

Ubuntu Center

Field Architecture
Zwide, Port Elizabeth, South Africa
2008-10



The construction of the Ubuntu Center was initiated by the Ubuntu Education Fund to promote the health and education of children in the township of Zwide. Zwide is situated seven kilometers outside of the South African harbor city of Port Elizabeth, the largest city in the Eastern Cape province and developed during the apartheid era. The Ibhayi townships, which include Zwide, are in an isolated location in the outlying areas of Port Elizabeth, and even today they remain excluded from the economic development of this major urban center. Huge social disparities exist between the population of Zwide, which has an unemployment rate of eighty percent, and that of Port Elizabeth, which prospers from industry and tourism. Among the major problems in the township is the high number of people suffering from AIDS or tuberculosis. The Ubuntu Education Fund was founded in 1998 by the American Jacob Lief and the South African teacher Malizole "Banks" Gwaxula. Internationally financed but locally administered and operated, the Ubuntu headquarters in Zwide were opened in 2011 and serve as a community center for some 4,000 people. The word *Ubuntu* originates from the African Xhosa philosophy and means "humanity." The Ubuntu Center includes a clinic specialized in the treatment and prevention of AIDS and tuberculosis; a learning and education center for children; and a large, two-story multi-purpose hall for theater, dance, music, and workshops. A roof garden is situated above the administrative wing and is used for the education and nutrition program.

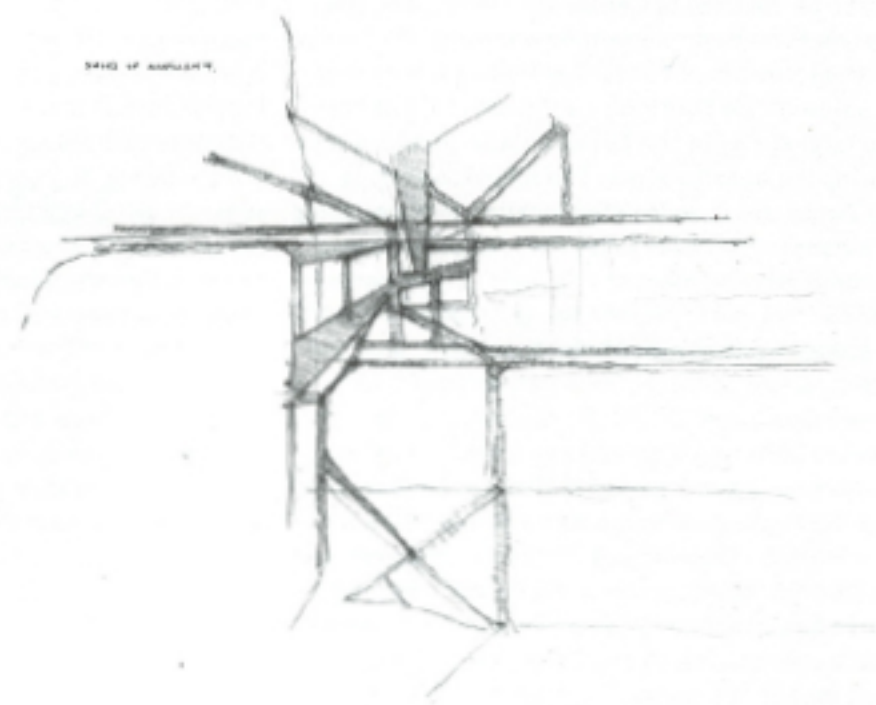
The architect Stan Field, originally from Port Elizabeth, and his son, Jess, were commissioned to create a landmark structure that would serve inhabitants as a visible sign of high-quality, sustained aid and also demonstrate the potential of medical and educational programs. In addition, it should attract international attention as a means of promoting the foundation and its mission beyond the borders of Africa. In 2009 the design won the internationally renowned Progressive Architecture Award conferred by *Architect*, the magazine of the American Institute of Architects. Constructed from exposed concrete and with large glass façades, the modern building complex represents for the architects an important contribution to the identity and development of the city. In its materiality, manner of construction, and form, the Ubuntu Center stands out among the low-lying structures of the township while simultaneously integrating itself into the landscape of existing buildings. Beyond the support services it provides, the center also offers a communal site for communication and exchange. Consisting of three trapezoid-shaped wings, the 2,100-square-meter complex is thus conceived to act as part of a designed public space. Stan and Jess Field initially examined the informal routes used by pedestrians on a daily basis—the shortest path between the bus stop, store, school, or soccer field—and used the culmination points and pathways as the basis for the design of the center. The spatial design of the interior was thus based on the continuation of these pathways into the interior, much like roots running

through the building, as Stan Field has described it. The massive cement structures are penetrated on two sides by a continuous glass façade, in front of which hang wooden louvers installed in a curtain construction. The open building structure and the circulating routes through the complex are conceived to reduce, to the greatest extent possible, any sense of distance or inhibition. The concept thus tries to foster visits to the center, and particularly to the clinic, in order to thereby lessen individual social stigmatization. The center has been well received by the inhabitants of the township. Some 2,000 schoolchildren visit the facility on a regular basis, and since its founding it has been able to support over 100 children with scholarships. Stan and Jess Field view the use of locally unusual building materials as the basis for a new conceptual approach: architecture can support and promote social change, and it can also build bridges between the old structures of apartheid and progressive technological development. (HS)

Selected Literature

Field, Stan, and Jess Field. *Designing Ubuntu* (2011). Field Architecture (website). <http://fieldarchitecture.com/designing-ubuntu/> (accessed May 22, 2103).
Findley, Lisa. "Ubuntu Centre." *Architect: The Magazine of the American Institute of Architects* (April 2010).
Hagberg, Eva. "Well-Grounded: Whether in a Dramatic Hillside Home in California or an AIDS Clinic in South Africa, Stan and Jess Field Look First to the Land." *Metropolis* (May 2012).
Newton, Margi. "Concrete Heart and Soul." *Indwe*, South African Express in-flight magazine (May 2011).

