

# Architecture driving sustainable spaces

From a desire to study interior design, Diphethlo Masemola found her passion being honed into being the architect of her own direction. Now she combines rigorous design with construction management to form a rare experience that leads to distinctive design processes and end products that are aesthetically, intellectually and financially informed

By Mark Pettipher

**F**iercely independent, Diphethlo Masemola has always had a passion for the built environment. Initially wanting to study interior design, she believes there is no substitute for hard work.

"I was raised by a single mother," she says. "I'd sell sweets in primary school rather than ask my mother for money. After I matriculated from Florapark Comprehensive High School in Polokwane, I found myself in Pretoria, commuting from home to the Tshwane University of Technology. After graduating, I went back to Polokwane and worked as trainee for a year.

"My plan was always to get a master's degree. Even though my mother was paying for my studies, I worked at a number of jobs to make extra money.

"My first break came while I was studying for my master's – I managed to get into a three-year professional programme with the Department of Public Works." Masemola's master's degree was in green building – trying to find alternative ways of heating and cooling; her dissertation was the "Comparative study of the exterior and interior climates of a building fitted with a conservatory: a Drakensberg mountain retreat case study".

The degree fired Masemola's belief that, as an architectural professional, she needed always to consider the occupants of the buildings and put people first. "Buildings are about the people who use them," she says. "There is a modern trend towards the use of natural light, pure air ventilation, a greater understanding of the usage of space and materials, and the integration of spatial relationships."

Since graduating in 2009, Masemola has worked on several interesting projects, including the design of SANRAL's e-toll retail store, the City of Jo'burg's visitor



*Diphethlo Masemola, architectural technologist and project management consultant*

centre, a prominent private residential homes, some corporate offices, as well as a hotel. "I enjoy working on commercial buildings, and I especially enjoy the challenge of optimising spaces while ensuring that my buildings work to Green Building Council South Africa (GBCSA) standards – standards that I'm closely acquainted with as I'm soon to gain my GBCSA Professional Accreditation," she says.

Her biggest project to date is the one she is currently working on: the Civic Centre. The aim is to refurbish the entire building, upgrade it to current GBCSA standards and retrofit the space without extensively changing its exterior.

Because it's a public building, Masemola has to find a middle ground for improving the Civic Centre's heating and cooling systems, while at the same time ensuring that there is an ease of maintenance that should cover a five-year cycle. Being aware of budget restraints, she needs to ensure that the fitout installation carries a maintenance clause in the post-fitout contract. "The post-fitout clause will have the added advantage of creating jobs by ensuring that local SMMEs are included in the contract," she says.

Transformation in the property industry, while slow, is happening. "My greatest challenge (apart from the usual breaking through of old stigmas) is proving that my qualifications are good enough, and thereby building trust," says Masemola, "There is nothing more rewarding than seeing a client's change in attitude, and building a relationship with them.

"Changing mind-sets is never easy. We have to rise above gender and race, yet we have to face the challenge of reticence to allowing for inclusion, where clients have previously had bad experiences. Potential clients shouldn't use a blanket approach of previously bad experiences – but they do."

"My advice to other young black women architects is to stay determined, always work to the best of your ability, and build your own name and reputation of excellence. Then people will find you. Try not to rely solely on other people, because they will end up disappointing you. Decide what you want to do, and take the time to study and keep up to date with trends.

"From one success another will come. Time goes by very quickly when you're dedicated, and hard work really does pay off. There is nothing fun about having doors closed in your face – but remember that the industry is always changing, and that your determination and hard work has to change along with the times. You need to stay focused in order to build your own legacy and make a difference.

"Joining SAPOA has provided me with an opportunity to network, especially through programmes such as the PPP and the PDP. I look forward to building lasting relationships as well as finding mentorship opportunities."