

Youth belong at the forefront of imagining, creating a future for SA

 BySindyPeters

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Sphephelo Mhlongo is a professional architect currently at the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Public Works. His hope for Youth Month 2020 is that it ignites passion, drive and a fresh sense of entrepreneurship in SA's youth, as they navigate their way through the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Sphephelo Mhlongo, professional architect, KwaZulu-Natal Department of Public Works

We chatted to Mhlongo to find out more about his journey as an architect, what some of the challenges are that young people face in the industry, and his thoughts on the significance of Youth Month this year.

Tell us a bit about yourself and your background.

Sphephelo Mhlongo: I'm a Zulu boy, born and raised in eSikhawini, a township on the outskirts of Richards Bay in Northern KwaZulu-Natal. I was fortunate enough to have parents who instilled values of good education in me. This meant that from a very early age, I was always keen to learn and I believe that this was the foundation of my academic career. After finishing matric, I moved to Johannesburg to study architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand. Moving to Johannesburg and adapting to the big city life contributed to my growth as an individual and as a creative. I found myself in a diverse, dynamic, urban environment which cultivated creativity and resilience. I completed my Master of Architecture (Professional) qualification in 2016.

Whilst studying architecture I developed an interest in African urban environments, particularly how they're put together and how they function. This led me to enrol part-time for the Urban Design programme at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2017. I completed my Master of Urban Design qualification in 2019.

Upon completing my architecture qualification in 2016, I moved back to my home town and started working for Jeremy Steere Architects as a candidate architect. It was at Jeremy Steere Architects where I grew the most as an architect. Jeremy Steere ensured he imparted his design values and philosophies to me, which became the foundation from which I built my own design values and philosophies. I am now a professional architect, currently working at the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Public Works.



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■ **What drew you to a career in architecture?**

Mhlongo: I think it was just fate. I, unfortunately, don't have a beautiful back story to what drew me to architecture. I remember being confused and not knowing what I wanted to study in matric. What was certain, however, is that whatever I studied had to be in the built environment because that was where my interests lay. So I applied to a couple of courses within the built environment and luckily or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, I was only accepted at the University of the Witwatersrand to study architecture.

I say it was fate because my name, Sphephelo, translated means shelter. This to me means that I have fulfilled my parents' prophecy. I always make jokes about how my name means shelter and I now design shelters for a living.

■ **What are some your achievements in your field of which you are most proud?**

Mhlongo: The achievement I am most proud of is helping my parents renovate their house and convert it into the house of their dreams. I can think of no reward better than giving back to the people who have been in my corner since the beginning of my architecture journey. What made it even more rewarding was being able to physically show my parents that this is what I have been doing in Johannesburg for the past six years.

Another achievement I am very proud of is obtaining my second Masters degree. The Master of Urban Design degree was challenging because it forced me to change how I perceived architecture and its role in forming and creating space.



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■ **What aspects of your field are you most passionate about?**

Mhlongo: Detail, detail, detail! I, much like every other architect, enjoy arranging spaces and making them work in ways which create beautiful functional architecture. I, however, enjoy the small intricate details of architecture a lot more. I realised this when I was renovating my parents' house. I ended up designing even items such as window boxes, burglar bars, stainless steel kitchen counters and the steel supports for the shelves in the kitchen and pantry. I believe the small details make the architecture.

■ **You're a previous winner of the AfriSam-SAIA Sustainable Design Award. What, in your opinion, made your design stand out from the competition?**

Mhlongo: Over and above the design of the building, I think it was the story behind the project which made it stand out from the rest. Jeremy Steere, the principal architect, got the project and designed the building he thought was appropriate for the client. The client rejected his proposal and said that it wasn't sexy enough. He then gave me the opportunity to lead the project and design a sexy landmark building for the clients. I designed the building and the client liked the design I had proposed. My design eventually became the building which was built. What is amazing about this project was Jeremy Steere, an experienced architect, taking a step back and giving me, a young technologist at the time, the opportunity to design a building.

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■ ***What are some of the challenges young people face in the architecture industry? How would you suggest they be overcome?***

Mhlongo: The biggest challenge young people face in the industry is getting opportunities, like I received at Jeremy Steere Architects, which is to design and lead projects. Designing and leading projects allows young people to become individuals and create their own identities as architects. It is important that more young architects are given those platforms because it would create a more diverse spectrum of architects. The more diversity we have, the more diversity we will have in the spaces we design and create. I think being proactive and constantly asking to be given those opportunities will go a long way to assist young people overcome this challenge.

■ ***The Covid-19 crisis is likely to have a significant impact on the opportunities available for professional development for young South Africans. Do you have any words of encouragement?***

Mhlongo: The pandemic has changed so many of our norms, especially our work culture. This pandemic and the period of uncertainty it has created has forced individual and communal evaluation of the goals and expectations we had placed on our careers. It has given birth and revived many business ideas and concepts. The beauty about this period is that more people are seeing which space they fit into in their 'careers'.

I feel it has also forced many of us to future-proof our careers and by doing so, making us more resilient to change. This pandemic has brought many challenges but through the difficulties, people are finding themselves coming out of this pandemic stronger, and are ready to face the evolving work environment. The key is definitely agility and being able to adapt to change.

■ ***What to you is the significance of Youth Month in 2020?***

Mhlongo: The first half of 2020 has been eventful and, in light of Covid-19, questions about the future of the youth have been palpable. Youth Month comes at a time where it seems as if the youth are being excluded and have lost their voice across our country. This is exemplified by the ever-rising youth unemployment numbers.

For me, Youth Month has always been a reminder that the youth should be at the forefront of imagining and creating a future for this country. I, therefore, hope that Youth Month 2020 ignites passion, drive and a fresh sense of entrepreneurship in our youth, allowing them to sustain themselves past the pandemic.

■ ***Words you live by?***

Mhlongo: *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – I am because you are, and you are because we are.

We don't live alone. We constantly need other people as much as they need us. This creates a sense of community amongst those around us, which in turn gives us a sense of self-worth by making us valued members of a community. In short, treat everyone with respect and dignity and they will reciprocate.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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