

with painstaking care. Due to the nature of the site, the sensitivity with which the builder approached constructing the pathway was essential.

The constraints on construction were considerable. No welding, painting or sanding could be done on site. As the air at the back of the cave doesn't circulate, any such work would result in fumes being trapped in those cavities for centuries, so the pathway had to be premanufactured off-site.

Finding a builder with the right skills to operate within the constraints, and in the middle of the Northern Cape, was a challenge. What was required was both high-level technological ability to construct off-site, and a skilful sensitivity to the context and requirements of the site.

McClenaghan mentions some of the peculiarities of a design process stretching over several years. A cross-section of the project would show, much like the collection of human histories it seeks to protect, the process of advancement in technology, skill and endeavour that took place from the origin of the project to its completion. The original project was drawn in AutoCAD, but this had been overtaken by more advanced technology when the project was about to be built. McClenaghan commissioned a team to conduct a digital investigation of the cave. A laser scan of the cave was done by the University of Cape Town's Zamani Project. Their work is focused on spatially capturing three-dimensional, digital versions of heritage landscapes and buildings in Africa. This opened a new world of information about the inner workings of the cave. Using this information, McClenaghan used the site as a drawing board on which he mapped out the points of construction. In this way, he met the need to ensure that no part of the precious archaeological site would be damaged by responding in an instinctual architectural way.

Deciding on the form of the pathway was difficult. How does one create a non-invasive architectural gesture and stay true to the already contradictory demands of accommodating people, and protecting the site? After toiling with a number of options, the decision was made to use the path of least resistance. By tweaking the existing path for public use, the team installed an object that would gently touch the ground.

The success of the project would not depend on the use of expensive material or technological glitz, but on a sensitive, considered architectural approach. The path was never meant to be precious, but to fit into a robust space where archaeologists were working, while still having the sophistication of an exhibit showcasing millions of years of unearthed human history.

UNVEILING THE PATHWAY

The built pathway remained true to its design philosophy. The materiality is raw and untreated. The elements are simple. The composition is impeccable, and the construction required using only basic skills well.

Elevating and containing the path above the ground alters the visitor's engagement with and experience of

the site, allowing the archaeological site to be viewed but not physically accessed. The raised platform is created through detailing that is considerate to the sensitive site. Concrete sleepers on the ground beneath the pathway were designed by considering the weight that the compacted powder sediment of the cave could withstand.

Steel supports are fixed into the sleepers to carry the pathway, so nothing is fixed to the cave itself. The path changes with the gradient of the cave, so it bows and dips with the landscape. Where this causes a kink, small pause spaces were created. Steel balustrades are hidden behind the unfinished mesh steel screen while timber handrails slide themselves in one uninterrupted, seamless line along the length of the pathway. The floorboards follow the path of the handrails running lengthwise instead of across the path. This drags your eye along the path.

This pathway unravels an intricate relationship where architecture and archaeology are the antithesis of one another, with one seeking to cover the earth and the other to remove it.

PATH INTO THE FUTURE

McClenaghan and the McGregor Museum team have put together a proposal for SAHRA to build an exhibition centre and a visitor's centre, and create a formalised landscape and parking area. Wonderwerk Cave is on the cusp of becoming a World Heritage Site and an initiative such as this one should give it the exposure it needs.

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McClenaghan is part of a new breed of architects, who don't just receive a brief, they create their own. The lessons he has learnt have given him the opportunity to create his own innovative space – one that explores the hidden cultural narratives within the South African context. Projects that grow in these innovative spaces, like the Wonderwerk Cave and the Origins Centre, provide essential bridges between cultural narratives that aim not only to protect and preserve heritage sites, but to expose the hidden histories of our country.

Perhaps in navigating the demands of this precious, ancient site, McClenaghan has uncovered other secrets about our humanness, such as an understanding of the ultimate fragility of human experience. And through the absence of grandiosity and a respect for context that preserves wonder, a humility that holds those who wonder so that they can coexist in a complicated, beautiful space without destroying the treasures it holds. ■