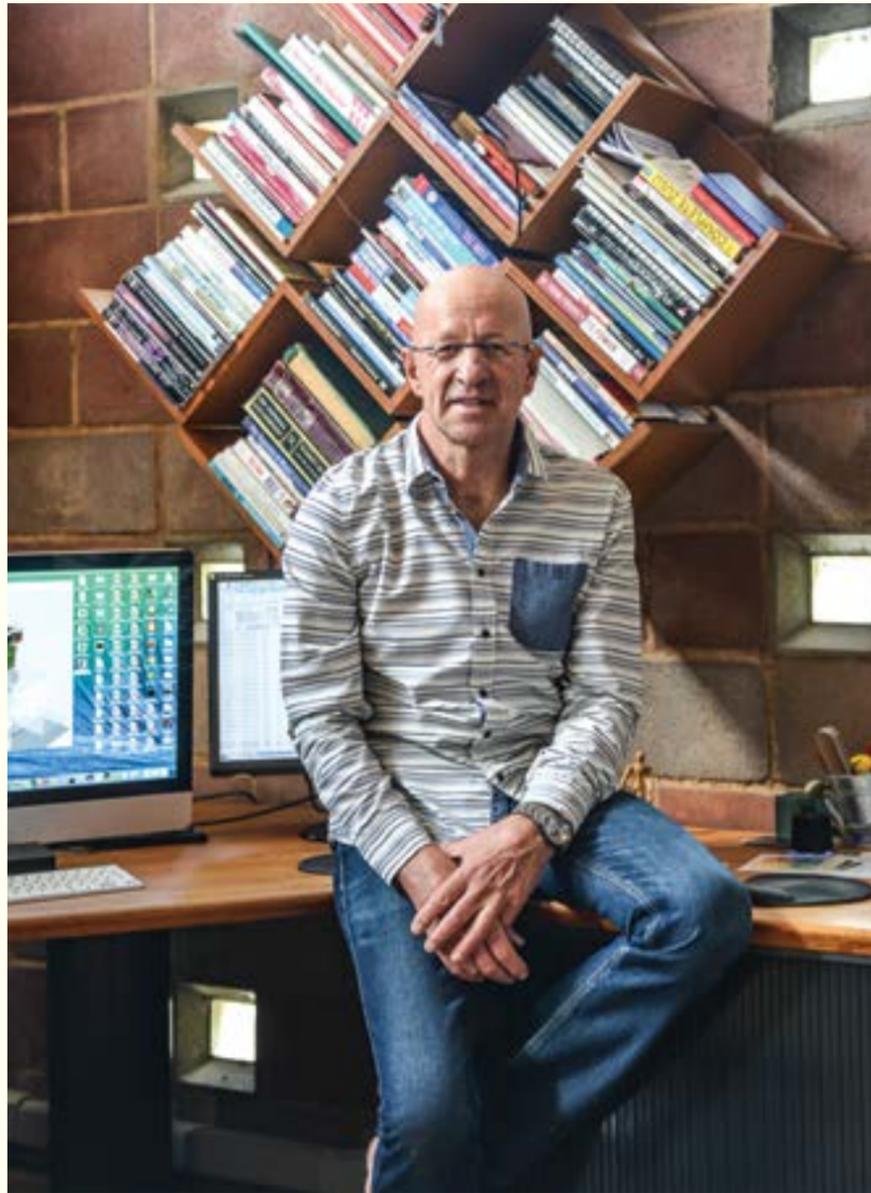


# Outside The Box



## South African architect Arthur Blake softens Johannesburg's gritty veneer with containers.

BY SARAH KHAN  
PORTRAIT BY ANTHONY BILA

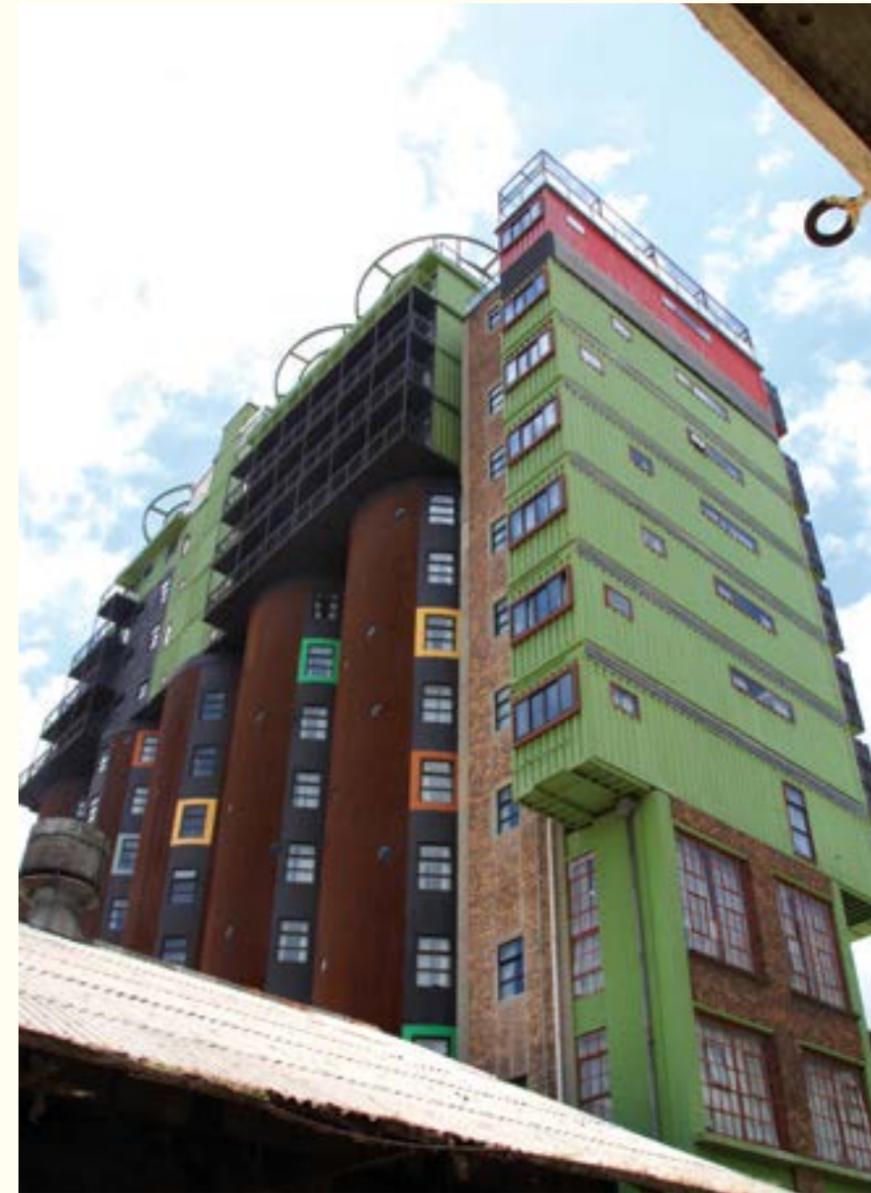
Johannesburg is many things—cosmopolitan, dynamic, and full of millions of dreams—but the word “beautiful” doesn’t typically appear among its roster of virtues. Cape Town, she of chiseled peaks sloping toward sinuous blond beaches, has the monopoly in South Africa’s looks department. But what Johannesburg lacks in natural beauty, it makes up for in manmade cosmetic enhancements. The result is a most unconventionally attractive 21st-century cityscape. Significant credit can go to homegrown minds, like engineer and property developer Arthur Blake, whose creative approach to architecture is the driving force behind a clutch of recent structural standouts giving the city a distinct new edge.

