

Local opportunities abound, says panel of architects and designers

Furniture designers and manufacturers are urged to tap into the rich vein of opportunity that lies in collaborating with local architects and interior design specialists.

This follows an in-depth discussion between senior architects, designers, and furniture makers during the recent 2020 Furniture Sector Forum, which was held digitally on Wednesday 21 October 2020.

The panel discussion at this, the second annual Furniture Sector Forum, was hosted by the South African Furniture Initiative in collaboration with Proudly South African, the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC), The African Institute of the Interior Design Professions (IID) and Trend Forward.

Speaking as convenor of the panel, well-known design specialist and trend consultant – Dave Nemeth of Trend Forward, highlighted the need for a centralised platform that could aggregate information on the available design and manufacturing services from South African furniture makers and designers. This platform would host similar information of architects, buyers and interior designers and act as a matchmaker between the maker and buyer of the furniture products.

This platform, says Nemeth, is under development by SAFI and already hosts many furniture makers, with their contact information and product range.

Nemeth and the panel found that the current demand for locally manufactured furniture is dormant, with most buyers sticking to trusted international suppliers and limited local sourcing for beautiful and unique conversation pieces.

With this in mind, furniture makers are encouraged to better market their wares in partnership with SAFI to create a demand from both the professional designers and architects and from clients themselves.

The panel comprised of senior architects and interior designers from across South Africa. Aside from Nemeth, it included Chryss Joannou, principal architect at Anagram Architects, Theo Bothma of Theo Bothma Architects and Design, Mpho Vackier founder and Creative Director of TheUrbanative, Mia Els, project Interior Designer at Boogertman and Partners, and Adrian Morris, Partner and MD at Design Partnerships.

The concept of a shared industry platform was welcomed by all panellists, including Morris, who noted that many architects and designers are often hamstrung by severely limited information on locally designed furniture.

“When we prepare a pitch to a client, we need images of the locally manufactured furniture and possibly even three-dimensional design images that we can slot into our designs,” says Morris.

His thoughts are echoed by Els and Joannou, who commented that speed and convenience often dictate which designers and manufacturers an architect or interior designer use. If there is no readily available information from furniture makers on their range and designs, a designer or architect will default back to the main suppliers that they always use, with most of these based abroad.

Joannou also says that there are significant opportunities for African design themes in furniture, especially for custom-designed conversation pieces. These unique African designs can help local manufacturers to set a trend and create lines of furniture that are not easily copied by large international manufacturers.

Theo Bothma agrees with the sentiment. He, like the other interior designers and architects on the panel, says that he would be keen to source more local furniture, provided that manufacturers maintain a high standard and make their wares easy to source.

As an architect, he says, you must guard your reputation. So, when you source from a local supplier, that supplier must be sure to maintain high standards and support when working with designers and architects.

Vackier, a well-known furniture designer and manufacturer, agrees and says that local manufacturers should offer fast turnaround times on all enquiries and orders, and they should offer consistent quality and a high level of adaptability. This, she says, will undoubtedly corner a significant share of the market.

The panel discussion concluded with a call to local furniture manufacturers to use the current COVID-19 crisis to their benefit. The crisis has caused a significant delay in the import of international furniture and has sent many interior designers, architects and developers looking for alternatives. This creates fertile ground for local furniture manufacturers to market their wares, work with SAFI as the industry body and grow their businesses in South Africa.

Ends

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