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Words **Nikki Benatar**
Photographs **Ruvan Boshoff**

Bam Architects' Chris Bam is passionate about enhancing South Africa's built landscape by creating striking buildings that have longevity.

SHAPING THE FUTURE

'Buildings need to make a statement,' says Cape Town architect Chris Bam. 'I don't want to design buildings that people drive by without noticing, that only contribute to the background noise. As architects, we have a responsibility to shape and enhance the built landscape.'

There's no denying the boldness of Bam Architects' buildings. Whether it's the wave-like 'floating hat' on the sea-facing skyscraper at Horizon Bay, the 'gliding, wing-like structure' on Century City's new Virgin Active Health & Fitness Club or a steel-encased staircase on a student residence, Bam's buildings are impossible to ignore.

'But it's not about grabbing attention,' explains Chris. 'The design elements are relevant to the building's function and context. Take the gym, for example: the "wing" reflects the kinetic function of the building. The curvy balconies at Horizon Bay reflect the movement of the waves.'

'And,' he adds, 'there's a misconception that creative design is expensive. On the contrary:

you can update or even create a building without a huge budget, like we did at Monpak. We converted an under-performing 1960s office block into a Cape Technikon student residence by, among other things, encasing an external stairwell in a contemporary-looking steel sheath. It instantly modernises and repositions the building.'

A graduate of the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE, now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University), Chris's decision to study architecture was instinctive. 'As a kid, I was fascinated by Lego. I used to spend hours pottering around building sites and watching things go up. In matric, when classmates were agonising over what to study, my choice was simple.' After graduating, Chris worked for a big firm of architects in the UK, gaining experience in a variety of commercial projects before returning to South Africa, where he worked at a local practice for a year and a half before opening Bam Architects in 1992.

'I wanted to work on projects I believed in and did not want to be dictated to in terms of style and creativity, other than meeting the



OPPOSITE Chris Bam at his firm's 30 000m² development, The Palms Lifestyle Centre, Woodstock, Cape Town. THIS PAGE TOP AND BOTTOM Horizon Bay, a 22-storey, mixed-use development in Table View, where Chris and his wife Cindy have their home. The curvy balconies reflect the waves of the ocean just across the road.



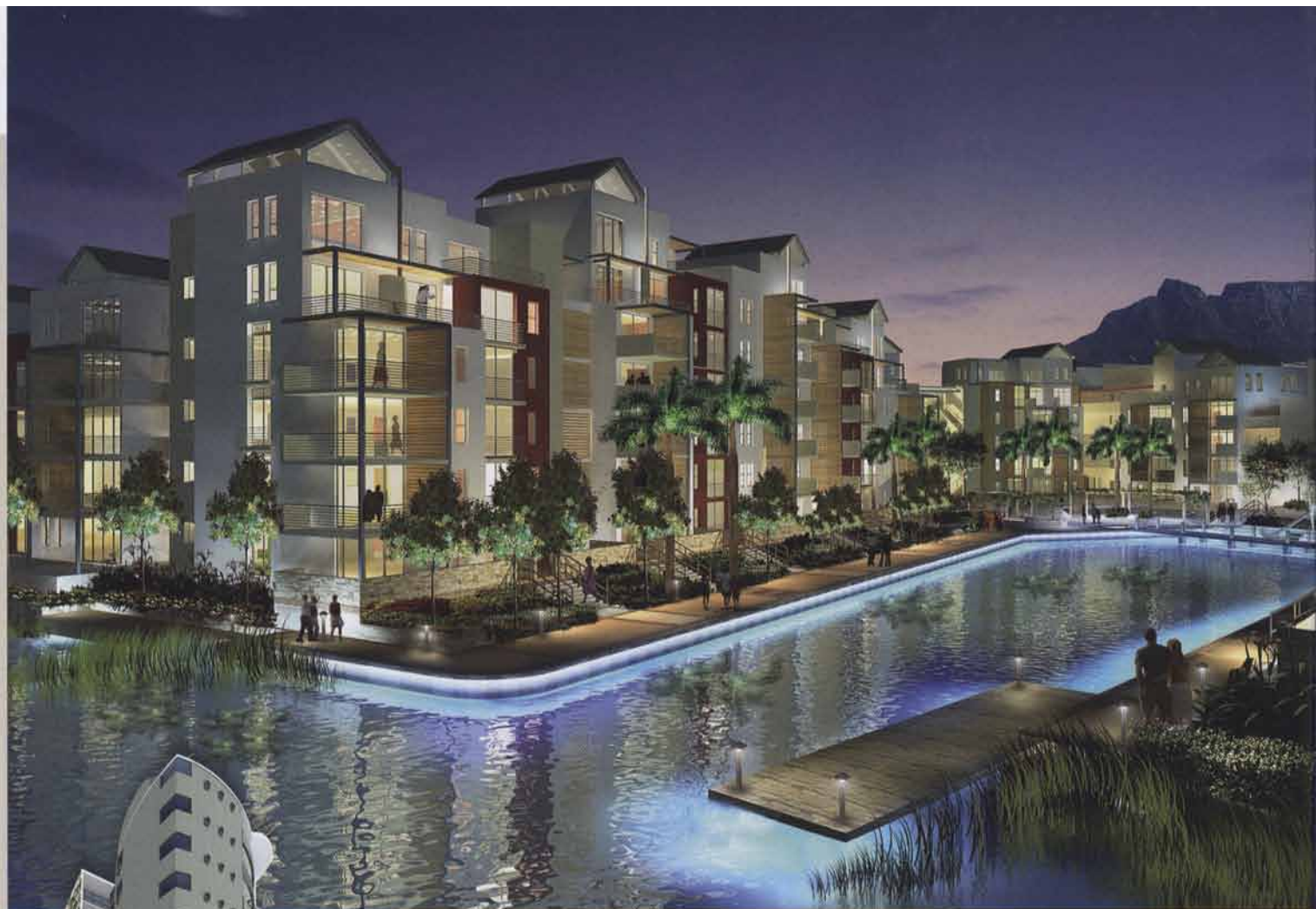
client's brief,' says Chris of his decision to go it alone. 'Like most start-ups, it was small to begin with. And like most businesses, you're only as good as your last project. But I reckoned I had very little to lose – a desk, my PC and a drawing board.'

