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MAY 2011

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**GREEN**  
**ZONE**  
REDUCING AFRICA'S  
CARBON FOOTPRINT  
AT INDABA



**ABOVE: STAN FIELD,  
ARCHITECT OF HOPE  
RIGHT: THE UBUNTU CENTRE**

**IT WAS ARCHITECT** Stan Field's first visit to the dusty corner in Qeqe Street, Zwide, on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth - known by locals as iBhayi. Field had been given a challenging brief to design The Ubuntu Centre: a state-of-the-art, environmentally friendly community centre that wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb – in the middle of a township where the unemployment sits at 80 per cent and almost one third of the city's inhabitants are HIV positive.

Port Elizabeth-born Field recognised the area as a typical grid-system development filled with government-issue "51/9" houses (the official name given to earlier government houses) and sadly noted the dichotomy that existed between the colourless squared-off surroundings and the vibrant people who called this place home.

Field's first task was to talk to the people that the Ubuntu Centre would serve. His mission: to discover their needs and dreams and design a building with function and form that would speak to the soul of the people who used it. He spent hours sitting and watching the comings and goings of the people of Zwide and the footprints they left behind as they moved across the township. In his mind, these pathways became "roots through the building" and Field realised that the building needed to be many things.



"I see it as a place that will uplift human spirit; a place of communication; of interchange; of expressing a most vital and beautiful culture. It will become a meeting place, a place of hope, guidance, health and opportunity."

In addition to the needs of the people, Field had to think of the environment, as it was vital that the building be self-sufficient and harness the potential of passive heating and cooling. The design would need to be high-tech and innovative. Over three years, Field would fly out from the US to visit the site and monitor its progress. Great slabs of concrete grew out of the earth at crazy angles – there



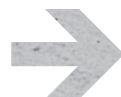


# CONCRETE HEART AND SOUL



BY CREATING AN INSPIRATIONAL  
COMMUNITY CENTRE AMID  
COLOURLESS SURROUNDINGS,  
STAN FIELD HAS BREATHED  
NEW LIFE INTO AN  
IBHAYI TOWNSHIP

WORDS BY MARGI NEWTON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLIE NORVAL







**FROM TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE:**  
A ROOFTOP VEGETABLE  
GARDEN; POLE BEAMS IN  
LADDER FORMATION; STEEL  
NETTING ALLOWING IN THE  
VIBRANCE FROM  
THE STREETS AND STAIRS  
LEADING TO THE 1ST FLOOR



“ IT WILL  
BECOME,  
A PLACE  
OF HOPE,  
GUIDANCE,  
OPPORTUNITY  
AND HEALTH ”

were no 90° vertical lines to be seen. As the construction continued, the concept of “ubuntu” started emerging with concrete walls leaning against each other, not so much for support, but for strength and encouragement. The crisscrossing red stone floors, aptly named Bushveld Sunset, “remembered” the dusty footpaths under the building. To achieve maximum lighting and heating, huge sheets of glass illuminate the north-facing facade of the building. Horizontally placed split-pole beams temper the glass in ladder formations. “These ladders teach our children that in life we have to start at the bottom, but there are always opportunities to reach the top,” says Qondakele Sompondo, who is part of Ubuntu’s management team.

In keeping with the centre’s green design, natural and local materials have been used. Solar panels harness the sun’s energy and the concrete walls and roof absorb heat in the day and release it at night. Water irrigates the rooftop garden, which provides insulation for the building.

As Field paid his last working visit to the site he walked around surveying the progress of the construction. He

## WHAT PURPOSE DOES THE UBUNTU CENTRE SERVE?

→ One of the most exciting aspects of the Ubuntu Centre is that it has the only Paediatric HIV Clinic in the country. This clinic has family and child-friendly counselling rooms, an HIV management and support facility, and offers prevention services for expecting mothers.

→ In addition to the clinic the centre has an education wing with group study areas, a psychosocial counselling facility, laptop stations, and an audio-visual screening room.

→ The community theatre has space for 250 people and in addition to holding theatre productions it has facilities that will be used to host holiday camps for vulnerable children during the school holidays.

→ The Ubuntu Centre will serve 3,500 clients with holistic support services for themselves and their families. A groundbreaking after-school programme will assist 250 students while Ubuntu’s organic gardens provide 2,000 children with a daily meal. HIV counselling and testing reach 6,000 community members.







**LEFT: THE OPENING CEREMONY  
HERE: HUGH MASEKELA DROPS BY TO OPEN THE IMPOSING STRUCTURE**

## WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

→ In 1998, 21-year-old American student, Jacob Lief, was introduced to local school teacher Banks Gwaxula in Jeya Jazz Tavern in Zwile. The men got chatting and realised they both believed in the power of education. Banks invited Lief to spend time teaching in the local schools and to live in his house. Lief didn't hesitate and ended up staying with the Gwaxula family for three months.

The men founded the Ubuntu Education Fund which reaches 40,000 people with its educational, clinical and healthcare programmes. The organisation outgrew its offices which served as meeting rooms, counselling units and workspace. Lief knew that they needed much more space, and that's where the Ubuntu dream started.

passed a young woman, with a bucket and a mop in her hands, singing quietly to herself. The affable architect politely asked if she'd do him the huge honour of singing for him – in the new theatre. She willingly obliged. Setting down her bucket and mop, she clasped her hands and started singing N'kosi Sikelel' iAfrika at the top of her voice. As she sang the national anthem, workers from all corners of the building downed tools and joined in the singing. Field was overwhelmed with emotion. When the last refrains drifted off across the

township, he asked the young singer, "So, do you think the acoustics are ok, then?" He received thunderous applause and loud cheers from all members of the impromptu choir in reply. The acoustics were more than ok – they were inspiring.

Field walked around the new building with renowned musician Hugh Masekela before he performed at the opening ceremony on 16 September 2010. "It's as though it's always been here," Masekela commented. It was the greatest accolade the architect could have received. ✕



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