



Lifestyle Mega Mica Home Garden Center – A New Leaf

By Judith Soskin

Lifestyle Garden Center has, for the past twenty years, consistently set standards for excellence in garden retail centers in South Africa. It has always been so much more than just a place to buy plants – now, a massive new extension to the Center is setting standards in sustainable building methods as well.

The Lifestyle Garden Center, located on Beyers Naude Drive in Randpark Ridge, Johannesburg, has, for the past twenty years, kept pace with the often startling level of development going on all around it. At first located in what must have been pretty virgin countryside, the nursery now sits prominently in middle class suburbia – while a city has sprung up around it, the nursery has also evolved into a premier retail environment that services every possible need a gardener could have – not to mention a grand day out for the entire family. Restaurants, pet stores, gift shops, garden accessories, plants and advice – all available under one roof. Truly a one stop for the serious, amateur or even the mildly interested gardener.

However, as Oscar Lockwood, the co-owner and landlord of Lifestyle, now known as the Lifestyle Home Garden Mega Mica explains, in recent years competition from shopping centers and other forms of retail entertainment have lured customers away from the joy of the nursery. In order to win their customers back and attract new ones, it was deemed necessary by Oscar and his partners to expand Lifestyle by almost double in size and to partner with a major national retail DIY brand. "Mica was the logical choice," says Oscar.

"Lifestyle is amongst the top nurseries worldwide," he notes. "Delegations come from all over the world to see how we operate. We have been pioneering in the formation of tea gardens,

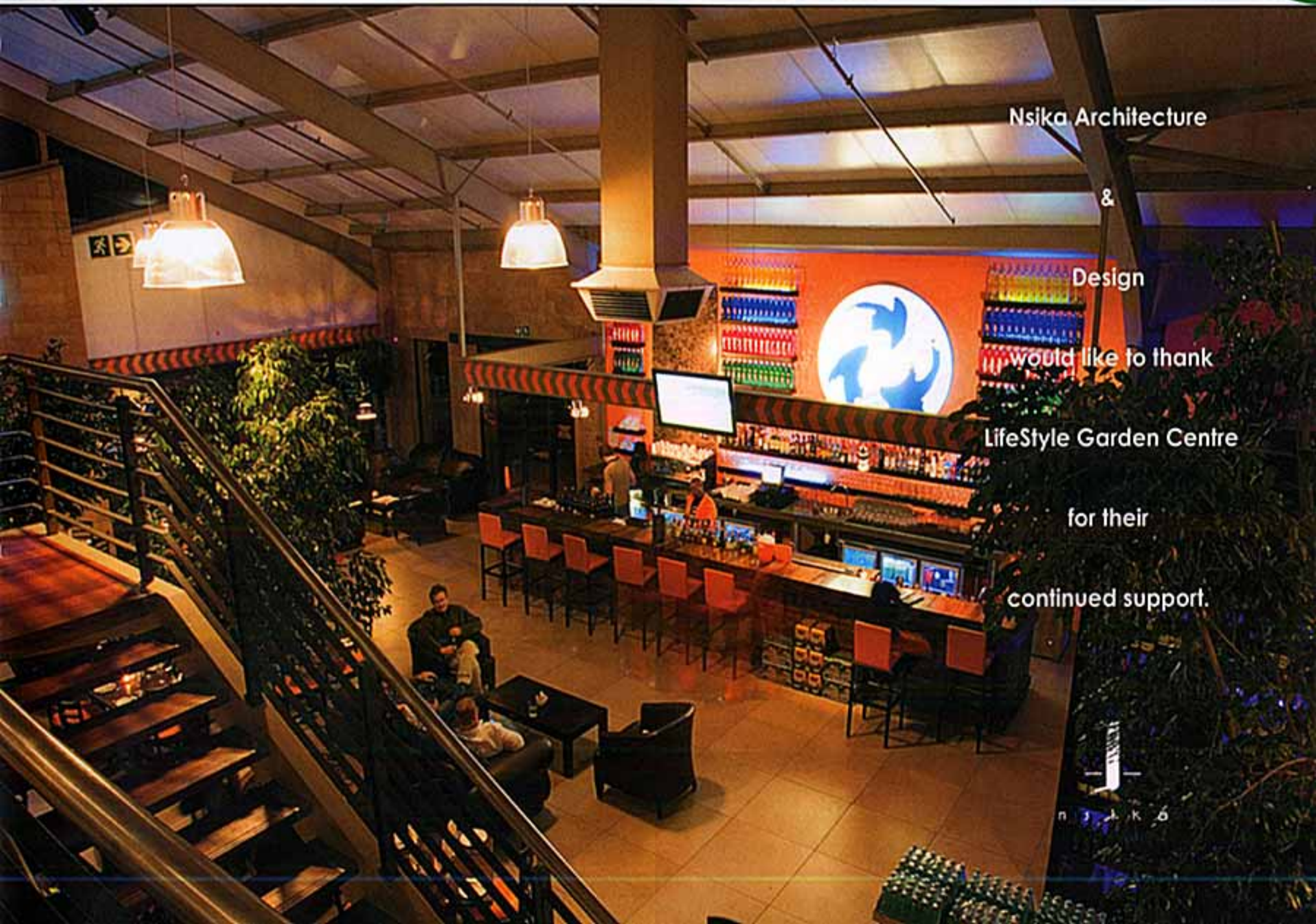
food and garden courses as well as garden clubs for all types of groups – we do feel we are at the cutting edge, but it is also important to keep evolving. After all, gardening is still one of the world's most popular pastimes."

