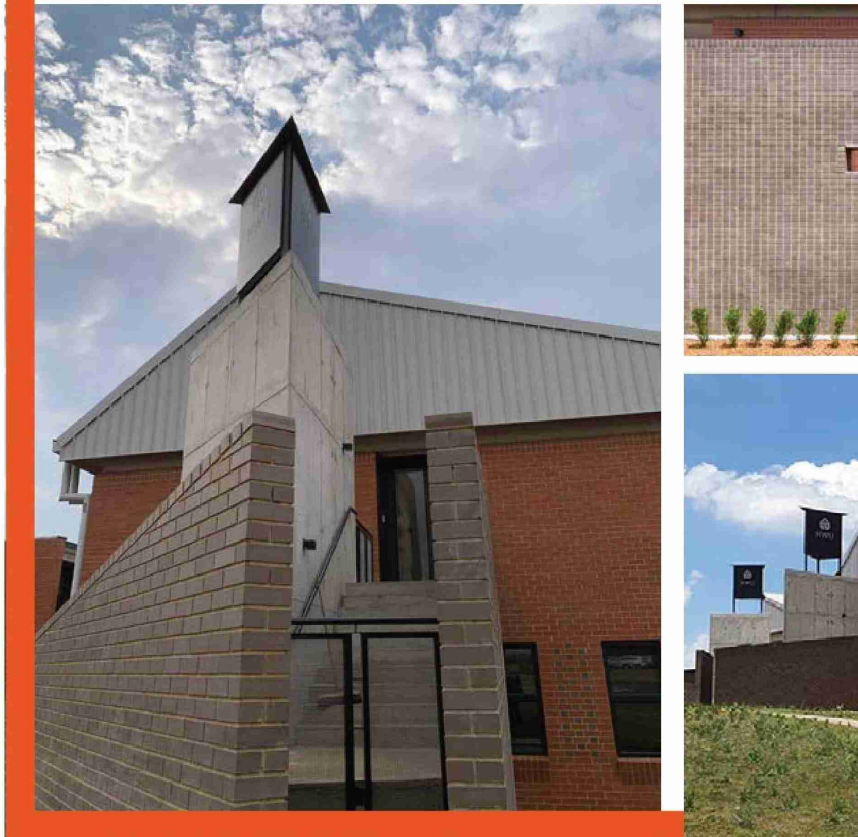


## BLUEPRINT

# TELLING STORIES



The new North-West University Vaal Triangle Campus Administration Building designed by Mathews and Associates Architects creates an identity and entry point for the growing campus.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF COROBRIK AND MATHEWS AND ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTS

North-West University's (NWU) Vaal Triangle Campus near Vanderbijlpark is one of the university's three campuses, which also include Potchefstroom and Mahikeng. Each campus has its own distinctive character. While the Vaal Triangle Campus had functioned as something of a satellite, recent growth and increased student numbers required

additional infrastructure and facilities.

The development of the campus is a multi-phase project – the first of which was to establish a new administration building, which would anchor the campus as its 'main building'.

Lead architect Pieter J Mathews of Mathews and Associates Architects (MAAA), who were appointed to design the buildings, points out that the brief

presented additional opportunities to add structure and coherence to the campus overall, establishing the basis of an urban design that would create a more user-friendly, navigable and logical experience for students, staff and visitors alike.

As the first of the new campus developments, the administration building also needed to establish an aesthetic for the campus,

PROJECT #2 NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY VAAL TRIANGLE CAMPUS ADMIN BUILDING



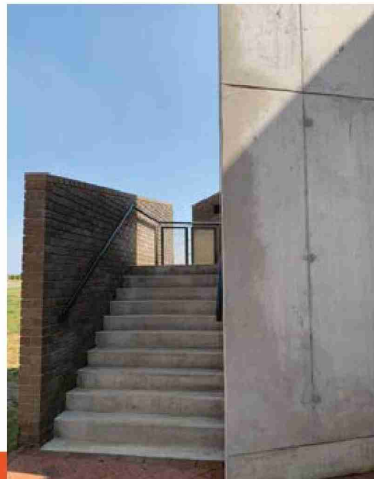
Clockwise left to right: Sculptural triangular pillars provide wayfinding prompts for visitors, immediately drawing their attention towards the building's public entrance on the western side.

