

Profile



Marelize Visser is managing to combine running her own successful South African consultancy with a growing role in the Institution. Doing one without the other would not have been an option. Interview by Jackie Whitelaw.



One sentence describing Marelize Visser's company, TMV Consulting and Design, stands out when you visit the website. It states: 'Our integrity shines through when delivering on commitments made to our clients. TMV is ethical in every facet of our business.'

TMV is based in Gauteng, South Africa and Visser is part of an engineering community that is working to demonstrate how well her country can now match international business standards.

'Corruption can be an issue in South Africa, but there is a big drive against it and we are fighting it. I apply zero tolerance to any unethical business behaviour, it is one of my base line values. I stand very hard against bribery and corruption,' she says.

Visser, who is 42, has been running her own structural engineering consultancy since 2010. She only recently employed a graduate engineer to help her out and now wonders how she ever managed without her new female assistant. But from age 34 she has effectively been on her own in the business, not only standing up to any uncomfortable business practices, but also working as a woman in a sector

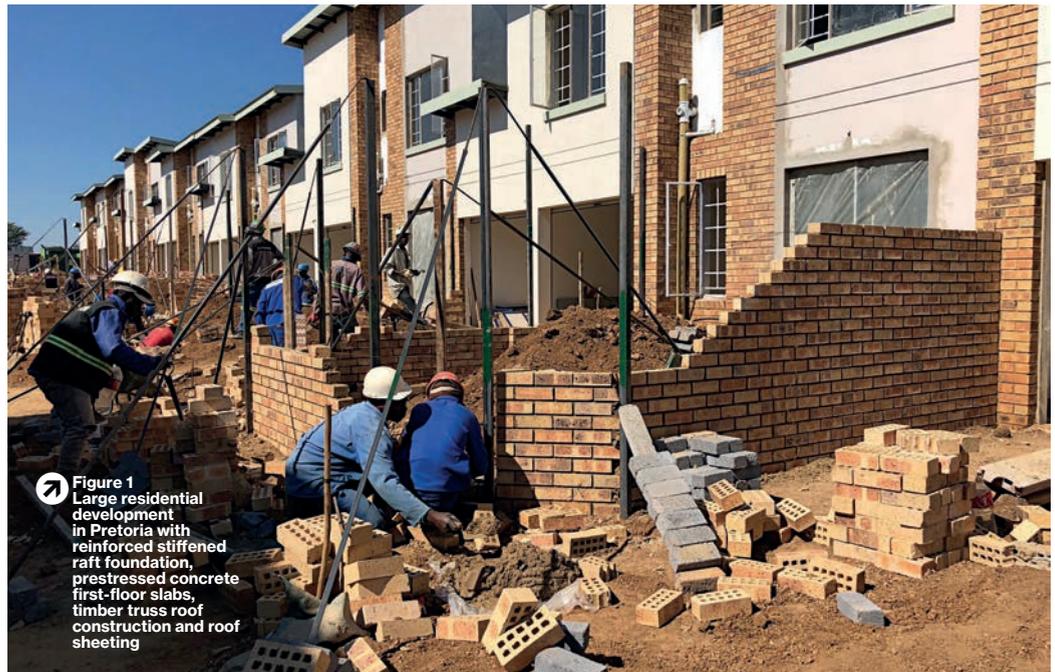


Figure 1
Large residential development in Pretoria with reinforced stiffened raft foundation, prestressed concrete first-floor slabs, timber truss roof construction and roof sheeting

that is not always as female friendly as in some other parts of the world.

Rather than opting to focus on the more architectural area of structural engineering, which might have made life easier, Visser has planted her feet firmly in the muck and bullets ground of the profession. TMV concentrates on concrete and steel designs for small industrial, residential (Figure 1), and high-end residential developments, with Visser particularly enjoying the challenges of retaining structures (Figure 2) and the creative demands of formwork, falsework and shoring.

She is charming, clever, confident, focused and knows her own mind.

'But I recognised that I was in a male-dominated arena and

"I JUST TOOK THE VIEW THAT I KNEW I COULD ADD VALUE AND HELP PEOPLE SOLVE THEIR ENGINEERING PROBLEMS"

needed to remain professional at all times, rather than being drawn into a culture that is easy to misunderstand. My port of call is either the site agent or contract managers when doing inspections on site. My mantra is "keep it simple and be professional; you need to".

If that makes it sound like the industry is tough to work in, it is not. If you are careful to set your boundaries and stay focused, all works well. People on site soon realise you know exactly what you are talking about, Visser explains.

