

urban green FILE

WATERSIDE WAY OF LIFE

– indigenous paradise



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Right and far right: CMAI was responsible for the overall planning and design of Thesen Islands – a project incorporating the challenges of building in an ecologically-sensitive area, preserving history and heritage, as well as introducing innovative concepts in engineering and construction.



Leading

Chris Mulder is certainly an impressive personality. He exudes conviction and efficiency in his vision to help redefine development in South Africa.



Mulder's brainchild, Chris Mulder Associates Inc (CMAI) is becoming well-known for its work that marries upmarket residential development with economically- and socially-sustainable initiatives and community upliftment. "22 years ago, we sat down and set some goals for CMAI," says Mulder. "The most important of these goals was to become known for sensitive coastal development in South Africa."

A collaborative approach

At the time Mulder said: "It is important for us 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: I guess it all boils down to how societies can meet basic human needs and nurture economic growth without undermining the natural resource base and environmental integrity". Today Mulder still believes in that ideal.

CMAI's mission statement is commitment to the environmentally-sensitive development of land, property and natural resources, and the company's aim is to optimise the commercial, socio-economic and environmental value of all projects through multi-agency co-ordination. This involves a holistic approach supported by the diverse skills of a multi-disciplinary team, the unique creative contribution of individuals, and rewarding personal relationships with clients.

"I believe that there is no one skill or profession that can be involved in a project," Mulder explains. "All role players must be aware right from the start what is involved. I insist on full consultant meetings all the time on every project, including the specialist consultants. I believe in absolute interdisciplinary collaboration and, over a quarter of a century, we have developed a unique process in this area. Our projects are large – up to 2 000 ha sometimes. The approval systems are complex, and the design, planning and ar-

chitecture have to respond to the region. Often the sites are in super-sensitive areas like Thesen Islands. It took us seven years to obtain the approvals and seven years to construct, sell and build the 605 residential units on this site. We built 11 km of canals, the entire infrastructure and 100 multi-million-rand houses a year in five consecutive years. In this time, we also completed Thesen Harbour Town: the project's own commercial centre. During this time, the full consultant team attended bi-weekly meetings and everyone was constantly aware of one another's problems and ready to respond proactively."

New approaches

CMAI's work is mostly based on the concepts of 'new urbanism' and 'new ruralism'. New urbanism advocates liveable neighbourhoods 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 simpli-



Chris Mulder originally studied soil science (chemistry) and horticulture at the University of Pretoria and was awarded a BSc (agriculture) degree. After farming for 12 years, external influences obliged him to reconsider his direction entirely. Today he holds a PhD in urban design and land planning, and is at the head of one of South Africa's trend-setting development companies.

BY EXAMPLE



Mulder is of the opinion that urban edge policies are restrictive, relatively undefined and unimplemented, and that there is nothing that can stimulate rural development in South Africa. Kurland Estate (pictured) is a sought-after equestrian estate on the Garden Route and another CMAI development.

fied but higher quality of life. New ruralism works to create bridges between sustainable agriculture and new urbanism.

"I know and acknowledge that there is continuous debate on this topic, as well as people who support it and others who totally disagree with it," says Mulder. "But we believe it addresses most of the housing and living conditions we face in South Africa. We have demonstrated very successfully that it works – it sells; it creates jobs; it contributes greatly to the local GDP and economy; it is sustainable; and people living in these developments love the lifestyle."

Mulder is of the opinion that urban edge policies are restrictive, relatively undefined and unimplemented. "We support the principle of densification within the urban areas and an urban edge. However, there is nothing that can stimulate rural development in South Africa. I believe we should identify farmland with high potential as well as potential to accommodate residential development in either a scenic area or

a place with natural attributes. The agricultural land should be set aside for agriculture development and the rest of the area should be developed in an economically-viable way. "If we do not create such a policy or a guideline, how will the people living in the rural areas ever become participants in the economic boom we are experiencing now?" Mulder questions. "The growth we see now is something we have never experienced before in our life times and the rural people are totally excluded."

Sustainable rural planning

Instead of building a model golf course, Mulder proposes building a model farm with everything required to be an economic and successful enterprise. This involves incorporating enough housing units to discount the cost of developing the farm – as in a golf estate. The fully-operational farm is thus debt free. A well-educated and capable farm management team would be appointed to run the farm while the labour component on the farm, as well as the

managing team and the home owners' association, would be given a substantial equity ownership in the enterprise. In this way, rural areas could be optimised while equity ownership in farmland could be provided to previously-disadvantaged communities. "We are busy with six of these large-scale projects and, while the authorities still battle to understand how to incorporate this concept in their policies, we simply cannot wait. I think my long-term vision is shaped by my concern for finding solutions to sustainable rural development, and finding a way to allow the poorer rural population a bite at the economic growth that the country is experiencing. We need to find a way to regenerate the agricultural potential of the land and support rural lifestyles. We need to define a rural edge – an edge that forms a buffer between the natural areas that should be protected, the semi-natural areas that can be developed very sensitively, and the agricultural land that should be preserved and developed economically for agricultural purposes."



