

LEADING ARCHITECTURE

A N D D E S I G N

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Green gathers momentum

Hidden treasure

A wine cellar high up in the Helderberg mountains took its cues from the location and its environment to create a state-of-the-art, yet environmentally aware winery

Leading project

As a student at the University of Stellenbosch, Dave Hidden was told about the superb viticultural potential of the soils on the upper slopes of the Helderberg Mountains by his viticulture professor. It was a conversation that he never forgot, and became the start of his dream to eventually build a premium vineyard on these soils.

In 2005 Hidden started with the construction of a state-of-the-art wine cellar high in the Helderberg mountain. Mark Thomas of Cape Town-based Jane Visser, Mark Thomas Architects says, "Dave wanted a combination of tradition and innovation, he wanted a state-of-the-art cellar which was practical above all else, and yet he also wanted us to capture the soul and essence of the spirit of the wines. One of the key factors was making sure that the whole wonderful process of making wines becomes transparent."

Opposite: The state-of-the-art cellar is practical above all else, but also captures the soul and essence of the spirit of the wines.

The final project is a combination of tradition and innovation.



The outcome was a contemporary rustic cellar with warmth. "The inspiration was to build the site rather than build on the site," explains Thomas. "Thus we created an enormous built stone plinth which supports and covers the building above." The built area, including ramps and the parking area, measures 5 469m² on a total land area of 267 552m². The walls of the building are 'living', built with huge rocks creating natural gaps and crevices to house whatever plants, birds and other creatures choose to make this their home. On the farm surrounds, extensive conservation of the indigenous flora and fauna as well as the introduction of a holistic water purification system is furthermore integral to the ecological sensitivity of this farm.

Location

The local environment had a strong influence on the design of the Hidden Valley cellar. "We cut the building into the slope to increase the passive cooling and we also shielded the large expanses of glass with pergolas or vines which lose their leaves in winter. Sun was critical when it came to the design – we built the barrel cellar with 1m thick walls and thin slot windows so that you could still have the view, but at the same time maintain the optimum cool and moist temperatures," says Thomas.

Thomas considers that the thick walls, playing with light, building the site and honest materials were the most important elements which were

Right: The palette of materials used is honest, natural and robust, designed to age gracefully.

Below: The stone for the base was laid by a third generation Sicilian stone-mason.



incorporated into the design of the Hidden Valley cellar. Materials which formed the basis of the cellar included stone, glass, brick and the heavy foundation onto which the lightweight 'shed' was perched.

The concept was to perch a shed on top of a solid base. The stone for the base was laid by a third generation Sicilian stone-mason, with Hidden personally supervising and controlling the Cyclopean stone of this massive wall. The intention was to reduce the impact of the building on the landscape and to rather create 'geography' than a big architectural statement. "Part of the concept was to pull the shed back from this massive base and fringe the building with a natural vine, which would help blend the architecture with the environment and also mark the changing of the season," explains Thomas.

Thomas says that working on this particular project was a long and complex process. "Although it started out on site with difficulty, the winemaking team are now delighted with their product," he says. As one of the signatures of Jane Visser, Mark Thomas Architects is to create buildings which do not date, Thomas says that in the case of the winery, the big heavy stone base is timeless and will age gracefully without any maintenance. "The barn perched over the stone base has vines and pergolas which will slowly soften the building and make it part of the landscape."

The practice

"Over the last decade we have worked on a broad spectrum of projects, ranging from schools and hotels, visitors centres, wineries, industrial buildings, beach houses and major residences. Although there are consistencies in aspects of all our work, we approach each project as a unique and individualised opportunity for design excellence," says Thomas. A previous project, House Pienaar in Philipskraal, Betty's Bay in the Cape, won a merit award from the Institute of South African Architects.

The palette of materials used by the practice is honest, natural and robust, designed to age gracefully by being either incredibly tough or by developing a patina over time. "Our architecture could be categorised as timeless and is definitely not based on any particular style. We share a great respect for the textures, richness, proportion and appropriateness to site and climate of traditional architecture, yet our work aims to achieve these qualities in contemporary architecture without building replica old buildings," he says.

The palette of materials used is honest, natural and robust, designed to age gracefully.



Jane Visser, Mark Thomas Architects were also involved with the Devon Hill Winery where the brief was to design a modern winery with the latest technology in a building that would be neither like a factory, nor historically dated or typecast. The building was planned in close consultation with the winemaker and the result was a state-of-the-art building with a handmade vernacular quality. Textured finishes to the walls, ochre-tinted plaster, and wall mouldings that capture some of the sculpted quality of the detailing of many early Cape buildings are hallmarks of this project. The building aims to fit into its natural and cultural context.

'We took agricultural buildings, barns and other outbuildings as our models of traditional Cape architecture, rather than homesteads, as this was more appropriate to the functions of a winery,' says Jane Visser, Thomas' partner in the practice. 'Our concern was also to integrate two languages of technology: that of traditional masonry work and that of steelwork.' This juxtaposition is further explored in the Hidden Valley Wine Estate.

The green aspect

Dave Hidden runs a biologically-tuned vineyard, with no plastic covers, but natural mulch, for example, working with the bugs, not against them. Their Devon Valley farm supplies grapes from 35-year old pinotage vines while their Helderberg farm is all strictly organic. They aim to set a new green standard and propel South Africa to the forefront in the field. Similarly, the architecture is environmentally aware, a key aspect of the 'green' approach of the project being how the building is cut into the site. Thomas explains; "This way, the huge barrel cellar and dry goods stores are naturally cooled and the energy requirements of the building are reduced. Added to this, the barrel cellar has narrow slot windows to the north facing view, reducing heat build-up from the sun."

The Hidden Valley winery represents the past, present and the future of Cape wine. Long regarded as a prime vineyard site, its potential is now

being explored through new plantings. "I see this as a legacy site," explains Hidden. "Its promise will only be partially realised in my lifetime. Right now, I want this to be a place for all people and all the senses – an experiential exploration of wine, olives, food, nature and the environment. A place to appreciate life." **LAD**

Project team – Hidden Valley

- **Architects** – Jane Visser, Mark Thomas Architects
- **Main contractor** – BL Williams
- **Quantity surveyor** – Bernard James & Partners
- **Structural engineer** – De Villiers & Hulme
- **Civil engineer** – Bradis Earthworks