Aman's world

Visser went to a technical high school and her mother worked for a civil engineering company, though not as an engineer, but Visser was exposed early to the type of work engineers did. It was a natural development to study first for a degree in civil engineering and then a master's in engineering management at Rand Afrikaans University (now part of the University of Johannesburg). 'I realised that as a woman, and possibly having children, I might not get time to study for a master's later on,'



she says.

Her first job, in 2000, was with Karena Africa, specialists in sliding construction of concrete silos, where circular formwork driven by hydraulics rises in 300mm increments in order to construct each facility. Visser was on site at a platinum smelter. ‘You had to plan very well, the concrete trucks were coming in 24 hours a day till we got to the top.’

It was, it turns out, an excellent introduction to live engineering. ‘If I had any fear of heights, I certainly got over it very quickly,’ Visser says. ‘I used to have to climb a small cat ladder to the top – these days we have much safer scaffold-type staircases, but back then it was just the ladder. The highest silo I built was 42m, the highest smoke stack constructed in South Africa is as high as 300m!’

Visser was the only woman on site. Conditions on site, and attitudes, were pretty hardcore and facilities for women non-existent. ‘I had to walk almost a kilometer to the smelter’s offices for the lavatory,’ she remembers. ‘Things have definitely improved since then; sites are much more oriented towards women nowadays.’

After a year on site, Visser wanted to experience working as a consulting engineer and joined Vela VKE in Pretoria (now known as SMEC South Africa). ‘I was working in a department

focusing on bridges and large culvert structures. I was very happy, all the projects were different – that’s what is so interesting about structural engineering, you are never bored.’

Balancing act

But always in the back of her mind was an ambition to run her own company. Six years later, and to gain experience of business management as well as new engineering skills, Visser joined temporary works specialists RMD Kwikform, with a short stint at Form-Scaff prior to RMD. ‘I enjoyed being exposed to the less “black and white” side of engineering, getting involved in the commercial and business side of things, and having to put on my “thinking-out-of-the-box hat”,’ she says. And the confidence

gained led her to take the plunge and strike out on her own by setting up TMV.

‘You’ll notice,’ she says, ‘that the time I picked was right in the recession. I just took the view that I knew I could add value and help people solve their engineering problems, from site inspection to design. And if the business worked in recession, it would work when we were out of it.’ Which is how it has proved.

Visser is more than busy working all over the country on schemes that currently range from concrete-block retaining walls, to upmarket residential (Figure 3), and a warehouse extension in Pretoria (Figure 4), along with a continuation of her expertise in falsework. ‘All my business comes from word of mouth. Doing it all and managing the business has its challenges, but being my own boss does

mean I can manage my life better.’

She has a husband and a daughter of 15 from her partner’s first marriage to consider too. ‘I keep family as my focus. I have gone through phases when I was working too much, but know that is not sustainable and now set myself personal goals with time for work, family, exercise and spiritual matters that mean I have a much better balance.’

Professional support

Visser got a lot of support when she first started out from South Africa’s professional bodies and, in particular, Tony Aimer, the then Chair of the Joint Structural Division (JSD), a joint division in South Africa of both the Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE) and the South African Institution of Civil Engineering (SAICE).

‘I’d asked the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) who could guide me in business when I started up. They referred me to Tony Aimer, for which I have always been grateful. He got me involved in the JSD and advised me to join the IStructE as an Associate. I’ve since been JSD Secretary, Treasurer and am now its Chair; and I have been serving on the IStructE Council for four years, and been appointed as an IStructE Board Trustee.’

Becoming involved in the international structural engineering professional





Figure 4
Extension to existing warehouse frame with addition of two 24m bays, Silverton, Pretoria (structural steel lines are distorted due to panoramic effect)

network via the IStructE is one of the best things she has done, Visser says. 'All small businesses need to network with the best of the best in the world, and that is how I believe one should do it.'

'And it is vital to keep up with changing technologies, ideas and innovation. The IStructE helps me gain a global perspective. It serves me very well.'

'I really value the time and effort the IStructE puts into its members all over the world.'

Big ambitions

The next step on the professional front is to become an IStructE Fellow – the forms are ready to be submitted. And longer term, Visser is thinking why not aim to be President one day? 'There are a lot of international members and a big drive for IStructE is to be more internationally recognised as an organisation. There is still a perception that because the head office is in the UK, it is a UK body. The next president, [Senior

Vice-President] Joe Kindregan, is from Ireland, which will help, but why not have someone like me from South Africa on a continent full of developing economies?'

On the work front, Visser is happy to continue building her business. 'I like the challenges the sector throws up and want to take TMV forward.'

She would also like to use her own experience to help guide young engineers and help them develop.

'As a woman, I would

recommend having your own business as a way of having a good and balanced existence,' she says. 'It works with family, you can balance your interests and you can take charge of your life.'

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