



NEWS RELEASE: 10 JANUARY 2011

SLOVENIA BRINGS MORE POSSIBILITY TO ITHUBA

CAPE TOWN – Students from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, their mentors and residents of Magagula Heights south of Johannesburg recently celebrated the opening of the seventh new classroom with a library they jointly built late last year at Ithuba Skills College.

The new construction, an initiative of the Austrian non-governmental organisation SARCH (Social Sustainable Architecture), will benefit Ithuba's learners as well as the residents of Magagula Heights, who also have access to the library. SARCH enables students from European institutions – mostly in the design and architecture faculties – to engage during their training with people in developing countries to jointly construct schools, libraries, clinics and other facilities for disadvantaged groups.

By building the classroom with a connected library, outdoor learning space and toilets, the project provides additional opportunities for South African learners to gain knowledge. Ithuba, the Zulu word for 'possibility', offers training to learners who complete their primary education at the onsite farm school, as well as local adults who seek to improve their skills in woodworking, building, cooking and needlecraft.

The project also achieved the desired exchange of knowledge between local residents, the Slovenian students and the partners of Ithuba. Magagula Heights' residents who participated in the building activities earned income for their work as well as gained valuable experience that can be passed on within the community. Likewise, the residents' building knowledge was beneficial to the 20 Slovenian students, most of whom were first-time builders.

The students' brief was to create good, sustainable architecture using a simple building concept that could be constructed quickly from local, inexpensive materials. Energy efficiency was also an important consideration.

"When creating the design and choosing building materials, we had to take into account that South African winters are mild compared to Slovenian ones; however, without heating they are cold, especially at night when the temperature drops below zero," said Anja Planiscek, one of the four student mentors. "Summers here are also slightly warmer and wetter than those in Slovenia."

The classroom was thus designed as two separate volumes, covered with a floating metal roof. One of the volumes was designated as the classroom with a library and the other contains the toilets. Between the two is a covered space for outside work and learning.

Straw and clay, the traditional building materials of rural African settlements, were used for the third time at Ithuba to construct the walls of the new structure. Besides being cheap and accessible, these materials together have good accumulative properties for energy efficiency.

The clay was obtained two kilometres from the site on the plain next to Magagula Heights and the building team only paid for the digging and transportation by truck. The straw was also cheap, bringing the price of the walls for the entire building to less than R10 000.

During September and October 2010, the building team prepared the site, cast the concrete slab, erected the steel structure, welded window frames, rammed the straw and clay walls, cast the concrete toilet walls, covered the roof and built most of the furniture. For improved energy efficiency, the standard steel windows were innovatively connected in a double format so the space in between the windows can provide passive heating in winter and cooling in summer.

“Constructing a 280 m² building in eight weeks is not easy, particularly in an unfamiliar environment,” says Planiscek. “We Europeans were also forced to understand time as a more relative dimension.”

Following Planiscek’s initial viewing of the site in the 2009 academic year to prepare the students for their challenge, the building plans had to be drafted, incorporating the input from the two energy consultants. Money also had to be raised for the classroom construction as well as the Slovenians’ stay in South Africa.

SARCH provided the initial R150 000 while Slovenia's Development Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Slovenian institutions, donors and sponsors provided another R150 000. The total cost of the construction amounted to R310 000.

“We did not intend to come, build and leave, but rather make a positive impact on the local economy, architecture and the quality of life of local residents,” said Planiscek. “Without the cooperation to build and learn together, it would have been difficult to complete the project from foundation phase to roof within our eight-week deadline.”

She continued: “Although Ithuba Skills College is a school for local learners, it is also a place where two worlds meet. South Africans and Europeans may not fully understand each other, yet will overcome the stereotypes of cultural and historical differences over time. We worked and learnt together here, each of us putting aside our own history and present situation to achieve balance.”

According to Dr Prieur du Plessis, Honorary Consul of Slovenia who is based in Cape Town, “Overwhelmingly positive results can be achieved when developed and developing nations work together on outreach programmes. South Africa can greatly benefit by forging stronger relationships with Slovenia, especially through links between educational establishments and by sharing skills in the area of affordable building.”

