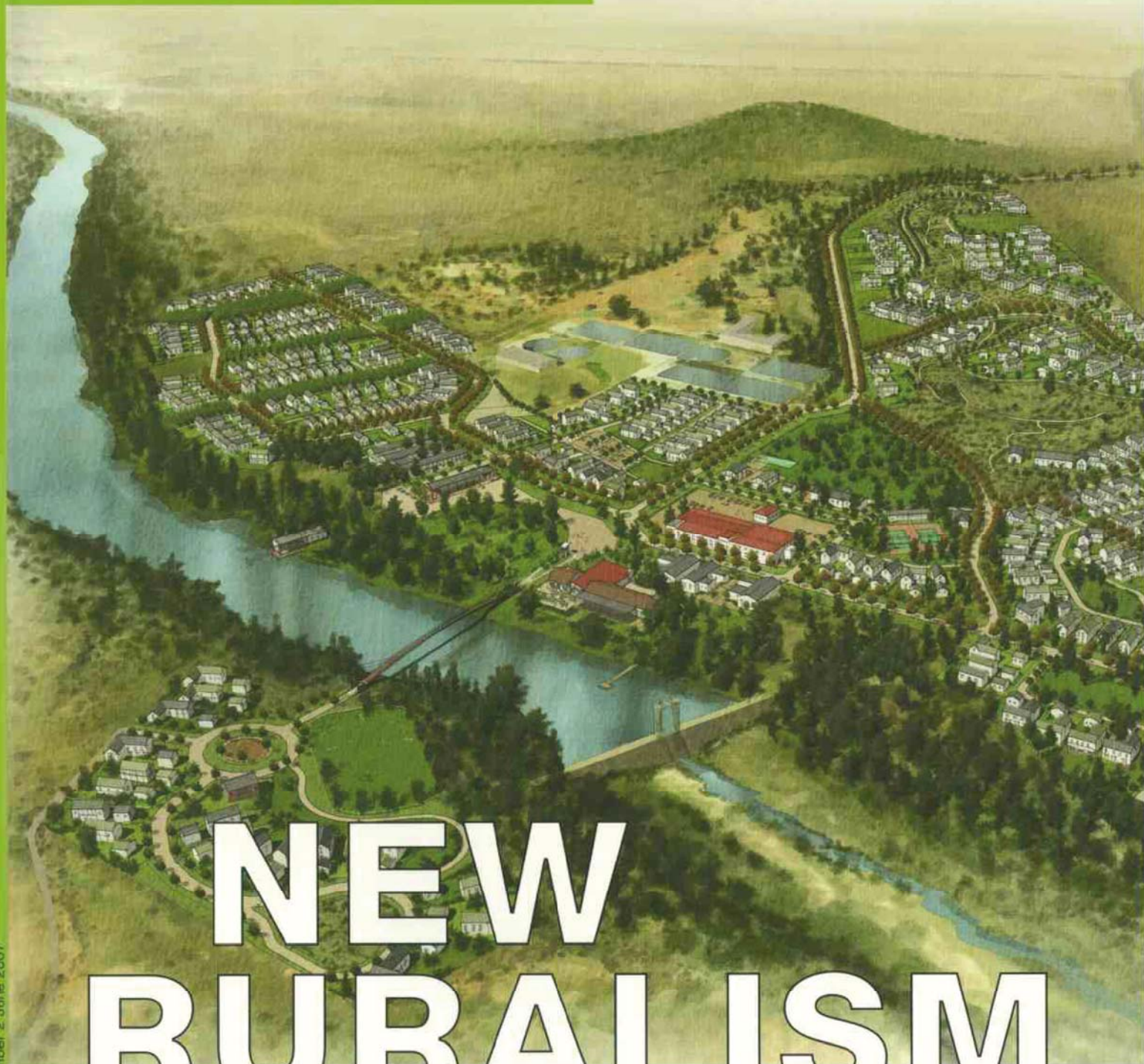


urban green FILE



NEW RURALISM

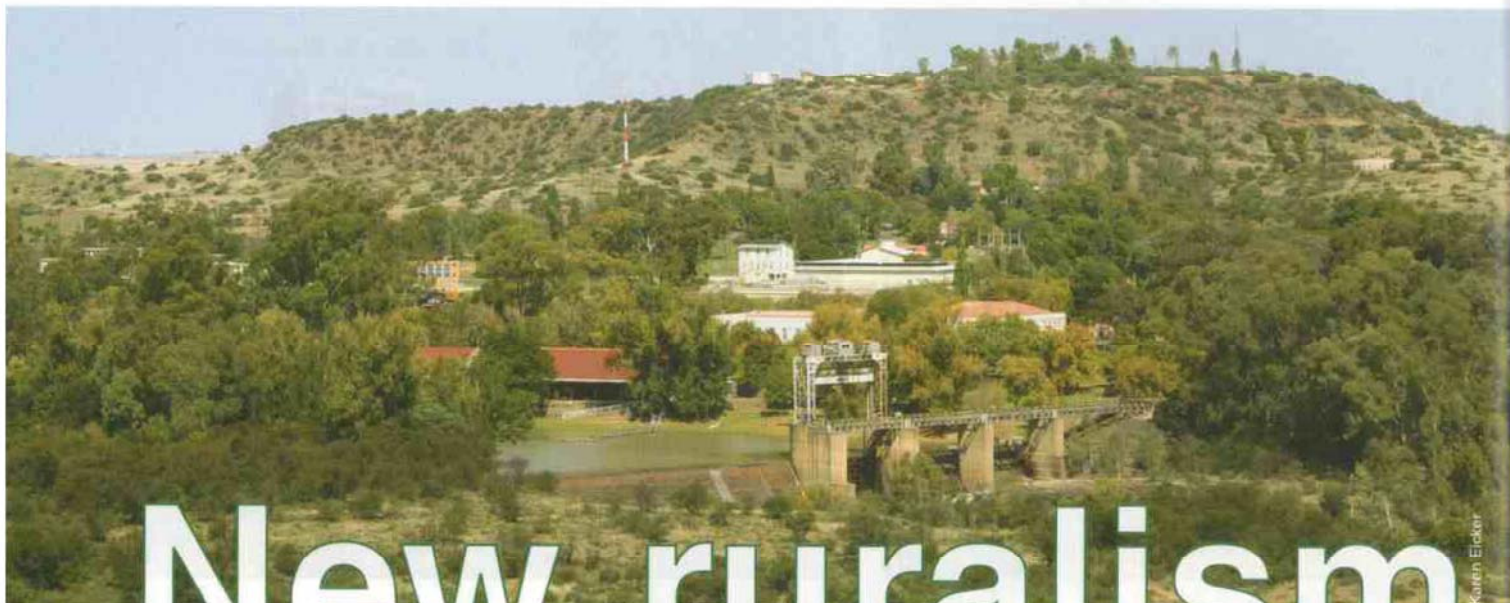
- return to the village

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Karen Eickler

New ruralism FOR OLD RESORT

A redevelopment on the banks of the Modder River, just outside Bloemfontein, will embrace new concepts of urban and rural living.

The redevelopment of Maselspoort is based on the concepts of 'smart growth' and 'new urbanism', advocated by urban designer and developer Dr Chris Mulder and his team of architects and consultants at Chris Mulder Associates Inc (CMAI). These concepts have been used in previous developments by CMAI, most notably Thesen Island in Knysna.

A CMAI article describes 'liveable neighbourhoods' as custom-designed communities that are the antithesis of conventional suburban sprawl of ad hoc, uncontrolled and non-integrated development totally dependent on the motor car for survival.

"Liveable neighbourhoods – in both a rural and urban setting – are self-contained estates, hamlets or villages built to reduce dependency on cars, provide easy access to public and commercial amenities, increase community interactivity, increase cost-effectiveness of services, and provide a simplified but higher quality of lifestyle."

This approach, recognised globally, encourages urban designers and planners to integrate local heritage and cultural elements into the character of the new built fabric. Such projects focus on the develop-



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ment and sustenance of communities, incorporate a sense of place, and encourage community pride and responsibility.

At Maselspoort, as with other developments under way, Mulder is extending this concept to incorporate new ruralism. This is essentially a vision to protect surrounding natural environments while promoting the growth of local rural economies. "I believe that people are besotted with the urban edge," said Mulder. "My question is 'What about the rural people?' More than half the country lives in rural areas so, if all the development happens within the urban edge, what's going to happen to rural communities? People will either flock to towns because that's where the jobs are or we will need to develop rural nodes and have a

Top: Viewed from the proposed equestrian estate, the existing resort of Maselspoort nestles on the banks of the Modder River. The Boyden Observatory is visible in the background.

Above: Its position beside the Modder River was a guiding aspect in the development's design, especially viewed against the dry and flat Free State landscape.



rural edge as well to protect the natural landscapes. Even in prime agricultural environments we need to identify small rural nodes to keep the local communities alive and boost rural economies without necessarily sacrificing prime agricultural land. It is important to identify opportunities for expansion in existing nodes and preserve natural resources. The projects we are working on at the moment incorporate this new ruralism, which is either agriculture-based or resort-based, with scenic attributes that can be developed and where natural attributes can be protected."

