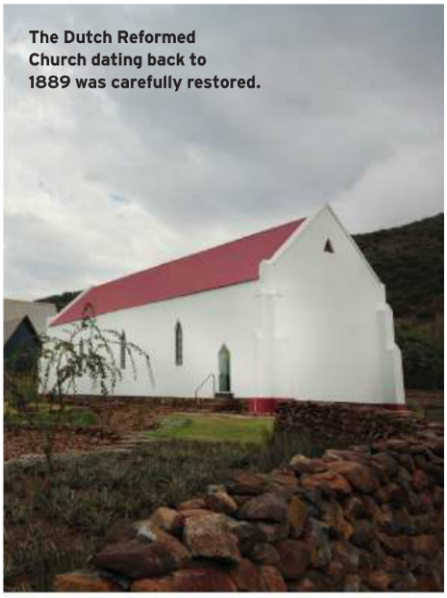
Modern Africa embraces tradition at Moruleng

Moruleng Cultural Precinct uses the careful layering of history and material culture to provide a critical reading of history while creating a tourist attraction and cultural centre.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATASHA LAURENT





The Dutch Reformed Church dating back to 1889 was carefully restored.





Moruleng Cultural Precinct in Pilansberg in the Northwest Province is a heritage site that has been redeveloped and transformed into a museum, exhibition space and community hall. It has been designed to function as a tourist attraction and as a centre for community events, so that it serves visitors as well as locals. The Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela Tribal Authority commissioned Totem Media and architect Nabeel Essa of Office 24-7 to carry out the project after they had worked on the design of an exhibition at the old museum during the 2010 Fifa World Cup.

"Kgosi Pilane wanted to find ways that the community and children could read their culture through a contemporary lens," explains Essa, "seen not a stagnant thing, but as something that has grown together with other cultures and developed, as modern African, traditional and Christian."

The site included a Dutch Reformed Church dating back to 1889, which hadn't been used for many years, and a school building from 1937, which had been converted into a museum in the late 1990s.

The project involved not just the restoration of these existing buildings, but also a comprehensive design that would include additional buildings, landscape design, interior design, furniture design, and exhibition design for the museum.

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Essa and his team's approach involved looking critically at the concept of museums and cultural centres. "Multiple historical influences have disrupted the cultural narratives and history of the Bagatla-ba-Kgafela people," says Essa. His design aimed to articulate the cultural layering and discontinuities, as well as to forge the basis of a modern identity.

To unify the site and begin an exploration of Tswana material culture, Essa found a poetic opportunity in the idea of reconstructing a nearby iron-age Tswana settlement. "We had to scale it by 15% and shifted some of the angles to make it work on the site," says Essa, but it sets up a dialogue between building and landscape, and also provides the practical necessity of a garden and recreational space.

"The stone age settlement reveals a very complex organisational system," says Essa. "It completely undermines the pre-colonial versions of African culture represented by apartheid."

Planting was carried out by landscaper Patrick Watson, who harvested indigenous plants in the area in consultation with a traditional healer to include a traditional medicine garden. "The planting is exquisite," says Essa. "It has such energy and colour, and is beautifully layered with the stone walling of the settlement patterns and buildings."

Rather than alter the colonial buildings, Essa restored them, but through the layering of the site, interpreted their place in Setswana culture. "Having layers that are separate and different makes it possible to read each one," says Essa.

PROFESSIONAL TEAM
Architects: Office 24-7
Project Team: Nabeel Essa, William Dewar, Beth Stevens, Letlabile Shubane
Structural Engineers: MVW Consulting Engineers
Electrical Engineers: CKR Consulting Engineers
Landscape Architect: Patrick Watson Landscape
Quantity Surveyors: Quanco Quantity Surveyors
Museum Development and Project Management: Totem Media
Exhibition Design: Brainwave
Community Liaison Officer: MR Mankgeli
Contractor: Bri-Dev Projects; ThomaThabiso Construction
Exhibition Contractor: ImageK, Digital Fabric

Among the discreet new buildings, including mostly modern ablutions and a kitchen, the bolder addition of a new amphitheatre not only provides a performance space, but also serves as a modern interpretation of an open air kgotla or meeting place for community leaders.

Lekgapo patterning, a striated design "traditionally used on floors and walls, and made from a dung mixture" has had various contemporary reinterpretations throughout the precinct. It is used strategically throughout the design, as a way to examine gender, patriarchy and the role of women in Setswana culture. Although it is used in its original form in some instances, it is also reinvented as wallpaper in the entrance of the museum, and in the laths used for the roofing of the amphitheatre, which creates a pattern of shadows that recast the traditional design language in a new light.

Inside the museum, the exhibition design explores Bagatla-ba-Kgafela creation stories, traditional beliefs and healing systems. Essa adds that the museum "problematised the idea of museum and collection and display". He relies more on the model of an archive than a museum. "The idea was to see the structure of how this history is constructed," says Essa. Not only does this approach create the space for "other voices to come through", it ensures that history is not presented as sealed off in the past.

In this way, the museum precinct becomes a site that allows the intersection of the past and the present to inform the future.







The roof laths used for the roofing of the amphitheatre mimic the traditional lekgapo patterning usually used on walls and floors.