

GREEN PIECES

Words Anne Schaffer Photographs Angela Buckland and Steve Kinsler

Steve Kinsler and Derek van Heerden are East Coast Architects, a Durban-based practice built on a deep commitment to responsible, sustainable architecture that responds creatively to the social needs of impoverished communities.

There's a wonderful, chunky book with a shoot-from-the-hip title – *Design Like You Give A Damn* – which is a pretty consummate way of describing the work ethos of Steve Kinsler and Derek van Heerden. They really do give a damn, to the point where you'd rather emigrate than watch them flinch at your sanctimonious tales of switching off your geyser. The Give-A-Damn book is edited by Architecture for Humanity, a charitable organisation founded to seek architectural responses to humanitarian crises like refugees, wars and natural disasters, and bring design services to communities in need. The book describes itself as 'a compendium of innovative projects from around the world that demonstrate the power of design to improve lives'. East Coast Architects' Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies features. Set in Somkhele in the Hlabisa district of KZN, it is one of the largest medical research facilities in rural South Africa, built essentially to research the Aids crisis. The project garnered awards, but most importantly for Steve and Derek, drew attention from the right quarters – from those seeking creative, sensitive solutions

to the complex issues surrounding community-based architecture. It put the practice firmly on the side of the map they wanted to be.

In effect, the Africa Centre showcased their left-of-centre design ethos, and the integrity with which they approached the task. For them, designs evolve, are never imposed; and the end product is strongly influenced by human, rather than glamour factors. To this end they run workshops that probe the needs of the broader community. No contractor imports labour – the team conducts a skills audit of the community, and contractors offer on-site skills training. As far as is possible, materials are locally sourced – this benefits the community, and it reduces the carbon footprint.

Steve describes their projects as being process based. 'Time,' he says. 'It's one of the things with community projects. The more intense the levels of engagement, the slower the process; but, ultimately, the better the chance of a sustainable, satisfying result for all.' He grimaces: 'Too much architecture is about the product, the glossy image. Usually it's devoid of people and beautifully lit, but you don't know anything about the process.'

East Coast Architects prefers to be known as a social rather than a Green firm: 'A great deal of our work is with communities, and most projects are community based. We design our buildings so communities participate, become empowered, and take ownership. Obviously, environmental issues are just as important, and usually there's a strong connection between the two. If you're saving energy planet-wide, you're also saving a community's small resources.'

Steve considers Africa Centre as a serious building, one from which they drew serious clients. Both agree they're now working with phenomenal clients committed to making a qualitative difference. But Derek's cynicism about the new South African elite creeps in: 'A social conscience? Don't see it in many local people. It's become unfashionable.'

Steve Kinsler's not a city person, and commutes from his home out on a quieter limb on the south coast. Interestingly, he qualified in agriculture, and only later, as an older student, studied architecture. 'It was the environmental stuff which really interested me – issues around energy and water.' He shrugs: 'It was pretty fringe

[ARCHITECTPROFILE]

then, in the early '90s, but frankly, not much has changed. People may be talking about it more, but they're still doing nothing.' In Steve's opinion, 'The glossy architectural mags haven't done the profession any favours.' A wry look at his partner: 'Derek calls it "architectural pornography". To watch the students ooh and ah over big shiny glass buildings..'

Derek lectured first-year architectural students at the University of KZN in Durban for over ten years. Steve's convinced that Derek's views had a major impact on newcomers to the discipline. 'I was quite a passionate teacher and students were responsive to me. If there's a place you can make a difference it's going to be there. The argument was, "Sure, if you want to create buildings for the rich and want to do exclusive architecture, then go and live in Australia, or

Germany or New York, but if you want to stay in South Africa, this is the kind of architecture for which you will never ever run out of work. We have buildings to make for the underclass from now until doomsday, and we still won't have scratched the surface." If you look at the shortage of classrooms or hospitals in the country, it's terrifying.'

