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The State of the Industry

A snapshot of the South
African decor, design and
interiors world.

20
22/23

Compiled by Chris Reid for Decorex Africa.



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THE STATE WE FIND OURSELVES IN

Creative industries don't often step back and take stock. It's not in their nature. When design is constantly evolving, and the needs of clients and customers are constantly changing, there's seldom even an opportunity. With this report, we wanted to pause for a minute and get a snapshot of the point in time we find ourselves in.

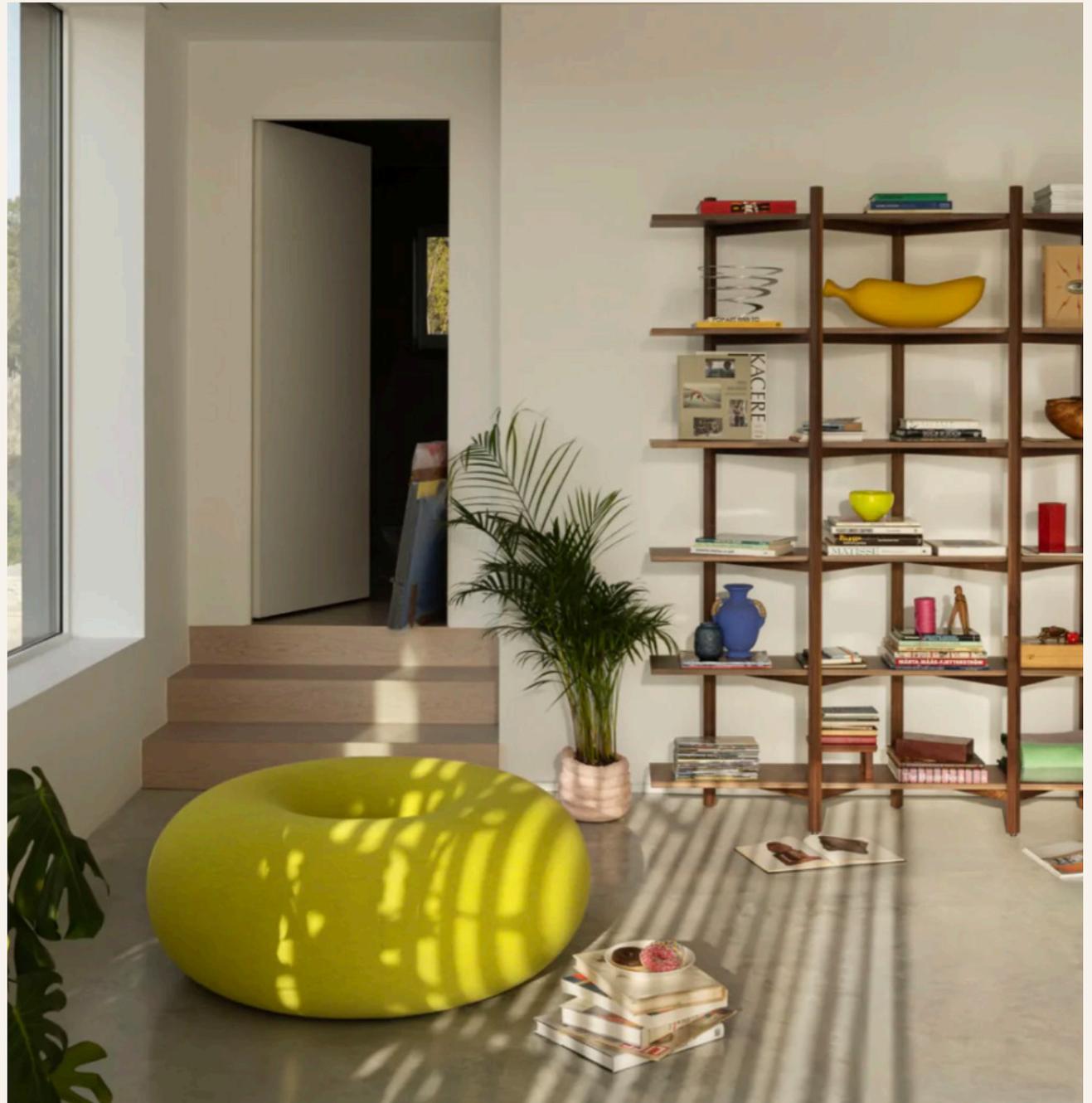
We've spoken to professionals across the decor, design and interiors worlds in southern africa to get a picture of where the industry is at right now. Through these conversations we've been able to survey the bigger trends impacting this space, and also identify some key opportunities for the future. Our hope is that all creative professionals can take something from this report – whether you find it inspiring, sobering, or just validating to hear you're not alone in your experiences.

