

Marli de Wet on her award-winning design project



By Jessica Tennant

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Last year's winner of the Caesarstone Student Designer Competition, Marli de Wet, will this year be taking up her prize by accompanying her lecturer Anel Joubert from Design Time school of interior design at an international design fair of their choice.

Conceptualised by Mphethi Morojele, director of MMA Design Studio, the competition brief was 'Boosting Africa's economy through creativity', which explored how architecture can empower the cultural and creative industries.

"What I loved most about this brief, was that it created awareness among the students who participated (the architects and interior designers of tomorrow) of the problems we are faced with and that we can help, just by doing what we love, to empower others and make a real difference," said De Wet.

Here, she tells us about her project, what she thinks made it stand out, and why she's leaning towards Dutch Design Week as her international design fair of choice...

■ ***Congratulations on winning the competition. What does this recognition and opportunity mean to you?***



Marli de Wet

Thank you. I am still in shock that I won! I am so grateful to Caesarstone, the judges, my lecturer Anel and Design Time. What a wonderful feeling to be recognised, being rewarded for something I put an enormous amount of effort into and knowing that industry professionals saw value in my work. It has been such an enriching experience from day one when we were briefed on the competition, and this dream trip is just the cherry on top (a very big, juicy cherry).

What I am driven by most, when working on a project, is the belief that the work I have done is not good enough and that I have to go back and reconsider all the decisions I have made. I think that self-doubt forms part of any creative process and that it's healthy to question everything. But winning this competition has given me a new drive that is more positive and enjoyable.

■ ***Have you decided on the international design fair you'd like to attend as your prize?***

Deciding where to go is tough since I have not seen much of the world outside of SA and there are so many design fairs to choose from. I am leaning towards the Netherlands at this point, partly because heritage played such a big role in my project and I have Dutch blood running through my veins. I am 100% South African and try not to involve western culture in my work, but exploring my own heritage seems appropriate. I also looked online at the work showcased at design fairs this year and found Dutch Design Week the most intriguing.

■ ***Comment on this year's brief and how you believe creativity or architecture/interior design can empower our cultural and creative industries and Africa's economy as a whole?***

We were asked to produce an architectural interpretation of our South African and African contemporary creative and

cultural industries, with the main goal being to boost our economy through creativity. This establishment would be the headquarters for the Arterial Network, a pan-African civil society network of creative practitioners who believe that the creative sector can make a significant contribution to shifting our economy, ultimately eradicating poverty and that we have the talent to make that happen.



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In order for our creative sector to grow, a number of things need to happen. The exporting of creative goods and services has to increase and importing has to stop. Part of the problem is that we don't have a strong presence in the global market of ideas and aesthetics. A stronger presence will increase the value of and demand for our cultural and creative goods and services, resulting in a stronger economy and the improvement of living and working conditions in Africa.

“ I believe that by providing South Africans (and all Africans) with education and resources and by reconnecting with our culture and heritage, we can develop a new, more authentic contemporary African aesthetic, which we need for the creative sector to grow and for people to benefit from it. ”

■ Tell us about the work you submitted, and what you think made it stand out from the rest.

The search for the perfect location and developing a concept was a lengthy process. After extensive research, I toured the country on Google Earth – you can easily spot informal settlements and I was looking for a big one, since that is where help is needed the most. At some point I found myself in the Drakensberg mountains, a world heritage site and my favourite place in SA. This part of our country is particularly rich in culture and history – elements that should inform and be represented in South African goods/services.

Phuthaditjhaba is situated at the foothills of the Drakensberg and although there are many tourist destinations in this area, they do not attract enough tourists and do not provide enough jobs. In addition, there is also no middle class to provide employment, so the unemployment rate remains extremely high. I wanted the landscape to form the backdrop for the building and in terms of design and construction, for it to be respectful of the mountain and not detract from its beauty.

I was particularly inspired by the sandstone and basalt rock formations, as well as the traditional Zulu and Basotho villages. Every part of the design, including the materials, layout and shape of the structures, relates back to the mountains and local culture in some way. Under a microscope, sandstone has a very similar appearance to Caesarstone's quartz surfaces, so I selected the colours in their range that resembled that texture the most and then combined it with cor-ten steel (the colours of the rusted surface can also be found in the sandstone), as well as reclaimed wood.

“ Meet this years WINNER Marli de Wet from [@DT_DesignTime](#) >>> <https://t.co/y8uDwtI7OP> [#caesarstonesa](#) [#StudentDesigner17](#) pic.twitter.com/J9rvqZvgWQ— Caesarstone S.Africa (@CaesarstoneSA) [November 7, 2017](#) ”

The final result was a cluster of cor-ten steel structures shaped like the boulders that are scattered across the surrounding grassy slopes. Each 'boulder' serves a different purpose, facilitating each link in the value chain: education, creation, production, distribution and consumption.

The Arterial Network headquarters I designed is a place for social, cultural and creative interaction, where underprivileged people are provided with the necessary resources and facilities to develop new skills and also practice local cultural traditions in their true form. Visitors to the headquarters can enjoy live performances, including traditional and contemporary forms of dance, as well as a gallery/shop showcasing products created onsite. Perhaps what made my project stand out was the relationship between the landscape and my design as well as the strong emphasis on heritage and cultural context.

■ ***Why did you decide to study interior design, and at Design Time specifically?***

I had explored a couple of creative fields before I applied to study interior design. I studied fine art at Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT) where I fell in love with metalwork, which led me to silversmithing, but with a desire to explore other fields and an increasingly keen interest in architecture. With the encouragement of my father, who is an architect, I decided to enrol at Design Time School of Interior Design. It was my first choice because of the quality of the work their students produce.

■ ***Tell us about your lecturer Anel Joubert, and the most notable thing she's taught you.***

I have known Anel for a very long time. We attended the same school and our parents are friends. I have come to know her better and what I enjoy most about her is her sense of humour. What I appreciate immensely is that she was supportive of my slightly unusual approach to interior design and she has taught me to persevere and to keep my obsessive tendencies from hindering my process.

■ ***Do you have a job lined up?***

Thanks to Caesarstone, I am proud to say I will be working as a designer in the Interior Architecture Department at ARRCC, which I am immensely excited about.

■ ***What are you most looking forward to?***

Apart from working at ARRCC, I look forward to applying the skills I have acquired, develop new skills and take part in the transformation of our built environment into a more sustainable one, as well as contribute to the empowerment of underprivileged people.

■ ***What advice would you give to aspiring students in the creative industry?***

I would advise them to do research, constantly, to embrace every opportunity to learn, and also to consider the impact we have on the environment.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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