Right: Preserving the history and cultural heritage of sites is an important part of CMAI's work. This existing sandstone building at Maselspoort will be incorporated into the new development.

Above: Flamink Vlei is a sensitive coastal development where natural resources are integrated into the built component of the project.



Integrating experience and work

Mulder's story is an unusual one and it is evident that his early working life has strongly influenced his characteristic approach to planning.

He originally studied soil science (chemistry) and horticulture at the University of Pretoria and was awarded a BSc (agriculture) degree. After farming for 12 years, external influences obliged him to reconsider his direction entirely.

"When I started farming, I was a share cropper: a guy who had no land and worked someone else's land for 25% of everything he produced. I bought my first farm three years later and then bought two subsequent undeveloped farms with huge potential in the following 10 years. The planning of these farms, the soil types and the vegetation interested me and I developed them according to what the land indicated to me. Soon after that, the previous government expropriated two of my farms for incorporation into the then Leboakgomo homeland. I was left with the original farm and had to make a decision to either buy again or do something else. I decided to go back to university, and obtained a masters degree in landscape architecture. During this time, I drove the 180 km from the remaining farm to Pretoria and back twice a week. At that time I was chairman of the South African Farmers' Union and director of the local co-op. My wife, Pat, and children stayed on at the farm with the farm manager and staff, and Pat managed the farm. I arranged with the professors teaching professional practice and ethics, and history of architecture, to tape certain lectures, hired a

student to tape them for me, and bought two tape recorders: one for the student who taped the lectures and one I kept in my bakkie. I would then listen to the lectures in my bakkie driving back and forth from the farm – the same lecture twice a week – coming and going. After three years, I graduated and decided that, as I had made this career change, I might as well go full out. I applied to three universities in the United States and was admitted to all three. I decided to go to Texas A&M University as it had one of the largest architecture schools in the US, as well as an urban design and land planning/environmental design programme. It was there that I obtained a PhD in urban design and land planning."

At the same time, Pat Mulder began an interior design course. Together they spent three of the most rewarding years of their lives, studying and working to support their four children. During that time, Mulder also spent time at Harvard University – in the terrain analyses programme and the aerial photo interpretation technology programme. "The money spent obtaining a degree in the US pales into insignificance if one thinks back to what it meant to us and the kids."

In May 1980, both Mulders graduated – she summa cum laude and he cum laude. In spite of some good job offers, they decided to come back to South Africa immediately and start their own firm, which they did in July 1980. Mulder & Mulder set up offices in Pretoria. Three years later, the name was changed to Chris Mulder Associates Inc or CMAI, and additional offices were opened in Durban, Cape Town and Mossel Bay.

Because of the nature of their work and fields of specialisation, the Mulders 'imported' 16 American graduates (architects, urban designers and landscape architects) to work for them for more than a decade. Three of Mulder's professors at the Texas A&M University's college of architecture – Don Austin and Michael Murphy and John Motloch – later became colleagues and also worked at CMAI on several occasions. "They introduced me to the profession, the challenges and the opportunities," Mulder acknowledges. Murphy and Motloch graduated with a PhD from the University of Pretoria's school of architecture with Mulder as their external examiner. CMAI also sponsored several South African graduates reading for masters degrees at Texas A&M. "All of them completed their degrees there, returned to work at CMAI, and then started their own successful professional practises, contributing meaningfully to the industry and the country."

A sustainable legacy

True to the goal of creating sustainable developments with liveable neighbourhoods, CMAI is busy with a number of projects that incorporate and preserve sensitive ecological areas. These include a small marina and agricultural village and estate on the Gourits River Mouth that will hopefully include seawater aquaculture and game farming; a waterfront development on the West Coast, which will also introduce large-scale seawater aquaculture and livestock farming; a project in the Addo Elephant Park; and a very environmentally-challenging new residential and commercial development in Knysna, opposite



Left: George Rex Place is situated on a severely-impacted wetland where large amounts of sawdust have been dumped. The site will be redeveloped along the lines of Thesen Islands but on a smaller scale and with higher densities.

Thesen Islands, called George Rex Place.

The latter is situated on a severely-impacted wetland where large amounts of sawdust have been dumped. The land has been left to invader species and suffered rampant stormwater problems for more than four decades. With correct planning, design and mitigation measures, Mulder hopes to make this land as successful as Thesen Islands, just smaller in scale, with higher densities and more affordable price ranges.

On the subject of success, Mulder has

this to say: "I guess success, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. I would call success achieving pre-set goals over a period of time; completing projects as planned and leaving happy clients and users; having people living in your developments telling you they got more than they ever hoped for or expected to receive; seeing young professionals dumped into the deep end, mature and take on responsibilities; and building up a potent team, with low staff turnover, working sometimes under extreme pressure and

rising to the occasion, time and again. To maintain success calls for people not to rest on their laurels and the awards they receive but to face up to the challenges and opportunities this country offers us, and find unique solutions, implementing them and evaluating how you could have done better. The challenge is to create even better places for people to live, to find practical solutions to our problems, and to demonstrate to the world how we resolve them. That is why we call CMAI 'the original thought factory.'" ■