

## Local government takes note of furniture industry's survival instincts

As part of the South African Furniture Initiative's (SAFI) vision to connect business, government and consumers, SAFI through Wesgro, engaged with the Mayoral Committee for Economic Opportunities and Asset Management at the City of Cape Town, Alderman James Vos. He recently visited various furniture manufacturing facilities in Cape Town to assess the current state of the sector.

According to Bernadette Isaacs, Managing Director of SAFI, a lot has changed within the industry since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. "At SAFI, we've seen how sectors like office furniture had to pivot to furniture tailored for the home and therefore it is fitting that CO Designs was one of the destinations to be explored by Alderman Vos and his team," she said.

"Today was an eye opener for me, as I was surprised to learn how much thought, training and skill goes into the design and manufacturing of something as ordinary as an office chair, something I sit on every day without even thinking about it," Alderman Vos told the delegation at the City Office warehouse in Stikland, Cape Town. "A lot has changed since the enforced restrictions in the country and it obviously had a dire effect on the office furniture manufacturing sector."

He also referred to the adopted Furniture Industry Master Plan. "The holistic approach of the furniture industry towards sustainability, the environment and innovation is a revelation that will be supported and expanded by the FIMP," he confirmed government's intent to the delegation.

Isaacs agrees in saying that the key to successfully implementing the FIMP will be partnerships. "To expand and nurture existing medium-sized companies to help them grow and supply retailers more successfully, will require an innovative partnership between government, retailers and manufacturers," she said.

The delegations took to the factory floor of Cape Town-based CO Designs, a market leader in office and work-from-home furniture to observe the cradle-to-grave concept from where the raw sheets of board come into the factory to the final product of a chair, table, desk or sit-down couch.

According to Graham Radford, Director at CO Designs, the pandemic forced them to take steps to secure the longevity of the business and to provide security and economic support for the staff. “One positive outcome of the pandemic was that we, as management, were afforded the time to take a strategic look at the business, refocus our efforts, while at the same time reprioritising products and product-lines,” Radford said. “This actually gave us the opportunity to reshuffle priorities and fast-track some of our very innovative products which had been put on the back-burner for too long.”

One of these latest innovations was demonstrated to the delegation. According to Radford the portable sit-to-stand workstation called “EasyActiv” addresses the affordable ergonomic requirements of a broad range of work styles including both remote and office work.

“It is a multi-functional product that encourages movement, prevents fatigue and provides comfort whilst working from wherever you are,” Radford told the delegation. “Most importantly the products are all designed inhouse, manufactured locally and, where possible, raw materials are sourced locally as well.”

The Quickpod, a demountable freestanding room-in-room modular system as an alternative to drywall, was unveiled as well. A reusable structure with services and lighting integrated into the structure, while air circulation is provided with concealed fans that draw air in from the greater air-conditioned open plan office space, proved a hit with the visitors.

“We believe it is an excellent solution for offices, meeting, collaborative and training rooms within large open plan areas,” Radford explained. “Quickpod is designed to be dismantled, moved in close proximity, and reassembled in a day to ensure minimal disruption and downtime and can be branded and even be off-the-grid.”

Alderman Vos responded positively by emphasising his amazement at the quality and innovations demonstrated by local production facilities and how businesses had to re-engineer their strategies to survive in the current pandemic with the accompanying economic downturn and high levels of unemployment.

“With the local lack of financial resources and raw materials proving a challenge, how businesses adapt is proving crucial in their long-term survival,” said Isaacs. “Today’s site-visits once again highlighted the importance for government and investors to take cognisance of the situation at grassroots level to truly impact on the future of the furniture sector and the manufacturing industry,” she said.

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