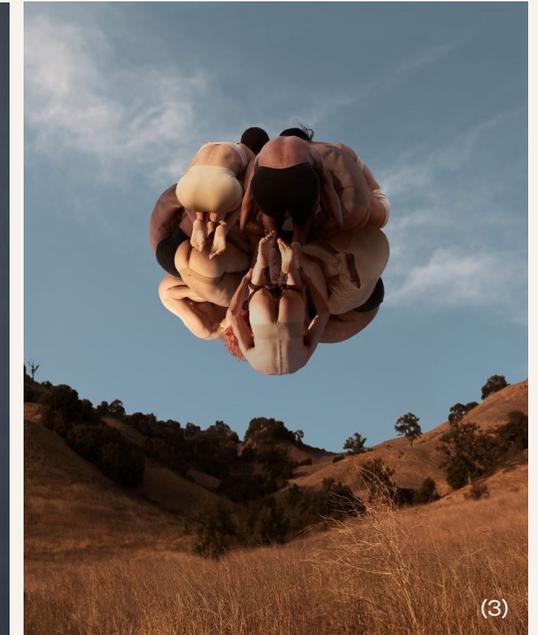
This is the state of our industry, and no one can shape its future but us.

FOREWORD

Decorex Africa has been a showcase for the creative talent of this country and continent for almost three decades. And as South Africa's largest decor, design and lifestyle exhibition, it's vital for us to understand the reality of the professionals operating in these industries. We're also increasingly looking to the rest of Africa as both inspiration, and a growing market for our creative output, so keeping in touch with the broader shifts across our continent is important too. With Decorex Africa, we want to inspire and support creative professionals as they explore new frontiers, and I believe it's insights like this report that will help us to do it.

Carol Weaving
Managing Director, RX Africa





THE BIG PICTURE

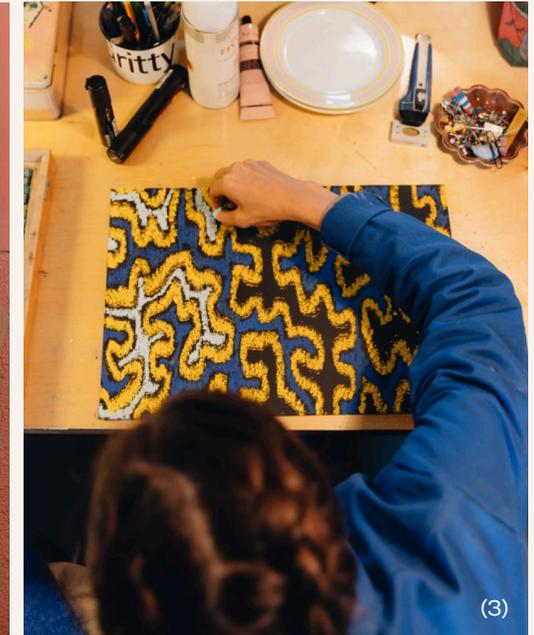
No profession operates in a vacuum. Macro global trends filter down to every industry and country, it's simply a question of when. These are some of the bigger shifts at play, impacting not just the decor, design and interiors space, but life more generally too.

Digital Realities

We're living in a truly digitally native world, and almost every aspect of our lives now has some kind of interface with technology. We're able to interact through digital avatars, quantify and calibrate our performance through wearables and access exponential amounts of content as we lie on our couches. While the fully integrated reality of the metaverse still remains to be realised, the implication of this right now is that any business needs to consider the way it shows up online as a virtual duplicate. This is easier for some than others, and with such a tangible and embodied focus, our industries need to think smart to adapt.

