

A shelter for the underprivileged

The Agape Child Care Centre, located in Waterfall, a township near Durban, is home to 40 children and offers them warmth, love and protection. The architecture of the new centre, rebuilt after a fire, needed to reinforce these attributes



Leading project

Agape Child Care Centre is an orphanage that accommodates 40 children, most of whom have lost their parents due to HIV/AIDS. Agape was founded in 1996 by Zodiwa Mqadi, an HIV/AIDS counselor who saw an increasing amount of children ending up alone after losing their parents. She started taking care of these children in her own home and later at the Agape Child Care Centre.

In January 2005 a fire destroyed a large part of the centre. No-one was hurt, but the building was deemed uninhabitable by the fire department. The children, who had lost so much already, again lost their home and their possessions. They were temporarily transferred to a renovated shipping container. Immediately after the fire the ex-volunteers of the centre dedicated their time and money to rebuilding the orphanage. The Durban branch of Osmond Lange Architects and Planners was approached to design the new buildings by a Holland-based company called Uthando, which had collected funds from Dutch communities and wanted to put the money to good use to help the needy.

Osmond Lange Architects and Planners is one of the oldest and largest architectural practices in South Africa, having been around since 1929. The practice has built up extensive design and technological expertise on major projects in South Africa and has in-depth knowledge of the construction process. Although its 23 qualified architects tend to work on larger projects (Melrose Arch, Durban's 2010 football stadium and the new La Mercy Airport to mention just a few), it is not too large to neglect community projects for those in need.

Left: The brief was simple in that it required dwellings to house some 40 children.

Right: Stand-out features include a rural vernacular with facebrick walls, timber cottage-pane windows, raw timber pergolas and decking.

Architectural freedom

"The brief for the project was simple in that it required us to build dwellings at an orphanage to house some 40 children who were living in donated shipping containers after their previous orphanage had burned down," explains David Baker, who has been with Osmond Lange since 2006. Prior to that he worked extensively in and around London where he completed his Architectural Degree at London Metropolitan University. "The client,



■ agape orphanage

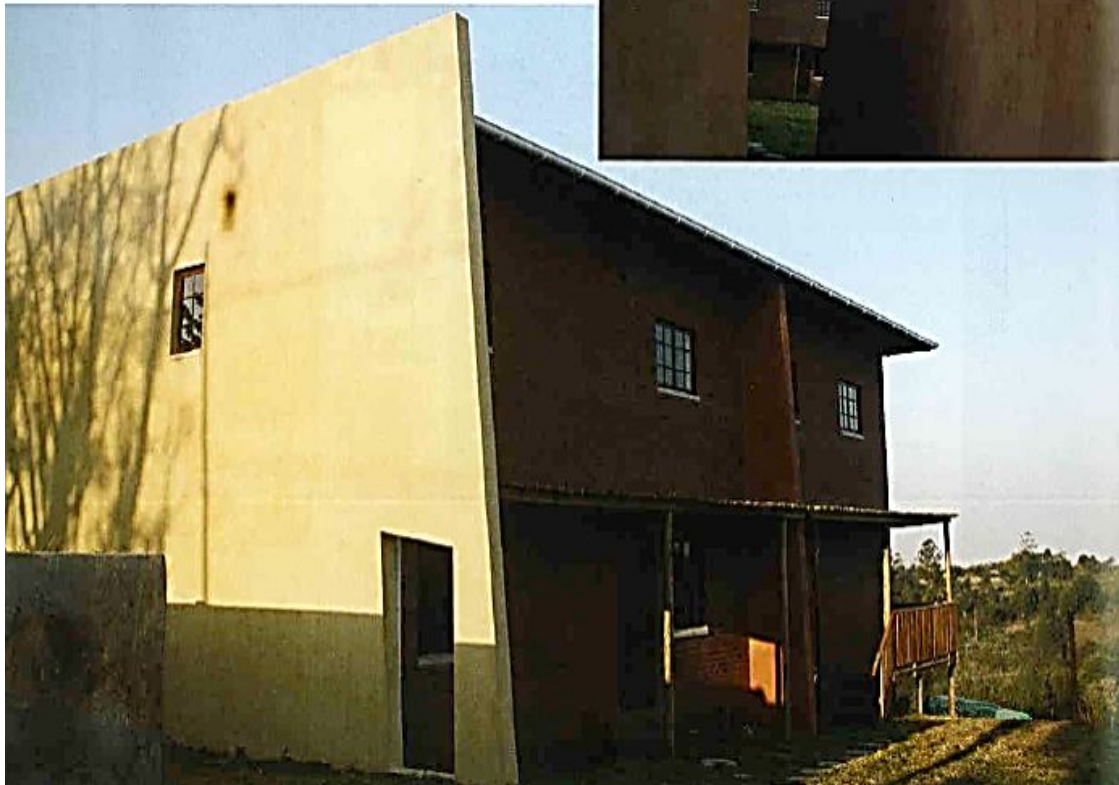
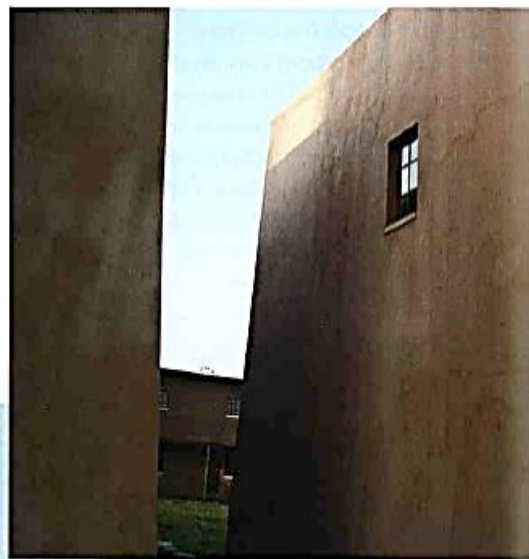
who was represented by Gunter Gys, gave us architectural freedom provided we could house the children in comfortable dwellings, design within the budget (which was very tight) and give the children a sense of individuality." In addition, Mqadi wanted the architects to reject the former government-type dormitory-styled dwellings and provide a more family-orientated home for the children.

