

Farm of the freedom struggle

Once the location of MK's headquarters in the quiet countryside, today Liliesleaf farm is in the heart of a busy residential suburb, writes Mary Corrigan

With its pristine facade and manicured lawns, the Liliesleaf house looks like an innocuous run-of-the-mill family home in the affluent suburb of Rivonia, Sandton. One almost expects a sweet blonde Sandtonite with a martini in hand to come swanning out of the front door.

But behind its unassuming French doors and picturesque sloping roof the Liliesleaf house once concealed the headquarters of white affluence. As the headquarters of Umkhonto weSizwe, the ANC's military wing, it was here that the head honchos of the struggle plotted the annihilation of the apartheid government.

What better way to plan the sabotage of white supremacy than from behind enemy lines? Of course, they would pay for their daring when the home was raided by police in 1963 and its inhabitants hauled off to jail. But in 1961 when the South African Communist Party purchased the house, the suburb was hardly a white enclave, colonised by well-appointed abodes. Back then Rivonia was a quiet countryside location.

Today the Liliesleaf house is a museum and it is nestled in the heart of a residential suburb check-a-block with clusters and high-walled fortresses.

Though the house did function as a residence for Arthur Goldreich, a member of the Communist Party, and his family who helped create the illusion that the house was home to an ordinary white family, the house is now a depository of strategic lighting and steel-cage ceiling, strategic lighting and boards of text and photographs relay information, the house has completely succumbed to its museum function. Aside from the parquet floors and a rusted safe in one of the bedrooms, the personality of the house has been completely extinguished; it feels like dead space.

Although it would have been impossible to have filled the house with the authentic objects and decor of the day as they were presumably destroyed over time, perhaps some attempt at reconstructing the ambience might have given the house some life and character. Some of the rooms, such as the lounge, contain enlarged photographs of the house on the day of the raid, giving one an idea of what it once looked like inside. But of course the nature of that event was such that the house was in disarray so one has no real sense of what ordinary day-to-day living was like.

Many of the outbuildings, which consisted of sleeping quarters and housed a mini press and clandestine radio communication system, are also empty except for enlarged photographs



Yesterday and today: Liliesleaf farm as it was in the 1960s, left, and in today, right, a museum dedicated to the struggle and the people - such as Walter Sisulu, Arthur Goldreich, Lionel Bernstein, Harold Wolpe, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Mosekoele, Ahmed Kathrada and Raymond Mhlaba - who were arrested during the Rivonia raid in 1963

of the infamous raid. Interestingly all these photographs were taken by the security police as evidence for the Rivonia Trial, so in a sense the only trace of that fateful day and life at the farm itself, was recorded by the 'enemy'.

Obviously, the security police weren't objective in their assemblage of evidence - in a caption that accompanies one of the photographs it is suggested that the police may even have manipulated the images after they were taken. Voice recordings and reel-to-reel lectures from some of Liliesleaf's inhabitants do supplement the photographs, but are less easy to digest than the photographs.

As with many museums that commemorate pivotal moments in history, the challenge is always in trying to conjure up the full weight of the past. How does one make past events tangible for visitors in the present day so that they are able to grasp their significance? Buildings can bear the scars of history but they are by nature silent witnesses. To set the scene, the tour of the museum begins with the screening of a

short documentary in the auditorium. The film is obviously designed to contextualise the events that unfolded in the Liliesleaf house but, like much of the historical information in the house, it also attempts to rationalise the shift from non-violent to violent resistance.

This change in the struggle movement is of particular relevance to the Liliesleaf house and the 1963 raid, it was where violent acts of sedition were planned. The 1963 raid wasn't like Sharpeville, where defenceless men and women were involved in passive resistance. Walter Sisulu, Goldreich, Lionel 'Rusty' Bernstein, Harold Wolpe, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Mosekoele, Ahmed Kathrada and Raymond Mhlaba had been working on Operation Mayibuye, a plan for guerrilla warfare, when the Security Police descended on the farm.

The Rivonia Trial, which followed their arrests, therefore, pivoted on the resistance movement's justification for warfare. It was Nelson Mandela's 'I am prepared to die' speech, which best encapsulated the prevailing thinking

Instead, the curators have been at pains to collect and preserve any inconsequential artefact that relates to the timeframe during which Umkhonto weSizwe operated at the farm. Underpinning this desperate search for tangible evidence of a bygone era that is beyond our grasp, rusted bits of plumbing, the foundations of a defunct outbuilding and the head of a disused axe lodged into cement beneath one of the floorboard's are laid bare and conferred with importance. Yet, interesting details about the raid do come to light from unexpected sources, such as the recollections of one of Goldreich's children, Nicholas, who recalls laughing and joking with his sibling in between the interrogations. He seems shocked that such joviality had a place on that traumatic cold winter's night, when the house was turned upside down and everyone's lives were irrevocably altered. But it is in these seemingly inconsequential recollections that visitors are offered a tangible window into the past. In between the political rhetoric,

however, these opportunities are few and far between and one is left with a messy and indistinct picture of the past.

A lot of money has been invested in this museum-run memorial site. The Liberation Centre, which houses a chic auditorium, coffee and curio shops, is a sleek, modern edifice, as is the Resource Centre, where documents pertaining to the history of the house and its inhabitants will be collected and stored.

Clearly the intention was to create a memorial site that doubles up as a tourist destination. But there is something uncomfortable about sipping coffee next to a site of trauma or buying souvenirs.

The commodification of tragedy is unsettling, perhaps as disturbing as the slope of our country's traumatic history which the museum attempts to keep alive.

The Liliesleaf Museum is located at 5 George Street, Rivonia, Johannesburg. Call 011-803-7882/3 for more information or visit www.liliesleaftrust.co.za

Photographs: Liliesleaf Museum