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Satyagraha Living-in Museum: fusing the past to the present according to Gandhi's principles on Tolstoy farm

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Abstract

100 years ago, two men set an example to the world by embarking on a radical experiment in living. Viewed as political and social rebels in a time of racial injustice in Johannesburg, they were armed only with their hands for building, and a deep sense of their own unconventional ideology.

Herman Kallenbach, my uncle, who was a German born architect, and his friend Mohandas K Gandhi, a relatively unknown Indian lawyer, conceived of a utopian environment separated from the city, as a training centre for 'non- violent passive resistors' and a hideout and safe haven for the families of imprisoned, political non- co- operators. Their memory still exists physically on the site, in the form of one remaining stone plinth structure, which was the foundation of one of various buildings erected by the community. Gandhi attributes the formulation of his most influencial and internationally respected ideas to the processes and thinking which he and other members underwent on 'Tolstoy Farm'- named by Kallenbach in honour of Russian writer and anti- consumerist revolutionary of the time- Count Leo Tolstoy.

On the farm, "Tolstoyan" principles were fused with the "Gandhian" philosophy of passive resistance- and Satyagraha: 'the way of truth'. This resulted in a rich and revolutionary prototype for living, inspired by similar establishments which were initiated in Russia, and based on a passion for Tolstoy's approach to basic living- devoid of the superfluous luxuries which he felt poisoned society's upper classes, robbing them of all moral value. Instead, a humble life lived in harmony with one's neighbours, and with compassion for one's oppressors, in close communion with nature, was preferred in reaching the ultimate goal of "Truth".

The landscape which hosted this experiment appears empty today, because its current value resides below its vast, grassy surface, in the rocks and soil buried below. Located just outside of Lenasia, Johannesburg, it is owned by Corobrik, whose interests lie in the site's mineral and clay- rich soil, used in the manufacture of bricks and ceramic products.

This thesis explores opportunities for connecting architectural design to the vast array of concepts which emerged out of the narrative of events which took place on Tolstoy Farm. Conceptually similar to the Tolstoy Farm experiment, this intervention aims to merge seemingly unrelated ideas in an unconventional and unprecedented way, ultimately resulting in a fusion of concepts, and a new, 'hybrid' architectural type. In doing so, it draws on existing types, such as the monastery, the educational environment, the communal living environment, and the museum- merging them to feed off of and compliment each other. This allows for cross- programming and user- mixing- stretching its possibilities socially and programmatically, but also spatially. To rekindle the spirit of a one hundred year old story, the project proposes a sensitive re- interpretation of its narrative, in light of a response which is appropriate for the Twenty First Century, to fuse the past into a contemporary dialogue with the present.