

The future of sustainable retail design in Africa

 By [Laine Barnard](#) 6 Jun 2014

Africa's economy has typically been shouldered by her natural resources. However, her growing economy is increasingly being supplemented by the booming retail industry.

The process of urbanisation is steamrolling through Africa and with that comes more spending money and a growing desire to spend that money. This makes retail in Africa a hot topic right now.

The future of retail in Africa presents its own set of unique challenges and opportunities. However, let's specifically think about what we want for Africa's future in terms of retail design.



Pop-up shops. © Suzi Bowles 2012

The significance of retail design

What does retail design even have to do with Africa's future you might ask? How we design the space around us affects how we live within it. Asking which came first: consumerism or shopping centres, is like asking whether the chicken or the egg came first. The one feeds the other.

In thinking along the lines of retail design, we ask what its impacts are on a society, who it's profiting, and what the values and principles are that underpins its strategy.

Do we really need Africa to follow in the footsteps of the West and create a consumer's paradise?

What Africa needs and doesn't need

In one word, Africa needs her future of retail design to be *sustainable*.

Yes, there are [ways to keep retail design green](#), but we're talking about more than just using green materials and providing a range of eco-friendly products for a few environmentally-conscious individuals. We're talking about the mindset behind retail design, the bigger picture of what informs our ideas about the direction Africa needs to take.

Surely Africa doesn't need to go the way America has, with gargantuan shopping malls lined up from coast to coast. This kind of thinking paves the way for importing the rampant consumerism the West is now struggling with. With unchecked consumption comes troubling implications for our lifestyle, and [especially for the environment](#).

Africa doesn't need heaps of cheap imported goods 'made in China'. Besides the fact that this kind of large-scale manufacturing treats the planet simultaneously as an infinite mine of resources and a dumping ground, it would steer a lot of African money to foreign hands, rather than reinvesting it back into the continent.

The future of retail in Africa?

What about retail design that prioritises local producers, rather than mega-corporations? These corporations typically lie far across the oceans, mass-producing a lot of junk we don't need, and generally ends up in an ever-growing pile of rubbish. This is not what Africa needs.

Africa needs to be able to stand on her own two legs, rather than forever play 'catch-up' with the West.

Giving local producers and retailers a prominent space in the future of Africa's retail landscape has a number of advantages. It keeps more of Africa's money in Africa, creates jobs and empowers locals, stimulates the local market, and facilitates Africa's independence. What's more, leaning towards local production methods tends to entail more sustainable growing and production methods.

Yes, there's a lot of room in Africa for development, and it will happen with time. But let's not think that the only way to go is to pave paradise and put up a parking lot. In thinking about Africa's future, we don't need [a knee-jerk reaction of trying to model Africa on the West](#). Not when there are other, more sustainable, alternatives to explore.

ABOUT LAINE BARNARD

Laine Barnard is the CEO and Marketing Director of 8brand. Laine has been instrumental in the repositioning and re-branding of some of the top telecommunication players in Africa, developing many successful brand launch strategies, go-to-market strategies and repositioning strategies.
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