



bentel

aspires to lead
the way for next generation architecture

Left to right back row: Marco Macagnano;
Andre Wiese; Lee-Anne Fletcher

Left to right front row: Tim Harlech-Jones;
Gordon van der Heever; Stephen Roberts;
Musa Ndlovu; Graham Smith



Interviewed by Tony Korsten
Written by Claire Cole
Photographed by Grant Difford

Bentel Associates International is one of South Africa's best-known architectural firms. Established in 1960, it has grown over the decades to become a respected name in architecture and a brand in its own right within property circles. Yet the executive team managing BAI today recognises that past successes are not necessarily a guarantee of future performance, and to that end, they have active strategies in place to keep driving excellence and relevance. *Asset* speaks to various members of the management team about how they are keeping the firm at the forefront of architecture both locally and in its overseas markets.

Strength in retail, but working in all sectors

BAI has been known for much of its life as the go-to architectural firm for retail design. In the 1970s, it secured work from Pick n Pay (which remains a client to this day) which propelled it into the retail design sphere and more or less kept it there. **Stephen Roberts**, chairman of BAI, recalls that when he joined the firm in 1976 there were already five Pick n Pay hypermarkets being designed and built – following on from the first major successful one (the well-known Boksburg Pick n Pay Hyper) which was built in 1975. “The firm was at a very important stage of its growth at that time. Our connection with Pick n Pay gave us an advantage in the retail space and allowed us to become retail specialists,” he notes.

It's probably safe to say that BAI has been responsible for more shopping centre designs than just about any other architectural firm in South Africa by now – and it continues to win awards for its work, as evidenced by its winning the South African Council of Shopping Centres' Overall Spectrum Award for retail two years in a row – in 2014 for Cradlestone Mall on Gauteng's West Rand and in 2015 for Waterfall Corner in Waterfall City, Midrand.



Waterfall Corner in Waterfall City, Midrand.

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There is no doubt that retail design work – which encompasses everything from the architectural design to detailed store planning and even branding – will continue to form a cornerstone of BAI's work in the future. However, as business development director **Tim Harlech-Jones** points out, it is important to note that retail work is not its only strength, and that the firm always has undertaken (and will continue to undertake) architectural design work across all asset classes including commercial, industrial, residential, hospitality and leisure, and even institutional work for buildings such as universities and hospitals.

It is also fully capable of undertaking urban planning and master-planning projects – a notable recent one being the master plan developed for the greater Waterfall Precinct in Midrand. For the entire Gautrain system, BAI held the role of the master architects. The company has also undertaken significant infrastructure projects such as the OR Tambo Central Terminal, which was completed in time for the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

BAI in fact has a number of projects in different sectors on the go at the moment. Among these are numerous schemes in the retail, office, residential and hospitality sectors across South Africa, but also across the continent, in the likes of Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, Kenya, Uganda and the Republic of Congo.

Notable past projects in South Africa include Nelson Mandela Square (for which the refurbishment and repositioning was recently completed); Michelangelo Towers (hotel and serviced apartments); Legacy Corner (including the Da Vinci Hotel and the retail podium attached to Nelson Mandela Square); Montecasino and Palazzo Montecasino; Bedford Square (retail and residential); Canal Walk in Cape Town; Tygervalley Mall in Cape Town; Greenstone Shopping



