1912 having the aim of defending their rights and fighting for freedom. In 1923 the organisation changed its name to the African National Congress (ANC). (2).

During the 1920s government policies became harsher and more racist. A rigid colour-bar was established to stop blacks from holding skilled jobs in a number of industries. The rise of

fascism in Europe led right-wing Afrikaners to stir up ethnic nationalism and racial hatred in South Africa. Inspired by Nazism in Germany, the Ossewa Brandwag (OB) was established in South Africa to set up a similar style of government in South Africa..(2)

The white parliament voted by a small majority to join the Second World War in 1939. In 1944 the ANC Youth League was established by younger members of the ANC, one being Walter Sisulu. After the conclusion of the Second World War, the Smuts government passed a law prohibiting Indians from owning land in certain parts of the city. This started a Passive Resistance Campaign led by the South African Indian Congress. (2)

The Youth League initiated a Programme of Action calling for strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience. This led to the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s. The Smuts Government was voted out in the 1948 elections. With the coming into power of the National Party came the introduction of apartheid. This increased resistance and during the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of 1952, volunteers deliberately broke apartheid laws. The government reacted by banning its leaders and passing new laws to prevent civil disobedience. (2)

The ANC joined Indian, coloured and white organisations to form the Congress Alliance, which adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955. When the government extended the Pass Laws to black women, women marched on the Union Buildings in 1956. In the same year, the government arrested 156 leaders of the ANC and its allies and charged them with high treason using the Freedom Charter as the basis of its charge. All the accused were eventually acquitted. (2).

On 21 March 1960, police opened fire on an anti-pass demonstrations in Sharpeville, killing 69 people and wounding 186. The country was plunged into a state of despair and many people who had the means chose to emigrate, seeing no future for the country. On 30 March the government banned the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress, declared a state of emergency, arrested and detained thousands without trial. (2)

It was clear to the ANC that peaceful protest was not bringing results and in 1961 the armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), was formed to undertake acts of sabotage against Government installations. Two hundred acts of sabotage were carried out in the following 18 months. MK's secret headquarters were at Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia. In 1963, the police raided the farm and arrested the leadership of MK. This led to the famous Rivonia Trial where the leaders of MK, including Nelson Mandela, were charged with attempting to cause a violent revolution, and were sentenced to life imprisonment. (2)

In the 1970s new struggles against the system began to grow. In response to the poor conditions of workers, spontaneous strikes began in Durban in 1973 and later spread to other parts of the country. (2)

The rise of 'black consciousness' at places of education resulted in student riots in June 1976. Protests by thousands of high school students against the compulsory use of Afrikaans at school caused the police to open fire on marching students. Uprisings spread to other parts of the country with thousands of young people joining the ANC, MK and workers movements.(2)

In the 1980s, mass action movements led to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF). School boycotts and stay aways became a common occurrence. (2)

The government reacted to the mounting resistance by declaring a state of emergency, detaining thousands of people and assassinating activists. There was also an international campaign against apartheid. The combination of internal resistance and international isolation resulted in the realisation by the apartheid government that they needed to enter into negotiations with the ANC. (2)



Fig. 1

In February 1990, the ANC and South African Communist Party were unbanned, and Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were released.

South Africans were able to join the ANC, and branch and regional structures were established. There was still ongoing violence and resistance to the changes by white reactionaries. After the massacre of 39 residents of Boipatong in 1992, the ANC embarked on further mass action. A Record of Understanding was signed by the government which led to the resumption of multi-party talks, culminating in the adoption in 1993 of an interim constitution. (2).

On 27 April 1994, millions of South Africans went to vote for the first time, resulting in a win for the ANC by a vast majority. On 10 May, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the President of South Africa, heading a Government of National Unity. The new Government focussed on writing a new democratic constitution. This was adopted in 1996 giving all South Africans equal rights. (2)

1.0 WESTERN CAPE, CAPE TOWN

1.1 THE DISTRICT SIX MUSEUM AND STEPPING STONES CHILDREN'S CENTRE

District Six is an area of approximately 1,5 square kilometres, spread along the flank of Table Mountain south of the centre of Cape Town. It was named District Six in 1867 as it was the sixth municipal district in Cape Town. It was originally a mixed community of freed slaves, immigrants, labourers, merchants and artisans. Later it included a different kind of mix – artists, politicians, businessmen, musicians, writers, teachers, sheikhs, priests, gangsters, sportsmen, housewives and always lots of children. (3).

