

ARCHITECTURE

JOURNAL OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS **SOUTH AFRICA**

DENISE SCOTT BROWN EMERGING ARCHITECTS 2 UBUNTU CENTRE – STAN FIELD



SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2011
RSA R19.95 (incl VAT)

THE UBUNTU CENTRE

Almost one third of the population of Zwide, a poverty-stricken township of Port Elizabeth, is infected with HIV.¹ The consequences convulse through the community, decimating families, derailing education and destroying childrens' lives. However, in 1998, a young American tourist and a local teacher teamed up to form the Ubuntu Education Fund, a non-profit organisation focused on getting children to higher education and employment. The fund provides prenatal and child healthcare, HIV testing, counselling, treatment for mothers, along with initiatives such as after-school programmes, exam-study sessions, university scholarships and an array of other counselling services.²

JACOB LIEF, THE AMERICAN co-founder of Ubuntu, interviewed 17 South African architects searching for the right person to design a new facility. None were selected because none, he said, seemed to understand that Ubuntu wanted something more than a serviceable building. 'I told them,' says Lief, 'that it had to be a fantastic building, that it must win architecture awards, that the access to such architecture is not a privilege, but rather a right.'

Finally Lief was referred to Stan Field, and within seven minutes of beginning their first phone call, Lief hired him.³ While Field lives in the United States, he was born in Port Elizabeth and embraced

the opportunity to work in his hometown. The project came into the office just as Stan's son, Jess, also an architect, was ready to form Field Architecture with his father.

On Stan Field's first trip to Zwide, he met one-on-one with the entire staff of Ubuntu. He knew the organisation needed a new clinic and education spaces, offices and also a community meeting hall, however each person he spoke with added to the programme their desires and aspirations. Field also noted how people moved within the township using an informal network of paths that spider across the landscape, showing the shortest distance between

transit nodes, shopping and other aspects of daily life in a place where people cannot afford cars. Along with an agenda for low-energy consumption, climate response and robust, locally available construction, these formed the programme and influences for the building.

As a site strategy, Stan Field convinced Ubuntu not to build the usual defensive wall around the building. Instead, the building should reinforce a path across the site. In this way, the project becomes part of the daily life of Zwide and getting tested for HIV, a still-stigmatised activity, can happen as part of daily movement.

The path, defined by pavers that echo the intense red of the local soil, begins as a plaza at grade along the sidewalk on the main road and winds through the heart of the building. It passes a reception area and the entrances to the clinic, the education wing and the huge hand-textured wooden doors that open to the soaring

community room. Then it slides out into a desert-landscaped yard, where it expands once again into the plaza.

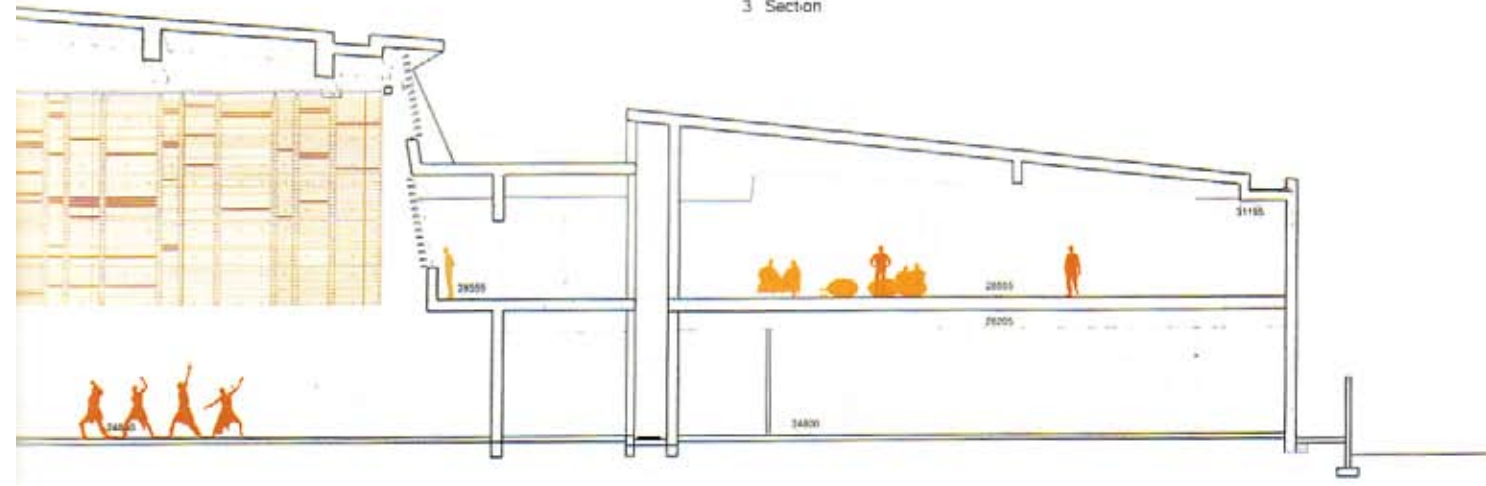
Making a R50 million, 2 100m² building at ease in the township fabric of tiny, one-storey houses on little lots required a nuanced solution. The Ubuntu Centre has a clear presence, yet is also scaled to not overwhelm the neighborhood and to avoid intimidating the people who use it.

