

# THE FREEDOM TO DESIGN

by Graham Young



**Freedom Park is an ambitious project aimed at developing a dedicated heritage precinct on Salvokop hill south of Pretoria's CBD. It seeks to create a deeper understanding of South Africa and its people by narrating the country's pre-colonial, colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid history.**

Freedom Park will "celebrate the achievement of democracy and freedom and stand as a beacon of hope for the future... a place of pilgrimage, renewal and inspiration for South Africans and all humanity". It is a cabinet-approved Legacy Project, managed by the Freedom Park Trust under the leadership of Dr Wally Serote, with former President, Nelson Mandela, as the Trust's patron-in-chief. The first phase of the project, including the Isivivane, was formally handed to President Thabo Mbeki on 8 March 2004.

It is also a superb interaction between African culture and landscape architecture to create a place that engages people spiritually. The design challenge was to reintegrate and introduce people to African culture, symbolism and spiritual meaning through a narrative that expresses the place abstractly, and not to alienate any one cultural group.

In developing the site, landscape architects used stone, water and plant material to create a landscape resonating with universal symbolic and spiritual meaning – yet one which is unashamedly founded in African cultural expression. By working in a sensitive manner, drawing on indigenous knowledge systems and advice from traditional healers, the landscape architects succeeded in creating a harmonious and unforced design. It is this innovative and culturally sensitive approach that is of significance and value in the landscape architecture profession.

#### **The site**

A development framework was first prepared for the site by a consortium of architects and urban designers, involving GAPP, MMA and Mashabane Rose. On the basis of a preliminary ecological survey, the landscape architects proposed a revised approach to the development of the site.



The ecological survey recognised Salvokop as being of significant ecological value, a fact confirmed by the later environmental impact assessment. Salvokop is a natural quartzite ridge with pockets of fascinating endemic plants. It is characterised by thickly wooded savannah on its northern and eastern slopes, giving way to highveld grassland on its southern slopes, where there is also a small forest of *Protea caffra*.

The location on a hill is significant. In African culture high ground on a rock symbolises many things. According to a report by the Freedom Park Trust, "... essentially, the rock is our home – African people used to live in mountains where they constantly listened to the voice of silence. Mountains and hills served as a seat of governance for many of the royal kraals. Mountains were considered sacred by some groups who used to go to the mountains to pray for rain, or to bury kings on rocks

or in caves in the mountains, believing that ancestors resided there – a step to the heavens and to our humanity" (Freedom Park Trust, 2004).

The first phase of development included a parking area, an information centre, the upgrading of the service ring road at the base of the hill, and the *Isivivane* – the first in a series of planned contemplative places in Freedom Park.

#### **Isivivane**

The *Isivivane* is a sanctuary – "a final resting place for all the people who fell in the fight for freedom in the eight conflict events, which eventually shaped South Africa." These events of conflict are the pre-colonial wars, the colonial wars and genocide, slavery, the wars of resistance, the Anglo-Boer War, the First World War and its impact on South Africa, the Second World War and its impact on South Africa

and the Struggle for Liberation. *Isivivane* roughly means 'cairn of stones', but its deeper meaning is 'monument', 'memorial', 'testimonial' and 'fervour, concentration of energy and commitment to solidarity and oneness of purpose' (Ngubane, 2003).

Entering the *Isivivane*, visitors experience a sense of reverence. Stone, water and the discreet use of plant materials form the basic design elements. Rocks and boulders have special significance in African cosmology. They represent mountains and caves, which served as the people's shelter and places of safety, and as shrines for ancestral devotion. In ancient times mighty people were buried on rocks in the mountains.

Rocks are considered sacred as, according to Credo Mutwa, "they are the stones and bones of the earth and some mountains are identified as places where the gods



reside. Because they are timeless and ancient, because they have long been here before us, they carry sacred networks of information” (Freedom Park Trust, 2004). The Isivivane is a symbolic ‘resting’ or ‘burial’ place.

