

#BehindtheMask with... Mpho Vackier, creative director and owner of TheUrbanative

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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This week, we go behind the selfie with engineer turned furniture designer Mpho Vackier, who started TheUrbanative, an award-winning contemporary African furniture and product design company based in South Africa.



Mpho Vackier, founder of TheUrbanative.

1. So tell us, what's really behind your mask (literally and/or figuratively speaking).

An entrepreneur, designer mom, wife... with moisturised lips.

2. Where are you locked down?

I am locked down or working from my home office in Centurion, our admin and design staff has been able to work from home and only in Level 4 our production team or 20% thereof started up again.

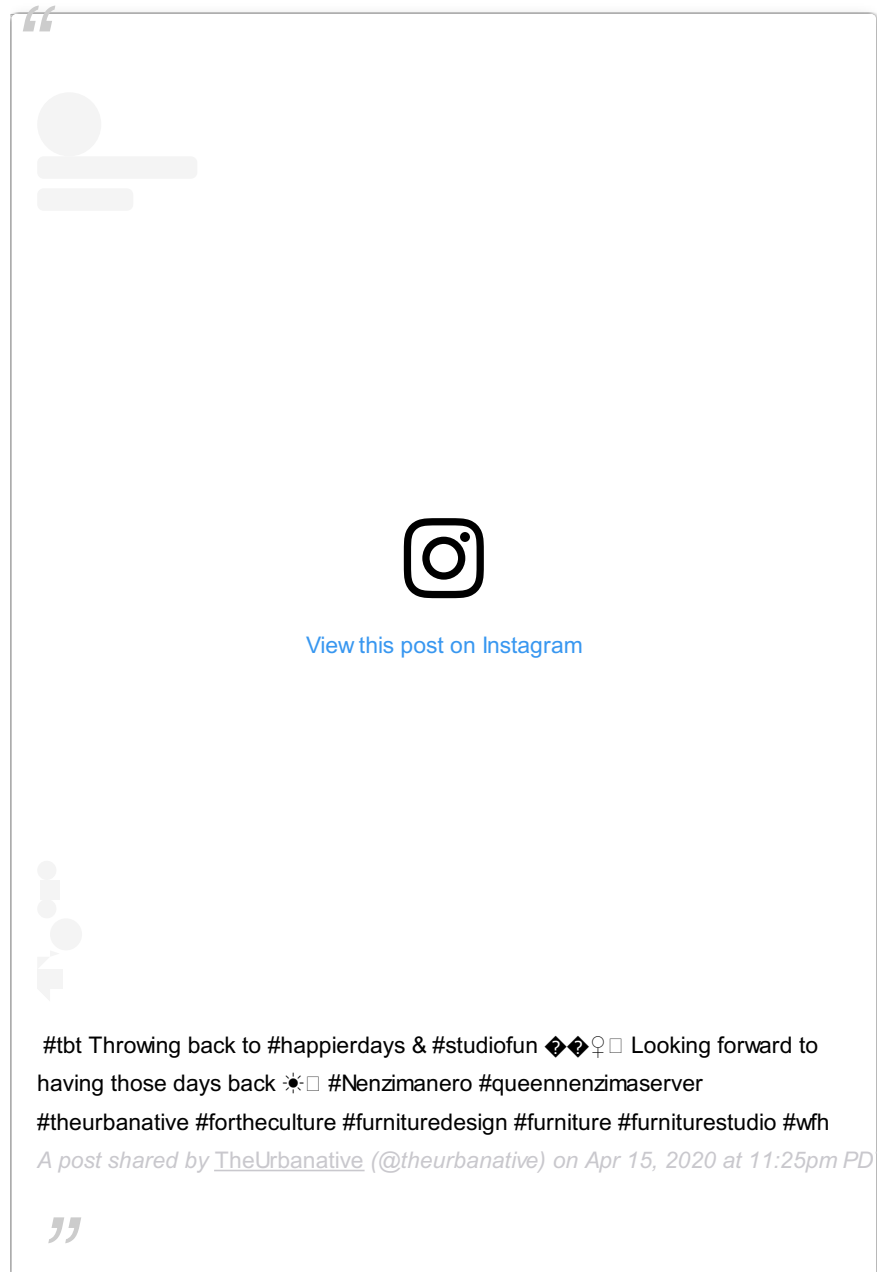
3. How are you finding working from home or physical distancing at the office / how has your way of working changed?

