

If Michael Taylor could have his way, a Singapore skyline or even a New York Central Park feel would be developed in the Cape Town CBD. His enthusiasm is catchy. He lights up with passion when he explains why he loves construction project management: 'It's about leaving a tangible mark, a structure that will forever change the landscape. I want to be able to drive past a building one day, point it out and say, "I built that; I was a part of that."'

Michael has just been appointed new business development director of construction management company Betts Townsend, which he joined in 1998. In 2006, he launched and headed up the company's Cape Town office.

Michael's appreciation of space and design started at a young age. He was fortunate to have travelled extensively and be exposed to many of the world's iconic buildings. During a trip to London with his father, for example, Michael visited the construction site

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of the landmark Sir Norman Foster-designed Swiss Re building (better known as the Gherkin). This particular event sparked his love of design, which was cemented during his 'coming-of-age' journey across America, and confirmed his belief in the effect that a building's design has on the environment and the people around it. 'In the end we are all a bit fickle. We want the best locations, and the aesthetically appealing buildings are the ones that always have full occupancy,' he comments.

Against his family's wishes for him to follow a 'sensible and profitable career in finance', Michael studied interior design. He went on to do an apprenticeship at interior architectural design firm Wilson & Associates, which led to a chance meeting with Betts Townsend's founder, Howard Betts. Howard's effect on Michael was instant. Intrigued, fascinated and hooked, Michael decided then and there to switch from interior design to project management.

At the young age of 21, Michael, working as a private consultant in project management, took 'the opportunity of a lifetime' and went to work on the development of a boutique hotel in what was then a totally under-developed Tanzania. The plot for development was in the middle of a coffee plantation and was surrounded by untouched beauty. The towering peak of Kilimanjaro could be seen in the distance. 'It is definitely the most beautiful place I have ever lived. Back then we were the first; we were pioneers who saw the potential in Tanzania. I would encourage everyone to visit,' he says.

After the project in Tanzania, Michael continued to travel extensively as a consultant, but he always knew he would return to South Africa. 'There was – and still is – so much opportunity and growth potential in South Africa, and in the construction industry in particular, that I wanted to return,' he says. When a permanent position, and the chance to work with his mentor, Howard, opened up at Betts Townsend, Michael didn't need a second invitation to pack his bags and head for home.

It's the 'It can be done – 'n boer maak a plan' – attitude of South Africans that makes Michael proud to be home again. 'South Africans, unlike any other nationality in the world, have the ability to work creatively within a budget. We have always had that ability

– the recession merely heightened that skill and people got more creative, more efficient. They looked at using different materials and new designs.' He describes this as the most positive thing to come out of the economic slump, and goes on to predict that the industry will forever be changed because of this challenge and because of higher expectations created for design and building practices in the future.

Betts Townsend weathered the recession well, and Michael believes that is because of the trust relationships and the reputation the company has built up. 'Over the last 15 years, Betts Townsend's reputation has been built by word of mouth in the industry. Repeat customers make up a large part of our business.' It's this reputation that afforded them the opportunity to project manage on big-name projects such as the Oprah Winfrey School for Girls in Meyerton, and the Peter Mokaba Stadium in Polokwane. These are the projects that lie close to Michael's heart. 'Don't get me wrong – I'm a capitalist by nature, but community-based building projects allow

one to activate a node that may not previously have had something there before. It's incredibly rewarding to start something new, to be the first to break ground, and add to and improve a community and people's lives.'

Retail is the backbone of Betts Townsend's business. 'We know retail better than anyone else does,' says Michael proudly. But their latest project in the Western Cape shows a widening business model for the company. Pearl House Hotel is currently being refurbished on Cape Town's Foreshore. It's being designed as a three-to-four-star hotel, and the Betts Townsend team believes this to be a winning formula. 'The recession made people tighten their belts and cut down on travel expenses, but with the fantastic location of Pearl House and the more reasonable rates that can be offered by three-to-four-star accommodation, we fully believe in this project.' In fact, they believe in this project so much that they have taken an equity share in the development.

In the next five years Michael hopes to spearhead the expansion of Betts Townsend's business model, taking on more diverse projects, and working further afield. Hinting at a hoped-for expansion into Africa and even Europe, it's also the concept of green building where Michael sees the potential for growth. 'Green building principles will soon not be an option but a mandate for developers, and I believe it will fundamentally change the way we build and the way we occupy space.' Michael's prediction for green building in the short term is the development of vertical gardens, rooftop entertainment and greening. 'With our views, rooftops in Cape Town have been seriously underutilised until now.'

As for Michael, if he's not on his Ducati 'monster' bike, training for his next off-road endurance race, kicking soccer balls around in his informal friends-and-clients league or hitting the trails on his mountain bike, you'll find him working on his next project. Surrounded by architects, builders and developers, he will be brainstorming his next project, sharing his enthusiasm and passion for his business. For Michael, his work and personal life have embraced Betts Townsend's company ethos: 'It can be done.' 📞 +27 (0)21 555 4131, bettstownd.co.za

Styling Justin Lund, Makeup Melissa, Model XXXXX, Parker Chair supplied by Wunders

Michael Taylor, new business development director of Betts Townsend, shoulders the responsibility of multimillion-rand projects with an easy smile and a 'can do' attitude.

The fun is in the FUNDAMENTALS

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