

The 25th anniversary of the launch of Belvidere Estate brought back a rush of memories of the very early years. I thought I would like to record some of these memories and the important contributions a number of individuals made at that time.

The Story of the early years of Belvidere Estate

The story of Belvidere Estate starts with the founder of Belvidere, Thomas Henry Duthie. He was keen to establish a community on the western shores of the Knysna lagoon. So in 1848 he excised what was later come to be known as Old Belvidere from his farm and divided it up into lots (erven). He enthusiastically promoted the sale of these lots to friends and acquaintances. He was the first developer ! Although he owned a large area of land stretching from Brenton to Portland most of his farming efforts seem to have been concentrated on what is now the Estate. This is where he built his home, Belvidere House, and planted the Avenue and other spots on the farm with English oaks and some of the first eucalypts(gums trees) in South Africa .

I first became aware of Belvidere in the 1970's when I visited my uncle Tony Bowman, who lived in Field House opposite the church. He was actively trying to have Belvidere village (now Old Belvidere) declared a conservation area with an architectural aesthetics code. All property owners had to agree for this to be implemented. Although he had wide support there were a few owners who objected so the proposal was never implemented. The result was that some house plans that were not sympathetic to the historic nature of the village were approved. This was a big disappointment for him but he put his energy into restoring the village green and churchyard, building the church boundary fence and planting trees and flowers. I remembered him saying that if you wanted to have an architectural code it would have to be agreed at the time of sale of the land. This stuck in my memory when I became involved in the planning of the modern Estate.

I moved to Belvidere in 1985 with my fiancée Joanne , both of us planning career changes. I would write the political novel I had been researching for a couple of years and she would open a small restaurant. It never worked out that way. We bought and restored Ferry House and Jo opened one of the first B&Bs in Knysna. In 1986 I became aware of the unsuccessful attempt of a consortium led by local attorney Mike Metelerkamp to sub divide the Belvidere farm and sell the resulting stands. I did not like the planned layout. I also discovered that the condition of Belvidere House was deteriorating quickly due to a leaking roof. As I have a love of old buildings I offered to personally repair the roof free of charge if the roof sheets were supplied. This was turned down. The combination of these factors made me realise that the only possible resolution was to somehow acquire the property. But I had no funds, just a large mortgage over Ferry House. I went to see Mr Metelerkamp. They would sell but sceptical I could produce a buyer.

With a design background (albeit in different areas) I wanted to produce a layout that adhered to certain criteria. 1. Conserve all significant natural areas, the historic Avenue and important other trees and incorporate them into a parkland. 2. Be walker friendly. Have a boardwalk along the water's edge and a trail through the lagoon side forest and thicket. Design the parkland so pedestrians could walk from one side of the Estate with a minimum of road crossings. 3. Have cul de sacs for an intimate village feel and low vehicle speeds. 4. Have the narrowest allowable roads for the same reason. 4. Utilise the great views and provide easy access to the lagoon. 5. Concentrate boating activities at a central deep water jetty, thereby reducing pressure on the salt marsh. 6. Have a ring road rather than a single main access road to reduce traffic frequency at any one point.

My layout took shape over several weeks. I did some rough financial projections and starting calling on anyone who I thought may be interested in funding the project. This was mostly in the Joburg area where I had previous business connections. It was a roller coaster of raised hopes and disappointments. Knysna was considered a backwater, too far from the major urban centres. Finally a breakthrough ! JCI had a property division and they wanted more information. More presentations. More meetings. More assurances. Months went by. I negotiated an option to purchase that they accepted, subject to a final main Board approval that I was told was a formality. It wasn't a formality, their Board declined as they had not invested in land outside of the Joburg area before. This was ironic as the later success of Belvidere Estate gave them the confidence to invest in the Cape and do the successful Steenberg Estate in Cape Town, following our formula of a Cape Vernacular architectural code.

To get so close and fall at the last hurdle was devastating. It seemed to me I should try some Cape institutions but had no connections. Ferry House provided the lucky break needed through two of our visitors. Bob Strain was staying with us and in conversation I mentioned my difficulty. He suggested I contact Lawrence Miller, a Cape Town attorney and financial facilitator, who it turned out had called in to see Ferry House a few months earlier.

Lawrence arranged a meeting with Carl Scheppening, the MD of the Board of Executors property company. I had found an ally at last. He was immediately excited by my concept, but cautioned that it would not be easy to get the approval of his Board. Headed by Bill McAdam, they were mostly banker types we would have to persuade.

