

eastern cape institute of architects



February 2013

Dear Colleagues,

February has been a surprisingly positive month for our city. We have “close to capacity” crowds watching our local team engaged in world class rugby at our world class stadium, we have a municipal manager appointed for the first time in three years and we have Sun International officially opening the new conference centre and five star hotel at the Boardwalk complex in Summerstrand. These are all very encouraging signs of growth, stability and revival in a city in which we all believe.



In fact, I was fortunate to be a guest at this weekend’s opening ceremony for the new and improved Boardwalk complex. But, as I sat at the glitzy, over-the-top, launch function, I could not help but notice those things that architects notice. Yes of course the design of the imposing dolls house façade of the 5 star hotel, is not to everyone’s taste. (In fact it is not to my taste at all, but I expect there are a good number of paying customers whose view is a greater consideration to South Africa’s premier hotel and leisure developer.) But as the function progressed and the mandatory speeches of the politically powerful drew on into the evening, the design issues moved further and further from the front of my mind. Rather, I began to think of the role of our local, Port Elizabeth based, professionals in the project. The project was carried out by a full team of local consultants: structural, civil, town planners, mechanical and electrical engineers. Except for the Architects, where the work was carried out by two Johannesburg based firms. (Yes, there was some “local” architectural support, but only a very small, limited appointment.)

As I contemplated the over-catered exotic foods, the scantily clad waitrons and the exuberant fireworks display that evening, I could not help but to become a little anxious of a pattern I have noticed, where any project of significance in this town requires the leadership and vision of some outside Architectural firm. We see it with the Capetonians at the new Baywest Shopping Centre, we saw it at the North End Stadium with the Germans, we see it now at the Boardwalk and even at the NMMU, where the prized commissions are snapped up by Cape Town or Johannesburg firms.

But, what to do? Can this tendency be reversed? I, for one, have long given up on the futile idea of trying to defend “our territory” against outsiders. Why? Because this sword cuts both ways. Many architects in our region are doing good work outside of our region and outside of our country, making it insincere and contradictory to argue that we should not be open for business to Architects from outside of our region and our country. Rather, I think we must embrace the reality that the world in which we live is a world of specialisation. We have got to get good at something and to be seen to be good at that thing. There is absolutely no reason why you cannot be based in Port Elizabeth and be

recognised as the world's best in some aspect of design and construction. This, I believe, must be our focus as an Institute. We must be seen to be pushing for the conditions that would enable our members to deliver cutting edge work of the highest order. This is how we remain relevant; this is how we remain competitive. All other "protectionist" strategies are for the short term and eventually tend toward making us weak and lazy. We can't afford to be weakened any more than we are. Its not an option.

A few years ago I visited the Cairn's Convention Centre on the north east Australian coast. We were investigating the potential for an International Convention Centre here in Port Elizabeth and we were told we had to visit Cairns as their centre had been voted the world's best four times in a row. Now bear in mind that Cairns has the population less than Uitenhage and airport the size of Uppington's. The sea is un-swimmable because the mud and mangroves. There is nothing really special about the town at all, but because of the commitment of the town's leaders to provide an excellent international conference experience, the place is booked out year after year by big spending international conferences.

So, can PE become to the world of Architectural Design, what Cairns is to tourism? Well, I don't know. But if the answer is "no", then it is not "no" because we are too small a city, it is not "no" because our airport is too small, it is not "no" because Cape Town is hipper or Jo'burg shinier. If we decide that we want to develop our city as having a reputation for excellent design, for sustainable design, for sensitive Heritage design, for urban renewal, for people focussed "developmental" design, then we better get going with it. We had better get going with figuring out what the first step is, because it is possible. Or we could then of course just do nothing, leave things to chance and winge to each other as our profession is eroded by "outsiders", "experts" and hostile clients.

I think, I would prefer that we don't do nothing. We have tried that for some years now. It's got us where we are now.

But more importantly; what do you think?

Yours in Architectural Excellence

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Hewitt-Coleman', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tim Hewitt-Coleman

(President – East Cape Institute of Architects)