



BACK TO BASICS

Architect Pieter Mathews believes a green design begins by working with nature

The award-winning head office of Mathews & Associates Architects (MAA) rises like a slice of urban sculpture on the Brooklyn, Pretoria horizon. True to character, creator Pieter Mathews and his team have delivered a pared-down, modernist structure of concrete, steel and glass – a head-turning space that fits the narrow pointed stand to a T.

“It’s not a green building in the true sense of the word,” concedes Pieter. “Having said that, our aim was a pragmatic design where we got the basics right in terms of the passive features. We treated it as we would a contemporary home – a space where we spend lots of time. So it’s peaceful, surrounded by greenery and orientated for optimal use of sunlight.”

Pieter is a firm advocate of working with nature and the existing row of established tipuana trees was an unexpected boon. “Deciduous trees like these are ideal for northern elevations as they lose their leaves in winter to allow warmth and light in, while delivering cooling shade in summer. This was definitely the starting point for the design.”

Capping each of the windows like an eyelid, horizontal steel louvres were used to control sunlight. “These features reduce the amount of light that falls on the glass, particularly in summer,” he explains. “We also used wattle branches as shade cover for the parking bays.” Downpipes concealed in steel columns empty into concrete channels, diverting rainwater directly to the low maintenance garden.

Pieter is optimistic about the future of green design, despite its current price tag. “Right now consumers can expect a 20 percent add-on to new-build costs if they go the ‘green’ route. This includes features like solar panels, rain and grey water harvesting, double glazing and a full audit on the construction process.

“The technologies still need to evolve and mature,” he adds, “but public awareness has definitely increased. It’s less about an instant ‘green fix’, and more about a shift in mindset. There’s so much that can be done that needn’t incur additional costs, whether it’s the use of cavity walls (to help cool harsh western sunlight), insulating a flat concrete roof with stone chip-covered polystyrene, or choosing paint in a light-reflecting colour. Getting the basics right goes a long way to creating more efficient, lasting living spaces.” ▷



THIS PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: ● Pieter on the veranda of his offices. The design was the recipient of the Pretoria Institute of Architects Peers Award 2009 and was a finalist in the Design Indaba South awards for 2009. ● The timber balustrades allude to a bar code design, contrasting with the use of concrete, steel and glass. ● A row of established tipuana trees provides cooling summer shade to the building’s northern side. The building is shared by MAA and attorneys Brink, Bonsma & de Bruyn.