

All under one green roof: Discovery's 5-star move

Property Review talks to John Robertson, Executive Director at Discovery, and David Pierre-Eugene, Head of Discovery's Group Facilities, about their new global headquarters in Sandton – a record-breaker in Africa as the largest new building with an impressive 5-star Green Star rating, and a fitting culmination of six years of innovative teamwork, foresight and dedication to excellence

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“We had a simple reason for building our new headquarters,” says Discovery's Executive Director John Robertson. “Six years ago, we were scattered across five big buildings in Sandton and Fredman Drive. It wasn't a very efficient situation – and wherever we looked, we seemed to be running out of space. So we decided to create one central office for our local and international businesses – one that would represent the Discovery brand and all our core values.”

“Working in several separate buildings can encourage sub-cultures,” says Head of Discovery's Group Facilities David Pierre-Eugene. “Being in one building has a huge cultural impact, and we wanted everyone under one roof so we could get back to our sense of oneness (one Discovery place, one Discovery brand). On the Discovery Health side alone, our membership of more than three-million across the various schemes we manage has always meant that we are very integrated in the community.

It suits our branding of an integrated product to have Discovery and its various entities under one roof. It reflects our company ethos of integrated care.”

“Discovery's ambition for 2018, set out for us by our Chief Executive Adrian Gore, is to become the best insurance company in the world – and even more importantly, to be a force for social good,” says Robertson. “It motivated our decision to get a 5-star Green Star rating as part of our ‘good citizen’ consideration. These goals have since informed much of our

design decisions for the new building – such as the chosen style of the open concourse, which is meant to be an open, welcoming space with a piazza feel for our people and for the public.”

“During the six-year run-up to the new building, our project team organised a detailed change-management programme for everyone which, among other things, provided a series of walk-throughs during the construction phases, and again in September through the completed building prior to moving in,” says Pierre-Eugene. “The reaction to the new building was unbelievable. The people loved the ambience, the decor, the spaces, the fact that they could walk everywhere, the staff restaurant, the ‘grab-and-go’ areas, even the coffee! We received positive feedback from the walk-throughs and from people rating the service they got while moving in, with our stats already showing that everyone has embraced the change with improved productivity overall.

“Our ideal is to help people excel and to bring out the best in them through the environment we provide. Knowing that the environment has a great impact on people and productivity has motivated us to provide, through the design, a healthy environment with many spaces that are conducive to free movement,



John Robertson, Executive Director at Discovery

spontaneous meetings, interaction and communication openings. We wanted to create opportunities to share. The environment needs to be a catalyst for these interactions. Having everyone under one roof is a contributing factor. As John says, it’s about representing our values – and our values are about innovation, activity, wellness and the widening of prospects for people. We spend the greater part of our lives at work. Whether it’s the new gym, the riding track on the roof or the staff restaurant that creates excitement, it’s important to make it an environment

with facilities that help people to work at their optimal level.”

“Now that we have everyone in the same building – all our product houses (Health, Life, Vitality, Invest, Insure, etc) and the international companies – we’ve seen that a lot of work happens across companies,” says Robertson. “Interestingly, such working groups often choose an open seating area and gather around what we call ‘a cheese grater’ (a divider with a white board on it) with their laptops. The way the building has been designed, with activity-based or agile working in mind, facilitates collaborative productivity between the product houses and the companies. This collaboration has already started playing out since we moved here, and it is the fuel for innovation. The result we are expecting – and are already starting to see – is a better dynamic skills set among individuals.”

“A research survey we carried out led us to design this building for the next generation, with the next 15 years in mind,” says Pierre-Eugene. “Our generation has always focused on time in attendance, but the new generation is more about delivery. They like to have the tools they need, a super-fast intranet, fibre for the internet, the latest in technology, and the opportunity to choose whether they want to work in an office or in a space. We will need to be very flexible, mobile and agile, with a different way of thinking, to remain a competitor, and it will involve more team collaboration to turn out innovation quickly for the new day and age. We had the opportunity to move ahead with the latest technology but we made our choices three or four years ago – and technology is changing so rapidly that even the lighting and other things we made a call on at the time are probably out of date. Nevertheless, we shall see the efficiency coming through – and because of the turnaround time for technology, we want the environment to facilitate that interaction. We anticipate from the facilities-management perspective that it will be more efficient and cost-effective to be in one new building than to be in several ageing buildings.”

“Six years ago, we presented to our executive committee the historic growth



patterns of the organisation, extrapolating them within various scenarios to predict what our requirement would be by 2025, and what options were available to us,” says Robertson. “Having presented the options, an overall concept of space and how much was required to make provision for our future needs, it was agreed that we went into the market with Broll – trusted partners with whom we have worked for 17 years. We received 26 responses.”

“A rigorous process involving clear decisions of our own whittled these down to a short list of three, and we requested a presentation from each,” says Pierre-Eugene. “They were Growthpoint, the owner of the site; Zenprop, with whom we are now in a consolidation concept; and Old Mutual. The idea of a joint venture with Zenprop and Growthpoint was actually one of our requests because of the size of the project, and they agreed.”

“We knew Zenprop, having previously worked with them. It’s good to work with people you know. Zenprop also had a huge knowledge of Sandton, and plenty of experience with bigger buildings. We knew them to be innovative in their thinking, always pushing the envelope; and I think we wanted something that was iconic, yet not too ‘over the top’.

Growthpoint had delivered a lot in terms of green buildings so there was drive and experience in that sense. There was also the beautiful site and the advantage of Rudolf Pienaar, then the Chairman of the Green Building Council of South Africa. We felt that the combination of the two working together would bring us something that was really world-class.”

“The end results of the Boogertman design aligned exceptionally well with our values in terms of the flowing lines, and the concepts of infinity and movement,” says Robertson. “There was nothing static about the design; it was always evolving. It did create challenges for our designer in terms of the roundness and all the curves, but it did represent our values. Boogertman put a lot of thought into it.”

“Part of the design criteria for the interior, done by Paragon Interiors, was that it should be very solid but easily broken down and reconfigured as and when required in the work and office context,” says Pierre-Eugene. “This has always been a Discovery feature: because the company grows organically, changes and evolves, our environment must always be flexible. Paragon took the cue from the architect, and the same design principles guided the interior decisions.

We were very involved throughout, but pushed back only when there was a principle in the design feature under attack. We ultimately acknowledged Paragon as the experts.”

“If we really had to, we’d do it all again,” says Robertson. “We had a very professional team, our process was quite good, and we have known the people that we worked with for a long time. We managed to negotiate very tight decisions and points simply because we had the strong relationships that we’d built up over the years. Plus, everyone was gunning for the same result, and that was the key.”

“When we started, the project was bigger than all of us,” says Pierre-Eugene. “Yes, we had the hard discussions, the hard negotiations, the hard debates about particular finishes or whatever the issue might have been. But the project was always going to be the winner, and that attitude and mind-set were at every meeting and at every discussion with all the professional teams, through every disagreement. In the end, we came up with something that was good regardless of the cost implications or the design compromises we had to make. We’d always say that the building – the end product – had to be the aim.”