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Evolution Architects: A Finger on the Pulse of Change

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The landscape for architects has changed immeasurably over the past couple of decades. Technology has been the catalyst for huge change in the design process, while the introduction of Green Star Ratings to the South African property market has precipitated an enormous paradigm shift in the last four years.

Adapting to such a developing market place, appropriately-named Evolution Architects is a practice making a big name for itself with numerous high profile projects.

The Westville, Durban-based company was started by Raewyn Gowar, Owner and Principal of the

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practice, in December 2010. Whilst the effects of the global economic downturn were in full effect at that time, Gowar was able to call on the many strong, long-standing relationships she had built up in the industry over fifteen years, since graduating from the University of KwaZulu Natal in 1994.



Relationships are one aspect though and Gowar was also very quick to embrace the concepts of technology and green design (the company is a member of the Green Building Council of South Africa), while other practices are still catching up:

"The green movement definitely gives us an advantage," she comments. "We encourage all of our clients to use sustainable architecture whenever possible. We have noticed all of our clients are increasingly interested in green design, whether that encompasses recycling, sustainable energy, solar devices for shading, natural lighting or natural ventilation.

"Once the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) was established and Green Star Rating came to South Africa (four years ago), I went on a course as quickly as possible

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and whenever there are any courses available I try to educate myself on green issues and that is reflected in our projects. It is a challenge to find people with green knowledge and skills in design simply because the concept is still so new in South Africa, but I have noticed that lots of younger people are interested.

"We use a Green Star Rating Tool as a basis for all applications and will adapt this to the clients' needs and budget, but all of our projects are designed with green building principles and sustainable architecture in mind," she continues.

One of the fledgling company's first major successes was a new office building for Shepstone & Wylie Attorneys on the Ridgeside Office Park. The design was the first in KwaZulu Natal – and only the second in South Africa, to achieve a four star Green Star SA Office v1 Design and As Built rating from the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA).

Having worked with practices for a few years post-graduation, Gowar went into partnership in 2005 and when that organisation was dissolved in 2010 she took the leap to launch Evolution Architects:

"The name of the practice is based on the philosophy that design is an evolutionary process. The dictionary definition for the word 'evolution' is "a gradual process in which something changes into a different and usually better form; the process of developing". We believe that this is exactly what happens during the architectural design process, not only in relation to the building itself, but also for the people involved in the project. We all grow and develop and our lives are ultimately enriched by the experience.

"Every architect's ambition is to be in charge of their own business and to be responsible for decision-making. We

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have a team of five dedicated people: Gowar (principal), one graduate architect, two technicians and a junior staff member. One of our greatest strengths (alongside vast experience in green design and retail projects) is the hands-on approach that we offer. We have built-up personal relationships with all of our clients as a practice, however, I don't expect my team to be left to run the projects on their own. Hence I oversee each project and am personally available for clients.



"From the outset we were able to win business based on long-term relationships and by performing well on projects we gained repeat business. If you can deliver a good service then you can succeed but it is a tough environment right now and we have been fortunate to get the work we have. I think it would have been very difficult to start fresh today without those relationships in place," she adds.

As new work accumulated, Gowar and her team amassed knowledge and experience which have given the company specialist areas of expertise in retail architecture and green buildings, but as she explains, Evolution Architects have broader capabilities:

"Our largest project to date was R85 million and we are

comfortable working at that size. That appeals to me as a manageable project where we can maintain control, while we can comfortably accommodate smaller projects.

"Our main successes have been in big retail developments but we have also made a name for ourselves with a number of commercial and industrial developments. At present we have three ongoing projects that are around the R40 million mark:

"The first is an alteration and extension to an existing supermarket at the Ballito Lifestyle Centre and it is a project I have been involved with since 2001. We are in the design stage of planning a new steel and glass roof over the existing escalator well. The roof will be organic in form, but the geometry is essentially a series of glazed panels. We are very excited about this as it will be an original and unique feature for the Centre!

"The second project is for a sectional title office park (Simbithi Office Park) in the North Coast area, while the third job is another shopping centre in Umlazi 'V' Section."

Whilst much of the company's work has been focussed within KwaZulu Natal, the company has worked further afield and Gowar is keen to explore further opportunities elsewhere in South Africa. Those projects will most likely stem from the private sector, although the company has already completed projects for the Government locally:

"We have in the past carried out small alterations to a local hospital and at the moment we are working on a substantially larger project. We have registered as a practice and as such we are on a roster for contracts with the local Government here in KwaZulu Natal," Gowar explains.

One area that the company has moved away from due to the current economic climate for the time being has been the residential market, perhaps hardest hit during the economic downturn. As financing criteria has tightened up the number of projects has dried up and Gowar has called upon her experience in retail and green architecture to ensure Evolution Architects has sufficient variety to survive the tough times.

The current commercial environment is also challenging but Gowar feels at present that this segment, almost exclusively private sector, offers greater security:



"Clients generally do their homework and ensure that there is enough demand and tenancy before they fully embark on a retail project," she reflects. "In the private sector people are very aware of what they can do financially and the culture of shopping malls in South Africa continues to attract further development.

"I think that is partly down to the security issues we have here. People visit the malls for shopping but also as a place of entertainment, somewhere to eat and meet up with friends. I think people tend to feel more secure at the

shopping malls and we feel that there is always going to be demand in this area.

"Over time we have acquired knowledge of what often works best in the shopping mall layout; we get very involved in the customer flow and tenant mix and can help to establish the best positioning for each shop and type of tenant, depending on the surrounding shops," Gowar affirms.

One of the company's biggest assets is its technology which brings to life design drawings with 3D accuracy, as Gowar describes:

"I will often create the initial sketches by hand – when I first started out virtually everything was hand-drawn. We then create a 3D model of the building on computer and we have a fantastic design tool which can work out the scale, proportion and finer details and then create presentations through to final working drawings and details.

"IT has changed everything; when I graduated we were working on drawing boards and fewer people knew how to use computer aided design packages. Today almost everything is electronic and this definitely speeds the process up."

Evolution Architects has come a very long way in a short space of time. In 2007 its work at the Ballito Lifestyle Centre was awarded a Retail Design and Development Award (RDDA) from the South African Council of Shopping Centres (SACSA), in recognition of excellent design resolution and achieving targeted development goals for the expansion of a shopping centre. In 2012, their work achieved another RDDA award from the SACSC, a commendation for Ballito Lifestyle Edgars extension.

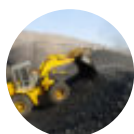
Gowar is confident about the future and feels that the opportunity to work on such projects remains the way forward: "Ideally I would like us to focus on green buildings and retail architecture. We are keen to explore all opportunities – including outside of South Africa if the right project presented itself.

"We also need to maintain our focus on the green aspect though. The difference nowadays is that clients are far more aware and there are green elements in the design of all buildings – the volume is dependent on costs.

"Increasingly we see suppliers are producing environmentally considerate products such as carpet tiles, timber products, energy efficient lighting and water heating systems, paints and building materials and it is important for us to keep up to date with changes."

With Gowar's enthusiasm for knowledge, any green advancement augurs well for Evolution Architects.

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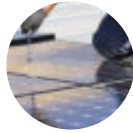
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