This was done by breaking the programme into three main masses, each defined by lofty folded and tilted concrete tubes: the education wing occupies the street corner, while the clinic tucks behind a low-entry piece along the main road. The meeting hall towers at the back. Upstairs spaces in the education and clinic blocks include offices, classrooms and study areas. The concrete masses are stitched together by circulation spaces framed in light steel and glass, and each mass sits casually on the site.



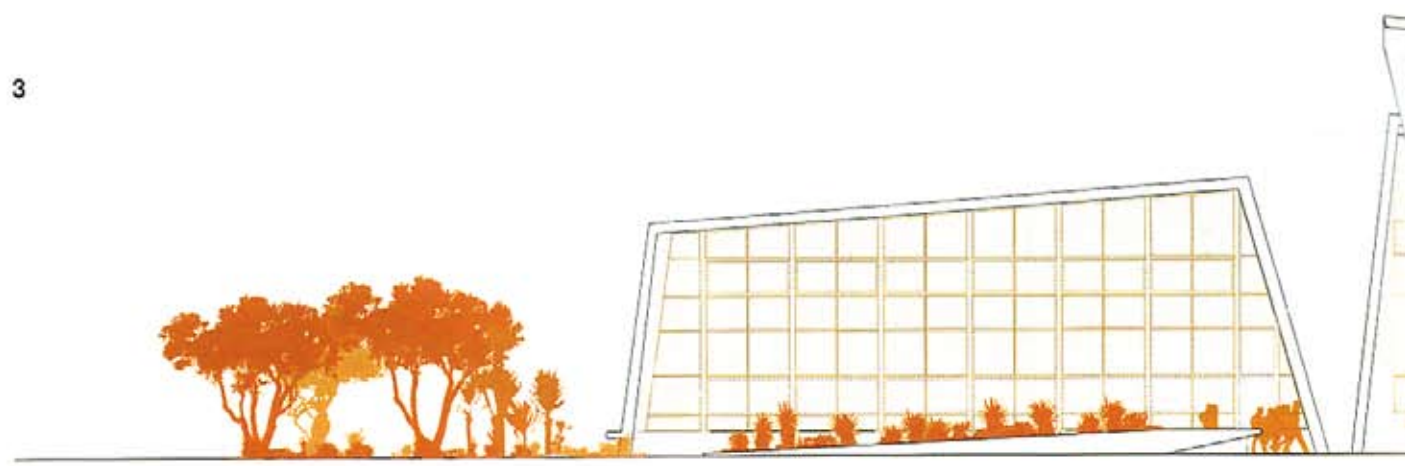
2

1 Front along the main road
2 End entrance
3 Section



1

3





6



- 1 Resource/ Computer Learning Centre
- 2 Multi-Purpose Hall
- 3 Community Kitchen
- 4 Staff Lounge
- 5 Pediatric HIV/TB Clinic
- 6 Pharmacy
- 7 Reception/ Entrance Hall
- 8 Flexible/ Expandable Meeting Rooms
- 9 Parking
- 10 Garden Court/ to Rooftop Vegetable Garden

Using *in situ* concrete was not a logical choice in a place where plaster is the usual finished material to rough brick or concrete block. As Stan Field explains, 'Here, the final finish was the concrete, so everything had to be done with more care. And this level of attention finally began to become the ethic of construction. It was not a new skill the builders had to learn, but rather a new approach.'¹


While the builders, using a high percentage of low-skilled local labourers, gained new expertise with concrete, other materials and details were chosen to work with local skills. The glassed-in ends of the concrete tubes bring daylight deep into the building, while horizontal, evenly spaced gum poles screen the sun and provide security. 'With the gum poles,' Jess Field explains, 'we were using something that was so familiar, that has been used there for generations, so we could just design the method of fabrication to suit skills the community already had.'⁵

A number of smaller design moves embed the Ubuntu staff's desires into the building. On the roof of the entry piece, where the bulk of the community hall blocks the cold south wind, one staff member is growing a demonstration garden of edible plants.

Benches invite people to sit along the sunny edge of the building on the main road, as well as at the edge of the planters in the back garden. Local artwork and crafts are incorporated throughout the building. But much of the building is loosely designed, purposely allowing for Ubuntu to adjust it to fit whatever needs arise. Indeed,

already a space originally intended for offices is being used for childrens' craft workshops.

Jacob Lief has not been disappointed by his decision to hire Field: not only has the building been successful in supporting the agenda of the organisation, but the Ubuntu Centre won a Progressive Architecture Award in 2009. It embodies Ubuntu's attitude towards all that it does: strategic, smart, state-of-the-art and only the best.

As Lief was fundraising for this project, some people challenged the idea that Ubuntu, as a socially-minded NGO, should spend such large sums on a building. Why not use that money for programmes? Lief rejects this logic forcefully. 'Buildings are symbolic and this building shows the children of Zwide that they are worthy of everything the world has to offer'⁶ – including ambitious architecture. 

- 4 End entrance
- 5 Walkway through
- 6 Plan
- 7 Reception to clinic

REFERENCES

- (1) <http://www.ubuntufund.org/about/workplace.html>
- (2) <http://www.ubuntufund.org>
- (3) Jacob Lief jacob@ubuntufund.org
- (4) Stan Field stan@fieldarchitecture.com
- (5) Jess Field jess@fieldarchitecture.com
- (6) Jacob Lief

SOURCE

This article was first published in the April 2011 edition of *Architect* magazine.