



PARAGON GROUP was founded in October 1997, and is now an internationally-active African group of design companies.

These include *Paragon Architects*, delivering commercial architecture for all property industry sectors; *Paragon Interface*, offering interior design and strategic workplace design services, and *Paragon Architects South Africa*, the B-BBEE arm.

SAProfessionals.com spoke to Interface Director at *Paragon Group* Claire D'Adorante about her personal and professional journey thus far. Claire sees *Paragon* as a space where one constantly strives to do things differently, better, more innovatively, and with more exciting ways to push the boundaries – one never feels like they are stagnating; you are consistently bettering, learning, and improving yourself.

Tell us about your training and career leading up to your role today.

I have a BA Honors Degree in Interior Design from the *Greenside Design Center*. I have always been interested in design and being creative; my favourite subject at school was Art. I wanted to study fine art, but the few job prospects in that field discouraged me. I also considered graphic design because I liked graphics, but I realised it wasn't really for me. Given that my father was in the construction industry for many years, I felt the need to blend creativity with technicality, and make a profession out of it, and that is how I decided on interior design. I absolutely loved it, and I still do.

My first job was at *TPC Architects (now LYT)* for two years in its interiors division. I guess that is where I developed the interest in creating interior architectural spaces more than how to play with colours and cushions in the space – it is an important part of the work we do. I also did residential, developmental and more bespoke housing for various architecture firms. I spent six-and-a-half years in Australia working for a large national architectural practice with multi-disciplinary expertise. I obtained international experience and exposure. I found the culture different, and the work there was also new and challenging. It's more systems-based, with traditional type procurement and delivery whereby you draw and then build, whereas here in South Africa we fast-track construction, whereby we draw and build at the same time. I then joined *Paragon* at the end of 2012.

What does the role of being Interface Director at Paragon mean to you?

The role is incredibly important to me. It means developing the business to something of my own with the team. We have increased our staff complement from 12 to 22 employees in the Interface division. Apart from the projects we have delivered, I can't imagine myself working anywhere else. We have met all the different outcomes that we set to achieve.

You have had several professional achievements. Please list them and indicate which one stands out for you and why?

SA Professional Service Academy, August 2019.

The *Discovery* project in Sandton stands out. Its scale was significant, given that you are looking at an 112,000 square meter project. Very few people in the industry can speak of being part of a project of that magnitude in their entire lives. I am proud of the outcome we delivered, and how it has been received by the industry. It makes people's lives better. The staff there love the space, and nothing is more rewarding and fulfilling than that.

Have you had any particular challenges as a woman professional that you think differ from your male counterparts? How have you tackled them?

Things have changed over the years. Being young and a woman in the construction industry was difficult in the beginning. On-site you would probably be the only female, and nobody really listened to you. You cannot compare then and now. It is a male-dominated space, and so you need to be tough, strong, and sure of yourself as a woman to get ahead.

What advice do you have for younger professionals who are looking forward to joining the profession?

It's a wonderful space. It's a lot of hard work, but at the same time a very rewarding industry. You need to trust yourself. Go for it, and learn as much as you can early on. It is important to find a good mentor and a good company. The first four to five years are critical, so you need to find a company that can give you a good grounding to enable you to succeed.

How do you take part in mentoring others?

Paragon takes great pride in social responsibility and the future of architecture. Not only do we have in-service training, we also have monthly open days for students who want to see what it's like in the day of an architect: Each session for job shadowers is half-a-day. Where we look at the range of work we complete in both architecture and interior architecture. It involves work at the office and, at times, we take the students on-site, and assist with portfolios required for submission to universities.

What has been the highlight of your career?

The *Discovery* project. It was an overwhelming feeling standing there at the atrium when we delivered the building. We started in early 2014, and completed it at the end of 2017. We were declared Office Design Winner for 1 Discovery Place in Sandton at the prestigious SBID International Design Awards 2018, held at the Dorchester Hotel in London in the UK. That was really heart-warming. For a small company in South Africa to be recognised around the world, it meant a lot to us.

What principles and values do you think are important for any professional and why?

I believe in having a very strong work ethic, and putting a lot into it if you want to get anything out of it. It should be a way of life. If you take it as a job, you won't make it – that is just my personal belief. You need to be passionate about what you do, and believe in the work you put out there – you must convince the client of the product you will deliver. And, above all else, be creative!

Explain what contribution you have made to your current company since joining it?

The quality and innovation in our interior design work has shown immense growth. We are the 'go-to' practice in terms of commercial architectural interiors. I have a close and amazing team that we have trained who now have a similar design ethos. I am hands-on with my team; I get involved in guiding the people in the direction that they are going, including their career paths and growth in the industry. We must keep learning and pushing boundaries. We must keep ahead of the trends in the world, and bring even better ideas to the practice.

Who stands out for you as a role model and why?

There's no particular person that comes to mind. I am inspired by everyone at *Paragon*; the unique skills that everyone brings to the table and their inherent passion keep me going. My work over the years has developed through my own experiences in life, places I've seen, and from my clients. The more aspirational they are, the better the output and results I deliver, and the more I respond accordingly.

Where do you want your career to be in 10 years' time?

SA Professional Service Academy, August 2019.

I'll be here at *Paragon*. We constantly have to try to find and learn new ways of doing things, and grow the business. We need to try and find how the world is working, and keep ahead. The world is changing; office spaces are shared and more temporary now, with short-term renting given that the economy is on shaky ground. People are unsure what will happen next, and hence there is even a greater need now to bring solutions to all those global imperatives.

What is your management and leadership philosophy?

Mine is not very prescriptive; it's collaborative. I like to guide people in the direction they are taking, and add my thoughts to enable us to agree and make it work. It is a two-way process that is inclusive and encouraging of people to come up with fresh ideas that we can use.

What are you passionate about/keeps you awake at night/makes you tick?

The market has not been bullish. We have been fortunate to be in a positive space, but that doesn't mean we are unconcerned. We have our feelers out there. Our strength is in our relationships, in which we invest a lot. We continuously put our ear to the ground to find work. And we need to keep producing great work to bolster our reputation.

Do you think your organisation is a great company to work for? If so, please elaborate in detail what makes it different from others in its field?

It is a great company, given the capacity to learn, and the talented people we have, who are willing to share their experiences and challenge each other. We have a fantastic office culture that is very positive, nurturing, and challenging, and that gives us the capacity to grow. We also have great social events. As a result, we hardly lose staff, except when people immigrate.

When you not at work, what do you get up to, including family life?

I love travelling when I can. Seeing the world and the different cultures is important for one's personal and professional growth. I love spending downtime with family and friends.

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