Cocooning 2.0

Covid has made us rethink the role of home in our lives. Added to this, an increasingly uncertain future has turned our focus inwards as we try to control what we can – the environment around us. Unlike some other global trends, this presents more opportunities than challenges in our industries, and we need to make sure we continue to understand the way people seek to shape their space over the coming years.



THE DIGITAL AGE HAS MADE IT VERY EASY TO DUPLICATE DESIGNS FROM ESTABLISHED DESIGNERS BUT A QUICK TRAWL ON INSTAGRAM OR PINTEREST WILL REVEAL THE TRUE SOURCE.”

PETER GORDON, ST LEGER & VINEY

Points of View

There's a growing dissatisfaction with inspiration by algorithm. People are starting to rebel against social-media shaped aesthetics and embrace individuality and self-expression in design again. A key figure that re-emerges here is the curator. The distinctive point of view that an individual can bring becomes a significant differentiator in a world of so much sameness, offering plenty of opportunity for our industry to lead the way.

Collective Impact

It feels like we've been living in a climate crisis forever, and still there seems to be no clear way out of it. In the face of institutional inaction, the growing trend is towards individuals taking their own initiative to reduce their personal impact and ensure they are a net positive to the world. This opens up discussions around sustainable materials and systems, and is one of the key areas in which design can unlock new possibilities.



THE BUSINESS OF DESIGN

The way we relate to space has fundamentally changed post-Covid. So has the way we go about shaping it. The business of design was already in a state of rapid evolution to meet clients' changing needs, and now that has only accelerated. Talking to professionals in this industry, it's clear that meeting the challenges of the times we find ourselves in requires not simply a change in approach, but also a reskilling in order to succeed in a new hybrid environment.

Image Credits: (1) Mami Wata Surf Look book shot by Pieter Hugo (2) Modular by Mensah (3) Hem X.

The Fate of Face-to-Face

Unsurprisingly, the design industry is being impacted by larger trends in business, and there's a clear shift away from in-person engagement across the board. Professionals are seeing fewer face to face consultations, fewer showroom visits, and an emphasis on communication via digital channels. While there's a sense that this adds to efficiency, it's becoming more difficult for makers and designers to build relationships – less contact time means you're less likely to be top of mind when it matters. That doesn't mean the end of the physical space, however. Some professionals report seeing a renewed focus on showrooms, but in a more focused way than just having one for the sake of appearances.

Design as Commodity

Design is often seen as a luxury. And just as the "masstige" (mass + prestige) trend has commodified higher end consumer industries, the ripples of this tendency are being felt in the design space too. Combined with fewer options to share the qualitative experience of products and spaces, this is only increasing in influence. Added to this, there's a clear financial crunch related to Covid, and an ongoing economic slump in our country. Professionals are reporting that clients are cutting to the chase and looking at the bottom line first – comparison shopping for both goods and services. Copy/paste and "me too" designs are also springing up to meet the desire for a lower price-point.



(1)



(2)



(3)



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PETER GORDON, ST LEGER & VINEY

The Race to Upskill

Creative professionals often have a DIY approach to their business, and the changing landscape has tested this to its limits. One of the most common areas that people are upskilling themselves in is digital marketing. It's also no surprise that eLearning programs have emerged as a significant expense in this time. Additionally, professionals shared that social media has now become one of the main channels to reach customers as a virtual showroom. Big brands have a leading edge already here by virtue of budget, and it's the identity and story of smaller players that ensures they're able to beat the algorithm and stand out.

The Bottom Line

It's a clear point of view that has always won out when it comes to this industry. Even as channels and markets change, it's a singular take on style that professionals report as being their success factor. Sharing it may require different skills in 2022, but it's the best way to stay top of mind and fight the commodification of design.