TheUrbanative was started from my home office and working from home with my family around has been great. We all (my husband, our son and the dogs) have been working in the same space. What has been great is that sharing a work space has brought us closer.

4. Describe a typical workday, if such a thing exists.

I don't have a typical work day, they vary from going to site, going to manufacturers, suppliers, client meetings, presentations, planning our marketing and sale strategies.

I am in the office at 7:30am, go through emails, thereafter it's a series of conceptualisation meetings, client meetings, marketing planning, site visits, workshop visits, showroom visits, sketching sessions, 3D modelling sessions, proposals, business planning meetings, mood boarding, then mom time. I have 12-14 hour days filled with the makings of running a small creative business.



5. How do you maintain a good rapport with your teammates/clients?

Now that we come into the office more often, there's a physical engagement (albeit behind masks or screens) with the team, whilst in Level 5 lockdown I would do daily video meetings to check in with them and basically making sure we're all on the same page and focused on keeping our momentum from the start of the year.

In terms of our clients just constant interaction, management of expectations and really just a level of transparency as well as try to run businesses and try to continue during the pandemic and the effects thereof.

6. How do you socialise these days?

Lots of calls and video chats.

7. What do you do to keep fit/healthy and/or sane (physically/mentally)?

We have a gym at home, exactly next to the office, so in terms of accessibility to a gym that's been taken care of, but obviously we've all been emotionally affected by the effects of Covid-19 and in terms of mental fitness, meditation, breaks from social media and really just basic awareness has helped me and my family.

8. What new apps would we find if we scrolled through your phone?

Zoom, Still Mind, Checkers 60, Google Classroom, Geist, Monday.com, Workout for Women.

9. Share your favourite Covid-19/lockdown-related meme/gif with us.



10. What is the first thing you plan to do when the lockdown lifts?

Visit my mom in Rustenburg.

11. Describe your career and if/how the pandemic/lockdown has affected its course.

We have been affected in a sense that our manufacturing facilities had to close down during the lockdown, which meant a lot of projects and site work had to be stopped as well. We did, however, during the lockdown manage to design new pieces for our range as well as our collaborative projects and also refine our systems, how we work and mainly pushed us to think about efficiency in our workflows and production of our goods.

12. Any companies/brands that you feel have responded particularly well to the crisis and/or Covid-19-related campaigns that stand out to you, and why?

Not one particularly but we've been inspired by creators and designers that have found a way to develop products to curb the spread of Covid-19, be it masks in sequins or fun social distancing screens. I have also enjoyed seeing galleries, agencies and design bodies take their offering online, making art and design more accessible. I recently received a box from the V&A Waterfront and curated by Platform Creative Agency of a selection of locally made goods, from beautifully looking chocolate to sustainability products to the most beautifully beaded objects, as part of 100 Beautiful Things celebrating South Africa's most inspiring projects, products, ideas and experiences.

13. What are you working on right now?

We have carried on with projects that we were busy with before the lockdown. We are constantly working on new pieces that are collaborative at their core, in order to engage other makers/craft people/designers, because we truly are all in this together. There are also some super exciting projects that we can't share yet, but overall we remain hopeful for the future.

14. What does the 'new normal' look like to you?

In terms of being back in the office, we have a our safety measures in place such as adequate social distancing in the office through masks, PPE and we have also been working on designing social distancing screens for one of our clients. We have been busy prototyping that, so we use those designs in our offices as well. I think this pandemic has prompted a lot of us to approach our businesses and design work differently. The lockdown has also affected our workflows and business systems and prompted broader thinking, which I hope will lead to collaborating with other unlikely industries to solve the issues arising from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

15. What are some of the buzzwords floating around at the moment, and some of the catchphrases you utter yourself?

Collaboration over competition, innovation and adaptation.

16. What advice would you give to other industry folk during this time?

We are all in this together. If we each pledge support one local designer/maker/craftsperson/supplier, those businesses in turn can retain some of their staff and overall their business and will, in turn, result in growth within our sector, which is really needed at this time.

Follow Mpho Vackier on [@mphovackier on Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) and visit TheUrbanative's [website](#) and follow it here: [Facebook](#), [@theurbanative_ on Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

**Interviewed by [Jessica Tennant](#).*

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