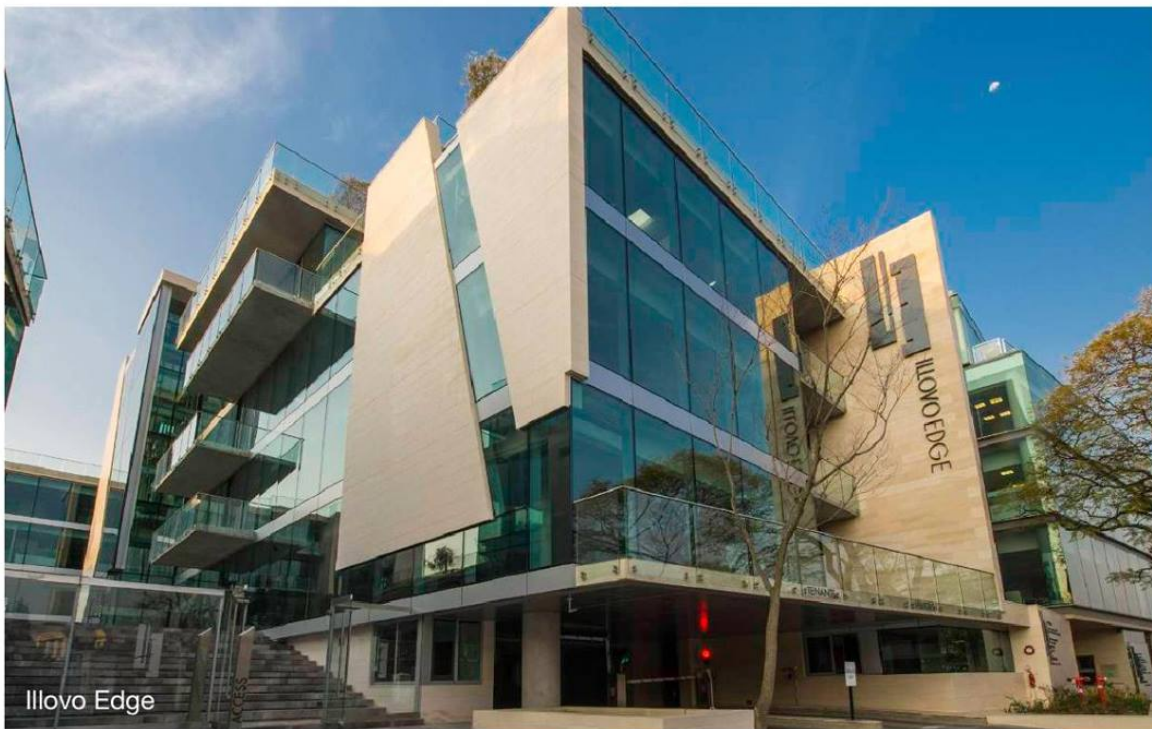
Michelangelo Towers, Sandton



Cell C's head office in Midrand

Story continues on the next page.

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Centre in Modderfontein; Clearwater Mall on Gauteng's West Rand; Maponya Mall in Soweto; La Lucia Mall in Durban North; Cell C's head office in Midrand; Illovo Edge (office development) Phase 1, 2 and 3; and FNB Acacia House in Umhlanga.

Projects in other African countries include The Palms Shopping Centre (Lagos, Nigeria), one of the first formalised shopping malls in West Africa; Accra Mall in Accra, Ghana; Stanbic Heights, Accra, Ghana (office block); Levy Junction and Manda Hill in Lusaka, Zambia; and Rail Park Mall, Gaborone, Botswana. These are all blue-chip retail and office buildings.

Growing international capability

Approximately 12 years ago, BAI made its first foray offshore and set up an office in Mumbai, India. While the Indian market has been attractive to many international architects, Stephen notes that most of them work from outside the country, whereas BAI has an established office there, staffed by almost 75 people. This is a sizeable offshore business, and one which has shown good growth over the years – so much so in fact, that the international company ICS Group, with which BAI has been working in joint venture in India for some years now, has become a shareholder in the South African business (it has been a shareholder in the Indian business since 2004).

The Bentel India office undertakes work in a variety of sectors, too – particularly residential and mixed use projects. This office has also won a variety of awards, including the Five Star Asia Pacific Property Award for best office development for its Thane One project in Mumbai in 2013, and for the best mixed use project for the Vegas mixed-use development in Delhi in 2015. Residential and mixed-use work makes up a large proportion of the work that this office undertakes, with notable recent projects including the Premium Residential Tower in Kolkata, the Pacific Golf Estate in Raipur,



FNB Acacia House, Umhlanga



Thane One, Thane, Mumbai,
India - office

Isphani Boulevard in Dhaka, Plaza One in Mumbai, Prozone Square in Coimbatore, and Vegas Mixed-Use development in Delhi.

