

Sonja Jansen van Rensburg, chief communications officer, Zutari

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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In October 2019, the owners of Aurecon Africa decided to demerge from the global Aurecon business and set course for a purely African business focus. The decoupling process culminated in its rebrand to Zutari, a proudly African player in the infrastructure space that will focus exclusively on solutions that are appropriate for the continent.

Zutari's launch took place during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic last year. We chatted to Sonja Jansen van Rensburg, chief communications officer at Zutari, who was at the helm of the rebranding process. She shared with us more about the process, how an ethos of co-creation has been interwoven throughout the organisation, and infrastructure's role as a catalyst for growth and development.



Sonja Jansen van Rensburg, chief communications officer at Zutari

■ ***Aurecon Africa demerged from the global Aurecon organisation in July 2020 and rebranded to Zutari. As chief communications officer, what was your role in the process?***

Sonja Jansen van Rensburg: I was responsible for the entire rebranding exercise. This included finding a new name, building a new brand strategy, embedding the brand, and launching the new company brand. We also had to create a new website, intranet – there was a multitude of aspects involved in demerging.

■ ***Why was the rebrand an important aspect of the demerger?***

Van Rensburg: The Africa part of the Aurecon business separated from the global group to continue as an independent business. The Aurecon brand naturally remained with the worldwide group, so we had to build our own identity. It was not just a "rebrand"; we had to de-couple all our corporate systems and platforms and re-create our own. We had to re-design and deploy all of that in the process. And we were given six months to do that. Quite a challenge, if you consider that we had to do this during a pandemic and while re-locating our head office!



■ *How did you approach this?*

Van Rensburg: As a professional services firm, our brand truly does reside in our people. It's why we started our journey by engaging our staff through several creative workshops across the continent in all our offices. We asked a simple question: "What would you like our new company to be known for?". It was amazing to see the level of engagement and energy these sessions created. When we revealed the new brand, we also made it clear how their inputs influenced our thinking, which went a long way to the new brand's uptake.

At the same time, we engaged a market research firm to do an extensive survey in our industry of the existing brand, our competitors, and expectations of clients of a company like ours.

We then assimilated these inputs in a briefing document, and we went to the market to find a brand agency. We shortlisted two companies that both presented potential brand strategies and visual concepts based on the brief. Getting recommendations from two agencies was a good approach and one I can recommend to other brand managers. Selecting the right agency to support a branding journey is one of the most critical actions to guarantee success. It's about much more than creative and strategic ability. It's about them becoming part of your team, adapting to your culture, and being willing to walk many extra miles. We were very fortunate in the agency we selected and have built a solid relationship with them over the last 12 months.



Where does the name Zutari come from?

Van Rensburg: Choosing a name was an interesting journey – and much more complicated than anticipated. A new name is such a critical element of a brand and our future. The staff feedback and market research provided excellent direction. The challenge was finding a name that does not exist and is not a registered domain elsewhere in Africa.

In the end, we used concepts and phrases to "build" our new name. Zutari combines two Swahili (Africa's most spoken language) terms, *mzulia* and *nectari*, which means "to invent" and "nectar".

“Combining these words enables a multilayer meaning that merges human design concepts, engineering, and innovation with nature's design and links to sustainability and the environment — all critical elements of our new brand.”

How is being a proudly African brand incorporated into Zutari's operations and projects?

Van Rensburg: As a local, private, management-owned firm with an almost 90-year presence on the continent, this is our home. We have a vested interest in our clients' success. It also means we understand the unique solutions required to meet the diverse challenges across the continent. It makes us the ideal partner for clients and international firms less familiar with the region.

Our global experience on world-class projects matches our deep local knowledge and intimate understanding of the environments in which we operate. This understanding allows us to shape solutions for our clients in Africa that are locally relevant, fit for purpose, and based on the latest practices.

And we've learnt that what works globally isn't always an authentic African solution. It contributed to our decision to demerge and return to what has always been our vision and passion – creating a company that offers a uniquely African perspective. We call it Zutari.



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Zutari's commitment is to infrastructure projects engineered to have impact. What does that environmental and social impact entail and how is it achieved?

Van Rensburg: Impact is hard-won. We know that the best social and environmental performance needs to be underpinned by strong financial performance. True sustainability requires the three to be integrally linked. Our designs always consider the impact on the environment and communities - but we also consciously deliver solutions that help our clients stay and thrive in business. That's why our impact matters.

■ ***Infrastructure has been identified as a catalyst for growth and development not just in SA, but in the rest of Africa and further abroad, particularly following the economic impact of Covid-19. What are some of the other sectors that impact the infrastructure space?***

Van Rensburg: As a catalyst for development, infrastructure impacts every other sector. Mines, schools, hospitals, office buildings, or manufacturing plants cannot operate without crucial infrastructure components like water and electricity or proper roads to get products to market. With the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw how vulnerable our communities were when, for example, there was no adequate access to water and sanitation. Good ventilation in hospitals became even more critical to prevent infections. Data and telecommunications had to accommodate much higher demand in residential areas when most people worked from home. Capital programmes stopped and now need to restart.

We also saw how the public and private sectors rallied together to solve many of the pandemic's challenges. These collaborations will remain key to realising the ambitious post-Covid growth plans through infrastructure investment.



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■ ***What has been some of the vital tools and trends of your trade that you've incorporated into the rebrand?***

Van Rensburg: Interestingly, we started the co-creation journey a few years ago as a "tool" for human-centred design. We relied heavily on this method in designing our brand – both internally and externally.

“ It was a true collaborative effort between staff, middle management and our executives. ”

Any brand, but especially a new brand, must align around a common "why" – the real reason you are in business. Our brand statement is simple. We co-create an engineered impact. It was through our co-creation that we identified *impact* as our why. Co-creation is how we do things and "engineered" refers to what we do and amplifies that we have moved beyond traditional engineering.



■ What have been the most successful channels for sharing the Zutari brand message in the market?

Van Rensburg: We launched in mid-July 2020. Right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, with everyone working from home. We realised early on that we will have to get our messages out virtually. There were no opportunities for large launch events or face-to-face engagement with the market to share our story. The media, social media, and digital technology became our key conduits for this.



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■ What's the best part of your job?

Van Rensburg: Having a fantastic team to work with.

Seeing how much our staff and clients love the new brand. It was hard-won, but we have built an exceptional team with internal staff collaborating with a wide variety of creative experts. Every day I see the power of co-creation and partnerships.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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