

NICO DEKKER ON CAPE TOWN FILM STUDIOS

Nico Dekker



WHEN Nico Dekker decided to build Table Mountain Motion Picture Studios in an old fertiliser factory which stank of ammonia, opposite an oil refinery and sewerage farm, the new CEO of Cape Town Film Studios (CTFS) admits that “people seriously questioned my sanity. I had my staff nearly in tears when I tried to tell them that these could become great studios.”

Within two years, however, he'd turned the studios into a profitable business, which became a victim of its own success: the property, which they were renting, jumped in value from “tens of millions to hundreds of millions” and was sold from underneath them.

When Nico first heard about the plans to build CTFS (then known as Dreamworld), he admits he was sceptical about the 250 million first-phase development in Faure, at the corner of the N2 and the R310 towards Stellenbosch. “My old philosophy was to make cheap studios; I thought we should just use warehouses. But if

we continue working on the low-end of the market, which is where our existing business is, we are vulnerable, because we are competing with every country in the world and we can easily lose.”

Instead, CTFS is targeting the top end of the market. “*James Bond*, *The Matrix*, *The Dark Knight* – these are the kind of films we are talking about, which we've never been able to attract before. We're going after an entirely new market for South Africa,” Nico says.

He believes that CTFS, although the first of their scale in Africa, may well be the last of their kind internationally. “It's anachronistic – the world of film seems to be going smaller, more digital, with an increased focus on mobile and the internet and new markets. But you equally have an increasing number of very high end films, where Hollywood is experimenting with 3d and special effects. People are creating such incredible home theatres, with flat screens and surround sound, that the studios are

realising that to get audiences to cinemas they have to create something epic and very high end.”

There aren't as many countries jostling for this slice of the market. Nico says, “There is no doubt in my mind that there is some good competition, as there are already studios of this nature on every continent other than Africa. But those studios that were correctly structured – like Mexico, like Australia, like the US, like Pinewood Studios – are doing extremely well.”

The correct structure is important though, because the most recent large scale studio – Ciudad de Luz Studios in Alicante Spain – struggled initially. “It was created for 500 million Euros, but in an area without proper infrastructure support, so the studios battled initially, although they're now attracting big budget films like *Asterix*.”

Being last in has its advantages, as it allows CTFS to learn from its competition. “If you look at Pinewood today, you can see it's cluttered because it's developed over time. Speaking to them, they would love to sit down with a white piece of paper and plan it again. That's our chance.”

CTFS is certainly not isolated – it's 25km from Cape Town, home to one of the most developed service industries in the world. A fair amount of this capacity is expected to move on site. “When I began working on this, there wasn't a single company who were on the books who said they wanted to come,” says Nico. “Within two months, we now have more than 45 companies who have expressed serious interest in becoming part of this site. They are all film-related and include some of the biggest names in the industry. Every sphere of service in our industry has already expressed interest, from helicopter supply services to special effects companies to equipment rental companies to truck and car rental companies. We want to be able to say: All the infrastructure is here, from very fast data connections to labs and post production, all the things that make it easy to work. If all these companies realise their interest, it will be quite full already, especially the light industrial space.”

Offices are available to rent or buy, as is the residential development. As Nico says, with his experience of Table Mountain Studios front on mind, it's a great investment opportunity. “It's already triggered a 200-hectare wine estate development in Vergenoegd, which has both residential and commercial opportunities; Meerlust is developing a golf

estate; there's a third housing development at Spier; and there's a multi-billion housing and commercial AECI development towards the coast. This is going to become a new development node.”

However, he stresses that the studios are not merely a property development. “If you look at the figures, they tell you a clear picture. We have 200 hectares, but are only developing 100 hectares. Of that, almost 70% is dedicated to film studios. Only 30% is for added advantages like commercial and light industrial properties that will in any case benefit the studio, as well as a small percentage for residential.”

Nico has dreams of a self-sufficient “world on its own.” He explains, “This is a place where you can live and work, with coffee shops and a hotel and shops spilling onto the streets, surrounded by 100 hectares of pristine, unspoiled wetland. Our architects are still working on it, but we want a modern look that still has that Winelands and Stellenbosch feel. None of us want a place that is a dead, industrial zone at night; we want a studio precinct that is alive with people walking the streets.”

Target is project managing the development, as well as the Cape Town International Convention Centre expansion; the Cape Town International Airport upgrade; and the Cape Town Station refurbishing. The main design consultant is Veronica Sive, who worked on Fox Studios in Sydney and Waterfront Studios. Moonlighting's Philip Key, who was briefly linked with the position Nico now holds, worked closely with Veronica on mapping out the specific requirements the studio would need for big productions. Nico says they expect to open the first phase in the first quarter of 2010.

Although he says that there's already been significant international interest, he admits that the studios by themselves won't bring in the level of work he wants. “We need to package the studios with financial incentives. In Australia, you can get up to 40% of your spend back if you use Australian crews and infrastructure. It's uncapped, unlike the existing rebates from the Department of Trade and Industry (dti). If we have a big studio film come in, where we know the potential impact, then we should be able to open the dti rebate further.”

The invite-only relaunch of CTFS will take place on-site on 1 December 2009. For more information, visit www.capetownfilmstudios.com.

Kevin Kriedemann