Maselspoort revitalisation

Maselspoort was established in 1933 and evolved into one of the most popular resorts in the country over subsequent decades. During the '90s, the complex became slightly neglected and dilapidated until it was taken over by Fritz and Reg Krohn. The two brothers from Bloemfontein bought the resort with a vision to restore it to its former glory. However, for the resort to remain relevant and meet modern demands, it needed a new vision and a major revamp. Enter CMAI.

Innovative concept

"The starting point in our design was to create a living environment that belongs entirely to its residents," said Mulder. "In this regard, we are following the trend that is gaining ground in Europe and North America. The old saying that 'there is nothing new under the sun' also applies here be-

The redevelopment of Maselspoort will provide more than 400 new houses and 8 000 m² of mixed-use, low-rise commercial and trading space, and an equestrian facility on the banks opposite the resort.

cause what we are doing in a modern context is to create a village as it would have existed in the days before motor cars when residents formed communities in the true sense of the word."

Reg Krohn explained that the existing concept had become outdated. "It was essential to find a new vision for Maselspoort – one that would preserve the best aspects of the past but, at the same time, manifest modern considerations."

In terms of the type of development planned, Mulder noted that the site, at 85 ha, is too small for an agriculture-based community but the heart of the development will remain resort-based because of its historical value. "The development is much more compact than a conventional, vehicle-oriented suburb with smaller, tastefully-designed houses following a variety of house types. There will be plenty of open gardens and, hopefully, some orchards and vegetable gardens to promote this community type of lifestyle."

The existing Maselspoort resort and conference facilities will be retained, together with day-visitor recreational facilities. The redevelopment will provide for more than 400 new houses and 8 000 m² of mixed-use, low-rise commercial and trading space. As the property straddles the Modder River, an equestrian facility will be established on the banks opposite the resort. Mulder ex-

plained that all houses would be built on stands of 300 m² to 900 m² as larger stands don't work in terms of the village concept and are not in keeping with market demands. The surrounding area is not particularly well-suited to agriculture so the intention is to develop one of the neighbouring properties as a golf course at a later stage, Krohn added.

"For most of December and January, and over Easter, the resort is full and, over week-ends, we have around 20 to 30 overnight visitors," said Krohn. "So we shall keep the resort component to meet this need and for the 2010 Soccer World Cup visitors. Part of our plan is to put up a 50-room complex next to the river and, of the 400 houses, 10 have been designated as guest houses. In addition, several rental pool houses will still be available for overnight accommodation. We shall have a community of around 2 000 people living on site so the new commercial activities will respond to these residents' needs. Eventually we would also like to put up a school to service the surrounding local community, which is very poor."

The end result will be a rural resort development existing in harmony with its environment and offering every modern convenience in a landscaped setting of gardens, pedestrian-friendly streets and riparian relaxation.

Designed for humans



CMAI

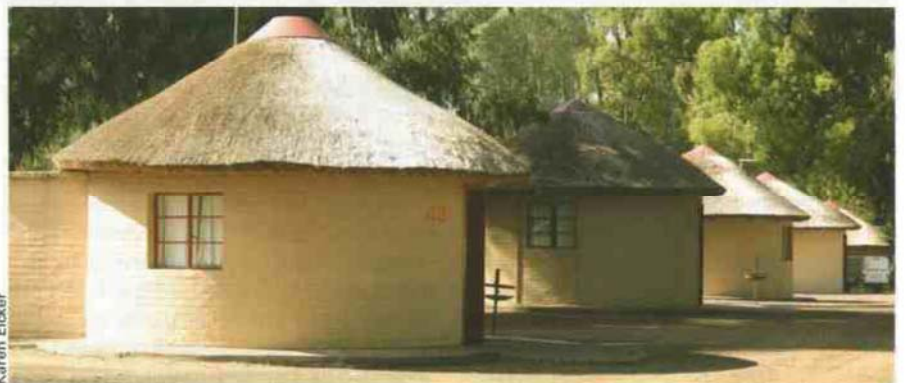
Existing

Some of the existing structures are going to be accommodated in the new development while others will have to make place for new structures.



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Above: The camp site, a popular holiday spot, will be replaced by new houses. New overnight facilities will be created for visitors while existing day-visitor recreational facilities will be retained.