“I’m an artist at heart,” says Blake, who was, until recently, managing director at Johannesburg’s Citiq Property Developers. “If I didn’t come from a more traditional house, I wouldn’t have minded becoming a ballet dancer. I was always creative, but because I have a few brain cells, everyone said, ‘Don’t be an architect, be an engineer.’”

It’s not hard to guess how that turned out. Blake studied engineering and gave the field a shot for eight long years, picking up an MBA along the way, but his creative energy felt stifled. He continued to dabble in designing and building houses as an outlet on the side until eventually he found his calling as a one-stop-shop kind of developer, marrying his engineering sensibility with his eye for aesthetics. “I may have studied engineering, but my passion is design,” he says.

As a designer, he’s been credited for elevating the humble shipping container to new heights. It’s a phenomenon that’s long taken hold in urban planning across the globe, but despite being a particularly utilitarian and affordable model in a country where shipping containers are frequently transformed into convenience stores, beauty salons, and makeshift restaurants in the townships, South Africa hadn’t quite embraced the concept on a larger scale. Enter Blake.

“There’s really amazing stuff happening in America and Europe with containers,” he says.



Mill Junction, a student-housing development in Johannesburg, South Africa. (OPPOSITE) Arthur Blake in his office.

“My MBA dissertation was about container housing in South Africa, which at that stage was very limited—it has exploded since then.”

One of Blake’s biggest achievements is the transformation of the Mill Junction, in Johannesburg’s Newtown district, into what must be the funkiest student-housing digs anywhere on the planet. There are no cookie-cutter, Soviet-style barracks masquerading as dorms here; instead, soaring grain silos are flanked by shipping containers stacked 14 stories high, jazzed up in splashy lime green and scarlet tones. Pretty? Maybe not in a traditional sense. But it would hardly come as a surprise if plenty of students tried to overstay their leases long past graduation.

When I catch up with Blake, he’s decamped to the coastal hamlet of Plettenberg Bay, a scenic stop along South Africa’s famed Garden Route. “I felt like I was on a treadmill: working, working, working,” he says. “I wanted a break.”

The respite is certainly well earned. He’s fresh off the completion of his chef d’oeuvre,

a visually arresting Johannesburg retail concept that employs his beloved containers in an unexpected new avatar. Located in the quirky enclave of Melville, the project, called 27 boxes, occupies an abandoned lot that sat in disuse for a decade, waiting for someone with the right vision to come along. Blake turned out to be that visionary.

“There were enough malls in South Africa that I didn’t want to create another one,” he recalls. So where most architects might have decided to think big, Blake went small, creating a complex of Lego-like receptacles housing over 100 mini-boutiques for independent entrepreneurs and designers. The unusual space is breeding a whole new kind of creativity: “People were inspired by the alternative design, it was contagious in a sense,” Blake says. “Like, ‘Wow look at this space, let’s do something that fits in!’ It was a cross-contamination of creativity.”

There are no department stores, and certainly no chains at 27 Boxes, just burgeoning local talents who lack the resources of bigger brands,

but finally have a brick-and-mortar—or is it steel-and-nails?—space to showcase their wares. Among the available goods are edgy interior pieces by Concrete Jungle, versatile African-print dresses by London womenswear label YouMeWe, and whimsically patterned socks by local brand Toe Porn.

“The guy with beautiful clothes doesn’t have to be working out of his garage anymore—he can have a space of his own now,” Blake says.

He might as well be talking about himself. The lifelong artist has finally corralled the behemoth canvases overflowing in his garage, using them to unveil his own gallery at 27 Boxes. At Wallspace, Blake displays a few South African artists, furniture makers, and jewelry designers alongside his own conceptual paintings in the vein of Pollock or Miró. “I don’t like painting something exactly like it is because that’s what I have a camera for,” he says. “What’s in my soul I just pump out on the canvas.” Canvases or containers—no matter the medium, Blake appears to be in his element.

PHOTO: COURTESY ARTHUR BLAKE