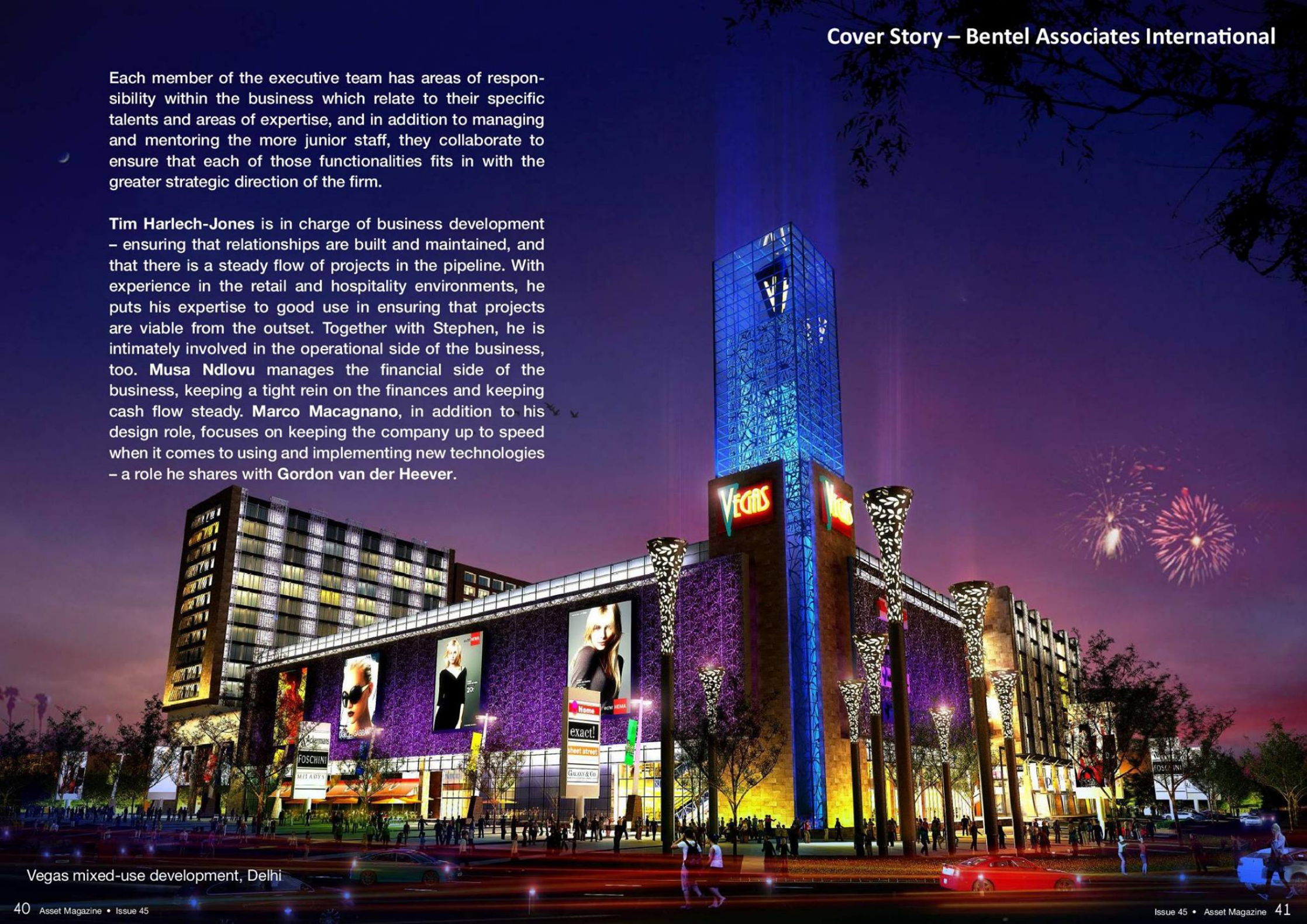
The Bentel name is so well known in retail that even in India, retailers will often take space in a Bentel-designed mall without hesitation. Having said that, it is important to note that the retail market is very different from the one we know in South Africa. Formal retail makes up only a small component of the overall retail market in India, with informal trade remaining strong. Bentel's Mumbai office has therefore always taken on a wide variety of work across the different property sectors.

Pursuing excellence in design, project management and co-ordination

Offering clients an all-round excellent service requires that every member of the team does the very best that they can to ensure the operations within the practice run smoothly – whether that means coming up with cutting-edge design ideas, co-ordinating teams within and outside the office, managing things correctly on site, keeping the project pipe line flowing, or making sure that the cash flow is steady and the finances are tightly controlled.

Each member of the executive team has areas of responsibility within the business which relate to their specific talents and areas of expertise, and in addition to managing and mentoring the more junior staff, they collaborate to ensure that each of those functionalities fits in with the greater strategic direction of the firm.

Tim Harlech-Jones is in charge of business development – ensuring that relationships are built and maintained, and that there is a steady flow of projects in the pipeline. With experience in the retail and hospitality environments, he puts his expertise to good use in ensuring that projects are viable from the outset. Together with Stephen, he is intimately involved in the operational side of the business, too. Musa Ndlovu manages the financial side of the business, keeping a tight rein on the finances and keeping cash flow steady. Marco Macagnano, in addition to his design role, focuses on keeping the company up to speed when it comes to using and implementing new technologies – a role he shares with Gordon van der Heever.