Sixty to seventy thousand people were living in District Six when in February 1966, District Six was officially declared an area for white people only. The buildings of District Six were systematically demolished, the vibrant community which inhabited District Six were forced to move in terms of Apartheid Legislation. Today vast areas of District Six are still vacant, there are plans to hold a Housing Competition for the area.

In 1992, a two week exhibition was held to commemorate the destruction of District Six. The exhibition was such a success that the need was seen to have a permanent exhibition. The building chosen for this function was originally constructed as a warehouse and later converted into a church. The architects have responded to the layering of previous functions by respecting the original building fabric while at the same time introducing new elements in a sensitive and appropriate manner. (4).

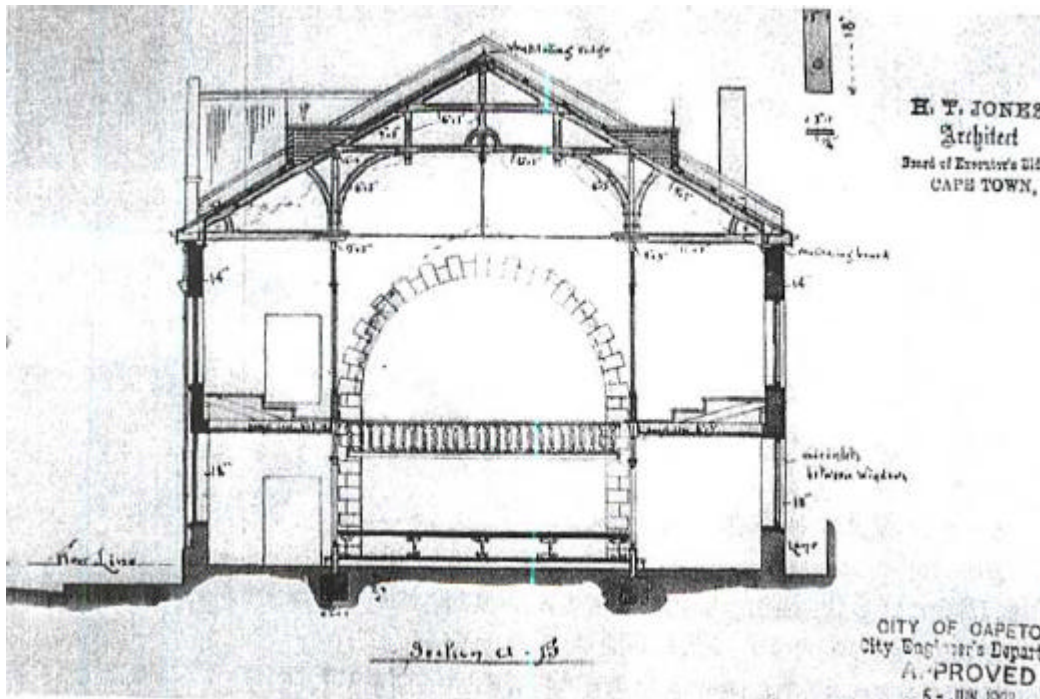


Fig. 2

The main volume housing the museum space has been well researched and sensitively restored with the introduction of modern components such as a small lift for disabled visitors. The secondary building behind the museum has been recycled into offices for museum staff as well as a creche for over 100 children. The building has been opened up to allow sunlight to penetrate the building and contorted circulation routes simplified. Besides the evidence of the architects competence in a fine example of architectural conservation is the pride displayed in the building by the original residents of District Six, many of whom act as guides in the museum and whose grandchildren attend the creche.

“Concluding citation by the National Panel of Adjudicators

The visit by the panel on Heritage Day gave a clear sense of the value of the project to the community it served as well as the visiting public. The architects have imbued a nondescript collection of buildings with an air of civic dignity and nobility. They have managed to explore the brief as facilitator for the disparate clients and funding agencies through clever and inventive planning and spacial organisation. Yet the designers have shown admirable restraint

in allowing for the expression of the client's concerns in their application of decorative features. (4)

This project receives a SAIA Conservation Award because the architects succeeded in skilfully creating, from a disparate collection of buildings and disjointed spaces, a cohesive place of communal memory." (4).

