

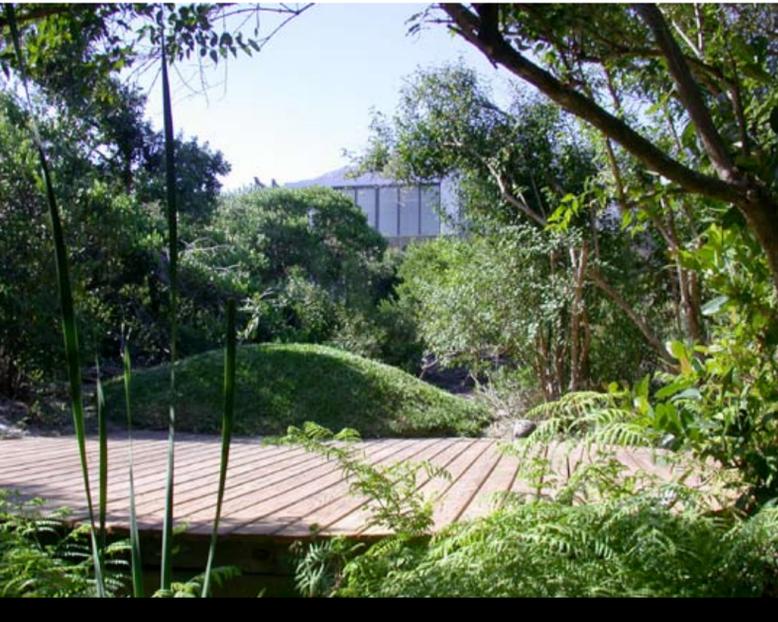


Words **Dianne Bayley**  
Portrait photographs **Paul Shiakallis**

# CREATOR

Vibrant, passionate and in love with her craft, Sarah Calburn's idea of green design is not, she says, 'a solar heater on a Tuscan roof ...'

# OF CULTURE



If Frank Lloyd Wright had not said, 'Architecture is that great living, creative spirit which from generation to generation, from age to age, proceeds, persists, creates, according to the nature of man and his circumstances as they change. That is really architecture ...', then Sarah Calburn may well have said it.

The head of Sarah Calburn Architects in Johannesburg believes architects are not merely designers that fill spaces; rather, they are the creators of culture: 'Architecture is as readable as a book. We speak a spatial language and we must take responsibility for the culture we create. People talk about sustainability without realising that what we should be creating is sustainable societies. Right now, both RDP housing and gated estates for the rich could be seen as parallel impediments to the creation of a healthy society. They are both faceless fields of a sort – two sides of the same coin.'

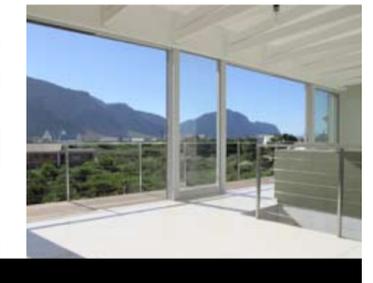
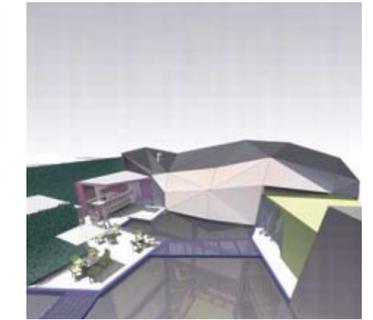
Harsh words? Not if you understand the passion with which Sarah and her team operate. A core interest is to work, as she puts it, in

the space between landscape and architecture. 'The principle of this idea is that buildings are conceived to play a critical role within their context, whether this be rural, suburban or urban.'

'Johannesburg is a multilayered city with many challenges. We should use these issues as design opportunities towards fresh and really "world-class" thinking. A truly "world-class city" is one that can recognise and then use its own eccentricities, its particular exigencies, to devastating design effect,' Sarah says.

'I'm not sure that the city authorities or private commissioners of architecture and urbanism have really understood the potential of the term "world-class African city".'

Johannesburg is a fortified city, but Sarah believes those responsible for public spaces should consider alternative strategies to simple fortification. 'The wall or the fence has become, by default, one of our base urban strategies. Public space has become reduced to the "quasi-public" space of the walled shopping mall. Real public space, available to all, is relegated then to the traffic island or the pavement. If we were



'We have a fantastic climate here. We should be able to experiment with design elements more easily than our European counterparts. I don't see much experimenting going on.'

honest, we'd have to concede that we have no public space in this city in which we are all able to feel comfortable.'

Sarah cites the Gautrain and the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system as examples of potential for public spaces. 'These are the first truly public platforms that Johannesburg has ever laid down. The station at Marlboro, for example, has the most enormous potential for opening up the Alexandra area and creating touch points with the public. These systems hold enormously powerful keys to future realisations of ourselves and our city, if they're used with open minds.'

Passion, however, is nothing without action, and Sarah is sharing the task of being programme director of Architecture.ZA2010, the first conference of its kind to be held here. Billed as South Africa's first architecture mega-event, the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) is set to seize the opportunity to tell the South African story. 'It's the single-most ambitious architecture event ever held here,' Sarah says. 'International participation is built around a model of personal interaction, which will produce various bodies of work.'

