**Today's projects should consider tomorrow**

Sustainable development or building practices should surely be on the mind of any architect, engineer and developer about to tackle a new project. Aiming to create a built environment that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs…' (World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press) is possibly one of the most urgent aspects in the global fight to prevent our resources from running dry, says Holger Rust, director of Terraforce, the Cape Town based earth-retaining company.

One obvious facet of sustainable development involves protecting the natural environment. A balance therefore needs be found between protecting the physical environment and its resources, and using these resources in a way that will allow the earth to continue supporting an acceptable quality of life for human beings, and not, as many wrongly assume, to keep up or 'sustain' the current pace of economic productivity to the point of exhaustion. But the word 'environment' should not be solely reserved for untouched nature. 'Man-made' or 'man-changed' environments fall into the same category, simply for the reason that they constitute, both in the present and the future, a large part of human existence.

Human element

This is where environmental aesthetics - aesthetic appreciation of human-influenced and human-constructed as well as natural environments - come into play. 'We tend to forget that aesthetic consideration of our living or built environments are just as important as saving the rain forests. Human-created environments, such as impervious concrete-lined canals, trash heaps, billboards, tacky neon strip-developments, smokestacks and suburban sprawl, all symbols of environmental degradation – should to be considered as paradigms of aesthetic non-value,' Rust says.

Rust bases his business philosophy on precisely this principle. 'A healthy environment and the well-being of society within are closely linked. The latter depends to a large extent on the quality and value of their living environments, whether it be their immediate living spaces or their natural surrounds. Large expanses of asphalt and concrete planned without consideration and environment-supporting
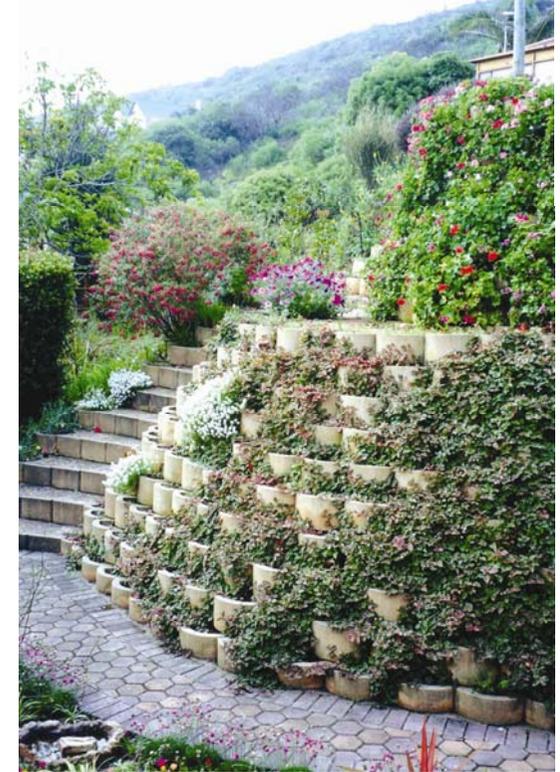
features will eventually erode the very foundations of our survival.'

The design of Terraforce retaining units is a good example of a product that can support all requirements of sustainable site development. The open horizontal surfaces encourage uninhibited penetration of water, a closed vertical surface structure provides for maximum amount of soil within the wall (preventing backfill spillage), while the flush-fitting horizontal interlock over full width of the block allows each retaining wall to be adapted to any existing site condition, whether it is a river bank or existing architectural structures. 'Every project tackled with Terraforce products has the potential to be aesthetically pleasing, in both a visual and environmentally protective sense,' adds Rust.

Moral judgment

Environmental aesthetics are not just concerned with the 'outward' appearance of human environments. Aesthetic considerations include moral judgments of the functionality and purpose of any man-made environment. One can argue that the landscapes created by modern agriculture are visually pleasing, yet if such landscapes do not fulfill their intended purpose of providing nourishment to society or if workers tending to the land are exploited, then instead of a positive aesthetic response to well-functioning landscapes, the appropriate response will be dismay at a massively dysfunctional system – no matter if visual or economical appreciation of such landscapes was possible.

So what do we do to become more aesthetically aware in our building practices?

American green architect Bill McDonough writes, 'Being "less bad" is no good.' Instead of 'aiming for zero', he envisions green buildings that celebrate nature's abundance, maximise beauty and delight and inspire a positive vision of change. David Orr, US conservation-education leader and chair of Oberlin's Environmental Studies Program, identifies similar positive ecological design principles – 'preserve diversity, both cultural and biological, utilise current solar income, create little or no waste, account for all costs and respect larger cultural and social patterns.'

Whenever we alter our natural environment we should ask ourselves this question, 'How can I build without causing ugliness somewhere else or at some later time?' Ugliness here means not just visual displeasure or adverse emotional reaction, but also the ugliness from the loss of a natural resource, diversity and even life, according to Rust.

See www.terraforce.com for more information or email us at holger@terraforce.com