The site outside Hillcrest was part of donated land given to the Agape Trust and allocated to the head carer of the orphanage, who lived on site in her park home (this was later relocated). The development is an allocated area of about 2 000m² of the total area owned by the Agape Trust, of which a footprint of about 900m² was usable. "The site borders onto a D'MOSS

(green belt) area in a relatively rural part of Hillcrest called Waterfall," says Baker. "Indigenous trees, a commanding view over a small valley and the abundance of birdlife influenced the building in its layout, position and choice of materials."

Right: The Durban branch of Osmond Lange Architects and Planners designed the new buildings for the Agape Orphanage.

Below: The project has a signature design style with its odd shaped walls and the crooked door opening on one exterior wall that leads to nowhere.



Leading project

"One of the on-site challenges was to overcome the rocky sandstone upper part and a lower area that consisted of a soft sand fill that had to be excavated to ground bed level – the trenches were 2m deep in some areas. The children were most intrigued by the building work and we had to cordon off the area to prevent them from exploring," Baker says.

The buildings measure around 400m² in the form of five two-storey units. Stand-out features of the project include a rural vernacular with facebrick walls, pigmented concrete gable ends pieced by timber cottage-pane windows, raw timber pergolas and decking on the exterior juxtaposed with a clean, homely interior with a family feel.

"Of the original six units, we had to omit unit four at the client's request. This broke the continuity a bit, but we managed to do the best we could," he says. "It is disappointing, as the missing building breaks the flow and the overall architecture looks a bit like a child with a missing tooth." A community hall which was badly constructed and was designed by an unqualified person was recently built on the site. "The challenge was to design something around the new hall that juxtaposed it completely but also did not look out of place," comments Baker.

An animated theme


"The project has a signature design style with its odd shaped walls and the crooked door opening on one exterior wall that leads to nowhere. It gives an animated, fun theme to life for kids that aren't born into a normal, loving environment," Baker explains. There was an interesting inspiration for the project: "The Rubik's Snake, a toy that was popular in the eighties, served as inspiration – it has many connecting facets and odd shapes."

The interiors of the five units are simple, consisting of three bedrooms, two bathrooms and an open plan lounge/kitchenette. "We used simple materials for the finishes," says Baker. "The floors and stairs are polished stained concrete and the stair balustrades are constructed out of timber gum-tree lathes and stained to match the doors." The walls are brightly painted in yellow (as requested by the orphanage manager), which highlights the dark stained windows and doors. The bathrooms are themed with a dark grey floor and neutral beige wall tiles bordered with a mix of blue mosaic tiles. Each bedroom overlooks the grassed courtyard/play area and the valley below.



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Apart from the missing fourth unit, the design of the orphanage remained practically the same from its conception. "The initial design had a timber balcony wrapping around the building, but the client thought it was an extravagance so we had to downgrade to the timber lathe canopy in order to try and keep within the architectural aesthetic. Ideally I would have asked for a larger budget on the landscaping – it would have been nice to design a garden for the children that would have blended in with the natural indigenous surrounds, but I am happy with the outcome of the project," says Baker.

"Working on this project was a challenge," he states. "The budget was tight and we were trying to provide a good architectural product with decent finishes. I spent a lot of time 'begging' for discounts from suppliers. It is amazing how the word 'orphanage' appeals to the compassion in people. We at Osmond Lange would like to thank the people who contributed, not only financially, but also with their hard work. The contractor Raju from Out No Corners Contractors went the extra mile to complete the project within a limited budget, as did Leon and Sachin, from MCJ Engineers. The suppliers who gave us good discounts also need to be mentioned: Corobrik, Cemcrete, Cobra and Onduline Roofing. But the biggest thanks go to our Dutch clients, Michel, Gunter and Tessa from Uthando for being so generous in providing the finances to build a shelter for our orphaned and underprivileged children," he concludes. 

Photographs by Dieter Schonknecht