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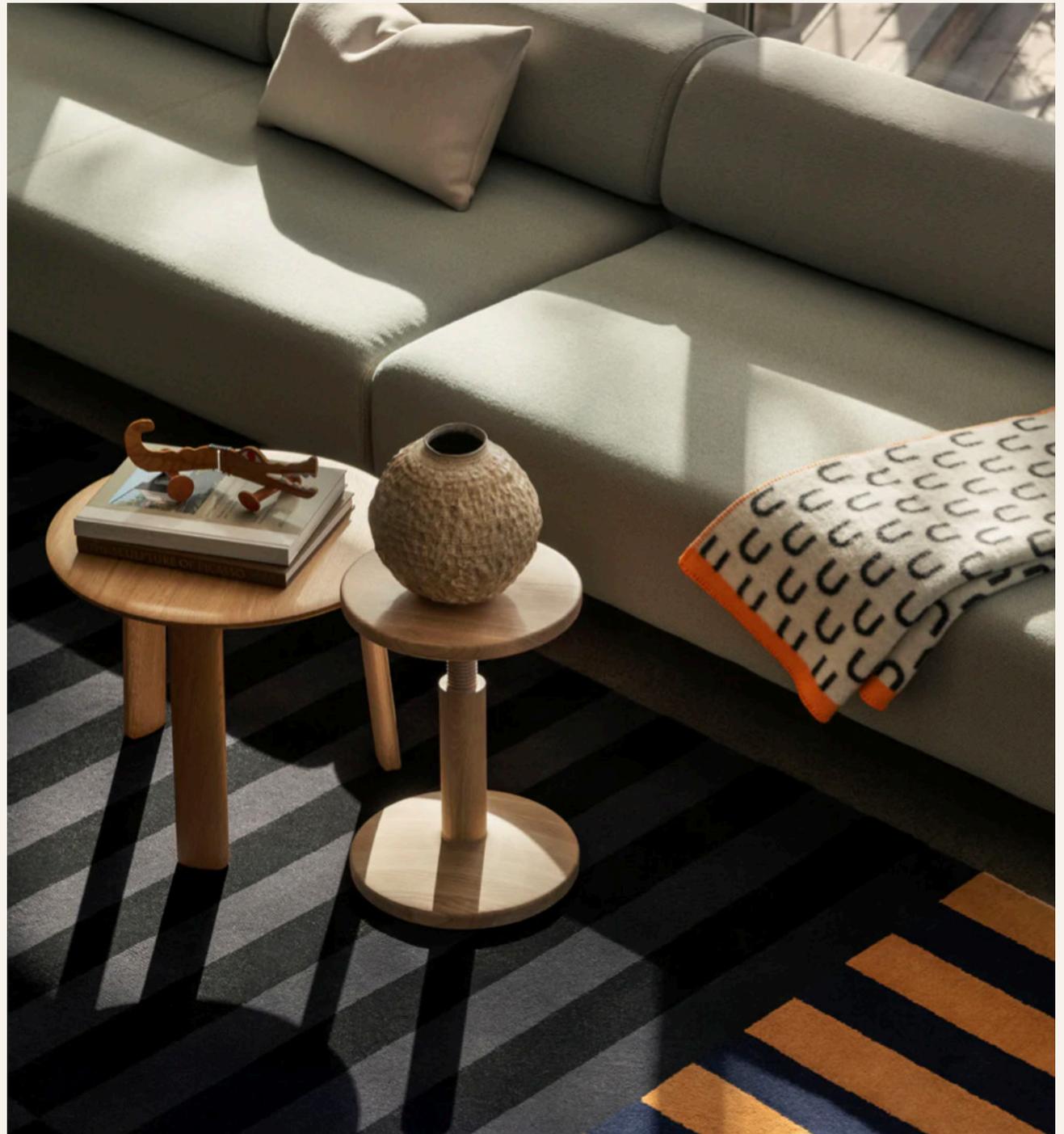
ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES IS ACCESS, BE IT TO DESIGN EDUCATION, DESIGN EXPOSURE OR DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES. UNTIL WE CAN EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ON THE HUMAN BENEFITS OF GOOD DESIGN, DESIGN WILL BE AN AFTERTHOUGHT AS A CAREER CHOICE.”