Using the BOE computer program Carl and I put together detailed financial, sales and construction projections for his board. There were a number of challenges to be overcome. There was no water, no electricity and the soak away sewerage used in old Belvidere was not suitable for an upmarket modern development. Borehole water was not considered reliable by the Divisional Council, the then local authority, so a pipeline would have to be laid under the lagoon next to the railway bridge to Brenton on Lake and from there brought 3 km to the estate. A large reservoir would also be necessary. A modern sewerage package plant would be built and the effluent processed to a high standard that would allow it to be used on the Estate and not discharged into the lagoon. New electricity reticulation from Knysna was needed. New sub stations would have to be installed.

Chairman of BOE Bill McAdam liked our plans and projections. An advantage was that the BOE estates department had administered the Duthie family trust for some years so they were familiar with the Belvidere farm. A conditional go ahead was given – but with some tough requirements. I had to pre sell sufficient stands to the value of half of the farm's purchase price of R2.5m and renegotiate a purchase agreement that would allow the price to be paid off over the projected sales period of 21 months. Carl had to find a civil construction partner to assume half the financial risk. Clifford Harris, a Cape Town Civils contractor, was keen to join as a third partner and Metelerkamp accepted the extended payment requirement. Preselling upmarket stands on an overgrown farm where it was not possible to show the prospect where is his/her property would be was difficult, to say the least. Jo and I approached every friend, business connection and former Ferry House guest we could think of. It was desperation stuff. Fortunately we found enough brave men and women who shared our enthusiasm for Belvidere and were prepared to commit financially. We signed the

last sale agreement 24 hours before the deadline. Without them the Estate would never have happened.

It was September 1987 and time was running out for the proposed December sales launch. We started to assemble a development team to bring our concepts to reality. These were exciting, but stressful times. I had spent more than a year and expended virtually all my limited resources on the project. I wanted to ensure that the original objectives of restoring Belvidere House and an Estate architectural ethic were met. In this regard I was fortunate to work with Boets Smuts, a talented George architect, who was already assisting me in the restoration of the Belvidere church bell tower. His extensive practical knowledge of our Cape Colonial architecture was vital in compiling the Design Guidelines for the Estate. At that time the idea of a strict architectural code for a development's buildings was a new idea. There was also a belief amongst some of the BOE connections that it would negatively affect sales. To their credit Carl and Bill were not amongst these and this was sufficient to get the go ahead.

Traditionally in South Africa a residential development was designed from the macro down to the micro. I.e. a site contour survey would be done and given to the town planner who would design the street layout. Then it would go to the engineers for the services design, then to the different contractors for execution and then on to the landscape architect. Usually the building architects would only become involved when all civil construction was completed. They had no input into stand layout and configuration. We adopted a different approach, recognising the important aesthetic contribution the architects or anyone else on the team could bring to the overall design. The contractors, whether civil, electrical or horticultural could also bring important input at the design stage. Hopefully this would produce a more practical, aesthetic and holistic end result.

From the outset planning meetings with all the professionals together were held. We identified the opportunities and restraints of the site, did an environmental impact study (long before this became a legal requirement) and formulated the criteria that would be binding on all aspects of the development, including the important architectural code that would harmonise the new architecture with Belvidere House and the Cape vernacular. Roads were often not straight and routed away from important trees, to the irritation of engineers and contractors. Large natural areas were to be conserved. All of this was incorporated into a Master Plan for the Estate.

When we did a presentation to the Old Belvidere locals I got the impression that some felt our plan was just hot air to get planning approval, such was the poor reputation of property developers. However the strong support from Belvidere Church pastor Rev Cedric Dickerson helped smooth the way.

At the same time we prepared a marketing campaign to highlight the unique location, beauty and history of Belvidere combined with our different vision of what a residential development could be. I assembled a group of enthusiastic local men to man our Sales Office in Belvidere House, which had received a quick interim repair to the roof and a paint job. They had to be enthusiastic as stand locations were difficult to find on the overgrown farm. Gumboots were issued for prospective buyers to protect them from puff adders.

We launched in early December 1987. I was anxious. An experienced township developer told BOE we had it all wrong – the stand density was too low to be viable, the prices were too high, South

African's would never agree to architectural control. However by the time of our official opening on 16 December sales had already started, albeit slowly. This was in line with BOE's expectations as they had all gone on holiday, sending only a single salesman to help over the season.

The opening party on 16th December had a tremendous vibe. There was a sense of expectation. Appropriately Rev Cedric Dickerson led the dedication prayer in founder Thomas Duthie's Belvidere House. A full circle had been completed. Just as he finished all the lights went out ! A nervous hush followed. Quickly we located the problem – the generator had run out of petrol ! Soon the lights were back on and the party got into full swing. The opening gave an impetus to our sales as from the next day there was a steady stream of buyers. This was surprising as there had recently been a stock market reversal with a resultant generally negative investment atmosphere. It soon dawned on me that something special was happening. The new Belvidere Estate was going to be a reality, Belvidere House would be restored, I could afford to stay in Knysna ! By the time the Carl and the other BOE staff returned from holiday we had already opened phase 2, a year ahead of schedule.

