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Fynbos: research & education centre

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a b s t r a c t

'Unless someone like you cares an awful lot,
nothing is going to get better,
it's not.'

(The Lorax, Dr Seuss)

How can architecture play a role to make us understand and realise the vulnerability of Fynbos? The Western Cape is the habitat for one of the six species of the floral kingdom, Fynbos. This botanical treasure is in danger of becoming extinct. There are thousands of types of Fynbos, each endemic to a specific region within the Western Cape and it is important to raise awareness of this unique species as creating a familiarity and deeper personal connection with the plant can help to protect this endangered flora.

I propose a Fynbos Research and Education Centre set in Clanwilliam, a historical area within the Cederberg Mountain Range. The centre will be created to allow a deeper understanding of Fynbos and to this effect, aims to educate people about Fynbos so as to give them a better knowledge about sustainable living and the value of this plant species. It will be a place of calm and learning and the landscape will have a fundamental effect on the form. A vital part of the work to be carried out by this centre will be research into methods of conservation as well as into possible medical and cosmetic uses inherent in this species.

Looking to plant structure, organic architecture and the analogy of nature, and its influence on architecture from both the geology of the region and the natural landscape setting, to discover what this then means for the architecture of the centre. The idea of Nature's constant generation and degeneration, life coming from death and the influence of ruins on architectural imaginations will be fundamental in this building. Fynbos is endangered but this centre will aim to prevent it from becoming a memory and perhaps once it has been saved the structure will be left for nature to take over once again.

The relationship between Fynbos and the landscape will shape and determine the architecture and materiality. Organic rammed earth walls will rise out of the sandstone formations which are the foundation of the Cederberg, to create this centre. The walls, made up of the very sand that sustains the Fynbos will exemplify it as at one with nature. As fire reignites life within the Fynbos seeds which lie dormant beneath the soil, so too can the building and the garden ignite passion to save this species, incorporating various design mechanisms into the architecture representing fire and its giving of life, in the case of the Fynbos, or preventing destruction in terms of the building.

The creation of an education centre, restaurant and research facility will encourage a steady stream of visitors to Clanwilliam throughout the year. This will help to build tourism and eco-tourism to the town and surrounding areas, giving a much needed economic injection by creating job opportunities. Importantly, it will also increase awareness and exposure to the Fynbos species, with the building encouraging the visitor to linger and get involved with the plants and site and to develop a deeper affinity with this dwindling flora.

This thesis aims to take its visitors on a journey, by means of architecture, creating a human experience and therefore a connection with their surroundings, exploring and uncovering the landscape of the Cederberg and its local identity and heritage, creating a bond forged by a new understanding.