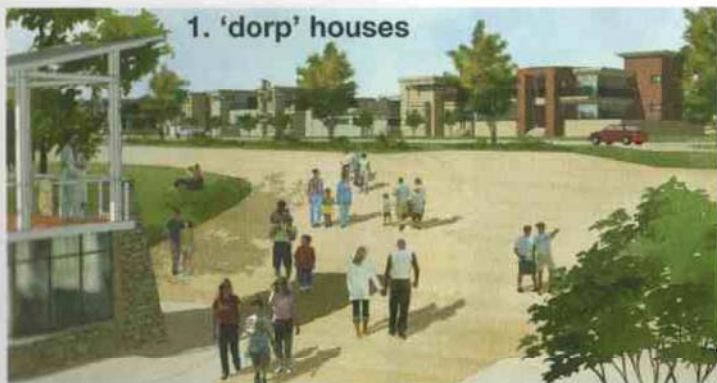
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Above: The existing self-catering units will be demolished to make way for the new houses, amenities and landscaping.

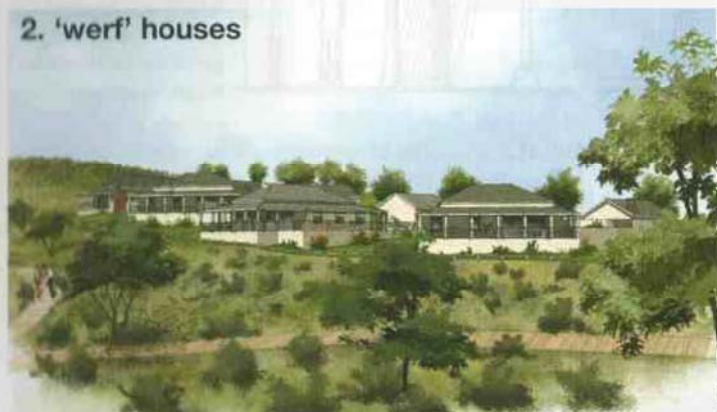


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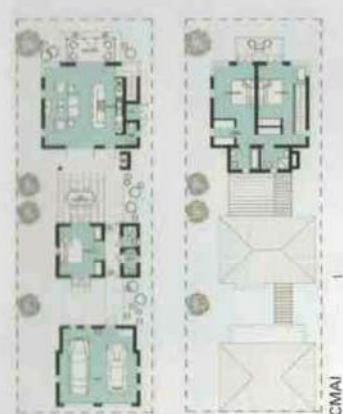
Left: Some renovated bungalows may be retained for overnight visitors.



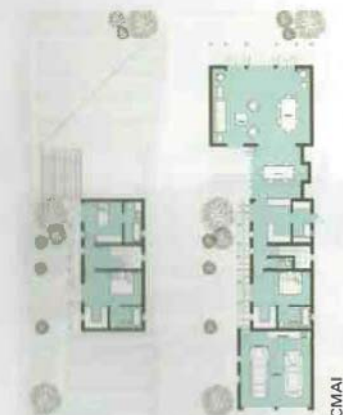
1. 'dorp' houses



2. 'werf' houses



3. 'park' houses



4. 'boord' houses

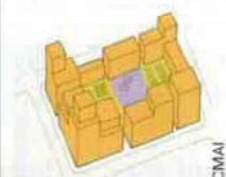
Different housing options provide for different ways to engage public and private space. In accordance with the principles of new urbanism, houses will have narrow street frontages and a long, narrow plan. Most will be double storeys with verandas due to the limited coverage of 40%. "What makes the new concept unique is the principle of a 'walkable' village: one where no-one is ever more than five minutes walk from the commercial and leisure activities; one where pedestrians take priority over vehicles; and where gardening and tree-lined streets take preference," explained Reg Krohn. The architecture will be a modern version of Free State *platteland* architecture. Different house types will have different treatments depending on their location.

Proposed

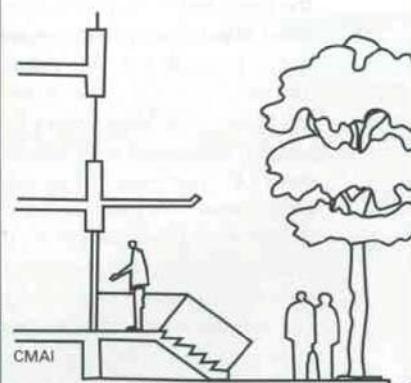
Detail design in the proposed development will result in a more sustainable residential community.



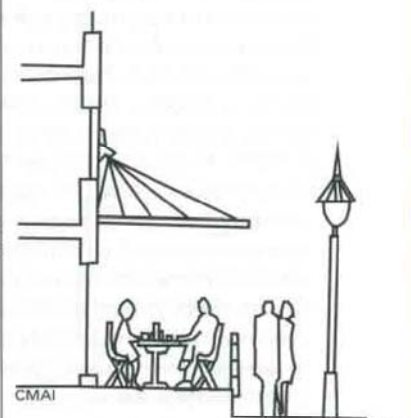
In the early phases of development, a full perimeter block may not be possible.



