



Jo-Ann Cavanagh

→ Trudi Groenewald (left) with business partner Debbie Preller

DYNAMIC DESIGN DUO: GROENEWALD PRELLER ARCHITECTS

by Frieda le Roux and 'Ora Joubert

The partnership Groenewald Preller Architects in Cape Town has the distinction of being one of the few female architectural practices in the country. Although both Trudi Groenewald and Debbie Preller graduated from the University of Pretoria, they only became acquainted while working for the firm Burg, Doherty and Partners. When Trudi decided to establish her own practice in 1990, Debbie was her partner of choice.

Gender, however, is to them a "non-issue". They attribute their success as practitioners entirely to their commitment to their discipline. According to them, gender was far less of a concern when they graduated in the mid-1970s, but admit that the present government has fostered a greater awareness of female empowerment.

Yet, neither woman has ever shied away from the responsibility they feel toward their profession and society at large. In 1992, Trudi became the first female president of the Cape Institute of Architects, with Debbie to follow suit in 2004. Debbie remarks that there are considerably more women presently on the Executive Council of the South African Institute of Architecture than in the past, and even the current National President, Trish Emmett, is female. Trudi was also appointed the first Vice-President of the South African Council for the Architectural Profession in 2001. Despite the additional workload, both women regard their selfless contribution to professional matters as a rewarding experience, also enriching the management of their practice.

Trudi – well-versed in the contractual and legal aspects of architecture – contributes her expertise to the practical experience she

gained as a part-time student. Although this part-time method of education has been discontinued, Trudi remains a champion thereof, recalling how she chaired site meetings since her third year at university.

Debbie, in turn, sought practical experience overseas and worked in the Caribbean for a number of years. As her mother hailed from Jamaica, it was an ideal opportunity to connect with her heritage and to gain new architectural insights. Trudi also spent some years abroad and worked in Canada and Spain. Both are of the opinion that the experience gained from working in different environments instilled the importance they attach to context.

They agree wholeheartedly with Professor 'Ora Joubert's contentious inaugural address on the dismal state of contemporary South African architecture. They are though pleased to increasingly encounter meritorious work, but mostly in the public and commercial arena. They single out contributions by Martin Kruger and Pedro Roos, Peet van Biljon and Hein Visser, and stalwart Gawie Fagan.

Both are highly critical of the ostentation prevailing in the residential market, which they ascribe to the overwhelming influence



→ An artist's perspective of the new Multistorey Parkade at Cape Town International Airport – a joint venture between Groenewald Preller Architects and MMA Architects.

of the mass media. Trudi comments on the drastic increase in size of the average family home: "It is no longer a matter of keeping up with the Joneses, but rather of challenging the Joneses." They are especially concerned about how the prevailing materialism manifests itself stylistically and undermines the integrity of good architecture, not to mention accentuating the discrepancy between the rich and the poor.

Given their acute awareness of the socio-economic realities of this country, it is no surprise that a considerable amount of their work is executed in the previously marginalised areas of Mitchells' Plain, Gugulethu, Bonteheuwel and Khayelitsha. Although they do not shy away from residential work, they prefer more challenging design briefs. Their broad spectrum of commissions ranges from education and community facilities to hospitals, clinics and highly specialised technical projects – a feat for this relatively small, female practice.

The two partners share their workload equally but have developed their own areas of specialisation. Debbie, a superb water colourist, is responsible for most of the sketch designs in the office and manages the community projects. Trudi prefers projects of a more technical nature and considers the design of the Southern African Large Telescope Building at the Astronomical Observatory outside Sutherland as one of the highlights of her career.

These two dynamic women have made a considerable mark on South Africa's architectural profession. Their unwavering commitment to their discipline, and to society at large, earned them the reputation as a highly competent practice. •

*Frieda le Roux (Die Burger) and Professor 'Ora Joubert
(Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria).*