Acknowledgement

The Living Park, Jwaneng, Botswana

Project data
Type of project: other
Start of construction: August 2006

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Comment of the Holcim Awards 2005 jury for Africa Middle East

This ambitious project is distinguished by its proposal for a park that also serves as a community resource centre facilitating a variety of local development initiatives. Cultural revitalization, as well as the conservation of natural bio-diversity. Highly convincing are the design philosophy and process which follow a logic of “systems-thinking” and demonstrate an acute awareness of the host context at socio-cultural and environmental levels. The premise of environmental as well as ecological conservation as the foundation of the proposed economic and cultural activities has been effectively substantiated in the design of the facility in terms of the buildings and the landscape. A significant contribution of the project will be in generating economic improvement for the region, which at the same time promises to stimulate a greater awareness of the benefit of community-driven initiatives such as this one across a larger audience. A convincing feasibility study guided the design to ensure viability and a flexible model allowing future replacement of less fruitful enterprises by more successful ones. The park and buildings are skillfully integrated to produce a seamlessly integrated environment, one that enhances and puts to use the untapped capacities of the existing site.

Project description by author

The Living Park is an exciting and innovative educational park that dynamically explores the interactions of society, culture and the natural environment.

It began as an initiative of local government in the diamond mining town of Jwaneng in southern Botswana. The Town Council commissioned the design team to carry out a feasibility study and preliminary design for a park that would bring value to the residents of the town and enhance tourism and other economic activity.

The design is the culmination of an interactive process between the design team, the community and other key stakeholders. The outcome of this process will provide an exciting recreational and learning environment, as well as a repository of cultural knowledge and information.

The entrance of the park is both a physical and virtual “gateway” into a diversity of experiences within its boundaries and further afield. Beyond the entrance lies a choice of two paths. Turn left, and you pass through gardens, fields and natural landscapes to a cultural village with traditional dwellings. Here you can practice making earth bricks, planting with soil and cow dung, and thatching a roof. The path to the right leads through a variety of cultural experiences to the same village and beyond to undisturbed bushveld. On both paths there is a linear transition from modern, technological, sophisticated experiences to natural, indigenous, traditional ones, given expression in every aspect of the landscape and building architecture.

Botanical gardens collect, protect and disseminate information on useful plant species including foods, medicines, cosmetics and building materials. The seedbank forms a link in the global effort to conserve indigenous species. Human comfort in the buildings is achieved by passive solar design responding to the local climate. The Kalahari sandveld is maintained as a key feature with additional planting of local and regional indigenous plant species.

The park is more than a response to its cultural and physical environment. It is a celebration of them. The main theme is man in his environmental context. A gateway to the surrounding wealth of culture and environmental heritage. Traditional elements are brought into the buildings to create a vernacular aesthetic. The buildings respond to the environment physically and visually. Development integrates with the natural environment. The design elements of the park are nested into the natural environment. The landscaping blends nature into the built environment. The park creates an accessible oasis of beauty on the edge of an otherwise functional mining town. There is a transition of decreasing development intensity from the entrance to the park hinterland.

Relevance to target issues (by author)

Quantum change and transferability

The innovation is in the application of sustainable environmental concepts forming the backbone of the park. The park is a living, cultural and environmental laboratory allowing for continual innovation. It adapts organically to its environment over time. There is a continual transfer of ideas in and out of the park as visitors learn from their experiences and interact with each other.

Ethical standards and social equity

The park promotes undervalued knowledge and skills residing with rural people. Local council commissioned and guided park planning with local stakeholders. Social impact assessment done as part of EIA. Ongoing local involvement e.g. in building, maintenance, guiding visitors, sharing knowledge. Supporting cultural tourism through trips to local villages and home stays.

Ecological quality and energy conservation

The park demonstrates harmony between man and the environment. It harnesses traditional knowledge of renewable natural resources e.g. earth and cow dung for building, traditional crops, medicinal plants. The existing Kalahari sandveld is maintained as a key feature with additional planting of local and regional indigenous plant species.

Economic performance and compatibility

A financial feasibility study guided the design to achieve viability for a modest capital investment. The town will develop a valuable resource. Activities generate revenue for the town, local enterprises and for the less well off rural population. The park generates employment. A flexible model allows less viable activities to be replaced by more successful activities over time.

Contextual response and aesthetic impact

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Technical performance and environmental impact

Highly convincing are the design philosophy and process which follow a logic of “systems-thinking” and demonstrate an acute awareness of the host context at socio-cultural and environmental levels. The premise of environmental as well as ecological conservation as the foundation of the proposed economic and cultural activities has been effectively substantiated in the design of the facility in terms of the buildings and the landscape. A significant contribution of the project will be in generating economic improvement for the region, which at the same time promises to stimulate a greater awareness of the benefit of community-driven initiatives such as this one across a larger audience. A convincing feasibility study guided the design to ensure viability and a flexible model allowing future replacement of less fruitful enterprises by more successful ones. The park and buildings are skillfully integrated to produce a seamlessly integrated environment, one that enhances and puts to use the untapped capacities of the existing site.