

Retail revolution

A groundbreaking retail development in KwaZulu-Natal demonstrates how thoughtful architecture can transform commercial spaces into vibrant community hubs.

Photography: Barry Goldman





CONTINUED »

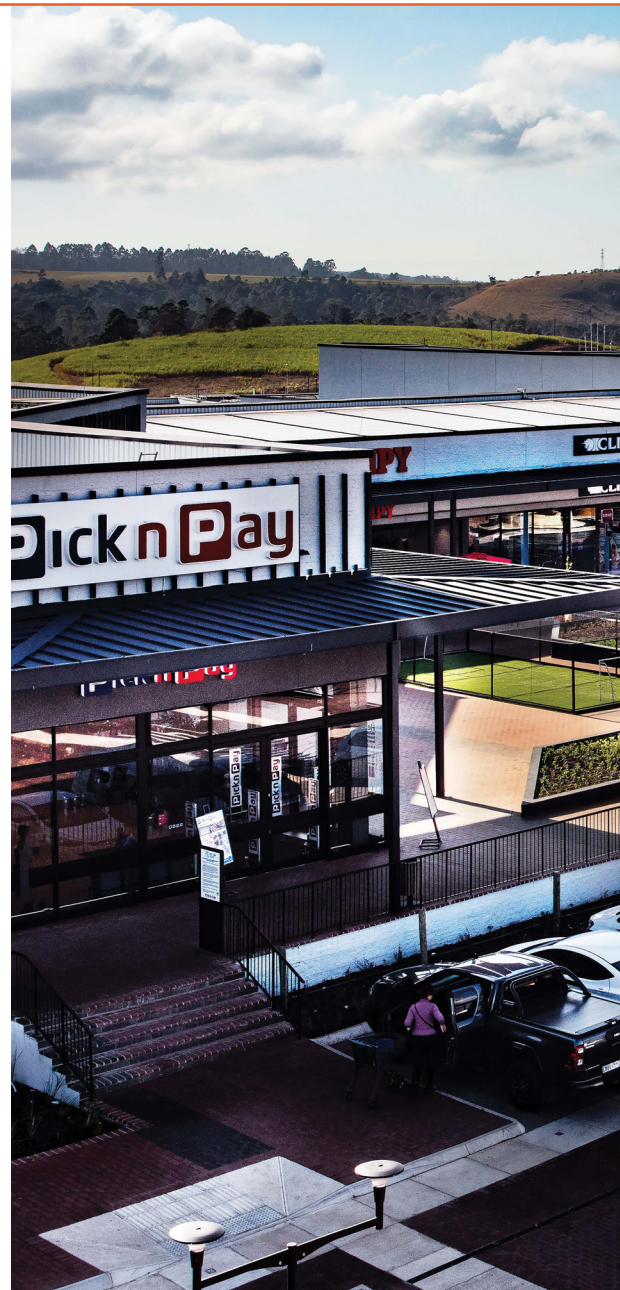
In the rolling hills of Shongweni, near Hillcrest outside Durban, a revolutionary retail development is challenging everything we thought we knew about shopping centre design. Westown Square, which opened its doors on 27 March 2025, represents a radical departure from the enclosed, multi-level malls that have dominated retail landscapes for decades.

Designed by MDS Architecture in a joint venture with Boogertman + Partners Durban, this 48 000m² retail destination emphasises connection over conventional commercial considerations.

'The project stands as a testament to progressive architectural thinking that prioritises human experience and community connection,' explains Donald McGillivray, partner at MDS Architecture.

CONTEXT-DRIVEN DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

The architectural approach at Westown Square is fundamentally about creating an open, permeable and accessible environment that encourages connection and interaction. Rather than following established retail formulas, the design team looked to the unique character of its surroundings for inspiration.



L&S Consulting (Pty) Ltd Structural & Civil Engineers

Tel : 011 463 4020

Web: www.lsgauteng.co.za



'Westown Square was designed to echo the unique character of its surroundings, offering an architectural expression that evolves naturally from the local culture and context,' says Geoffrey Richards, associate at Boogertman + Partners.

The design references the region's rolling hills, sugar cane fields and traditional farmstead buildings, creating a retail environment that feels simultaneously global in its design sophistication and distinctly local in its character.

BREAKING THE MALL MOULD

Westown Square embraces what McGillivray calls a 'high-street design approach', where the boundaries between shopping, socialising and outdoor experience blur seamlessly. The development is characterised by densely planted walkways, pergola-covered seating areas

and an intentional celebration of the surrounding Shongweni green belt.

