



STRONG PROJECT PIPELINE IN AFRICA IN 2019

One major focus in 2019 for architecture and interior architecture group Paragon remains the acquisition and implementation of architecture and interior design projects in Africa, with another one being the growth of the newly-established Cape Town office, according to Director Henning Rasmuss.

Major successes in Africa in 2018 included the ongoing construction of The Habitat residential tower in Nairobi. At 23 storeys, this is Paragon's tallest building in construction to date. Also in Nairobi, the group is close to construction completion on the 24 000 m² Crystal Rivers Mall, which Rasmuss describes as "an unbelievably challenging project."

Significant new project successes include residential and commercial projects in Swaziland. Also in Swaziland, the 160-room Hilton Garden Inn Hotel, already a landmark on the Mbabane skyline, is approaching completion. A groundbreaking ceremony for the Pullman Airport City hotel and apartment project, attended by Ghana President Nana Akufo-Addo, took place just before Christmas 2018. "This project is the largest current construction project in Accra," Rasmuss notes.

Paragon also bid for exciting projects such as the Orange Data Centre in Botswana. Data centre projects are one specialist practice area, with the company having a ten-year track record in their design. Interior design highlights in 2018 included being appointed for the South African roll-out of projects for a major global shared workspace provider, and smaller ongoing corporate fit-out projects in Tanzania and Nigeria.

"Africa is bigger than the US, Europe, and China combined. We often forget how big it is as a continent. There is great architecture being realised 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," Paragon Group Director Anthony Orelowitz comments.

In South Africa, the Paragon Group opened its Cape Town office in the first week of January 2019. "Towards the end of last year, we achieved alignment on very exciting changes in ownership and management structures, and we are actively working on a substantial and industry-leading Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) transformation project," Rasmuss reveals.

The major challenge faced by the Group and the architecture

and construction sectors in particular last year was the continued erosion of business confidence. "The underperformance of the South African economy led to project postponements, and to a tough and relentlessly aggressive procurement culture that challenges our resolve every day. Relationships are key for success, but are also under strain.

"Being a large company with experience and cash reserves, we are able to manage these challenges, but smaller and emerging companies are being forced out of the market, and the trading environment is dismal especially for small and black-owned companies. The extent and length of time of our exposure to so-called 'risk work' is becoming unreasonable and unsustainable. Overall, the trading environment is tough. The dissipation of building skills through the folding of some of the larger South African construction companies will affect our ability to achieve built quality," Rasmuss stresses.

Looking to 2019, there are a larger number of smaller projects in South Africa, and outside its borders. "We see a strong upsurge in interior design and fit-out projects. This is an ongoing trend where we are positioned favourably through strong partnerships," Rasmuss notes.

Orelowitz summarises the Paragon Group's underlying business ethos: "We really understand our business, and push for excellence all of the time. We never rest on our laurels. Every time we design a building, we are innovative in taking it further, and pushing the boundaries of the materials used, together with the detailing and the construction itself."

One of the early adopters of Revit 3D design software, the Paragon Group has since branched out further into using Rhino and Grasshopper. "We are now using augmented reality and virtual reality to help understand our building designs better, and to allow our clients to experience the actual spaces before they are built.

We are using a lot of 3D printing to make components that we cannot manufacture using traditional methods, such as The Link in Rosebank, where the internal form-making is cutting-edge on a global level," Orelowitz concludes. ■