

# A BLACK ARCHITECT IN SA TODAY

*South Africa has much to offer the world of architecture, provided we become open to the richness of diversity and widen the discourse around representation.*

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**H**uman endeavour, in all its forms of expression, is forever evolving – the discipline of architecture included. Just 50 years ago, the world was a different place. The 1960s now look funny in films or magazines. Imagine 2067, 50 years from now. Where will the changes to our special environment come from? Will we be instigators or followers?

Historically, architecture has resided in the quagmire of exclusivity and privilege. Recently, in a bid to play more relevant roles in society, professionals and academics have been engaging in more socially conscious discourse. The practice of architecture is changing, but change will be more appropriate and rapid when it incorporates interest groups that have previously been under-

represented. The argument for addressing inequality, exclusivity and access in society continues to be well made. Too much in society is determined by gender and race. We need to get to a place where these are backdrops to the discourse, not the main items on the agenda. Yet the motivation for more inclusivity is multilayered and extends beyond moral confines. A nation cannot reach its true potential if it can't capitalise on its greatest resource: its people. So why is it taking so long to tap into these resources? Why do women and black architects remain under-represented.

It behoves architectural educators, students, colleagues and employers to remember that the black architectural student, though intelligent and capable:

- is unlikely to have understood what architecture is about before commencing studies;
- is unlikely to have parents or relatives in the profession;
- is likely to be working within the family's competing basic priorities;
- is likely to have financial constraints that affect their ability to fully express themselves or compete;
- is likely to believe that her tutors don't really expect much from him or her;

- is likely to see the architectural programme as foreign and irrelevant to their experience and circumstances; and
  - is unlikely to have a surfeit of role models.
- Even after training in the subject, an architect's real development happens after graduation. The black practitioner:
- is likely to be restricted in which offices they can continue their training;
  - is unlikely to be exposed to the variety and size of projects that would build up competitive experience;
  - is unlikely to be appointed by major private patrons;
  - is likely not to even have the confidence of potential black private clients; and
  - is likely to get messages, subliminal or otherwise, that they're not good enough.

These are serious hurdles to overcome. Admittedly, this may be a worldwide phenomenon, but that's a poor excuse. The lack of attention in this department is holding back the development of architecture in South Africa. We're missing out on the potential contribution of large sectors of the community that can expand the discourse further. South Africa has much to offer the world of architecture – if only because of its diversity.

This is not a cry for special treatment from 'victims'. This is an appeal for colleagues to open their eyes and take advantage of the wealth that accompanies diversity. Privileged groups have always fought against change, usually out of ignorance and fear. Fear of losing one's place in the pecking order? Should there even be a hierarchy?

This is an appeal: embrace and welcome the other; expose yourself to the richness that is in South Africa's fabric; absorb the new perspectives that are developing, thanks to fresh players in the field. Be courageous enough to see yourself, and your perspective, through the eyes of others.

The narrative has centred too much on the 'apparent' sacrifices of the privileged few, rather than on the opportunities lost by not supporting our sisters and brothers who, ironically, may be better attuned to the nuances of the fractured South African landscape. But these are my thoughts – what do you think? Please, do join the conversation. ■

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