### Concept

The layout of the *Isivivane* is that of an African ‘homestead’ encompassing the ‘*lesaka*’ (burial place) and the ‘*kgotla*’ (meeting place).

The ‘*lesaka*’ in African culture is a circular structure commonly found in southern African villages where generation upon generation are buried, a place where the spirits of those who have fallen in the struggle for freedom over time can come home to rest (Freedom Park Trust, 2004). It is built of stone and comprises nine boulders, one from each province, placed near the edge of a circle. Balancing these are two larger boulders completing the circle. They represent the national and local governments.

Contained within the boulder circle are stones that come from other countries – symbolic of combatants and exiles who fell while seeking refuge internationally. The circular pattern symbolises unity and equality. A fine water spray is designed in the *lesaka*. Mist rises from the stone floor to envelope the boulders. This smoke or *impepho* emphasises the sanctity of the place and is representative of the South African nation healing from its past. The spiritual and ancestral significance of the *lesaka* is captured in the words of an elder to Archbishop Dandala.

### I am an African

*If you dig the Earth in this lesaka, you will find me*  
*If you dig and dig and dig*  
*You will find me still*  
*If you dig and dig and dig*  
*And even if you use the big machines*  
*Which the human race has made*  
*To dig and dig and dig*  
*To the fathomless bottom*  
*There*  
*You will find me in the earth.*

Near the *lesaka*, also on the terrace, a tree is planted in the middle of a circular bench. It is an *Acacia galpinii* (mologa or monkey thorn), symbolic of the *kgotla* tree. It will provide dense shade and cover in the summer for visitors wanting to reflect on the place and the meaning of the *Isivivane*. It is orientated with a beautiful view across the *lesaka* to the natural valley and hills south of the site. A symbolic reference to African culture and the spiritual bond formed between the Nguni people and the *Ziziphus mucronata* inspired the choice of nine buffalo thorn trees that will form a green backdrop to the *Isivivane*.

When a person died far from home (often in battle), family elders would send a party to ‘fetch the spirit’. Branches from the *umhlalankosi* or buffalo thorn tree were used for this ceremony. The party would carry a branch from the tree and, at the spot where the person died, call out the name of the deceased and announce that they had come to take his spirit home (Manqele & O’Donoghue, 1994).

One of the interpretations of *Isivivane* is “paying homage to the hospitality of place”. This is represented by a cairn of stones often found in the countryside near a village and adjacent to a footpath. When African people passed a village but did not

go in, they indicated that they had passed the place by picking up a stone, bringing it to their mouth, breathing on it and placing it on a heap of stones. Travellers paying homage to the landscape considered this accumulated heap, called an *Isivivane*, to bring good luck (Freedom Park Trust, 2004). An abstraction of this is captured in the sloping packed-stone wall formed between the main terrace and the spiral pathway.

To further capture the essence of the *Isivivane* being a place where “... its spirit flows and cleanses like water”, a waterfall is designed into the stone-packed wall near the *lesaka* and beneath the buffalo thorn trees. Water flows over a trough, down a stone-pitched wall and into a shallow pool, creating an ambience that reminds the visitor that in this place “the spirit flows and cleanses like water”. To complete the experience of the *Isivivane*, a small ‘spring’ of water emanating from a bowl carved into the top of a large boulder placed near the exit acts as a basin where visitors can wash their hands in respect after paying homage to the spirits of those people who fought and died for South Africa’s freedom. 🌿

### References

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- Ngubane, H. 2003. *The role of research in the indigenous knowledge sector of Freedom Park*. In: *Proceedings of the Youth Workshop, Pretoria, 26 May 2003*.

*Graham Young is a senior lecturer in the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria, and principal of Newtown Landscape Architects. The Isivivane at Freedom Park received the Presidential Award of Excellence: Design from the Institute of Landscape Architects of South Africa in 2005. This award, together with three other awards of merit awarded to Young in 2005, contributed to the review of creative output as research outcomes.*