Experientially, Noero and Wolff conjured a kind of architectural Arte Povera through poetic use of the cheap, the commonplace and the disregarded. And though the museum is very intensely focused inwards on its subject matter, it also aims to connect with and enrich its wider surroundings. Noero cites the example of the Smithsons’ Onionness and light, in which architecture acts as an armature for and backdrop to everyday lives. Here, the long eastern side of the museum is transmuted into a habitable wall with testing, a children’s play area and parking spaces for taxis. The entrance at the south end is marked by a generous porch sheltered by a timber pergola which is also forms a public gathering space. And on the west side, the L-shaped footprint of the building defines a grassy park area with an outdoor cinema screen that can accommodate an audience of 2500 people. These efforts at urban integration did not prevent some commentators from questioning the museum’s conspicuous monolithicity, but though its scale is clearly at odds with the low rise, makeshift houses of its surroundings, paradoxically, it a tangible symbol both of historic struggle and a new urban sensibility, it has had the effect of boosting local civic pride. It was also built using a pool of local labour, thus improving and developing the skills base.

In a country still tentatively grappling with daunting political, economic and social transitions, the Museum of Struggle might seem like a small drop in a restless sea of change. Yet it is a hugely important building for South Africa, and one that should have been unimagined 15 years ago. It is perhaps misguided to assume that architecture (not so long ago the despised physical expression of state policy and power) can instantly solve deep-rooted hurts and injustices, but as a courageous attempt to confront and understand the past, it does offer the prospect of redemption and a coming to terms. Without this there can be little hope for a better future. CATHRINE SLESSOR