



*Paragon Group Senior Architectural Technologist and Pod Leader. Taz-Wynne Superman.*

## POD STRUCTURE BOOSTS quality and innovation

The secret to Paragon Group's ongoing success as a leading architecture and interior architecture practice in South Africa is its talented staff. The group has been behind some of the most iconic projects in the high-profile Rosebank and Sandton areas of Johannesburg, from Sasol Place to the new Discovery head office, the Alice Lane precinct, 144 Oxford Road, and Katherine Towers.

A recent innovation at Paragon Group to maximise its talent and skills, and to ensure that the design solutions supplied to clients are of the highest quality, has been to form teams of diverse skill sets and responsibilities. Known as pods, these teams are then allocated projects according to their specific strengths, and overseen by a senior Paragon Group staff member, who also acts as a mentor.

The impetus for the pods was to ensure that all employees receive the maximum benefit of the experience of the most highly-skilled and experienced staff members, while also acquiring new skills and transitioning into mentoring roles themselves. "We found that the traditional approach was not that efficient," Paragon Group Senior Architectural Technologist and Pod Leader, Taz-Wynne Superman explains. Traditionally, a senior staff member would oversee a project in a top-down approach, connecting with all the staff members necessary as and when required.

"We then came up with another system whereby the more senior staff members are allocated much smaller groups that, in turn, comprise specific skills or experience. The immediate benefit for our clients is that the quality of our work is enhanced, as any design issues can be clarified at a much earlier stage, thereby minimising any rework or liability considerations," Superman points out. Another benefit of the pod structure is that it streamlines the interface between Paragon Group and its clients. "A critical aspect of project management is how we deal with our clients and the rest of the professional team. Constant monitoring and steering the team in the right direction is vital."

Hence a particular pod has oversight in terms of any quality issues on a project, while at the same time acting as an incubator for up-and-coming talent, affording young Paragon staff a collaborative environment in which they can grow. "This is in line with our approach of hiring young talent, and



*A render of the interior of 144 Oxford Road for Growthpoint Properties.*

then inculcating them in our way of doing things. All architectural practices have different ways of working. We are proud of our work, and how efficient we are," Superman emphasises.

A major benefit of the pod structure for Paragon staff is that it allows them to gain experience in all aspects of a project, particularly the larger projects like 144 Oxford Road that can run for a couple of years. "A pod can be assigned more than one project, of different scopes and sizes, thereby giving all members of that pod a chance to work on different aspects that they would not normally be exposed to."

This means that staff can grapple with both design and technical issues, which combines creativity with engineering concerns. "Larger projects invariably contain a lot of design work, while smaller projects tend to be more technical in nature. Other projects may be speculative design proposals only, and never even reach the construction stage. This means we can

allocate resources accordingly in order to keep everyone motivated," Superman elaborates.

"We find that the pod structure allows our staff to flourish in what they are best at. Whether your strength is on the technical side, in liaising with clients, or in dealing with the design elements, there is a pod for everyone." Another advantage is cross-pollination across different pods, which can draw on strengths from each other when it is needed, or when deadline pressure requires more resources to be allocated.

"In the past, on a major project like 115 West Street (Alexander Forbes), we would have had a team of four overseeing the entire project. Now we can easily deploy a pod of eight, with skills and knowledge that feed off each other, in addition to having access to the necessary support and back-up. The pressure and stress associated with tight timeframes is reduced, allowing for more innovation and better-quality control," Superman concludes. ■