Schematic sketch of the informal system of routes through Zwile



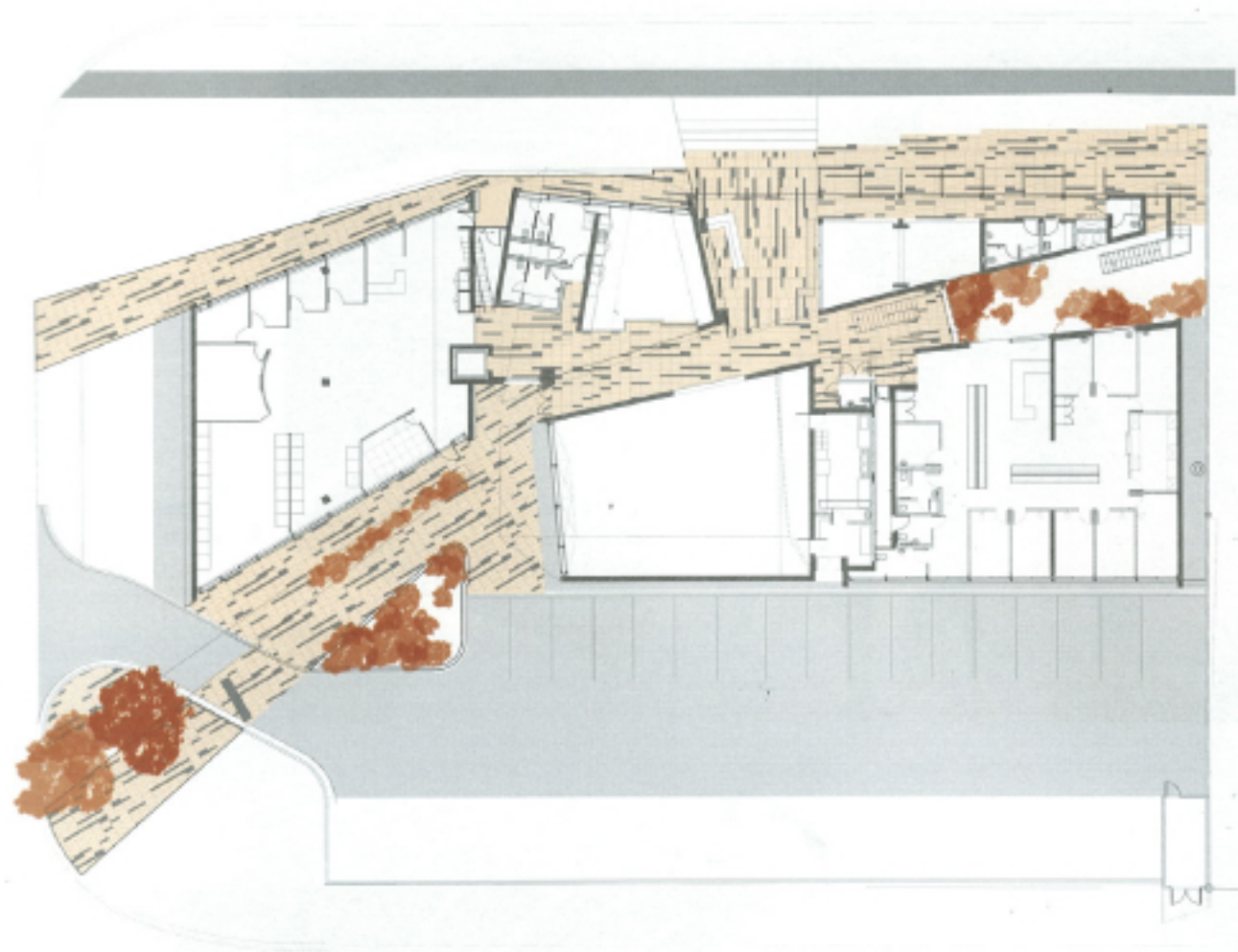
View from the north with clinic, multi-purpose hall, and training center



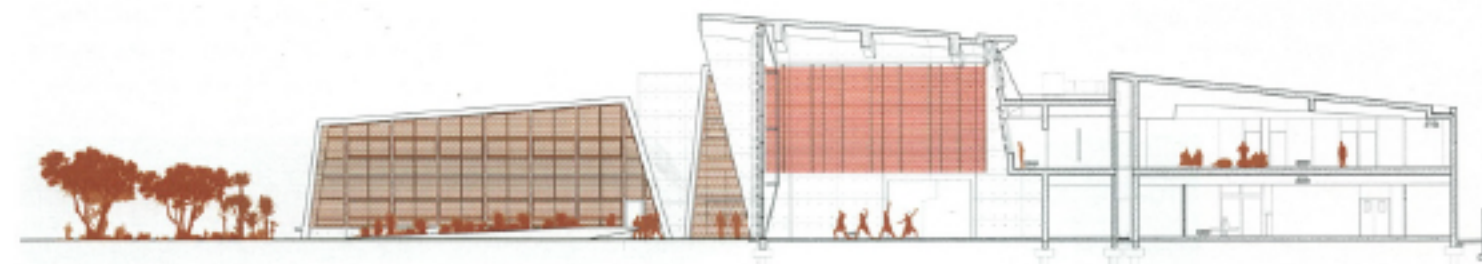
Roof garden with raised beds for cultivating vegetables

Large multi-purpose hall





Plan



Section