A horizontal 'slit' in the wall allows a cinematic moment of delight as you ascend the stairs.

Stairs leading up towards the deputy vice chancellor's office entrance and the more understated set-back entrance.

The concrete 'pillars' are actually extended structural supports for the external staircases/ fire escapes.

The building stands proud, elevated on a hilltop, while the surrounding landscaping and pathways and stairs usher visitors to the relevant entrances.



functioning as its 'public face'. As such, rather than drawing on historical references, it required a "contemporary, modern, forward-looking design".

Mathews explains that, unlike conventional university campus schemes, which typically develop around a central administrative building, MAAA and NWU took the decision to locate the new admin building at the university's entrance point, establishing a new node that was 'fit for purpose' rather than simply following convention.

The building is intended to serve members of the

public, including visitors, university applicants and those dealing with financial services – which don't necessarily require access to the rest of the campus – as well as university staff and students. The administration building also houses the offices of the deputy vice-chancellor (DVC), including council chambers and entertainment areas.

The building is made up of two asymmetrical wings: one with a more public character, which houses the hub for student administration and related offices, and the other,

which is more private, for the office of the deputy vice chancellor and staff. Its deliberately asymmetrical design is a conscious departure from the classical references typical of South Africa's older, established university campuses. Its elongated, narrow wings allow all the offices direct natural light and ventilation.

Its immediate appearance works from two perspectives: first, as "a subtle billboard in the landscape", given the building's visibility from the highway to the north. However, as an interface and entry point to the campus, it also acts as a welcoming,

guiding and orientation device from the point of arrival in the parking area. From this point of view, it is designed to be clearly legible, welcoming and easy to navigate.

A prominent pair of towers (extensions of the structures to support the fire escapes) on the western side of the building function as orientation devices, providing a landmark feature. Their sculptural triangular form attracts the eye, their appearance providing a "sense of arrival" and signalling the public entrance.

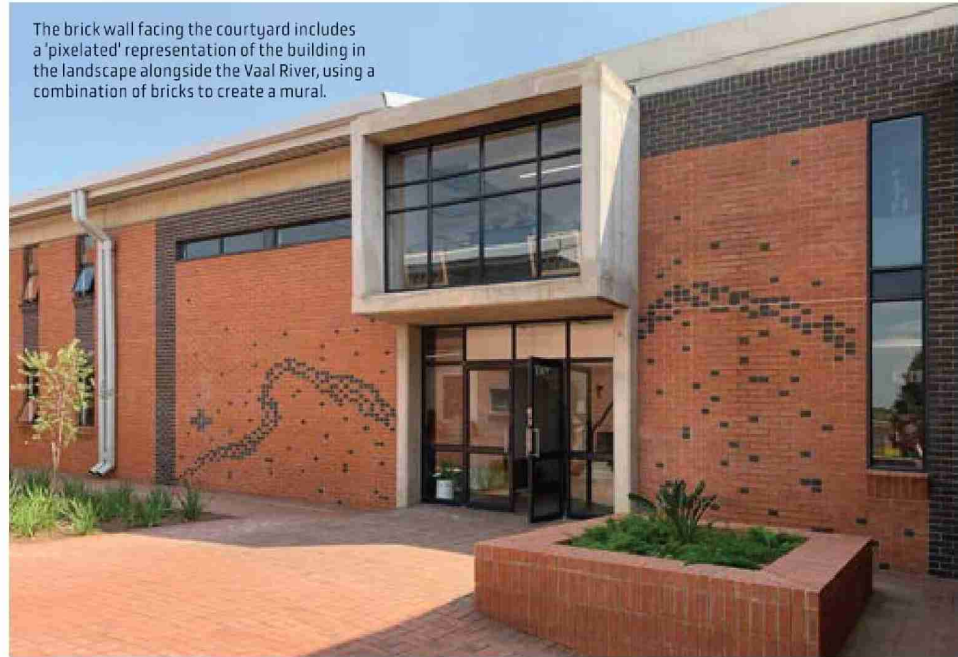
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## BLUEPRINT

The architects have emphasised the horizontal aspects of this wing. The landscaping around it includes a snaking path – a combination of stairs and ramps, or “stramps”, as Mathews calls them – which facilitates meandering registration queues and almost imperceptibly ushers visitors towards the entrance. The horizontal treatment also helps make it possible to maximise shading around the building.

