

AfriSam drives environmental excellence in construction



Victor Bouguenon, marketing manager at AfriSam

There was a time when man demonstrated his control over nature and proclaimed his advancing technological prowess by designing and producing massive wonders of engineering that towered over cities in overpowering statements. Great Gothic cathedrals reached for the heavens, Renaissance palaces soared upwards, then the Industrial Revolution threw up monstrous factories and through the modern age, the trend has continued with awe-inspiring bridges, dams and skyscrapers.

Gradually, however, as society evolved and matured, mankind has realised the sometimes irreversible damage its construction projects are exerting on the environment and this new consciousness has created an ever-increasing urgency to preserve, conserve, restore and sustain.

"Nature's resources are limited," Victor Bouguenon, marketing manager at AfriSam, points out. "We have to conserve and use them wisely and nowhere more importantly than in constructing the built environment wherein we live. At AfriSam we realised over 15 years ago that we had an enormous responsibility to promote sustainable development and were the first cement producer to develop an environmental policy, long before environmental and 'green' building issues became widespread."

AfriSam's proactive approach led the way in reducing dust emissions, using less coal, enhancing energy utilisation and introducing ground-breaking technology which resulted in pioneering products for the construction industry. Since 1990, AfriSam has successfully reduced its carbon footprint by more than 34%.

The culmination of AfriSam's significant investment in research and development has been the manufacture of Eco Building Cement, which more than halves the world's average carbon footprint for cement without compromising on the quality demanded by SABS for cement in this strength class.

Not content with this achievement, AfriSam is adding its weight and expertise to the newly evolving "green" drive for sustainability in architecture and construction by developing or supporting such programmes as the AfriSam – South African Institute of Architects' (SAIA) Awards for Sustainable Architecture and the Construction World Best Projects Awards.

"We are seeing a return to an understanding of the need for a human dimension in architecture," Bouguenon says. "We are witnessing a departure from massive structures which dominate and overpower to impress, and a move towards environmentally responsible design. It is an attempt to integrate human activities with natural systems in a holistic manner.

"The principles underlying this approach are evolutionary, progressing from 'green' to sustainable design, and from there to restorative design, which uses the activities of design and building to restore the capability of local natural systems. Ultimately, we aim to achieve a whole system integration process which seeks to optimise all the relationships among the key systems and entities."

Sustainable architecture is still a relatively new concept in South Africa, so AfriSam, as a conscientious and responsible manufacturer intensely aware of its role in protecting the environment, is a fitting partner for SAIA in promoting public awareness and debate on architectural issues.

"We are encouraging architects and their clients to look at architecture with new eyes," Bouguenon says. "As with the Construction World Best Projects Awards, we want to put human and environmental needs and considerations back into design and construction." He points to the innovative use of concrete at Freedom Park, winner of the 2009 Construction World Best Projects' Award in the AfriSam Sustainable Construction category as a prime example of restoring the human dimension to architecture while making optimum use of environmental conditions. "President Mandela wanted a project that would represent a shrine for the people. Concrete was used in an extremely inventive way to produce rounded and curved building planes that blended in with the undulating surfaces of the area. Human beings can relate to the design – they become integrated with it in their daily activities. The environment itself is merged into everyday life.

"We are serious about leading the way in developing eco-friendly products, promoting green building initiatives and making a sustainable difference," he adds. "Market response has proved unequivocally that there is a strong demand for such developments. We strongly urge other companies to seize the vision and come on board to put South Africa in the forefront of the green evolution in construction and architecture." ■