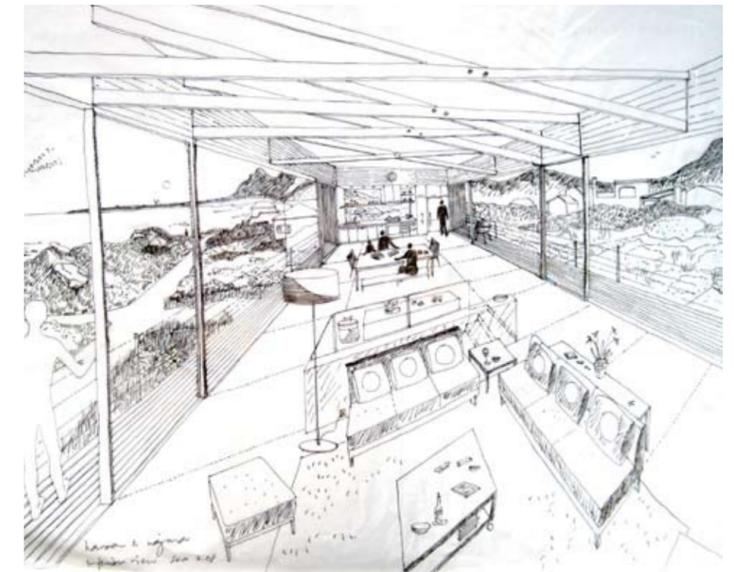
Twelve acclaimed international architects and theorists whose interests coincide with

SA's will participate in EVENT+CITY, a fresh and challenging festival conference. They will lecture, participate in panel discussions and conduct design masterclasses focused on the contemporary challenges facing architecture in Jo'burg.

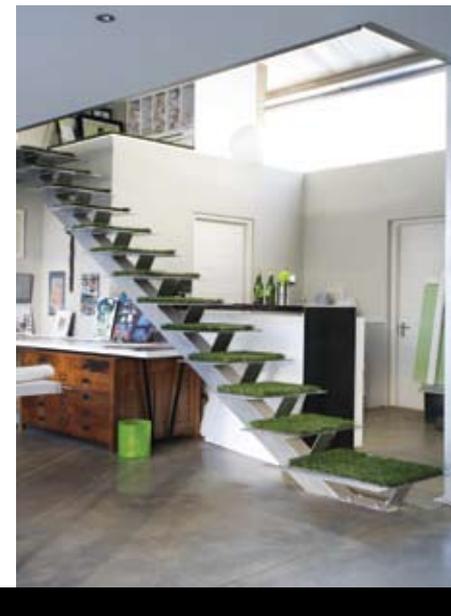
'The panels are made up of multi-disciplinary groups – writers, photographers, developers, brand "imagineers" and architects. All of these produce the culture of our city. We aim to debate new takes on old problems and find new ways to view the city.'

With a Masters in Architecture from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and having spent time working in Hong Kong before returning to her beloved country, it is this 'seeking of new ways to view spaces' that has seen Sarah Calburn and her team's winning of a litany of awards for a variety of projects. The 2008 SAIA Award of Merit for Fynbos House, in Betty's Bay, was a particular delight, given the way in which the team placed the structure within – and even 'under' – the exquisite Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve. With sea views from higher levels, the lower level is part of the thick fynbos that got there first.

On the drawing board is the Greenside Design Centre, where a 'spectral fish swims



OPENING PAGE  
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

along the top of a 1950s frame building'. Flush-jointed, two-toned aluminium and glass come together to provide studio, exhibition and lecture spaces, and the inner front of the fish creates the space for roof terraces, a coffee bar and a chill space. A walk through a coral reef, in the heart of Greenside ...

If Sarah had the chance to take one area in Johannesburg and work with it, which would it be? 'Rosebank. I would ensure that the space along Oxford Road where the Gautrain runs is completely opened up, de-fortified and not relegated to what I call the "franchised landscape". 'Rosebank contains the simultaneous potentials of scale and densification, while being able to retain and enhance urban intimacy. It is not fake. It is an integral piece of urban fabric with a history to exploit and extend into the future.

Next, she says, she'd refurbish Mutual Square. 'We can't keep demolishing beautiful spaces and putting chain stores in them. We are able to create so much and yet we seem to do just the opposite. On the corner of Jellicoe and Tyrrwhit avenues there's a glass-and-steel building that sits so gently in the landscape, you barely notice that it's there. These are the things architects are capable of.'

Because her main interest lies in the relationship between landscape and architecture, Sarah says she sees interiors as landscapes too. 'The architecture – in and out – must respond to its context.'

So, what about green? 'I was once asked if I consider myself a "green architect". My immediate gut response was "no" – not

because I have a naturally contrary personality, but because this term, "green", seems to me to be either too limiting or too wide, as it is currently purveyed.' Not entirely sure what she'd be buying into, Sarah began thinking about what green architecture, or what a green agenda for architecture, might be.

'I suppose my most visceral first thought was that I have a certain resistance to definitions that start to imply a "style", or that might lay down a rigid set of determinants that would serve to limit – or prefigure – what for me is always a "free" act of design. I do not consider "style" a generator for design at any level. Style is an outcome.

'My planted buildings, for example, which might well be considered green, are outcomes, not prefigurations. They came from response, or from more complicated ideas of blur and of framing, from ideas of view, of point of view, of mirroring, of expansion and heightening of consciousness of place. These buildings do not set out to be green. These buildings came from mutual conceptions of landscape and architecture; of mutual becoming in space and time,' she says.

'I also talk about other, less green work of mine in terms of landscape, and these buildings do not have planted roofs to make them green – they are simply buildings mutually conversational with their locating landscapes.'

That, it would appear, is the living spirit of architecture. 🌱

**Sarah Calburn Architects,**  
+27 (0)11 447 0867,  
sarahcalburn.co.za

