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## Conveyancing & Property Update, An inspired point of view, reported in Leading Architecture & Design

Practice Area(s): [Property & Conveyancing](#)

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### An inspired point of view

Written by Lynne Yates

The new modern head office of Shepstone & Wylie Attorneys in Umhlanga offers sweeping views of the Indian Ocean and is an exemplary model of environmentally sustainable design.

Few companies are fortunate enough to occupy a building overlooking the ocean, but when given that opportunity, naturally the design needs to make the most of the orientation and uninterrupted views – after all, what better way to entice staff to come to work? Not only does the new head office of Shepstone & Wylie Attorneys in Umhlanga do just that, but it also affords the law firm a high level of visibility and presence in the area, and fulfils many of the requirements of environmentally sustainable design. Situated in the prestigious Ridgeside Office Park, once home to sugar cane fields, but now the address of several blue chip companies, the building was designed by Raewyn Gowar of Evolution Architects (formerly of Archi Angels Architects). Gowar graduated from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 1994 and over the past 16 years has been involved in the design, documentation and running of several high profile and prestigious projects throughout South Africa. In 2005, after working for an established practice in Durban, she founded the Archi Angels Architects partnership. This partnership was terminated in 2010 and Evolution Architects began. Evolution Architects is a young and dynamic team and their aim is to provide innovative and original design solutions which comply with the client's brief and budget. "Shepstone & Wylie Attorneys, a prominent firm established in 1892, required a building that would reflect its status and image. Our design intent was to provide a high quality corporate office environment in keeping with the overall ethos of the precinct and the corporate identity of the tenant," explains Gowar. "While the land price was at a premium and it was necessary to maximise the bulk developed on the site, we also needed to acknowledge the surrounding sites and the relationship between the buildings within the precinct, therefore

ensuring that the landscaping and built form knitttogether to form a high quality, functional and healthy working environment." The decision was therefore made to position the main office footprint centrally within the site boundaries and to create large areas of hard and soft landscaping, providing for greater distance and space, and ultimately a better relationship, between the surrounding buildings. The landscaping for the site became an integral part of the architectural design and includes beautiful, textured Zen, rooftop gardens viewed from the offices above. The shape, access, orientation and views of the 5 547m<sup>2</sup> site, developed and owned by Maponya Developments and Beare Holdings, ultimately determined the building form, which is long and rectangular with predominately east- and west-facing facades. The structure comprises four storeys of office space with a large, naturally ventilated basement parking area and covered parking bays sitting below the rooftop gardens. Each floor consists of an 18m-wide floor plate, which traverses the length of the site, boasting magnificent east-facing sea views. "The clients, Maponya Developments and Beare Holdings, both of whom have been property developers and owners of commercial, retail and industrial property for many years, are committed to a green building philosophy," says Gowar. "The main entrance is announced from the upper parking deck by an elegant high volume, white steel, louvred canopy, which provides a play of light and shadow on the building, contrasting with the solid simplicity of the main structure. This canopy leads into an impressive double volume entrance traversing the width of the building. This double volume is expressed on the facade with the use of full height curtain walling and a roof volume framed with red Hulabond elevated from the cantilevered flat rooftop of the main structure," explains Gowar. The design of the facades was also dictated by the building's orientation and takes cognisance of the interior function and occupants of the building. "Naturally, we have drawn on the natural setting as much as possible and taken full advantage of the views. The intention was to have as much natural light and ventilation within the building as possible to allow for a comfortable and pleasant office environment," reveals Gowar. "In fact, one of the major requirements of our brief was that the building be in keeping with the principle of innovative and environmentally sustainable design. To this end, the building design was submitted to the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) and obtained a four star design rating – only the third office building in South Africa to achieve this design rating. Passive climatic control elements as well as energy saving designs were implemented where possible in order to respond to the principles of sustainable architecture," maintains Gowar. The GBSCA sets out a point system for various aspects of a building which need to comply with green design principles. "This had an impact not only on the overall building design, but also on many of our design decisions, such as the HVAC system used, electrical specifications, selection of finishes and landscape design. Building management and waste management systems also needed to be implemented. Some of the green star points were easy to achieve as they formed part of the

original design thought – for example, the building was designed for a specific end user, which allowed us to achieve points for an integrated fit out-while the maximisation of the site bulk allowed us to achieve points for the building's efficiency," explains Gowar.

"As mentioned, part of our design brief was to maximise on natural lighting and views. The design intent was to allow for every office space to have an element of natural lighting as well as to enable all the occupants to enjoy the sea views at some point in their experience of the building. As the predominant views were east-facing sea views, it was logical that the large glass expanses would be on the east facade, consisting of a series of strip flush glazed windows and elements of curtain walling along this elevation, while the west and north facades feature smaller window openings. Every cellular office along the building's perimeter is provided with an external view window, while the centrally located open plan office spaces gain natural light from internal windows. In addition, the floor to ceiling curtain walling in the double volume main entrance reception area is experienced by all who enter the building and capitalises on the outstanding sea view," she adds. In order to control the effects of the sun on the north, west and east facades, double glazing was implemented throughout the building. This also assisted with internal noise level reduction as per GBSCA requirements. "Achieving points for items such as the selection of internal finishes proved particularly challenging as we needed to comply with the low VOC requirements and provide the necessary back-up paperwork and certified data sheets. Many products are marketed as being green, but suppliers had difficulty providing the back-up paperwork, which proved frustrating," says Gowar. The materials used were largely dictated by the design guidelines as set out by Tongaat Hulett Developments. Plaster and paint dominate, while sandstone, curtain walling and Hulabond cladding provide complementary accents. Says Gowar, "The proximity of the building to the coast dictated that all building materials be as maintenance free and durable as possible. We therefore avoided excessive amounts of steel work which would corrode, and rough textured finishes which would attract dust and dirt, and rather aimed for a smooth, washable building surface." The landscaping design makes use of the xeriscaping principle, which provides for a selection of plants which do not require additional watering once established. The building also promotes ecology-conscious considerations through waste recycling, efficient use of water, irrigation and energy management. "It was a privilege to be given the opportunity to work on this prestigious building. The green building principles and application thereof was an exciting and challenging learning curve as it was fairly new territory for most of us. I think most architects and consultants have a basic understanding of the green principles for sustainable buildings and do apply many of these principles as part of the design process, however, it is quite demanding when applying the principles to submit to a council and having to follow exact procedures and guidelines in order to achieve a point system

rating. There are no half measures and one needs to follow the principles through precisely and completely," she concludes.

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