JULIET KAVISHE, HEARTFELT DESIGN

“

THE TANGIBLE ASPECTS OF A PRODUCT LIKE PRICE, AVAILABILITY, SPECIFICATIONS ARE READILY COMMUNICATED BY WHATSAPP OR EMAIL TO CLIENTS BUT THE INTANGIBLE ASPECTS LIKE QUALITY, TACTILITY AND CHARACTER ARE BEING MISSED.”

HAIDEE KRAMER,
DREAMWEAVER STUDIOS





CHANGING ATTITUDES

The design industry is a litmus test to the broader sentiment in our world. And professionals are reporting a significant change in client priorities over the last few years. This has influenced the kinds of projects they're undertaking, as well as the decisions they're making around process and product. In South Africa, this maps onto global shifts, but with some specific local nuances – particularly when it comes to weaving design for resilience into everyday spaces.

Image Credits: (1) GEENIE (2) Hide Pedestal by Karoline Fesser, Hem.com (3) Apartment by Studiotamat.

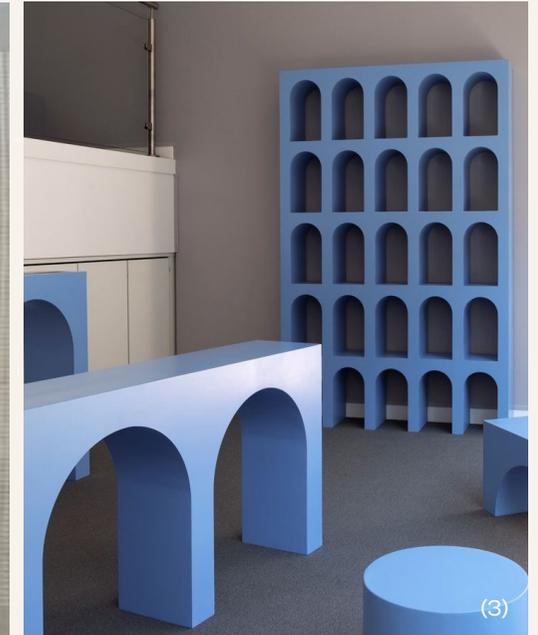


Home Bases

It's no surprise that professionals have reported an increased focus on domestic spaces in their businesses. Although we're facing fewer restrictions in our everyday lives, the legacy of Covid Cocooning will be felt for years to come. Clients are spending more time at home, and so many respondents spoke of a shift towards comfort and creating capsule experiences. The emphasis for clients now, it seems, is less on the picture-perfect, but more on room for living.

Design for Resilience

Globally, we're living through an era of uncertainty, and in South Africa the trend toward self-reliance is particularly appropriate. The respondents reported that there's increasingly a combination of form, function and future shaping briefs – incorporating considerations like loadshedding-proof designs, for example. The challenge that's coming up now is how to incorporate these in a design-forward way.



COVID BROUGHT ABOUT A SENSE OF SERENESS AS EVERYTHING SLOWED DOWN, WE WERE FORCED TO SPEND TIME IN SOLITUDE AND AT HOME.”

ABIGAIL RANDS

Engineering Healthy Spaces

The combination of wellness and space-making is seeing mass adoption according to the feedback from professionals. This is both the case in homes, where wellbeing-promoting materials and environmental impact are increasingly a concern, as well as in commercial spaces, where the link between health and performance is more of a consideration. The respondents report more focus on natural light and air, and non-toxic materials in design as part of this too.

The Bottom Line

Home may be our focus right now, but that doesn't have to lead to sameness, and our expectations are higher than ever. Design professionals who are able to help people define the space that meets their specific needs and self-expression are the ones that succeed – especially in a time where inspiration is in short supply.