Today, Bam Architects is a medium-sized firm that employs a network of specialists. 'Architecture is a multifaceted profession, so I surround myself with people who know more than I do in some specialist areas. That way, our clients are guaranteed the best skills and thus the best results.'

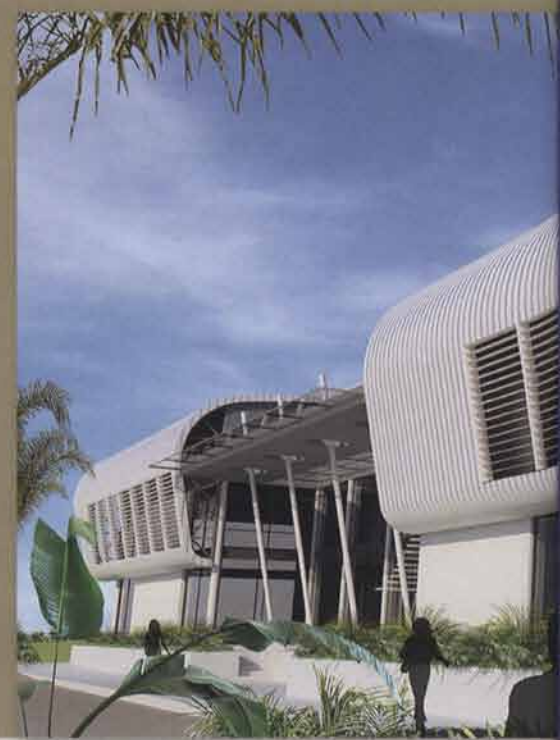
Chris takes the matter of meeting his clients' needs more seriously than most: 'I try to inhabit places we design wherever possible. It's the only way you really get to grips with a building. It can be daunting, because if there are problems you experience them firsthand. It's a big responsibility designing work and living spaces that people use every day. Our built environment has a big impact on us and it needs to work well.'

The Palms Centre in Woodstock, which Chris cites as Bam Architects' breakthrough project, is one such example. 'We had our office in here before building started. I remember walking through what's now a thriving design and décor hub when it was still the Baumann's Biscuit factory. The developers saw beyond the food factory – the concept was to transform the area into an enclosed shopping arcade with separate shop fronts and an atrium (where the road used to be). It's done wonders for the area.'

Another example is Horizon Bay in Table View. Chris and his wife Cindy, a fashion designer, were among the first to move into the 22-storey building when it was completed in December 2006. 'It's probably the building I'm



TOP The Quays, Bam Architects' planned development for Century City. LEFT Aquarius, a 14-storey, mixed-use development currently under construction in Table View. BOTTOM LEFT AND OPPOSITE TOP LEFT Chris at the office, The Palms Lifestyle Centre, Woodstock. RIGHT The new Virgin Active Health Club at Century City is scheduled to open in November 2008. The building's wing-like form echoes its kinetic function.



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TOP LEFT AND BELOW RIGHT Soho on Strand, an office-apartment block in the Cape Town CBD. CENTRE The balconies at Horizon Bay double as shading devices.



most proud of,' says Chris. 'The town planning vision was to create a portal to the sea in the form of a good-quality residential building, which would act as a catalyst for other developments in the area.'

Chris explains the building's orientation: 'All the apartments are north-facing, with their backs to the southeaster. And the sunscreen

over the balconies eliminates the need for air-conditioning.'

One of the tallest residential buildings in Cape Town, Horizon Bay won the prestigious CNBC International Property Award in 2007 for the Best High-Rise Development in South Africa. 'This is my ideal living space,' says Chris about his home at Horizon Bay. 'It's comfortable and close to nature – I fall asleep to the sound of the waves.'

When he's not designing highly visible buildings, this adrenaline junkie enjoys riding his motorbike in and around the back roads of the Karoo with his pals. 'The thrill of riding a motorbike is unparalleled.'

Chris believes there are enormous challenges facing the building industry: 'Finding a way to broaden the skills base is an industry-wide dilemma. Training local labour needs to start at grass-roots level if we want to grow this industry and produce high-quality, world-class buildings.'

When I ask him if he'd rather be living elsewhere, he's adamant: 'Never. It's such a wonderful and exciting time to be living in South Africa. To have lived through the recent changes and to be part of the new South Africa is an amazing opportunity. Now's the time to make a positive contribution, to help shape our country's future.' **Bam Architects,** +27 (0)21 465 6007, www.bamarchitects.co.za

LEFT AND RIGHT Bam Architects have designed balconies at Horizon Bay with energy-efficient sunscreens to eliminate the need for air-conditioning.