2.0 EASTERN CAPE, PORT ELIZABETH

2.1 RED LOCATION APARTHEID MUSEUM

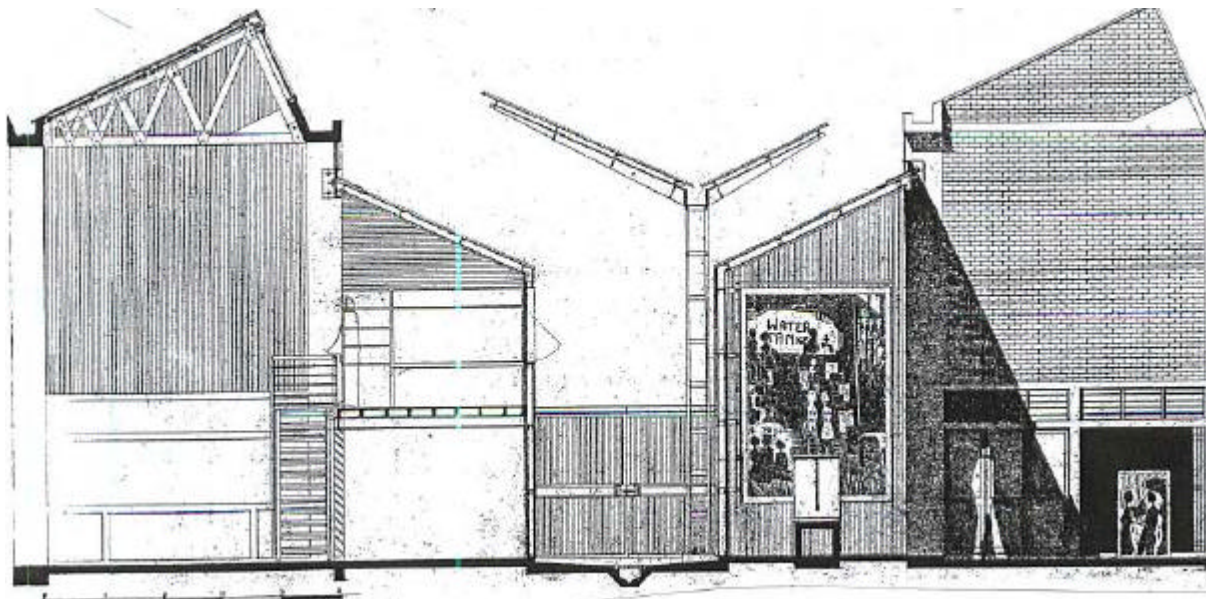


Fig. 3

The Eastern Cape was one of the primary areas in South Africa used for the establishment of the ANC system of cells and the carrying out of the Defiance Campaign. The region produced some of the leading activists in South Africa. In recognition of the contribution made to achieving democratic freedom for our country, the Municipality of Port Elizabeth decided in 1998 to hold a national competition for the re-development of an area known as Red Location for an Apartheid Museum, an Art Gallery and Creative Art Centre, a Market, a Library, a Hall and Visitor's Accommodation. Red Location originally consisted of numerous corrugated iron buildings, painted red, which had been used as a concentration camp during the Anglo Boer War. After the war, the buildings were moved to an area outside Port Elizabeth as a designated area for only black inhabitants. (5).

The competition was won by Noero Wolff Architects but due to problems with funding, only the housing component was constructed.

3.0 GAUTENG, JOHANNESBURG

3.1 WORKERS LIBRARY AND MUSEUM IN NEWTOWN

Black workers were seen as a source of cheap labour, removed from their families and housed in single sex compounds. A municipal workers' compound in Newtown, Johannesburg, used until the 1970s was left to become derelict. The Workers Library employed Alan Lipman in

association with Henry Paine to restore the building. The east wing of the building has been converted into a four room Workers Museum that commemorated the history of the African migrant workers who helped build Johannesburg. The museum provides a faithful reconstruction of conditions in the single sex hostels in which black Johannesburg municipal workers lived and struggled, for the better part of the 20th century. The remainder of the building was converted into meeting rooms, offices and a library.

The restoration of the building won an Award of Excellence for the architects from the South African Institute of Architects in 1995. The buildings have also been declared as a National Monument and are recognised as an important part of working class heritage.