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**WE ARE NOW
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ON HEALTH.
WHAT IS A
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LIFESTYLE?
WHAT IS A
HEALTHY WORK
ENVIRONMENT?
WHAT IS A
HEALTHY
INTERIOR
SPACE?”**

SUNÉ UYS, INTERIOR ARCHITECT



CREATIVE IMPACT

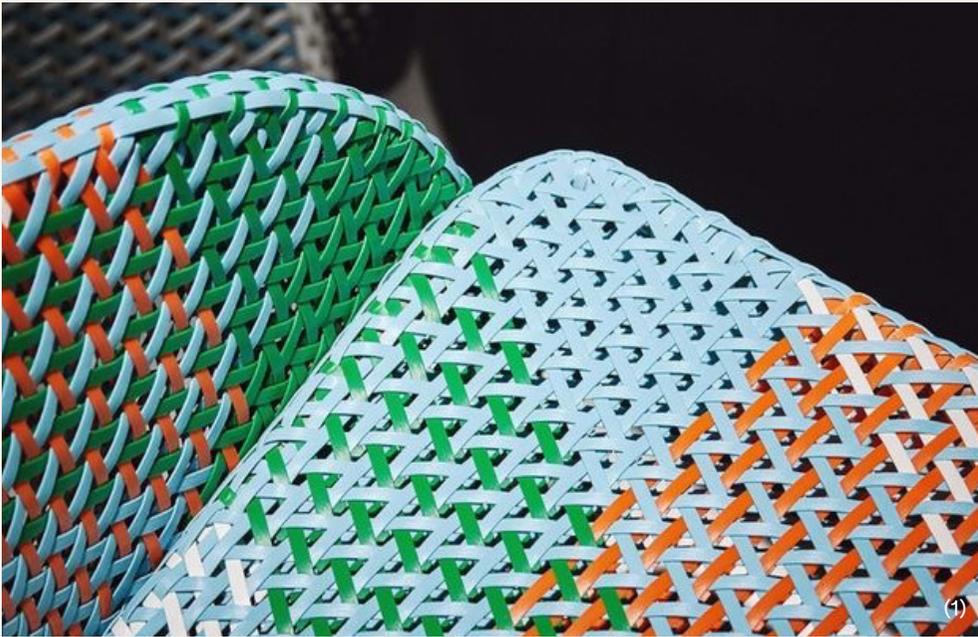
It used to be thought that the creative contract was seen as something between the buyer and maker or designer, and the responsibility ended there. But this was never truly the case, and the design industry is increasingly aware of this. Professionals report that they're seeing a consideration of a larger social and environment context emphasised in their work, moving from a nice to have to an imperative. It seems that as the issues of the world become more pressing, creatives' role in addressing them becomes more relevant.

Possibility-Driven Professionals

One of the major themes that emerged from the research was the feeling that the design industry has the ability to effect real social change. As something that touches every part of life, design can shape the way we live and work for the good. While the respondents reported this as a priority in their own work, the extent to which this is being carried through with the realities of client expectations and budgets is less certain. But what is certain is that there is a sense of growing responsibility, but also possibility.

Material Matters

At a high level, many professionals pointed to the increasing influence of sustainability on their business. This is a much longer-term trend, and one that's only been growing over the years. Some key focus areas right now include recycled materials, as well as local production to reduce carbon footprint. One common frustration is the difficulty of finding cost-effective and sustainable solutions in the South African market, but professionals report that this is changing rapidly as client demand increases.



IN ORDER FOR THE DESIGN INDUSTRY TO GROW, WE NEED FUNDING FOR CREATIVES WHO PROMOTE ORIGINALITY AND FUNCTIONALITY EQUALLY ALONGSIDE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY.”

STEVEN WHITEMAN, PEZULA INTERIORS

Smarter Sourcing

Many professionals reported sourcing locally out of necessity with financial constraints and global shipping challenges in mind. This recalibration has given rise to a new focus on where materials and products are sourced, and with this new energy, sustainability is increasingly becoming a part of the design discussion. While professionals emphasised that the realities of the project will almost always take precedent, there is new latitude for discussions around sustainable sourcing, and with that the possibility for a broader industry shift.

The Bottom Line

Truly responsible design is still on the cusp of mass adoption by the public. Our respondents almost unanimously spoke of its growing importance in their work. As the people shaping design realities, this brings a real sense of responsibility. The design, decor and interior industries are the ones that can usher in change, even if for now it is mostly through the back door.



