

The art of relationship

About the striking office buildings and corporate headquarters that he most enjoys designing, Cape Town architect Chris Bam says 'what ever its size, we place strong emphasis on a building's relationship with people and focus on retaining a human scale.'

'Our buildings need to be grand and imposing in celebration of the companies that occupy them and those that own them, but at street level, they must be aesthetically, emotionally and practically accessible.'

'Buildings and people can't exist in isolation, so it's appropriate that in architecture, the term relationship has its broadest meaning.'

Relationship is a word that occupies his attention right now. It has to do with his 23-year architectural practice, where every one of the diverse designs represents the relationship his practice has with each of his clients.

'Buildings are inseparable from their environment and

their occupants so the successful relationship of a building with its site and surroundings is vital, as is the relationship between the needs of the inhabitants and the efficient function of the building.'

But a relationship he considers equally essential is that between the architect and the client.

'Relationship is more often the term used by architects to describe how a building occupies its space, or its position in relation to other buildings and the landscape on which it's placed. But a client relationship similarly includes elements like harmony and a good fit, or in some cases, the flash of

difference, that both in architecture and human interaction, can be creative. And enormously valuable.'

Bam Architects' work includes buildings that challenge on various creative levels, and others that are so in harmony with their surroundings, it is as if the entire landscape has been transformed by their presence. This isn't by chance. He believes that buildings have the capacity to shift the emphasis of human activity from one place to another, and to change the way people live their everyday lives.

An example is the Tyger Valley Waterfront, where two Bam-designed projects, corporate headquarters

BAM architects

valued at R400 million, form the core of an entirely new CBD. His work at Century City is equally transformative. Here, his design of The Quays for long-time client, the Rabie Property Group, was in line with the creation of a workable, sustainable waterside environment with all the prime characteristics of Rabie's developments. A focal component of its holistic design is a 1.5m-deep freshwater body, connected to Century City's network of waterways.

Chris ranks the culture of collaboration as a major component in his practice's success. 'We provide a client with the best building by getting to know their attitude, objectives and brand values. A successful building can be one of the most powerful brand icons.'

It is for this reason and others that he highly values having Virgin Active as a client. His

practice has been exclusively commissioned to provide the architectural designs for the rollout of Virgin Active's Red clubs nationwide and he was part of a team that has created an unmistakable physical and graphic presence for the brand.

'Virgin Active is inspiring. It represents concerted energy, and its buildings and spaces create the brand image. It is an example of function driving form. Just looking at a Virgin Active club gives one a sense of movement, vitality and enthusiasm,' he says.

There is another advantage of close and lasting client relationships evident in his work with Virgin Active. Because the clubs are in constant search for more accommodation, Chris and his team are often at the interface between the client and developers.

With Virgin Active as a client, Chris says he is part of a process.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Virgin Active Red; Marlborough Place, Kramerville; Virgin Active Red; The Edge, Tyger Falls; Virgin Active Red



BAM architects

'In many ways this becomes a synergistic relationship between developer, tenant and architect, and we can give input on design both for the interiors, and the exterior, resulting in a well integrated building.'

He cites the example of his new design project for Shoprite Checkers Properties' development in Sun Valley, Noordhoek where Bam Architects are responsible for the fit out and the shell of the building which was introduced through Virgin Active, a tenant in the project.

With his contract for all the Virgin Active Red Clubs throughout the country, and commissions for a number of major clubs as well, he believes a point has been reached where Bam Architects will increasingly create both the inside and outside designs of the clubs, either as stand-alone buildings or as key tenants.

Based on his principle that a company's building should speak for it and reflect the brand, he

believes that with landlord and tenant aligned, the longevity of the tenancy is ensured.

Of the future, Chris says he will always love to design commercial buildings. 'I like the scale. It is an opportunity to showcase our design skill on a big canvas. We like to make meaningful interventions on a site, and in some cases, as we have done, transform a node.'

As adherents of the concept of New Urbanism, Chris and his team believe that a great deal needs to be done to reverse the effect of earlier movements that separated urban buildings from their immediate environment, with blank facades at street level.

'In transforming the space they occupy, buildings transform the wider environment, as well as the lives of those who occupy and move around them. People's relationship with buildings shows in their attitude, either positive or negative, and the building lives or dies according to the way it serves their requirement.'



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