



visionaries cmai architects

“As long as I am useful, I want to be around and as long as I am around, I want to be useful” Dr Chris Mulder, Founder, Chairman and CEO of CMAI Architects

“I love my work; it is my hobby, my life and my passion and I am in the fortunate position that I share my work with my family who are all involved somehow or the other”, says Dr Chris Mulder who set up CMAI in 1980 with his wife Pat upon their return from America. Having both graduated from The University of Pretoria, the couple obtained postgraduate qualifications from Texas A&M University; Chris with a PhD in Urban Design at the College of Architecture and Pat with a BSc in Floral and Interior Design. Both hold directorships at CMAI and remain integral to the company today, with son Steff Mulder joining the team in 1998.

Also a qualified architect, Steff helped to establish CMAI Architects in 2003, with Eugene Marais as a director, running parallel with, but entirely independent from the original CMAI. The separation means the company is able to streamline processes and concentrate on both master planning, like with the Belvidere Estate on the Knysna Lagoon in the mid-1980s (which at the time was one of the first master planned communities in South Africa) as well as designs of large scale developments and co-developing.

Previously CMAI had offices in Cape Town, Mossel Bay and Durban, with a head office in Pretoria. After a three year stint working on large scale projects and master planning in Mainland China between 1995 and 1997, Chris and Pat decided to relocate the head office to Knysna in order to assume the full time detail design, implementation and co-development function for the now infamous Thesen Islands Estate.

As specialists in developments along coastal areas and with experience in multi-faceted large scale projects in environmentally sensitive areas, CMAI was best placed to create a liveable and walkable community at Thesen Islands. Chris is now determined to revolutionise the industry with creating contemporary Rural New Towns, whereby commercial agriculture forms the backbone of the

development and is integrated into the design from the start. The idea was inspired by the work of the great Ian McHarg, who at that time conceptualised the notion of Design with Nature and who Chris names as his role model and mentor. Together with his meaningful stint at the Harvard School of Design where he attended courses in land planning analysis and with the guidance from Professor Don Austin, Dean at Texas A&M University College of Architecture’s Land Planning department, Chris began to fuel his passion to design with nature. His model had already worked well at Crossways Farm Village in the Eastern Cape, which aims to be entirely independent from local municipality services and was the country’s very first independent agri-village or “Rural New Town”. “Our country needs rural development that has integrity and sustainability where everyone can live happily without sacrificing city conveniences”, explains Chris. The evolution of human settlement patterns and property development are inseparable. The challenge faced by land-owners, development facilitators and the authorities is therefore one of balance and sustainability.

“The residential estate community needs to continue providing for all ages and income brackets, but they also need to cater for an increasingly older, but very active senior clientele who are not necessarily interested in a retirement village and who require an inclusive estate which offers something for people of all ages”, explains Chris.

Developers should be creating the most environmentally sensitive and responsible methods that will ensure a socio-economic return and benefits to the surrounding communities and to the country. “Some developers positively impact the landscape and some negatively; investors should always check the track record of the developer as well as the products on offer, the proposed site and access, location and facilities. Developers driven by greed and profit making will negatively suffer”, warns Chris.



CROSSWAYS COUNTRY ESTATE



THESEN ISLANDS ESTATE

“To be a success a development must have a sense of exclusiveness; it must be able to tell a unique story and live by it in its layout and lifestyle offering. Today’s homeowners are demanding a wealth of sporting activities, state of the art security, outstanding schooling, superb medical care and a unique story that sets the development apart from others. If you can achieve the above and in a smart rural village too, where food is produced with integrity and there is care for the environment, then what a pleasure. Agriculture is very much the new golf”. The CMAI philosophy is highly influenced by the long and continuous working relationships and exposure to America, where the rural new town concept has received extremely positive feedback. “When we go on holiday, we plan it in such a way that we can look at developments in different countries, as it is important to see and understand what is going on everywhere”, says Chris, who when designing Thesen Islands spent days in Venice with his wife, measuring canal widths, sidewalks and bridges and then the same again in the Intracoastal Waterway on the American East Coast.

One of the most exciting projects on the drawing board for the talented team is a new rural town in the Limpopo Province for the ZZ2 group, the largest tomato farmers in the world. The model is similar to the Crossways Farm agri-village model and will interweave ZZ2’s cutting edge high tech green farming techniques in order to create a sustainable new rural town. “This really has all the makings of a unique development and I think it will be the only new town with a fully-fledged, fully stocked, commercially managed game reserve woven into the town boundaries. It will also have amazing heritage sites, farm lands, rivers and mountains, as well as a series of state of the art agriculture research facilities, all interlaced into the fabric of the land. In addition to the mandatory green measures such as rainwater harvesting, solar water heating, security and fibre optics, it will also involve commercial agriculture as well as poverty alleviation, job creation and training,

all of which are national priorities. Once the rural new town development really gets off the ground, Chris would like to see how these same concepts can be used in low cost housing instead of the current approach where people are given homes with no sense of a neighbourhood, community spaces, walkability or sensitivity to the design; a lack of basic land development principles and no attention to sustainability.

Over the last three decades, CMAI has been involved in numerous projects countrywide, including the master plan for Pezula Golf Estate, Belvidere and Thesen Islands, as well as several other completed estates which are awaiting approval from local government. Despite a wealth of experience in urban design, architecture, land planning and landscape architecture, it still took the company seven years to obtain formal approval for the Thesen Islands development. “You literally have to fight your way through the quagmire of rules and regulations whilst another obvious challenge is obtaining finance, especially if it is a new or unconventional concept like a Rural New Town”, explained Chris.

Having received the President’s Award for Design in 2009, the Outstanding Alumnus of the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University in 2002 and the Outstanding International Alumnus Award in 2011 from Texas A&M, and named as only one of three South African icons in the profession by the SA Institute of Landscape Architects in 2009, Chris Mulder is proudly and successfully tackling the green revolution with purpose and force.

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