“DESIGN IS IN EVERY PART OF OUR LIVES, FROM WORK, HOME, FOOD, TRANSPORT. IT SHOULD BE INCLUSIVE, NATURALLY IMPACTING SOCIETY AND BEING A CATALYST FOR POSITIVE CHANGE.”

SIAN CULLINGWORTH, HEAD OF BUSINESS, RX



(1)



(2)



(3)

DESIGN IN AFRICA

South Africa has a strong design community, but its connection to the rest of the continent, and even its own public is something professionals believe should be strengthened. Africa as a whole is a focus for global creative inspiration, which brings with it opportunities, but also the threat of being interpreted by others if we don't find our own voice.

An African Eye

While it's clear that the world is looking to the global South for inspiration, there's still not much consensus on what constitutes a South African design perspective. But that in itself appears to be a positive. Most of professionals spoke of the diversity of the local industry as its strength. It seems to be less of a single-minded point of view as it is a resourcefulness and creativity. Many of the respondents identified a need for more self-assurance by the creative community, but acknowledged that with the increased exposure and high-profile success stories comes confidence and validation for others too.

The Opportunities

Many professionals shared a perspective that South African creativity is often appreciated more outside of the country than back at home. A key opportunity locally is therefore to simply highlight and celebrate what already exists. There is a sense that our inherent imperative to innovate is also one of the things that makes us good designers, and should be celebrated. Professionals also pointed to the wealth of cultural assets within South Africa, and the need to leverage these in innovative and sustainable design.



(1)



(2)



(3)



WE'RE A 'NEWER' DEVELOPING INDUSTRY. THERE'S A LOT OF OPPORTUNITY WHEN YOU'RE THE UNDERDOG."

CASSANDRA TWALA, MOEA DESIGN

The Challenges

Some professionals expressed a frustration that when the global South is seen as inspiration, it is for its reference points, not its creative style. There is less valuing of African design as a school of thought, and more as an aesthetic to plug into existing ways of doing things. On a very practical level, there is limited support for creatives across the continent, making careers in this industry unviable for many. Professionals therefore identified a need for significant investment in the creative economy and innovation ecosystem. Lastly, there was also a sense that markets like South Africa are relatively insular, and still need to work towards greater collaboration with neighbouring design communities.

The Bottom Line

Africa is on trend. But the challenge is to turn this from a seasonal fascination to an authoritative design voice. The imperative that has been issued to professionals is to become more confident in their own abilities and own the multitudes that make up African design – especially by collaborating with colleagues across the continent. It's only in this way that Africa can be not an inspiration, but also a market for the local creative industries.



Image Credits: Missibaba

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**“THERE IS A
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AS DESIGNERS.
WE OFTEN SEEK
VALIDATION
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INSTEAD OF
APPRECIATING THE
INTRINSIC VALUE OF
OUR DESIGNERLY
EXPRESSIONS.”**

**PROF. MUGENDI K. M'RITHAA,
TRANSDISCIPLINARY INDUSTRIAL
DESIGNER, EDUCATOR &
RESEARCHER**



Image Credits: "Superficial", Alexander Calder [dezeen.com](https://www.dezeen.com)

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“WE ARE NOT DEFINING HOW AFRICAN DESIGN IS DIFFERENT FROM THE WESTERN SCHOOL OF DESIGN, WE ARE NOT CHALLENGING THE WESTERN SCHOOL OF DESIGN – THE OPPORTUNITY IS TO START DOING THIS AND OPENING UP A PLACE FOR AFRICA AS A RESPECTED VOICE ON THE WORLD STAGE.”

PEET PIENAAR

WHAT'S NEXT ?

Even though we are going through a prolonged period of recalibration, the way forward is becoming clear. The challenge we face is also the key opportunity. There is an imperative to reclaim our agency – for ourselves, our clients and the world. When there is sameness, design professionals can offer a point of view. Where there is uncertainty, we can help people to make sense of it. And where the Global North is quick to use Africa as surface level reference, the local creative community can centre the narrative on an authentic voice.

Design is a response to change and a creator of change. This is the industry that is most able to influence its own future.



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