It was heady times. Belvidere Estate sold out completely in 9 weeks. Now we had to deliver on our promises. Designs had to be finalised. Construction could theoretically begin but some areas of the Estate were a tangled mass of huge decaying gum trees that first had to be cleared. A new set of challenges was arising.

In our clearing team we were fortunate to have the skills of former Knysna foresters and they set about the task with gusto. Some of the tree trunks and stumps were so large that it was impossible to cut them up. We had to dig huge fire pits and burn them individually. This was done day and night, sometimes taking a week or more. At the same time we established an onsite nursery to start the acclimatisation of the thousands of plants and trees our extensive planting program required. It was fun travelling around South Africa searching out the best specimens . Precautions were taken to protect the flora and fauna – tortoise and bird reserves, puff adder relocations, removal of old snares, indigenous tree protection, no go natural areas for contractors, etc.

The services installation went well with partner Clifford Harris delivering mostly on schedule. There was some friction when I wanted the road near the entrance to Belvidere Park to be realigned to save what was then a young oak tree. It had been incorrectly plotted in our survey. It is now a magnificent mature specimen.

We agreed that BOE and Clifford Harris would buy and jointly develop the retirement village site and that my company would buy Belvidere House and surrounds, restore it and construct the Manor cottages to form a country hotel. We started the comprehensive restoration of Belvidere House that was going to take 18 months to complete and culminate in its declaration as a National Monument.

The first transfers of properties to buyers were in the first quarter of 1989 and several houses were begun immediately. Owners had 4 years to build a home. I chaired our architectural committee and we began meeting monthly to approve building plans. Generally owners entered into the spirit of what we were trying to do, but early on we had a show down with one difficult individual who did not want to build in compliance with the Design Manual. A legal challenge resulted. He lost and left the Estate. This set the precedent. Our job was demanding, trying to meet owners' requirements whilst staying true to the spirit of the Cape Vernacular and our Manual. As my background was that

of the schoolboy rebel who sat at the back of the class I found the policing role very difficult to carry out.

An unexpected challenge arose when the time came for the handover of the services to the Divisional Council. (At that time Belvidere was not in the Knysna Municipality). They said they did not have the capacity to take this on - although they were legally obliged to do so. As developers we had a responsibility to our purchasers. We would have to assume this role. As I was the local partner this fell into my lap. I was suddenly the de facto Town Clerk of the Estate. We would have to administer the Estate, prepare a budget and collect a levy to operate the sewerage plant, the water system, maintain the roads and public areas, manage the building contractors. This was done using the structure of the BHOA. No charge was made by the Belvidere Estate development company for its services in this period. At the same time our extensive on going landscaping and planting program had to continue.

About 18 months later the matter was resolved when Belvidere became a "Local Area" falling under the new Regional Services Council. This allowed for a more formalised administration and the BHOA's work was replaced by that of a Local Council.

Belvidere Estate is what it is today because of the collective contribution of many different people over the last 25 years and I salute each one of you. However I would like to record my particular appreciation to the following from the early years.

Tony Bowman, Mr Belvidere in the 1960's & 1970's, whose passion for Belvidere was the inspiration for the new Estate.

Rev Cedric Dickerson, former pastor of the Belvidere Church, for his support when everything seemed to be running against us.

Carl Scheppening of the Board of Executors, a man of vision and integrity.

Gem Morton and the other pre-launch buyers. You believed at a critical stage.

All our original owners. The point is often missed that you are the lifeblood of any development, providing the cash flow to make it happen.

Boet Smuts, Architect, for his knowledge of our vernacular architecture and major contribution to the Estate Building Design Manual.

Deon Nel, Town Planner, who convinced a very conservative Council that the strange looking design with crooked roads was workable.

Chris Mulder, Environmental Planner and Landscape Architect, for his support for my unconventional approach .

Wendy Rademeyer who held the office together through thick and thin.

Gerrit Niewoudt, Site Engineer, a practical man with practical solutions.

Adrian v.d. Byl and John How for their expert local horticultural input.

Doug Donaldson, hard working clearing and planting foreman.

Pam Cooper, Council and BHOA administrative stalwart.

Karl Barnard, an early owner, who handled the finances and budgets professionally . Homeowners / Council Chairmen Rob Scott and Graham Hoyle. All contributed their skills freely when the Estate was in its infancy.

And more lately :

Mike and Sue Mills for maintaining “the jewel in the crown” Belvidere House and its grounds so beautifully.