

SOUTH AFRICAN

May 2013

PROPERTY

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*45th International Convention
& Property Exhibition*

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THE VOICE OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTY

ARCHITECT CHRIS BAM:
FUTURE-READY

In the future, Chris Bam is probably the name many young architects will quote as inspiring their work.





LEFT: The 11000m² Glacier head office in Tygervally for Ingenuity Property Investments currently under construction. RIGHT: Horizon Bay, one of the tallest residential buildings in Cape Town, designed for Swish.



It is the way of artists, writers, and architects to hold one or another of their peers or predecessors in high regard, as the quintessential master of their art.

Chris Bam, in a 20-year career, has created a body of work that already has iconic status.

This is not hyperbole. Bam is still young, but his buildings are immediately identifiable. Even more remarkably, they've been created, certainly in the latter years, in an economy not noted for its buoyancy.

"It's in the worst economic times that one's creativity is finely tuned," says Bam. "You can't take license with budgets, and that's where you learn to combine creative design with boundless functionality. Sometimes, you'll be surprised that the combination of these two disciplines produces a result that is far, far more beautiful than design dedicated primarily to aesthetic considerations."

His own architectural hero is, unsurprisingly, Spaniard Santiago Calatrava, whose style has been heralded as a bridge between structural engineering and architecture, and who, in his projects, continues a tradition of Spanish modernist

engineering that includes the work of Félix Candela and Antonio Gaudi. Nonetheless – and this is what most intrigues Bam – Calatrava's style is also very personal and derives from numerous studies of the human body and the natural world.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Bam feels passionately that spaces he creates must be both iconic and positive, particularly the areas around his buildings. He points to a new project, one among many, the Ingenuity Property Investments building in Tyger Valley, which will be occupied by Glacier and Santam and is currently under construction for R219 million in Sportica Crescent.

The building is designed to function as a positive working presence. Glass exposes the surrounding views, but is shaded to provide a temperate interior. The building also incorporates a rehabilitated watercourse, which has "pause spaces" leading onto it, and two roof-top gardens.

The building acknowledges its human context, with pedestrian links and a preoccupation with use by people on bicycles and on foot. A cycle track running past the

edge of the building links to nearby tracks, which will eventually form an unbroken safe route for cyclists through the area and end up at the Tyger Valley Waterfront.

Even considerations such as the concealment of parking have been given priority: the parking area is behind the building and none of it is at street level.

Looking at the elevations, it's clear the building is very accessible, in a way that is diametrically opposed to the brutalist facades of the 1960s and onwards, when security was ensured by almost impenetrable inaccessibility from street level.

"We simply have to get rid of the siege mentality," urges Bam. "We can't assume that every space we create and every building we build is going to be vandalised. And in any case the more barricaded a building is, the more it provides a challenge for those who will want to breach those barriers. We just have to create environments that simply don't give licence to criminal intent."

TOP PROJECTS

Right now Bam's practice has 14 projects completed, in construction or in the planning



The Century City Virgin Active (above) and Quayside (below), currently under construction at Century City, both projects designed for Rabie Property Group.

stage, and Bam says that each one must have a differentiator. "We take pride in the creativity of our buildings. Each one needs to be iconic, something we and our clients can take pride in."

He emphasises that while good design doesn't have to equate to extra expense, it does give a better return on investment. In each of the projects, he says, there's an individuality that reflects the character of the client and the function of the building: "We listen very carefully to our clients and in the end, our architecture speaks for them and their clients."

Another priority is the sustainability of the buildings he creates, their readiness to cope with future needs and conditions. "That includes the responsible use of recyclable materials and an ability for the building eventually to be demolished – as it inevitably will be – efficiently and with as little environmental impact as possible."

He is pragmatic about living spaces too, recognising the need for "densification" that gives people human-scale occupancy of convenient places. "Giving people great design in smaller places is essential if we're to avoid the escalating need for endless new and bigger transport routes and other infrastructure, with their attendant cost implications. Providing breathing space and leisure areas is essential in what is becoming a more closely-knit society," he says.

One of the phenomena Bam has identified when creating a better design in an unexpected place is the effect it has on



the people and buildings around it. "An attractive building, well-designed and placed, in an industrial area for instance, often has the effect of motivating nearby property owners to make changes that make their own buildings look better."

He says that sometimes creating a better-designed building is as simple as fronting it with the most attractive aspect and putting more functional and ordinary features behind it. "This always creates a sense of pride and pleasure in the building that then transforms it from merely functional to attractive and aspirational," he explains.

INVESTMENT BUILDINGS

Bam's projects vary in budget from R50 million to R700 million, and he never does domestic buildings. He says that most industrialists and commercial leaders have a pragmatic view of their buildings; they're looking for function, financial viability and prestige in equal measure.

"They appreciate that we'll give them all of this in one package and there's not a lot of emotion involved other than passion," he explains, clarifying: "An investment building has a very specific goal – to have an increasing value potential."

COMPANY PROFILE



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Soho on Strand • Aquarius and Horizon Bay • Digistics Distribution Centre, Bellville • Farbers Coachworks, Sheffield Business Park • The Palms, Woodstock.

Some of his upcoming projects include the doubling in size of The Palms in Woodstock for Omnicron, where Bam has his studio and offices and for which he was responsible when the old Baumann's biscuit factory had to be recycled. There will be more and larger retail space and offices in a character similar to that of the existing building. The project, slated for 2013, has a budget of several hundred million rand.

Bam also has more work in the pipeline as the architect who has created some of the most eye-catching free-standing Virgin Active health clubs, more of which are planned.

The Quayside residential project at Century City, currently under construction, will consist of upmarket apartments. Great care has been taken to provide an appropriate urban setting including a beautiful water body, landscaping and public spaces.

"The client, Rabie Property Group, has continually shown a commitment to the environment in all their projects and the results show in the proliferation of bird life on the bodies of water that have been created as a result of their vision. They are indeed developers with a great sense of responsibility," says Bam.

In his own practice, Bam emphasises adaptability "We have no super-ideology. We recognise that each of our clients is an individual. We respond to their brief, the context and the climate and pay close attention to the most important factors: the economics and aesthetics of the building."

And the secret to his unwavering success over a long period? "I'm a strong believer in the tenet that success results when preparation meets opportunity." ◻

