

PRESS RELEASE

Designers, architects have a major responsibility towards sustainability

13 January 2020: The fact that South African and Nigeria are the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, while the continent as a whole barely accounts for 5%, places a major responsibility on designers and architects to be environmentally responsible. However, convincing clients of the imperatives of sustainability is a balancing act between the often high upfront initial costs, versus the long-term operational savings, and having a healthy and productive workforce that caters for the wellbeing of employees.

Striking this balance is the difficult task of **Marli Swanepoel**, Head of Sustainability at the [Paragon Group](#). The group focuses on both interior architecture (Paragon Interface) and base design (Paragon Architects). Swanepoel explains that regulatory standards such as SANS 10400-XA, which pertains to energy efficiency, represents the minimum number of boxes that need to be ticked in terms of sustainability.

However, Paragon always strives to remain ahead of the curve. Here the aim is to achieve a Green Star rated design as certified by the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA), which is an internationally-recognised and trusted quality certification for the design, construction, and operation of buildings, interiors, and fit-outs.

What gives the Paragon Group a competitive edge in the market is that it is able to incorporate sustainability into both the exterior and interior design. With those projects where it is only responsible for the interior, such as the award-winning Discovery Place in Sandton, it is able to deploy the latest trends and developments in workplace design, and how this impacts on employee wellbeing.

“At Paragon, we always strive to challenge the conventional way of doing architecture. This not only ensures responsible design, but it motivates us and keeps us excited about what we do as professionals. It is important that our projects take into account their surrounding environments, especially with the trend towards designing multi-building precincts, where the interconnectivity between all of the different buildings, including all of the communal spaces and facilities, is critical,” Swanepoel comments.

Sustainability is not only about ‘green’ buildings, but encourages out-of-the-box thinking. “It means taking the latest technologies and exploring the opportunities these represent in terms of design, and how we interrogate on way of working, and possibly do things differently to enhance our place in the world.”

With the South African construction industry in the doldrums, sustainability is still perceived as adding onto the final price tag. “Sustainable buildings do have financial implications,” Swanepoel acknowledges. This is especially true if technology such as photovoltaic systems is incorporated. However, cost can be mitigated by adopting first design principles, such as building orientation, natural ventilation, and daylighting. “That will not necessarily result in a Green Star rated building, but it is still a responsible design.”

Therefore the Paragon Group always engages its clients in a discussion about maximising their total cost of investment, and the importance of reduced operating costs in the long run, which is critical given the water and power shortages facing South Africa at present. “It is also a challenge if the

client only has a small budget, or if sustainability is simply not a priority for that particular client. However, as a country and as an industry, I do think we are starting to move in the right direction.”

Swanepoel points to neighbouring countries such as Namibia and Botswana boasting their first Green Star rated buildings, which bodes well for the rest of Africa. “Admittedly, sustainability as a driver has had a minimal impact on the continent to date. There are some wonderful examples, but it has yet to kick off as a major trend.” With the Paragon Group increasingly involved in Africa, it is slowly starting to introduce best practice in sustainability to the rest of the continent.

Back home, Swanepoel is currently in the design phase for a major new healing centre project that is anticipated to break ground this year, and which will be built in phases. The aim of the project is to introduce people to a responsible and mindful way of living, and hence will include sustainable elements such as a permaculture farm, a wellness centre, and a restaurant focusing on farm-to-plate food.

“We are taking all of these exciting concepts and implementing them in a very real way. It will be interesting to see how we can take what we learn from this project as a practice, and use it to influence us all to become better designers,” Swanepoel concludes.

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Paragon, established in October 1997, is an internationally-active design business, based in Johannesburg. We deliver commercial architecture, masterplanning, interior design, and space planning to visionary clients in all property sectors, from retail to residential and education.

We are committed to global urban development. We are able and agile. Paragon is flexible and diverse in its approach to design. Each project is unique and not driven by style, but by lifestyle and a response to user needs. Elegant and efficient planning form the core of our designs. We understand the needs of our clients, and know how to generate ever new architectural forms in a competitive property market.

We are known for hands-on engagement with all opportunities present in the modern global building industry. The true measure of our skill is our ability to engage at all levels and with all players that make up the colourful world of construction and property development. Our buildings look forward. We embrace the future, because we will be a part of it – part of its problems and responsibilities, and part of its great freedoms and achievements.

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