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Paragon sets the architectural excellence standard

The Paragon Group has established itself as one of South Africa's premier architecture firms over the last 21 years, leading the way through innovation in architecture, interior design and space planning en route to numerous high-profile awards and landmark buildings

The founders, Anthony Orelowitz and Henning Rasmuss, have a keen eye for detail within the bigger picture of integrating both business and design, and continue to lead the organisation in terms of strategy, design and innovation.

Orelowitz has a captivating story, from nearly losing his eye-sight and changing professions before starting Paragon, to becoming an internationally acclaimed Architect and business owner in his own right. Orelowitz connected with Greg Simpson recently for the full story and shared some of the key ingredients of their considerable success.

Please could you tell me about your early education and business background and how you formed Paragon?

In my final year of architecture, I got a viral infection, I went blind and the doctors weren't sure if I was going to lose my vision. The doctors gave me a five-year window to see if this was a single event or if I would lose my eyesight progressively over the next few years. I decided to proactively mitigate against this risk. I did an MBA for two years, where I specialised in property and structured finance. I then worked in the property division at Standard Bank for three years after my MBA. After five years, my eyesight appeared stable and I went back to architecture at the age of 32.

When I left the bank, my co-workers had a client who needed a house to be built. They introduced me to the potential client, who wanted to see me as soon as possible as he was

returning to Taiwan. I'd only left the bank that weekend and had no business, place of practice, equipment or staff. However, my father owned an office furniture company, so I phoned him and asked if he could lend some furniture to me and we set up an office in my apartment. I had no co-workers/staff, so I phoned a friend of mine, Gary Louw, who had an architectural practice, and I asked if he would come to my makeshift office, sit there and pretend that we're in business together. He brought his staff and their computers and they pretended to work. The previous night, we had made up a company name and had business cards printed. Our meeting was successful, we all shook hands, they left. Gary and his staff also left and my dad's employees were waiting around the corner. They picked up all the furniture and the office was vaporised. And that's how we started our business.

Did it help coming full circle, exploring the business aspect of the economy with an MBA and then getting back into architecture?

It has helped me all my life. Understanding the economics of buildings and how they function



Anthony Orelowitz

PARAGON ARCHITECTS

informs one about what allows developers to bring projects to fruition. Having a financial background, especially in property, is helpful because you're working within the process of what developers are looking for. One is acutely aware of how to manage their costs, yields and returns. This allows us to create greater value propositions for our clients—essentially, better-designed buildings for competitive rentals and yields.

On a business level, there is the art of architecture and then there's the art of running an architectural business, and the MBA and bank experience have facilitated us being innovative in both of these fields.

Looking at your initial vision for the company, did you expect it to be where it is now, with numerous successful projects under your belt?

We realised quite early on that architecture is very unstable, so we decided that we would focus our energy on developers and the property funds. This would allow us the greatest chance of success. So, after two or three years, we moved away from doing houses and pushed more and more towards working with developers.

We have had some fantastic clients along the way, they gave us opportunities and we delivered. Zenprop, who were also starting out at that time, helped us grow our practice initially. From there, our business grew. You always need luck and someone to give you a break.

What was your most memorable moment in those early years?

No one would give us large buildings to design as we had no track record. We were invited to enter a competition for young architects in the Melrose Arch Precinct and we won. This was a multi-storey building with basements and four lifts. This opened up doors for us to approach new clients who then took us more seriously. This was a pivotal moment for our practice.

It is complicated designing these intricate buildings, what are some of the specialities that go into it?

We design buildings with two primary drivers in mind, efficiency and culture. We're

designing buildings that allow organisations to function at levels that exceed their expectations. Our buildings allow for tenants to function at optimal efficiency for the current period and futureproof their growth and churn for the period of their lease.

We also design buildings, which enhance the staff's working experience and foster the organisation's culture through the physical environment.

Paragon has masterminded some eye-catching designs, with projects like Sasol Place and the Alexander Forbes building in Sandton drawing international acclaim. What are some of the creative inspirations behind those masterpieces?

Most of the buildings we design are won through competition. We generally pair up with developers and we pitch on various land parcels, so in order to win, you really have to sit down and think about how you are going to give the best to the end user, deliver buildings to your clients that are flexible, that can be subtle, that are future-proofed against changes, all within the constraints of a yield and a return on cost. One of our strengths is that we understand the economics of buildings and where the money goes, and we are often able to make a client's money go further and give them better buildings for the same cost.

As a group, you are committed to Africa and believe in the future of its cities. What does Africa have to offer and how does African architecture compare in the global arena?

Africa is bigger than the USA, Europe and China combined. We often forget how huge it is as a continent. There is great architecture being built throughout Africa. We just need to be sensitive and responsive to the local environment, skills and available materials. This is the excitement that Africa holds. Each country is different and challenges us to explore from first principles, who we are as architects.

Are you seeing different materials being used during construction?

Yes, we're using innovative materials all the time. People all over the world are innovating,

whether it's lighting, airconditioning and cladding materials. You find innovation happening in every part of the industry, and with every material. For example, we have stones that are cut so thin, they are flexible enough to be wrapped and glued around columns.

In a very tight marketplace with a lot of experienced architecture firms locally, what would you say your key differentiator is?

We really understand our business and are pushing for excellence all the time. We're never resting on our laurels. Every time we build a building, we are innovative, we take it further and push the boundaries of the materials, the construction, the design and the detailing to another level of excellence.

As a leader, how do you get the best out of your staff in order to maintain that premium product?

Firstly, you have to start with the best people. We are very careful about how we select people and how we bring them into our business. We mentor people; we set very clear goals with regard to what their current skills are. We review people every four months and set goals. We monitor their aspirations and our expectations in a measured and structured way.

What are some of the cutting-edge technologies that are utilised during the design process?

We were one of the early adopters of Revit, which is a three-dimensional design software, but, lately, we've been innovating using Rhino and Grasshopper.

We're now using augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) to help understand pieces of our buildings and to allow our clients to experience the actual spaces before they are built.

We're using a lot of 3D printing to make up components of our buildings that we can't build using traditional methods—an example of one such building is the Link, which we've just completed in Rosebank. Although no one has had access to the inside of that building, the complexity of the form-making inside that building is cutting edge on a global level. ▲