

From the ground up at Lilliesleaf

Lilliesleaf farm is regarded as the birthplace of Umkhonto weSizwe. Tucked away in fast-developing Rivonia, it has gone through various phases: it was an out of town mansion in the Sixties but, by the turn of the century, was functioning as a chintzy bed and breakfast sleepover that was featured in décor and food magazines.

Photographs from 1963, when Nelson Mandela and comrades were arrested there while hiding from the security police, show a characteristic suburban setting — a gracious home with a bay window facing a rolling lawn. Behind the "manor house" stood a row of rather ungracious servants' quarters where black members of the ANC made themselves at home while the authorities hunted them.

In 2006 the venue again made headlines when the present owner, Nicholas Wolpe (son of late anti-apartheid stalwart Harold Wolpe), invited archaeologists to scour the property for Mandela's Makarov pistol that he received from an Ethiopian colonel as a contribution to the armed struggle.

Of course the handgun, considered of key symbolic importance, was never found. But Wolpe continued to develop Lilliesleaf and today it is on the brink of becoming a meaningful landmark for anyone interested in struggle history.

Architects of the Mashabane Rose stable, also responsible for sites such as the Hector Petersen Museum, Apartheid Museum and the Wits Origins Centre, have demolished developments on the property since the Sixties and have begun to reconstruct the famed row of servants' quarters and premises for a research and archive centre.



Lilliesleaf as it stands today (top) and a police file photo (above)

"We have restored Lilliesleaf by using original brick," says Wolpe. "We undertook an archeological excavation and brought in the company Corobrik. They identified different types of brick and then baked the brick. We sit with about 60% of the original structures still standing.

"We have completed building the resource centre that contains an archive section, properly air-conditioned with temperature

control. Then there will be a library and above it the administration of a trust. We're in the final phase of completing the Liberation Centre containing a crèche, coffee shop and a curio shop. There will be a 66-seater auditorium that will be used to show a film to put Lilliesleaf into context."

Lilliesleaf will be opened to the public in June 2008. — Matthew Krouse

For information Tel: 011 803 7882