3.2 CONSTITUTIONAL COURT, SITED AT THE OLD FORT BRAAMFONTEIN

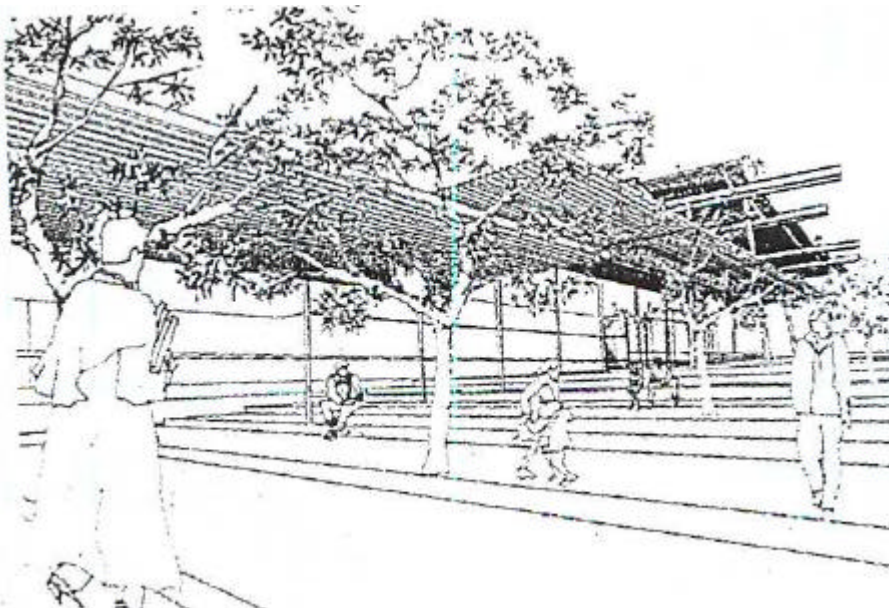


Fig. 4

The international competition held in 1998 for the new Constitutional Court building in South Africa was the first major competition for a public building since the installation of the new Government in 1994. Many sites for this important building were considered, but the site that was eventually chosen for its symbolism was the site of the Old Fort in Braamfontein. The Old Fort was considered the Robben Island of Johannesburg. “Built to control the British Uitlanders, and later used to incarcerate Boer rebels, white mine-worker insurrectionaries, members of the Ossewa Brandwag, and the Treason Trialists of the 1950’s, the Old Fort is the only prison in the world in which both Gandhi and Mandela were locked up”. Justice Albie Sachs, Constitutional Court Judge. (7).

The competition was won by OMM Design Workshop and Urban Solutions and is currently under construction. (7).

4.0 KWAZULU-NATAL, DURBAN

4.1 INANDA FREEDOM TRAIL, GANDHI'S HOUSE AT PHOENIX SETTLEMENT, INANDA SEMINARY, JOHN DUBE'S HOUSE.

4.1.1 GANDHI'S HOUSE AT PHOENIX SETTLEMENT

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in India in 1869 and trained as a barrister in London. He arrived in Durban in 1893 as his professional services had been engaged by a wealthy Durban trader. Unaware of the racial prejudices in South Africa, he was thrown off the train to Pretoria at Pietermaritzburg because he refused to move to a van as he had purchased a first class ticket. The Natal Indian Congress was formed in 1894 and Gandhi decided to practice law in Natal. He brought his family out to South Africa in 1896 and in 1904, influenced by the teachings of Ruskin, he bought a farm at Phoenix to establish a communal settlement. The settlement consisted of Gandhi's house, a printing press and settlers' homes. The house was subsequently converted to a museum, but was destroyed by the Inanda riots of 1985. The house has now been re-constructed. (8).

'To have nurtured in our bosom a man of the calibre of Gandhi the universal revered originator of passive resistance as a means of struggle against oppression, is indeed astonishing.

Within the tiny Indian community at the turn of the century and into its first decade Gandhi wrought and practised this philosophy against formidable adversaries. Success was limited but the fulfilment here was of limitless value.....Indeed the spark of resistance fired by Gandhi had never died down and the succeeding generations of all South Africans caught the spark and ushered in the change in this country in April 1994." Hassim Seedat, Attorney. (8).

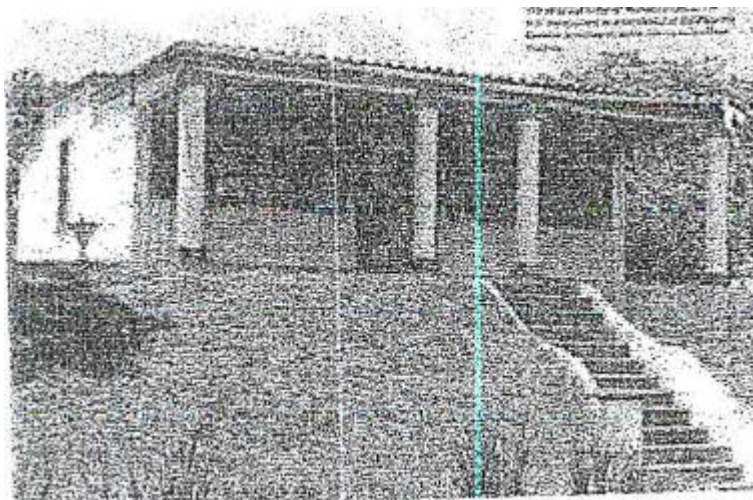


Fig. 5.