Phasing building close to the street – with parking close to the rear – enables future intensification to take place.



Level changes can promote surveillance while retaining privacy.



'Spill out' space adds vitality to the public realm.

4 Socio-economic improvement

The proposed development falls within the Mangaung Local Municipality where around 60% of the population is economically active. Of this figure, 59,9% is employed and 40,1% is unemployed. Poverty is high and 58% of those employed earn less than R1 600/month.

The new Maselspoort project is expected to provide significant employment opportunities for the surrounding local communities. "The proposed development will also serve as a valuable growth point in the area and will provide substantial new employment opportunities during construction and thereafter," said Mulder.



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Serving the community will remain a priority. The existing day visitor recreational facilities are a popular destination for residents of Bloemfontein and its surrounds, as well as school outings, and will be retained.

During the construction phase, projections indicate that approximately 9 000 jobs will be created while, during the op-

erational phase, the sustained impact of development is expected to provide around 1 000 jobs.

5 Heritage priorities

In terms of the National Heritage Resources Act and the Environmental Conservation Act, a heritage impact assessment was carried out to evaluate the existing site. Several structures were identified as being older than 60 years. Only three of them have historical and architectural significance, and will be conserved: the water works, the old manager's house and the restaurant.

"Maselspoort forms part of the Bloemfontein water purification scheme," Mulder explained. "The water works includes two existing sandstone buildings in the middle of the development. Although these are utility buildings, the architecture is quite beautiful. We are speaking to the council about incorporating these or doing a public-private partnership joint venture project."

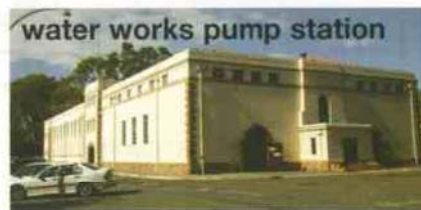
The existing manager's house is completely derelict, Krohn pointed out. "We will restore it and use it as a sales office. Another existing house next to the reception has already been renovated as a guest house."

The aesthetic origins of the new components of the development are derived from the urban, rural and farmland environs of the Bloemfontein area. Maselspoort will essentially have a village



restaurant building

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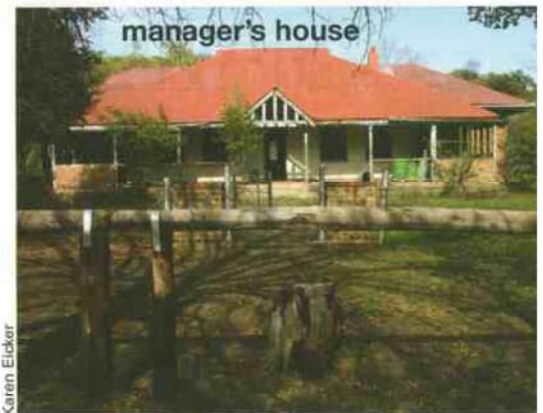


water works pump station

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square at its heart with a country retail component and gathering spaces for communal and public activities.

The architecture will be a modern version of Free State *platteland* architecture. In accordance with the principles of new urbanism, houses will have narrow street frontages and a long, narrow structure facing north. Different house types will have different treatments and ambience depending on their location – river, hill, park and town houses. As a rule, most houses will be double-storey with verandas be-



manager's house

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cause there is limited coverage of 40%. Backyard lanes will be used for services (water and electric meters, and garbage collection) and parking, so that front streets will be mostly vehicle-free and pedestrian-friendly.

Design Integrity

Krohn is excited about future prospects for Maselspoort, and has been suitably impressed by the dedication and skills of the design team. "Chris's idea is very different from our original concept. He helped us to really see the dream."

It is important for them, as planners, designers, decision-makers and developers, to blend our creative, technical and management skills with a professional ethic that

shapes a sustainable future for people and the environment, Mulder said. "I guess it all boils down to how we, in South Africa, can create opportunities for social upliftment and nurture economic growth without undermining the natural resource base and environmental integrity."

The concepts of new urbanism and new ruralism, as envisioned at Maselspoort, are positive, particularly the ideal of trying to

reinstate the notion of community in a modern world where individual achievement and self-gratification tend to triumph. These ideas are also admirable in the desire to protect cultural and environmental resources while uplifting surrounding communities. It will be interesting to see whether or not developments of this nature, tried and tested over years to come, will indeed deliver on their potential. ■