

Harry McCarthy: In memory of a master builder

The South African construction industry recently bade farewell to one of its stalwarts, Harry McCarthy, who passed away at the age of 96. He was well-known for his commitment to the promotion of education and training in the sector and, through his efforts, saw the Construction Management degree implemented at tertiary institutions around SA.



McCarthy began his career as an apprentice at his father's business and worked his way up to become a contract supervisor. Upon his return from military service in World War II, he joined McCarthy Contractors as a contract manager.

In 1951, he started his own construction company, Charles McCarthy and Sons, which he named after his late father. From then he dedicated himself to a wide range of activities in the building industry and to training in particular.

He was elected president of the Cape Peninsula Master Builders Association (MBA) in 1959 and president of the Building Industries Federation South Africa (BIFSA) in 1964. At that year's congress, which was officially opened by PW Botha (a junior member of Parliament at that time), McCarthy told delegates that the political constraints imposed by the government through apartheid seriously inhibited the building industry, predominantly through the continued insistence on job reservation.

The Job Reservations Act prohibited any person of colour from obtaining certification for their skills and only allowed them to undertake unskilled labour. At the same time, there was a severe shortage of skilled labour in the country. Unsurprisingly, his sentiments were strongly endorsed by the rest of the building industry, represented by Master Builder Associations around the country.

Launching a degree in Construction Management

The highlight of his presidency, however, was working with professionals in the industry to launch a degree in Construction Management at the universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Pretoria. After which, the universities of Durban, Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein followed suit.

Over the course of his career, McCarthy served as a member of the Cape Peninsula Building Industrial Council (known today as the Building Industry Bargaining Council), the National Development Fund Management Committee, the National Development Fund Finance Committee and the Council of the Cape Technikon. In recognition of his dedication and the unselfish devotion of his time to the advancement of education and training in the industry, he was awarded life membership to BIFSA in 1992 and became the longest serving life member of the MBA.

According to Rob Johnson, executive director of the Master Builders Association of the Western Cape, "Harry would have been 97 in September this year and he leaves us with a legacy of how 'business was conducted between gentlemen'. He will be long remembered for his unfailing service and involvement in many aspects of the building industry. Up until the end of 2012, he was a mentor to many in the industry, especially those of us who enjoyed a close business relationship with him. The Master Builders will be forever indebted to Harry for his invaluable contribution and unconditional dedication to the industry and its future wellbeing."

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