4.1.2 INANDA SEMINARY

In 1869, Inanda Seminary was founded by Mrs Edwards of the American Board of Missions. The school and mission station was constructed in Inanda, near where Gandhi would later establish his settlement. Inanda Seminary was open to African girls and the standard of education offered was comparable to better funded schools for the daughters of white colonists. Subjects taught included agriculture which led to 20 acres being cultivated to keep the school financially independent. Today the old girls are evident in government, medicine, law, education and other professions. (9).



Fig. 6.

4.1.3 DUBE'S HOUSE

John Langalibalele Dube was born in Natal in 1871, the son of Rev. James Dube one of the first ordained pastors of the American Zulu Mission active in the area of Inanda. In 1901 he established the Zulu Christian Industrial School on 200 acres of land at Ohlange, close to Phoenix settlement where Gandhi started the newspaper, Indian Opinion. Dube started a Zulu/English newspaper, the Sun of Natal, thus establishing his professional reputation but he is best known for being the first ANC President General. Dube witnessed the conversion of his people from independent freedom fighters and warriors into "house boys" and "garden boys" - dispossessed rural and urban wage workers. (10).

The importance of Ohlange was underscored by Nelson Mandela casting his vote during our first democratic election in the school hall building.

4.2 KWA-MUHLE APARTHEID MUSEUM

This building was constructed as the 'Bantu Administration' offices to control the influx of labour from the rural areas. Prior to the formal introduction of apartheid in 1948, this building was hated by all those attempting to find work in Durban. Here pass laws were enforced and controls established to prevent people working where they wished and for as long as they wished. People were also humiliated by having to be dipped and by being 'medically examined'. The building is now a museum and tells the story of life in the townships, single sex compounds and municipal beerhalls. There are also full scale re-constructions of shacks that people were forced to live in. The irony is that the majority of people have not escaped from this life. Durban has an abundance of informal settlements where life has not changed for the inhabitants.(11).

5.0 CONCLUSION AND THE APARTHEID MUSEUM, GOLD REEF CITY, JOHANNESBURG

While this paper has attempted to demonstrate the importance of conservation in coming to terms with the history of South Africa, one building recently completed, the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, is considered by many architects to be extremely successful as a building of Africa.

Freedom Park was conceived as the community project that formed part of the winning bid submitted for the casino licence at Gold Reef City. While the means to achieve this building could be questioned, unlike the Apartheid Museum in Port Elizabeth which was never constructed, it has achieved a building of merit which portrays in graphic detail the apartheid years, focussing on the period 1948 to 1994. (12).

Conservation in South Africa in the areas most effected by the apartheid regime is answering Ahmed Kathrada's call for 'a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness, a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness, a triumph of the new South Africa over the old'.

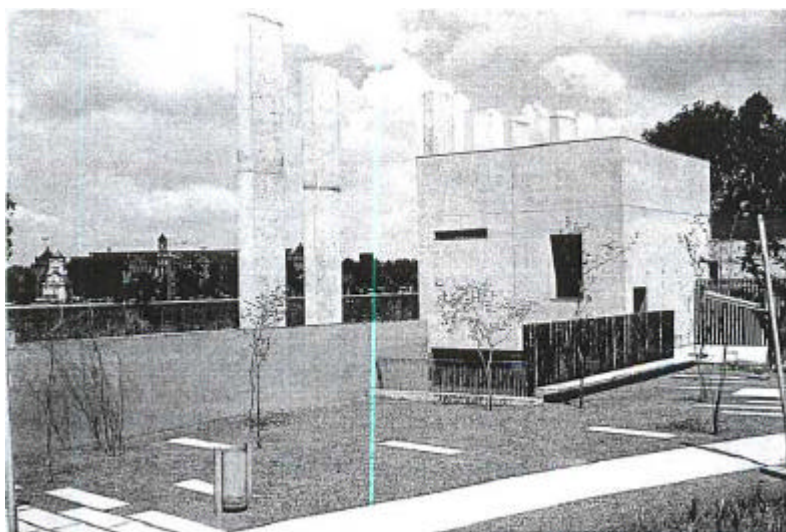


Fig. 7

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FIGURES

1. Nelson and Winnie Mandela, February 1990.
2. Original drawing, District Six Museum, SA Architect, Nov/Dec 2001
3. Section through Red Location, Apartheid Museum, Noero Wolff Architects, SA Arch.
4. The African Steps, Constitutional Court, OMM Design Workshop & Urban Solutions
5. Gandhi's House, Gandhi – Mahatma in the Making 1983 – 1914, K Chetty, 1996.
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