

PAT ON THE BACK



Natural strategy

Eco architect Andy Horn uses natural materials to design sustainable buildings in harmony with nature

If architect Andy Horn could choose his ideal brief it would be to design an entire eco-village from start to finish, from shaping the urban design to being involved with the training and hands-on building. "I'd like to see a much more integrated approach towards human settlements," he says, "where one has the whole team on board from the beginning. It then becomes a system-based design where one can learn from others on the team, instead of a compartmentalised design where individuals are boxed and labelled according to what they do."

While growing up in Swaziland, Andy realised that the only buildings that fitted into the natural environment were the indigenous structures built with local materials. He made similar observations while travelling overseas and this, coupled with an increasing awareness of environmental and social issues, led him to focus on natural architecture. "What gives me the most satisfaction," he says, "is to work in an inspiring, natural environment where I can make use of local materials as well as engage with local communities and empower them with skills."

One of his favourite projects to date, and one which won him an international, sustainable construction award, was the upgrading of the Nieuwoudtville caravan site. What made this project stand out for Andy was the beauty of the environment as well as the high level of local community involvement.

Instead of going the standard contract route Andy appointed

a mentor, who trained people in natural building techniques like straw bale and clay building. Being away from a strictly-controlled urban setting, Andy was able to explore the design in a freer way. "I was able to go the full extent of natural building," he says, "even doing moon phase harvesting of timber so that we didn't have to treat it. We also used local succulents to create a planted roof, which is something I've wanted to do for over 12 years."

Natural building comes with its own challenges. A major stumbling block is that one can't raise a bond for residential projects as the NHBRC (National Housing Building Regulatory Council) doesn't recognise natural building. Finding reliable building contractors who are knowledgeable about environmental issues can also be difficult. "Despite these problems the rewards of building naturally are immense," says Andy.

However, he does caution prospective builders not to automatically expect natural building to be cheaper. "While it can be," he says, "this depends on many varied factors. Cost, time and quality are totally inter-related. It's when one builds oneself, using readily available natural materials that major savings can be realised, but not typically when you have it built for you."

"Either way, it will normally result in a better building that is aesthetically pleasing and nurturing in terms of your health. If you are going to go this route, you need determination as people will try to talk you out of it, and patience, because you have to respect the process and things can take longer." GH



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