The entrance to the DVC's office wing has a vertical rather than horizontal emphasis and is set back, which immediately creates a degree of privacy, while maintaining a sense of status and formality.

The offices of the DVC and those not directly interfacing with student admin on a day-to-day basis are separated from the main hub of activity and are situated on the first floor, which allows them quieter and more focused workspaces. These offices also overlook the river towards the south of the building. The campus is, after all, set in a proclaimed nature reserve, with trees and abundant birdlife and



even game roaming the campus grounds.

Mathews points out that robust, honestly expressed materials such as face brick and off-shutter concrete have been chosen for their longevity and because they are easy to maintain, as much as for the character they impart, which includes an ability to “paint and play”, adding richness to the details and variation to the colour palette and putting a contemporary spin on a traditional building material.

The brickwork includes a variety of colours and textures from Corobrik, including Country Classic

Travertine, Platinum Satin and Black Brick Satin face bricks with Nutmeg and Ironstone pavers. He points out that the variety prevents a monotonous appearance, breaking up the bulk and adding interest to the exterior.

The brickwork also allows the opportunity to introduce a narrative dimension to the architecture, which Mathews considers of paramount importance in architecture. A prime example is the façade facing the courtyard at the entrance to the eastern wing. Black bricks have been used to create an abstracted, ‘pixelated’

representation of the Vaal River with a cross indicating the campus's position in relation to it. Apart from its aesthetic charm, this ‘mural’ conceptually ties the building to its context, creating a sense of belonging.

The use of brick has been carried into the interior design of the building too, particularly the student-facing areas, which need to be hard-wearing given the amount of traffic through the building. Curved shapes and rounded edges not only create a softer, friendlier and more inviting atmosphere, but also provide



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subtle wayfinding prompts that guide visitors like an invisible hand through the building, accommodating circulation patterns and multiple entrance and exit points to adapt to changes in circulation as students engage with various services.

The university's corporate identity has been subtly woven into the fabric of the interior design, too, introduced with accents given the naturally expressed materiality of the building. Functional elements, such as fire extinguishers, for example, have been thoughtfully framed with blocks of the university's purple offsetting the red. Services and reticulation throughout the building tend to be exposed, similarly elevating

the mundane, functional aspects of the building to the status of sculpture.

The major animating feature of the interiors, however, is the curated selection of artworks drawn from the university's extensive art collection, "the largest historical and contemporary collection in the North-West province", which includes more than 1 200 historical and contemporary artworks.

From a distance it might function as a 'billboard' but this building is not just a static object to be looked at. Rather, it created a series of 'embodied experiences'. "How you move through the building was very important for us," says Mathews.

The design of the building unfolds cinematically as

people move through it, framing views, creating intrigue and what Mathews calls 'aha moments'. A narrow slit in the bricks alongside a staircase, for instance, creates a moment of surprise and delight. Everywhere, opportunities have been found for creativity and architectural magic.

The temporal dimension in which the embodied experience of the building unfolds is rich and thoughtful, fostering an appreciation of, connection to and enjoyment in the building's surrounds that bolsters its sense of connection and belonging in its setting.



The interiors include materials also used on the exterior of the building, such as hard-wearing face brick, but also include new furniture and artworks drawn from the university's extensive art collection.

#### Professional Team

Client: North-West University Architect: Mathews & Associate Architects Principal agent: NWU Projects team: Pieter J Mathews (Lead and Concept Architect); Jannes Hattingh (Project Architect) Structural and Civil Engineers: Moedi Consulting Engineers Mechanical: E.G Africa Consulting Mechanical Engineers Electrical Engineers: Lyon & Partners(Pty)Ltd Quantity Surveyors: Havenga & Olivier (Pty) Ltd Contractor: GVK-Siya Zama Building Contractors (Pty) Ltd Fire, IT & Electronic: NWU