

South African creatives are designing for social impact

Design is a powerful tool for change. As part of reshaping the industry's paradigms, this year's theme for Decorex Africa, the popular decor and design showcase, is Designing for Impact. It marks a commitment to thinking beyond traditional boundaries and identifying the sweet spot that lies at the intersection of creativity, commercial viability and societal impact.



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Decorex Cape Town (6-9 June 2024 at the CTICC) and Decorex Joburg (1-4 August 2024 at the Sandton Convention Centre) will be anchored by this theme. The shows will consider the societal and planetary impact of design, with particular focus on encouraging sustainable choices in exhibitors, and reducing waste. Every exhibitor will be given a sustainability audit when they sign up and the website will feature guidelines on making more sustainable decisions.

"We all need to step out of our comfort zones, and embrace innovative approaches that recognise the power of our collective impact," says Bielle Bellingham, executive creative director of Decorex Africa. "We need to make radical changes to our relationship with our home - the planet. We need to create sustainable solutions that are accessible and affordable to all, shaping a future where sustainability is not a privilege, but a universal reality. This year's theme acknowledges that design is an attitude of resourcefulness and resilience, and should reflect a holistic, and robust approach to problem-solving for our country and continent. Are you with us?"

With designing for impact top of mind, it is encouraging to see how many South African creatives and collectives are, like Decorex Africa, stepping in and making changes. Many of the goals of accelerating the circular economy in Africa through design are discernible in Circular Squared – a Cape Town-based non-profit that champions circular economic thinking and urges aspiring entrepreneurs in manufacturing and retail to adopt regenerative practices.

The head of sustainable design at Circular Squared, veteran artist and designer Heath Nash, is dedicated to turning one

man's trash into another's treasure. Nash is working with local furniture brand Wunders to find solutions to the heaps of scraps produced on a day-to-day basis as a result of manufacturing. Family-owned Wunders previously partnered with Decorex Africa's Future Talks series in 2023, where it supplied brightly coloured seating made using its own factory's waste materials.

Local furniture brand Pedersen + Lennard – which unveiled its Umpire range at 100% Design Joburg 2023 – is working towards reducing the environmental impact of plastic waste. In 2023, the studio pioneered furniture that incorporates a recycled board made from plastics that are considered 'unrecyclable' (such as toothpaste tubes and cling film). It has released a new range of public seating for the V&A Waterfront made from this recycled material. Co-founder Luke Pedersen participated in the 2023 edition of Future Talks where he touched upon the importance of building community in design and business to facilitate broader conversations of impact.

Focusing on spatial development for society is Urban-Think Tank Empower (UTTE), a non-profit organisation which emerged from Urban-Think Tank Design Group, an international collective that uses the power of architecture and design to uplift the lives of marginalised communities worldwide. UTTE employs a unique collaborative, research-led design approach to provide decent, affordable housing for all – the fruit of which is a modular housing unit which allows the owner to adapt the layout to suit their specific needs.

Another company paving the way in social impact architecture is The MAAK, an award-winning architectural practice based in Cape Town that focuses on public buildings and spaces that yield a positive outcome for communities. "The less we engage in the social issues of our time, the more we breed a public apathy towards architecture and in turn dilute the urgency of our craft," it says. The MAAK's New Rest Valley Crèche is an early childhood development (ECD) centre for The Vuya Foundation, and the first completed formal public infrastructure in the New Rest Valley near Riebeeck-Kasteel.

Based in Cape Town, The Ramp is a multidisciplinary project space that challenges conventional means of institutional access to the arts by bringing creative practitioners together. The Ramp connects creatives with the goal of sharing collective knowledge and resources - and invites the public to get involved - to produce more impactful work.

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