

## Prospect of new design qualification excites the furniture industry

A new Furniture Design Qualification was announced by Gugu Motlanthe, former first lady of South Africa and executive trustee of the Kgalema Motlanthe Foundation, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Furniture Sector Forum that recently took place online.

According to Motlanthe, no one has a monopoly on education, and this qualification will bring young people into the industry in pursuit of a new career path.

“This will empower students and improve overall efficiency to achieve sustainable growth,” she said. “I hope the private sector will collaborate with government and that students and universities are ready to expedite the important process of design thinking and expanding the local value chain.”

The qualification was registered with the South African Quality Assurance Framework (SAQA) in May this year. Members of the panel discussion were in agreement that, although they are more than prepared to see the qualification being presented at various South African tertiary education institutions, it still needs a lot of clarification in terms of the syllabus.

Angus Campbell, Head of the Department of Industrial Design at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), said the current drawback in design qualifications was mainly the limited equipment and materials available to give students a full experience, from handcraft to cutting-edge laser designs. “Practical education requires one-on-one interactions, which means *en mass* learning should not be pursued,” Campbell said during the discussion.

“Learning from an expert in the industry is key, so finding the right people to teach the programme is pivotal to the success of implementing this qualification,” Campbell continued. “One of the benefits of a dedicated Furniture Design Qualification is that it will codify and transfer some of the knowledge from experienced furniture designers and manufacturers.”

On the question of the employability of students once they have graduated, Clifford Moleko from TUT, acknowledged the importance of differentiating between employment at a manufacturing or design organisation and the possibility of being an entrepreneur. “We must be able to teach students the business acumen and prepare them to join the industry as employers as well,” he said.

Prof Mugendi M’Rithaa from the Machakos University in Kenya, said the larger design industry should not create silos when the same qualification is introduced at multiple institutions. “Students must learn the practical, theoretical as well functional approach to design, while at the same time being able to have fun and be experimental to assure a win-win for all,” M’Rithaa suggested. “It must be remembered that it is about design first, then production. Not the other way round.”

An African style and ethos proved to be vital to many of the panellists. “South Africans should be at the forefront of local furniture design,” Juliet Kavishe, a professional architect and educator, told the panel. “There is too much focus on learning the craft and too little on teaching the design language, tying into the proudly South African and even a proudly African concept,” she remarked.

To emphasise her point, she said that students at different tertiary institutions must be part of a bigger network to bolster the quality of the qualification, with a healthy dose of competition brought into the mix. “We must teach local influences in our education syllabuses, while preparing the students for a global market.”

Prof Des Laubscher, current president of the Pan African Institute of Design and facilitator of the panel discussion, echoed this when he told the panellists that the country and continent should share inspiration and move away from drawing design inspiration from regions like Europe.

Prof M’Rithaa concurred and claimed that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is an African Century. “We have the material, the ability and the tools. With a proper industry collaboration while linking training with entrepreneurship and employability, we can be at the forefront of furniture design in the world,” he said.

Daryn Molenaar from the department of design at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, warned that being at the forefront of an industry needed to have the proper technology, access to the latest materials and the necessary expertise. “As part of the course, students should be cognisant of the pitfalls in the industry. We often see entrepreneurs taking on too many tenders and jobs, eventually failing to provide in quantity as well as quality. In the process they lose their reputation while at the same time having a negative influence on the reputation of the furniture industry collectively,” he said.

“However, there are so many vibrant design influences in Africa. If we can capture the design narrative, the story behind each design, we can build a truly African design identity,” Molenaar told the panel.

In conclusion, with the prospects of a Furniture Design Qualification in 2021, the South African Furniture Initiative is excited about how the upcoming curriculum development will drive closer collaboration between South African institutions, how it will codify African design language and how it will help to drive communication across the silos of design, manufacturing, exports and the setting of industry standards.

“The discussion that took place will show the way in implementing a much needed and important qualification, while at the same time tying into the very important Furniture Industry Master Plan that the furniture industry and government will soon publish,” said Bernadette Isaacs, Managing Director of SAFI.

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