

# Yakha, an online marketplace for the local built environment

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Fresh to the local startup scene is Yakha, a new digital marketplace for the African built environment which aims to simplify the procurement process of African architecture, construction and furniture products through its e-commerce B2B marketplace designed for the industry.

Architecture and construction firms and designers can upload details, photos and videos of their projects to the platform where they can display and sell their products.



Mondli Cele, CEO and founder of Yakha African Architecture

We chatted to CEO and founder Mondli Cele to find out more about the inspiration behind the platform, what makes it unique, and what his long-term vision is for [Yakha](#).

 ***Tell us a bit about you, the founder, and what inspired you to launch Yakha.***

I'm Mondli Cele, born and raised in Port Shepstone. I studied architecture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) before working as a design officer at Propertuity, the developers of Maboneng in Joburg and Rivertown in Durban.

For many years, I was involved with an NPO that assisted entrepreneurs from disadvantaged communities with business development. We created an informal waste management system solution for a community in Underberg and developed an upcycled palette furniture business for artisans in Umlazi.

*“ I’ve served as the deputy chairman of the Black Management Forum at my university where I learned about the importance of transformation in South Africa, as well as the lack of capital and investment, ownership and representation at a board level amongst disadvantaged groups. ”*

My background as an entrepreneur would be hosting inner-city architectural walks, cycles and dinners on weekends via Curiocity and Airbnb, and serving as an art director and investor of an art and music festival in Bangkok, Thailand.

I started Yakha in 2014 as a passion project after attending a hackathon hosted by IBM and Innovation Durban. This was when I realised Africa’s construction industry was outdated – Africa wasn’t contributing or collecting data to benefit and grow the industry and there was no online database for architects to know about what’s been built and the products that have been used in these projects. It dawned on me that architects, contractors and building product manufacturers may not be equipped or have the time to build a tool of this nature, a tool that connects architects with the products they need and that can make the process of procurement seamless.

### ■ **What makes Yakha unique?**

Yakha intends to create an ecosystem to unlock the power of the built environment in South Africa and Africa. The platform’s aim is to empower the entire industry, starting with architects and designers as they are at the top of the decision-making funnel that affects the construction industry. An online platform was the best solution as the digital space has a stronger influence on buying habits than print. It’s also more personal, regular, dynamic and measurable.



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### ■ **What are some of the obstacles you’ve encountered in bringing this idea to life? How did you overcome them?**

As most entrepreneurs will tell you, a lack of access to funds is generally the biggest obstacle. This lack of funds led to a delay in completing a working demo as developing an online-based platform is no small feat and requires quite a bit of financial resources. In order to overcome this, I moved to South-East Asia for two years where I worked with the digital nomad community to develop Yakha’s platform.

Building a team for a startup is also tough. People are terrified to lose their steady incomes and take a calculated risk.

*“ I hope to inspire and contribute to building an entrepreneurial spirit amongst the youth of our country, and to show that a lack of access to markets doesn’t necessarily mean there are no other opportunities for you and your business. ”*

I’ve also found that there’s a sense of uneasiness when it comes to consuming locally produced products. We need to support, evolve and embrace local industries and solutions.

### ■ **Since launch, what has the reception been like to the platform?**

We’ve mainly been building relationships with local furniture and building product manufacturers and suppliers for our e-commerce B2B marketplace offering. We now have 1,000+ products listed on the Yakha marketplace and 500+ built projects to view. It’s been a slow and quiet launch, working with a few reference clients, but this helps us test our offering and find ways to further develop and curate what’s on offer from our current clientele.



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### What is your long-term vision for Yakha?

The aim is to become the largest online source for knowledge, collaboration and products for the African built environment by allowing architecture, design and construction professionals to specify and procure local furniture and building products without a trade show or sales pitch. Instead, we offer transparent prices, reviews and direct architect- or design-manufacturer communications. Yakha is an online shopping experience for the design and construction world.

### What impact has Covid-19 had on the development and service offering of Yakha, if at all?

Covid-19 hasn't impacted us negatively; instead, it's presented us with more opportunities. I've always stressed the importance of decentralised local manufacturing of architectural and construction products and furniture. The pandemic has revealed the shortcomings of the global supply chains for building products and furniture, with shipping containers held up at harbours during restrictions on travel and the import and export market.

*“ We hope the industry will learn from this crisis and begin to think differently about the products and materials that are available in their own backyard, starting with the Yakha platform as a base for procuring African products and materials for their next projects. ”*

### A thriving startup environment is key to a prosperous economy, particularly within the tech space. What advice do you have for others with similar ambitions of launching a digital platform in SA?

I think you need to listen to your users, which includes both buyers and sellers. Yakha has been doing this by taking feedback from its users and implementing new features as they are requested. You're creating for real people and you need to listen to them.



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### Lastly, what's your favourite local trend in the small business space for 2021?

President Cyril Ramaphosa's call for South Africans to buy locally manufactured goods and the introduction of small business local procurement thresholds for the public sector. This initiative is set to grow the economy, broaden markets and create jobs and other opportunities for business expansion.

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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