Having previously worked with the same architect from Nsika Architecture & Design during the last major refurb at Lifestyle back in 1997, the firm was again called upon by Lifestyle to design the new extension, which was also to include an office park component. In all, the footprint of the new section totals some 17 680m², of which the new Mica store takes up 2 859m², the office park component 2 656m², a large Primi Life restaurant of 905m² and a total of 1 017 parking bays.

However, nothing in life goes as planned, as architect Brent Buchanan explains: "We were well into the design phase of the project, when we were informed that not a single extra kilowatt of electricity from City Power was available for this extension. Naturally, this catastrophic news influenced everything, and forced us to think of new ways of resolving, designing and running this project." In the end, what has come out of



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In pure design terms, Nsika were briefed to continue with the same organic linear style for the design of the new nursery section as before. Comments Brent: "We have used economical materials; steel sheeting, recycled timbers, exposed concrete and screeds in the design. This has allowed us to elaborate on the structural elements of the design - in essence, we have a well detailed portal structure."

The addition of a two storey A-Grade office complex beneath the massive new parking structure may seem a surprising addition to a nursery and garden centre, but actually the multi-tenanted office component not only serves as an additional income generator for the complex, but is also an economical way to utilize the double volume space underneath the parking deck. Open light wells built into the parking deck naturally ventilate the parking while filtering light down below into the 'atriums' where the offices are located, while effective landscaping helps to provide a softer natural focus within the context of the contemporary linear design of the offices.

So, while the total building footprint has been doubled, the whole





Photograph: MKDP



operation basically runs on the same amount of electricity as before; just 600 kilowatts. How is this possible? Through the expertise of consultants such as Dr Johann Delpont, Henning Holm and Ernst Wertheim, new systems have been developed and put into place at Lifestyle, including R2.3 million worth of solar panels, which not only services all underfloor heating requirements, but also all of the hot water for the entire development.

Basically, what happens is that hot water, produced by solar power is stored in an insulated hot water cylinder underground, the heat being maintained to 65° at night, utilizing limited amounts of off peak electricity. The water is then pumped through an extensive system of

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polypropylene piping to all concrete floor areas of the retail floor, which creates a pleasant plant life sustaining ambient temperature day and night. During the day, skylights in the ceiling made out of polycarbonate sheeting provide natural light and heat – not only does this foster plant growth by creating a mini-greenhouse effect, but also allows for more flexibility than a traditional air-conditioning system would. Additionally, when things get a bit too hot in summer, evaporative coolers help to cool the atmosphere down, providing a pleasant, slightly humid ambient environment – good for both people and plants.

Air-conditioning for the office component of the development is another ground-breaking



Photograph: MKDP

area of ingenuity for the development. This aspect is handled through the creation of ice, utilizing off peak electricity at night. Throughout the day in summer, water is pumped through the ice to produce the chilled water required by the air handling plants, which in turn feeds the cool air to the various office blocks. In winter, surplus heat generated by the solar powered hot water system is utilized to heat the offices.

In addition, an intelligent and sophisticated computerized energy management system has been installed to optimize electricity supply. During the day, the roof architecture keeps the building cool through the use of external overhangs, ensuring that light only enters the building at a maximum angle of 68°.

The Lifestyle complex now also includes a large new branch of the popular restaurant chain, Primi – in this case called, appropriately, Primi Life. The intention behind this addition, apart from, of course, providing the centre with a stunning new restaurant, is to create a visible public microcosm of all of the sustainable elements of the garden centre, such as the use of solar panels for underfloor



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heating, evaporative coolers, heating water utilizing the excess heat from the gas cookers and the recycling of water from the hand wash basins to flush toilets and urinals. The aim is to utilize Primi as a platform for these sustainable systems; to appeal to other professional inventors, and to promote these systems through practical use.

This aspect of sustainability has also filtered through in human terms as well. Primi Life has partnered with loveLife to place disadvantaged young adults into positive lifestyle awareness programmes, known as 'groundBREAKERS in the Workplace' which, apart from providing positive life reinforcement training, are also creating employment at Primi's all over the country.

That such a monumental undertaking can be achieved so efficiently and cleverly and despite some catastrophic events, such as the devastating fire which ravaged the existing portion of the centre when the entire project was a month away from completion - ironically, forcing an opportunity to re-look at the existing centre and find new ways of running it more efficiently by introducing more light and flow and improving the retail area - is truly an example of commitment on a level that is inspiring. Even though the costs of installing such a sustainable system have been prohibitive and may take years to recoup, the end result is a pioneering example of the direction in which we should all be headed, to tread lightly upon the earth. *ic*



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