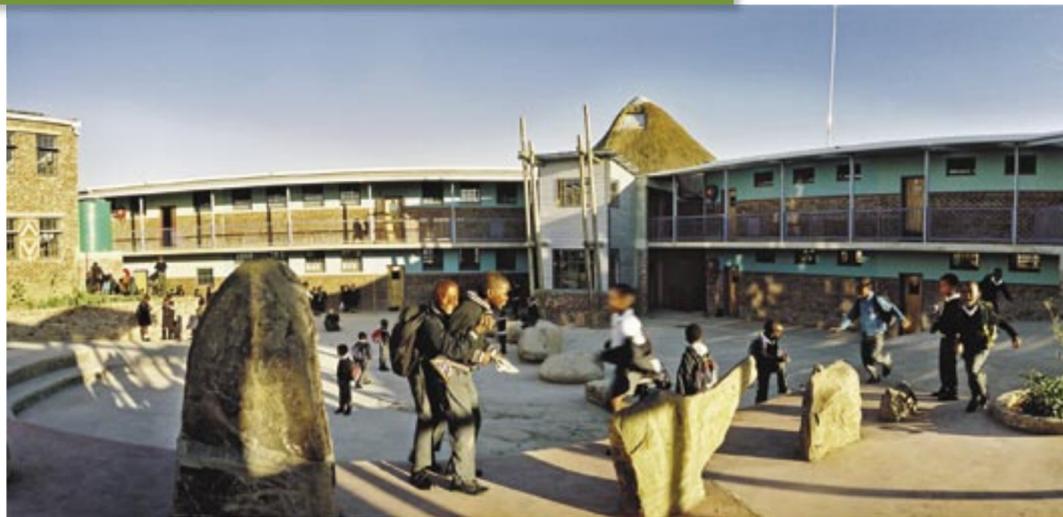
Born in northern KZN, Derek studied at UND and UCT, and 'had a long, chequered academic career'. After graduating, Derek joined the Urban Foundation. 'I'd worked there during my practical year, and became very involved in what was pretty cutting-edge, social architecture. On the one hand, there was post modernism, and on the other, architecture for the poor or recognising that local architecture has the potential to make a difference in people's lives.'

'We were involved in housing, education, social programmes, and business development, mainly in rural or peri-urban township areas. I know the townships well.' He grimaces: 'I grew up at the tail end of the hippy revolution, and have been an anti-materialist ever since. I'm very wary of rampant materialism or consumerism – that's where Steve and I connect. He comes from an environmental dimension – the kind of problems we're facing as a result of unbridled consumer culture – and I'm seeing the social

problems of that. There's only so much to go round. My interest in environmental architecture always comes down to the bottom line of cost, so if we can make buildings more sustainable in the long term, then the available funds can be spent on upliftment rather than on services, whereas Steve has a much shrewder point of view when it comes to environmentalism, almost a missionary calling to save the planet. I'm the social architect and I would imagine Steve would be the hard-core environmental one.'

‘If we can make buildings more sustainable in the long term, then the available funds can be spent on upliftment rather than on services.’

LEFT TO RIGHT
BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT



ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT
BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT

Derek began designing schools for the KZN Education Department, and in the process, began collaborating with Steve. Now, with his years of lecturing behind him, Derek and Steve have formalised a partnership, one Derek calls 'architectural polygamy'. 'We don't feel beholden to each other. We work together because we enjoy doing so, and only come together on projects in which we have a common interest.'

One such project dates back to 2004, when 460 primary school children were evicted from their farm school outside Kokstad. Most came from the new Shayamoya township which falls under the Kokstad Municipality – it's an impoverished community with high unemployment, no commercial or recreational facilities, and the water supply is turned off during the day and trickles for a while at night. The brief was for East Coast

Architects to build a school for 1 000 learners, within the standard budget of R12-million. Seven Fountains Primary School, as it was named, was funded by Oprah's Angel Network. Between Steve and Derek, they've probably designed about 40 schools, but, says Steve, 'We'd never had a client who gave us such latitude, encouraged innovation, and basically set us loose.'

For East Coast Architects, the school's design was one element of a far greater experience. 'We had a very dynamic community on a number of levels: the school – as in the principal, learners and teachers; the parents; and the residents. We started working with them, because community buy-in is essential.'

The school is now complete, innovatively self-sustaining and came in at the budget allocated by the province for a school of that size. Women

in the community acquired skills they can carry forward, there are outreach and adult-education programmes, and there's sufficient water for the school, vegetable gardens, and, when necessary, for the community.

An integral part of the design involves community accessibility to facilities like the library, computer room, and the sports field. A second sports field has been handed over to the community.

Steve and Derek know that Green buildings need more attention, more participation and more interaction. 'Instead of flicking a switch for air con, you might have to adjust louvres,' says Steve, 'but we've used it as an opportunity to educate the children. There are posters in all the classrooms explaining the winter and summer thermal strategy.'

The success of this project, has led to two more commissions, one in Vryheid, another in Limpopo. 'We are going through a similar process with the communities there.'

As would be expected, neither Derek nor Steve are moved in the ways we are, by the Eskom issue. They're hoping it's the start of something. 'Every journey starts with a tiny step. But you can't just put up a solar heating panel and forget about it. We're going to have to reinvent ourselves,' says Derek. Are there new ways of going Greener? Steve shrugs: 'These problems are not going to be solved by technology, but by attitude; it's about reducing consumption. Society overconsumes.'

Contact East Coast Architects at the South Coast office: +27 (0)39 684 6245 or the Durban office: +27 (0)31 205 8616.