

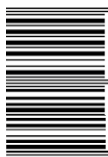
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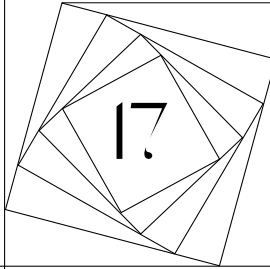
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Park Life

At the West Coast Fossil Park outside Cape Town, architect Jo Noero has used the past to design a future we can share with the natural world.



As an architectural photographer, I always appreciate a project that encourages a symbiotic relationship between a built structure and its surrounding environment. This oscillation between permanence and impermanence reaffirms my belief that we can sustain a world shared with nature. And the West Coast Fossil Park is just such a project.

About an hour and a half from Cape Town lies a rich fossil site, world renowned for its exceptionally well-preserved fossil faunal remains, which date back 5.2 million years. The park was created after phosphate mining in the area unearthed fossil deposits including the likes of saber-toothed cats, short-necked giraffes and African bears - all of which roamed the then lush, subtropical West Coast.

Tasked with creating a structure that encompassed the

temporality of the natural environment and celebrated the discoveries of a changing world, renowned South African architect Jo Noero and his practice used this duality to form the basis for their design. Complementing the sloping geological landscape, the buildings have been dug into the earth while extending out beyond the line of the slope and facing outwards onto the dig sites to the west.

Through their layered design, the buildings echo the action of "cutting" into the site analogous with mining operations. The vision is that over time, the buildings will form a part of the physical site so that its placement will blur the sharp distinction between building and landscape.

The architecture also celebrates the use of natural light, free-flowing forms and natural earthy tones. The additions made to the park include an interactive educational centre,

exhibition amphitheatre, restaurant and courtyard. A notable feature includes the large, thick wall - which also acts as seating - that outlines the full length of the walkway. The wall gives a nod to the estuarial history of the site, as the fossil bed area would have once been filled with water. Noero notes: "This presence of absence is very important in sites such as this one, as the past is so palpably present that one needs to make markers that try to remember it."

Also worth taking note of is the park's winding entranceway, which memorialises an important stretch of stratigraphy damaged during past mining operations. The "bend" in its

design both acknowledges this and implies a preferred route when entering the courtyard. The space offers a "pause" to visitors, who can rest here before continuing on to their journey through the park. The architecture gently guides you from the top of the site down through the exhibition amphitheatre - its atrium bathed in ambient light - and ending at the fossil dig sites. Recently nominated as one of the V&A Waterfront's *100 Beautiful Things*, the Fossil Park's mix of built and natural environments makes it a wonderful educational, architectural and tourist destination for both children and adults alike. fossilpark.org.za, noeroarchitects.com



ABOVE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) The exhibition amphitheatre exterior, dug into the earth to complement the sloping landscape; The courtyard exterior and interior. OPPOSITE PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) The winding entrance to the park memorialises an important stretch of stratigraphy damaged during past mining operations; The central walkway linking amphitheatre and courtyard; The exhibition amphitheatre and atrium with current exhibition designed and curated by Jo-Anne Duggan.

PHOTOS & WORDS: PARIS BRUMMER PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOERO ARCHITECTS