Vegas mixed-use development, Delhi

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Marco, as a Green Star SA Accredited Professional, also works closely with Lee-Anne Fletcher on ensuring that the principles of sustainable design are understood and implemented in the firm's projects. Gordon and André Wiese both have a particular strength in project implementation, and are the go-to men in the firm for co-ordinating project teams, managing implementation on site, and ensuring that projects are managed down to the last detail. Wessel van Dyk, Bentel's principal design director, has extensive experience in urban design and architecture, having been involved in a number of landmark developments in South Africa and East Africa during his career. Graham Smith heads up the interior design department, managing a team of enthusiastic and creative interior designers and liaising closely with the architectural design team.

Hand drawn sketches



Montecasino, Johannesburg, South Africa - Mixed-use



Montecasino, Johannesburg, South Africa - Mixed-use

Staying ahead as architecture evolves

The discipline of building design is a constantly evolving one, and it requires a firm to keep its eye on the ball in order to stay abreast of those changes, let alone ahead of them. Sustainable building design is one way in which architecture has evolved rapidly in recent times. Including responsible, 21st century architectural principles in the design of all its buildings is one of the particular goals that BAI strives for. As Marco explains, this broadly encompasses everything from sustainable and energy efficient design to notions of re-use and re-building, to using responsibly-made and sourced products.



Story continues on the next page.

Mall at Newmarket, Alberton

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Building information modelling (BIM) is another area in which it is vital to stay up to speed. As the latest step in the evolution of building design, the BIM capability is built into most modern design software, yet is not always optimally used. Marco and Gordon explain that in essence, BIM provides a system for information management, collaboration and communication on a project, both during its design and construction and for the life of the building thereafter. It could be described as a platform for digitally embedding all the relevant information about every aspect of a building and its functions. “What is really important is what this means for us – which is that we’re no longer thinking about buildings as products but as systems with an active lifespan. The fact that we are able to embed all the relevant information into a digital model means that a whole new world of possibilities is open for the building owner or occupier in terms of facilities management and operations,” Marco elaborates.



Nelson Mandela Square,
Sandton



Bedford Centre,
Bedfordview



Cradlestone Mall,
Krugersdorp



The Workshop,
Durban CBD



Secunda Village,
Secunda, Mpumalanga

Furthermore, this information can be shared between all members of the professional team – which should then facilitate seamless design execution and construction.

Although there is still some progress to be made in the industry overall with respect to understanding and using BIM optimally, once again things are moving fast and such methods of working are already becoming standard in more sophisticated markets.

It's not just technology that is changing in the world of design. As Lee-Anne notes, one increasingly finds that clients – whether they are property developers, landlords or retailers – are informed and sophisticated, and that one needs to be prepared for that as a designer. It requires striking a fine balance between considering the client's needs and requests, and giving advice as a trained professional, and often the ability to find this balance is the key to building and sustaining long term relationships.

A forward-looking firm with a vision for the future

The Bentel brand looks set to be a part of the South African and Indian architectural landscapes for a good while to come. BAI has a forward-looking team committed to growing that brand and ensuring that the firm's offering stays relevant in the current market. Stephen notes that some of the brand 'redevelopment' that is currently taking place is aimed at making the market more aware of BAI's broad spectrum of capabilities beyond its retail specialisation. Although retail work will remain an important part of the firm's business, the way in which urban spaces evolve to encompass more mixed uses, and the need to balance out work in different sectors over the economic cycles, already mean that the greatest strength an architectural practice can probably have in the current environment is the ability to take on a broad range of work.

Tim also comments that as mixed-use precincts become more common, he believes that certain aspects of building design which before were not necessarily given much attention, will become more important. If neighbourhoods are to be more walkable and pedestrian-friendly (as they generally must in mixed-use environments), then the way in which buildings interact with pavements and street edges will need more detailed consideration, for example.

Marco adds that there is a further aspect to urban development, and that is the rise of the smart city. He comments that there is a degree of innovation needed to design buildings today for future uses – for digital contexts which may affect the building design and infrastructure planning immediately. BAI therefore consciously attempts to innovate

in that sphere, aiming to establish itself as a leader in this respect. The BAI team is clear on its direction for the future – about how it wants its brand represented in the market, and about how it intends to maintain its leading position in a rapidly-changing world. Things have certainly changed dramatically over the past six decades, and no doubt the next six will bring changes we cannot even anticipate. With the experience gained over that time and a solid foundation in place, together with a strong vision and strategy, BAI looks well set to continue being a star performer in architecture. A+



Cornubia Shopping Centre, Cornubia, Umhlanga