Du Plessis actively encourages relations between the two nations and led a successful trade delegation to Slovenia in 2010 for South Africans to explore commercial opportunities in Central Europe. Slovenia's top business people will be conducting a reciprocal visit to South Africa later this year.

For further details about Slovenia, please visit www.slovenianconsulate.co.za or contact the Consulate of Slovenia on tel: 021 970 2447 or via email: info@slovenianconsulate.co.za.

End

BACKGROUND

Ithuba Skills College

Ithuba was built through an initiative of Christoph Chorherr, the head of the Austrian non-governmental organisation Social Sustainable Architecture (SARCH) based in Vienna. It is based on Montic Dairy premises and is funded by the Montic group. In addition to its school-going and adult learners, a group of disabled persons is currently being trained at the centre.

There are currently seven pavilion-style school buildings and four houses for teachers at Ithuba. The buildings, mostly comprising a classroom and a workshop, have all been built by students from different schools of architecture in Europe (TU Vienna, TU Graz, FH Kärnten, Kunstuni Linz, RWTH Aachen and FH Dessau) with the help of local residents. The students and mentors of the Ljubljana Faculty of Architecture are the latest Europeans to join the list.

SARCH

Christoph Chorherr's activities in South Africa span the past decade, from when students of architecture from the Technical Universities of Vienna, Austria and of Munich, Germany built day-care centres and a centre for children with special needs at Orange Farm, a community south of Johannesburg. Following these projects, a day-care centre, library and the workshops of Montic Primary School were constructed.

Chorherr's idea to enable students to participate in architectural projects was inspired by the activities of the Auburn University Rural Studio, a centre in the USA that involves architectural students in building houses in underprivileged or disaster-stricken areas.

Magagula Heights

Magagula Heights is one of the smaller communities in the south-east of Johannesburg. North of Magagula Heights are the bigger communities of Zonkizizwe, Katlehong and Tokoza that are growing into Johannesburg's industrial zone. The entire area forms part of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, previously the largest gold producer and today the centre of industry that accounts for 23% of Gauteng's budget. Around 2.5 million people live

here, 76% of whom are black Africans. The unemployment rate is 20 to 22% and the average monthly salary is R1 600 (data for Zonkizizwe).

Around 7 500 people live in Magagula Heights. Their homes are modest, mostly 35m² RDP houses and shacks.

Further transfer of knowledge at Magagula Heights

While the Slovenian team was constructing the classroom at Ithuba, the residents of Magagula received another new building. The Austrian NGO buildCollective (www.buildcollective.net) together with Magagula residents erected a new community centre, comprising an adapted cargo container and a roof next to a taxi rank.

The centre aims to encourage residents to learn building and craft skills and familiarise themselves with sustainable materials they can use to improve their own living environment. This acquired knowledge will also increase their employability.

The centre will be managed by workers from the Ithuba project and other volunteering residents. As with Ithuba, the centre is another reason to bolster residents' pride and inspire them to further develop their community.

The Slovenian approach

Before participating in the project, the Slovenian team considered how to define the project – would it be a charity, humanitarian or educational project? How would the team, as foreigners/Europeans/white people who have little knowledge of the South African situation and with a different cultural background, influence life in a community in a country with a completely different history that was marked by apartheid?

Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian economist and the author of the book *Dead Aid*, is extremely critical of different forms of aid offered by Western countries to African nations. She claims that the consequence of this aid is even greater dependence of the countries on the sources of aid, corruption, and a breakdown, or at least inertia, of individual countries' economies. The aid is more a contemporary form of colonialism than a driving force of development.

Moyo radically suggests abolishing aid in the form of big financial injections and she searches for solutions to particular circumstances in individual countries and smaller-scale, direct forms of loans. She emphasises knowledge and improved educational possibilities as two of the most important goals of society. Our project can be placed within this idea.

Ithuba_final