The spatial heart of the design is a central town square inspired by traditional farm buildings wrapping around a courtyard. Various side streets and lanes converge on this square to create a vibrant gathering space.

'The somewhat irregular layout echoes the organic growth of town centres with varied forms and spaces,' explains Richards. 'The interplay between the town square, village green and children's play areas encourages pedestrian movement, activating the "village" and its streets, and creating a dynamic environment in which visitors can connect with each other and to the spaces around them.'

CONTINUED »

THE BARN: AN ARCHITECTURAL CENTREPIECE

At the heart of Westtown Square stands The Barn, an iconic structure that serves as both spatial centrepiece and cultural anchor of the development. Shaped like a traditional barn but executed with modern architectural precision, this space provides a permanent home for local traders, embodying the development's commitment to community and local economic empowerment.

The exterior design concept references an old farmhouse building facing a central courtyard. The Barn opens out onto The Town Square with folding sliding doors connecting bespoke fast-food offerings, local artisanal kiosks and live music venues. The upper level houses bespoke restaurants and a split-level brewery overlooking The Town Square.

'The interior architectural vision for The Barn was designed by Sculpt Spaces Architects. It is designed around the experience of meandering through a high-street market, where shoppers can explore what's on offer, grab something fresh to eat from a local vendor or sit and enjoy a coffee or drink while watching local musicians perform,' explains McGillivray.





MATERIAL PALETTE AND LANDSCAPE INTEGRATION

The architectural language of Westown Square is deeply rooted in its context. Timber and steel structures are softened by extensive landscaping, creating a contemporary yet organic aesthetic that reflects the natural beauty of the region. Large entrance trees, green screening and carefully positioned planter boxes transform what could have been a sterile commercial environment into a living, breathing space.

This approach reflects a post-pandemic preference among shoppers for spaces that feel expansive, connected to nature and conducive to social interaction. Walkways are intentionally wide, seating areas are strategically positioned, and the entire development feels more like a curated urban landscape than a traditional retail environment.

SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

The development incorporates renewable energy solutions, including solar power and rainwater harvesting, alongside walking and biking trails that integrate the retail space with the surrounding environment. The landscaping actively contributes to the rehabilitation of former sugarcane land into an indigenous green belt.

CONTINUED »



Fundamentum Property Group, the developers behind Westown, worked closely with local communities and traditional leaders to ensure the development respects and enhances the existing social fabric. The architectural design plays a crucial role in this approach, creating spaces that feel both familiar and aspirational.

A BROADER URBAN VISION

Westown Square and The Barn form part of approved development rights of approximately 520 000m² of bulk floor area within Westown's Urban Core. This retail hub will be supported by interconnected precincts, including residential apartments, a business park, commercial activities and a private hospital to be developed over the next 10–15 years.

This catalytic investment, together with over R1bn in roads and infrastructure currently under construction by eThekweni Municipality in partnership with Fundamentum, will leverage a further R14bn in investment across the Westown development over the next decade.

RETAILER INTEGRATION AND TENANT MIX

Despite its sophisticated design approach, Westown Square successfully accommodates major retailers including Pick n Pay, Checkers Hyper, Mr Price, Foschini and others, who have adapted their store designs to complement the architectural vision. The development also features an extensive food and beverage offering including Kalamata, Joops, Tiger's Milk, Robsons Brewery and Elephant & Co.

'We've crafted an urban experience that responds to contemporary lifestyle needs,' says Richards. The design team has created more than just a successful retail development – they've established a blueprint for future urban spaces that prioritise human experience, environmental sustainability and community connection.

By challenging traditional retail design paradigms, the architectural team has created a space that feels less like a shopping centre and more like a vibrant, living urban quarter.

'This is about creating a destination,' McGillivray

concludes, 'not just a place to shop, but a place to experience, to connect and to belong.'



Professional team

Client: Fundamentum Property Group Project manager: Orion Project Management Architects: MDS Architecture and Boogertman + Partners Quantity surveyors: MLC Group Civil & structural engineers: LS Consulting Mechanical engineers: Graeme Page Consulting Engineers Electrical engineers: RWP KZN Consulting Engineers Fire engineers: Lotter Consulting Wet services engineers: Vertex Engineering Consultants Landscape architects: Uys & White Interior design (The Barn): Sculpt Spaces Main contractor: Stefanutti Stocks



Tel: +27 (0)11 784 5221

+27 (0)83 625 3820

Email: kmcpherson@orionpm.co.za

www.orionpm.co.za



WESTTOWN SQUARE