

**T**HE recent spate of fatal accidents on building sites is at least partly the result of skills shortages in the industry, construction experts say.

In the worst accident in recent months, five workers were killed in Stellenbosch last month when the building they were renovating collapsed.

"The accident rate is definitely getting worse," said Theo Haupt, a visiting professor in the engineering faculty at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

"And I would venture that, given the increase in construction activity in South Africa, this trend is not necessarily going to reverse," Haupt said in an interview during a construction conference in Cape Town this week.

Haupt, who is also a research coordinator at the Southern African Built Environment Research Centre, said many accidents were the result of bad design.

"We don't just need engineers, we need the right kind of engineers. In other words, engineers who are experienced enough to be able to design a bridge and so on," he said.

The government's attempts to redress apartheid imbalances by promoting the construction sector as an empowerment opportunity also played a role, Haupt said.

"We have a situation where you have pyramid contracting, where the contractor who bids for the work is not necessarily the person who is executing the work.

"Allied to that is competence, which comes back to the skills issue. You don't have people who are technically trained to be able to execute some of the work. And there's just so much work out there."

Haupt complained that it had become too easy to get into the industry. "Anybody can decide they want to become a contractor and go out there and have no idea of what construction is about. Many government initiatives, which are well-intentioned, have some undesirable consequences because people see it as a commercial opportunity rather than a career choice," he said.

"They think 'I can make some money, go out there and present

# Danger ahead

The construction industry faces worrisome and potentially fatal challenges, writes **Anton Ferreira**



**DEADLY LETDOWN:** Scenes such as this collapse of Port Elizabeth's Coega Bridge in 2003 are becoming more frequent as unqualified contractors treat the industry as a money-spinner, not a long-term career choice **Picture: © THE HERALD**

myself as a contractor. Hopefully, I get the job, then get someone to do it for me."

The rush to churn out artisans and engineers in programmes such as the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition had harmed the quality of training, Haupt said.

"We used to train bricklayers, now we train layers of bricks.

"There's a big difference: a layer of bricks has no idea why it is that you treat a corner in a certain way, that you need a different bond in terms of your bricks... all he knows is he must pack the bricks."

He said at one time a bricklayer was expected to lay 1 000 bricks a day on average, but now "if you get someone who lays 450 bricks a day,

that's an achievement".

"What has happened in our industry is that we have moved backwards. We've ditched what's good for the industry in terms of training and skills to fast-track. I understand there's a need to create opportunity because of the previous political dispensation, but we can't do that against the realities of what



**CONCERNED:** Tibor Szana, acting safety chief at the Department of Labour

it requires to be a craftsman as we used to know it... Something's gone wrong in terms of how we deal with training."

Haupt said many contractors failed to give priority to health and safety on the construction site.

"It's cost, cost, cost and time — getting a job done quickly at the expense of safety. They're cutting corners wherever they can.

"There are three key issues where we are underperforming: lack of management commitment, lack of adequate supervision on projects, and the inadequacy of our training and education.

"Unless we start looking at leadership, allied with respect for people, we're going to have more and more of these kinds of accidents."

Tibor Szana, acting chief inspector for occupational safety at the Department of Labour, said the government was concerned at the number of work site accidents.

"We need to appreciate people's lives," he said. "People who are performing even the most menial task are people with families; they've got a life."

Szana said the government was giving its inspectors intensive training in how to bring prosecutions for safety violations, but the best solution was for the government, employers and unions to work together to reduce accidents.