

Building a Legacy Worth Preserving: The Construction Sector's Role in South Africa's Heritage

By Bongani Dladla, CEO of the Construction Industry Development Board (cidb)

"Heritage Month reminds us that construction is not just about bricks and mortar. It's about dignity, foresight, and possibility."

Heritage as Legacy in the Making

Heritage Month is a time to reflect, not only on where we come from, but on what we're building for the future. In South Africa (SA), the construction sector plays a vital role in shaping that future. Every bridge we build, every school completed, and every clinic opened is more than a project. It's a reflection of our national identity, our priorities, and our collective progress.

We are not simply constructing infrastructure; we're building the legacy of a country.

When We Build Well: Proof of What's Possible

South Africa has several examples of infrastructure that has stood the test of time. The Nelson Mandela Bridge in Braamfontein, the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the Gariep Dam, and the Table Mountain Aerial Cableway, are landmarks that combines engineering excellence with symbolic meaning. They demonstrate what is possible when infrastructure is delivered with vision, technical competence, and long-term purpose.

When construction is done well, it transcends function. It becomes part of our national heritage, serving generations and reinforcing public trust.

Warning Signs: A Legacy Under Threat

Yet this legacy is under growing threat. In 2022/23, a parliamentary audit of 132 infrastructure projects ranging from clinics and schools to water systems, found that 82% were delayed, over budget, or substandard. At the municipal level, only 16% of local governments received clean audits in 2023/24. The remaining 84% faced compliance issues, including procurement irregularities, poor reporting, and neglected maintenance. Alarming, 77% of infrastructure projects inspected in municipalities had major defects.

When infrastructure fails, the impact is immediate and deeply personal. Communities lose access to services, but also lose confidence, safety, and dignity.

Compliance and Quality: The Foundations of Public Trust

Enduring infrastructure depends on more than materials and labour, it depends on compliance, ethical procurement, and quality control. The cidb contractor grading system, which ranks contractors from Grades 1 to 9 based on financial and project capacity, is a critical tool for managing capability and risk.

While most contractors currently sit in the lower grades - signalling broad access to the industry - this also highlights the need for targeted mentorship, training, and oversight to ensure that access is not achieved at the expense of delivery. Access and accountability must go hand in hand.

Transformation: A Legacy That Includes Everyone

A legacy worth preserving must reflect the diversity and potential of all citizens. A transformed industry is one where contractors of all backgrounds and sizes can grow, thrive, and contribute to national development without compromising on standards.

Transformation isn't about choosing equity over quality. It's about expanding opportunity while insisting on excellence. Equity and excellence must move together.

Future-Proofing Infrastructure: Innovation as a Legacy Tool

South Africa's infrastructure demands are evolving rapidly. From urban expansion and service delivery backlogs to the escalating effects of climate change, we face complex, long-term challenges.

The National Infrastructure Plan 2050 outlines ambitious programmes to meet these needs, but success depends on capability, innovation, and sustainability.

To future-proof our infrastructure, we must embrace:

- Green building practices that reduce energy consumption and environmental impact.

- Sustainable construction materials, such as low-carbon concrete, recycled aggregates, and locally sourced alternatives that support both the environment and the local economy.
- Digital platforms and data tools to drive transparency, accountability, and performance tracking.
- Smarter project management that plans for the full lifecycle of assets, not just their initial build.

These aren't optional. They are essential if we want infrastructure that lasts 50 years and continues to serve the public long after the ribbon cutting.

What Will Tomorrow Say About Today?

As we celebrate Heritage Month, we are reminded that our actions today shape the stories of tomorrow. The roads, bridges, and schools we deliver today must reflect not only engineering skill, but ethical leadership, sustainability, and public value.

Let's build infrastructure that lasts. Let's build a sector that includes. Let's build a legacy we'll be proud to pass on. Because if we build well today, we leave behind more than infrastructure, we leave behind trust, dignity, and the living proof of national progress.

About the cidb

The Construction Industry Development Board (cidb) is a Schedule 3A public entity established in terms of the CIDB Act 38 of 2000. Its mandate is to lead the development and transformation of the South African construction industry.