

Landscaping, Building Design Grow Together at Pran Boulevard in KZN



The distinctive angular design language of the architecture at Pran Boulevard in Umhlanga has been carried through holistically into the landscaping, too.

Developing one of the last open sites on Umhlanga Rocks Drive in the Ridgeside precinct in Umhlanga, KwaZulu Natal afforded architecture and interior architecture company Paragon the unique opportunity to shape the landscaping as part of the overall design.

Known as Pran Boulevard, the development consists of two separate office buildings of three levels each above ground floor, linked together on each level with enclosed glazed bridges. There are three parking levels providing about 250 parking bays, as well as a ground-floor podium level with timber decks, walkways, landscaping, and water features. The total building area, including the parking levels, is about 18 600m².

Paragon was commissioned by Shree Property Holdings to design the landscaping as part of the holistic design of the project. This meant using the building's design language throughout the landscaping. "The client gave us the design freedom to sculpt the landscaping to complement the buildings' angular and distinctive design," Project Architect Jurie Geldenhuys comments.

Six basic elements or materials had to be included throughout the design, namely fire, earth, water, metal, wood, and stone. Three separate external timber deck seating areas had to be provided in terms of the program: two areas for the two buildings, and one area for the public coffee shop at the pedestrian entrance to the buildings.

A 4-star Green Star rating was the target from the offset, which the project received in May 2018. Over and above these specific client requirements, Paragon also had to adhere to the very specific requirements of the Ridgeside Management Association (RMA) concerning the treatment of corner sites in the precinct, as set out in the RMA Design Guidelines Volume 0 & 1.

These guidelines relate to planting types, which had to be presented and approved by the RMA Design Review Committee. The guidelines also include: planting recommended for use on specific streets; 90% of all planting is to be indigenous, and the landscaping plans are to list and motivate plant types to be used for approval.

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A minimum of 20% of each site area is to be landscaped (the 20% is to be regarded as hard and soft landscaping areas); landscape designs are to take into account safety, surveillance, and defensibility of the public environment; in addition, corner sites have very specific requirements in terms of planting height and species, so as not to obscure or obstruct views.

Another focus of the guidelines is the external horizontal surface treatment throughout the Ridgeside precinct, and the interface of the public surfaces with the surfaces used in the various properties. In this regard, professional landscaping design firm Ochre Office of Johannesburg assisted Paragon in selecting and specifying plant types that would meet the requirements of both the RMA and Green Star throughout the design. Ochre Office also assisted in terms of the documentation of the paving layouts, timber decks, timber seating, and the water features.

The site, situated on the corner of Umhlanga Rocks Drive and Ntusi Road, slopes away steeply from Umhlanga Rocks Drive towards the east, down Ntusi Road. The steep slope, combined with a maximum building-height restriction on the site, posed a major challenge in terms of maximising the building height/office area, while also finding a median level to maximise pedestrian accessibility from the Umhlanga Rocks drive side, and vehicle access from Nokwe Avenue on the opposite side of the site.

There is a level difference of more than 1 m between Umhlanga Rocks Drive (the western side) down to the ground-floor podium level, while down Ntusi Road (the northern side), most of the first-level basement would have been exposed was it not for the cascading planters next to the stairs, which provide access from more than 1.5 m below the podium level.

The edge conditions of the landscaping on the site boundaries were designed to, where possible, join seamlessly with the adjacent RMA landscaping levels to soften the transition, to keep the natural slope, and not to impose the new landscaping on the area with hard edges. The RMA landscaping will, in future, tie into the project's landscaping as a natural extension of the design.

Pedestrian access to the site was designed with the pedestrian movement through the precinct in mind. From Umhlanga Rocks Drive, pedestrian access was introduced to the podium level through an accessible ramp and a stair down. From Ntusi Road, access is provided through a stair to the podium level, while on the corner, on-grade access was provided that could also be used for deliveries to the coffeeshop. The positions and angles of the various access routes were influenced by the buildings' shape, its axes created, and the relationship/position of the pedestrian routes around the site.

Another important element of the client brief was to keep the area between the two buildings as flexible as possible for future functions, and as a spill-out area for both buildings. To that end, a row of trees was designed on the axis between the buildings, in combination with built-in and movable planters to create the necessary flexibility.