

Design competition uplifts young SA talent

Edited by Leon Louw

This year marks South African wood panel manufacturer PG Bison's 1.618 Education Initiative's (an annual design competition) 28th year of existence.

The competition is aimed at third-year architecture and interior design students around South Africa and is written into the curricula of participating educational institutions. It aims to nurture and recognise young talent, introduce students to real-world briefs and products, and encourage creative thinking. In 2020, for the first time ever, the competition moves online.

"Our brief for the 2020 edition of the PG Bison 1.618 Education Initiative is 'The pursuit of Balance'," explains Lian Markham, communications manager at PG Bison. "Students are given a brief – exactly as they would be on a real-world project – and submit their designs, which are judged by a panel of industry experts. Every year, we choose the site for the project based on where the previous year's winner was studying. The 2019 competition winner was Sanette de Villiers from Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth, so this year's brief focuses on a site in Port Elizabeth."

The 2020 brief sees students submitting their ideas to transform a site in a community-based space for work and leisure in the Lower Baakens Valley, South End. Entrants need to select a tenant or brand and design a fit-for-purpose space within the existing development, balancing the tenant/brand requirements with a social cause that will elevate the brand experience.

Livia Coetzee-Stein, creative executive at DHQ Interior Brand Architects, is one of the five competition judges and helped PG Bison to craft the 2020 brief. "The theme – Pursuit of Balance – is



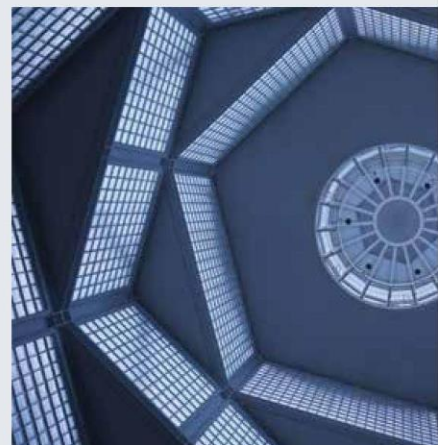
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about balancing the experiential component with the actual site and its distinct elements," she says. "It's such a very raw space, so I'm interested to see how the students are going to look at the tenant mix and who's there at the moment, and then what they can bring that's different to offer that will bring value. It's more than design – it's strategic thinking."

Coetzee-Stein is joined on the judging panel by Dale Friedman, associate at Paragon Interface and Phill Mashabane, founder and principal architect at Mashabane Rose Associates, who have both served as PG Bison 1.618 Education Initiative judges before, as

General design-styles.





prize of R2 000 each. However, given travel restrictions and concerns around Covid-19, the 2020 winner and their lecturer will each receive a cash prize of R50 000, with R20 000 for the runner-up. The third place and finalists' prizes remain unchanged.

"Our awards ceremony will also take place online this year, which is something we've never done before, so we're working hard to ensure we keep our students engaged," says Markham. "The benefit of doing a digital ceremony instead of a gala event is that we can include more of the students' special family and friends, allowing them to be part of celebrating South Africa's young architecture and design talent."

well as two new judges: Mardre Meyer, creative director and a partner at Source Interior Brand Architects, and Henk Marais, founding member and director at Connect Architects.

"I believe strongly that supporting students is supporting the future of the design industry in this country," says Meyer, adding that being a judge is a way to help shape these students, and thus the future of the industry.

"Judging is quite a lengthy, considered process," says Markham. "But in the wake of Covid-19, we're doing things differently this year. Whereas previously, we would bring the judges together for a full day event, where they would view printed student submissions and discuss them, this year the process is digital. Our students will submit their entries digitally and the judges will go through two rounds. First is the elimination round, where entries that do not meet the requirements of the brief or the standard of the competition will be discarded. Then there's a round where the judges whittle down the remaining entries to come up with the top 20, select the top 10 and decide on the top three places."

Previously, the winner and their lecturer would win a fully-paid trip to the Milan Furniture Fair – one of the world's top design events. The runner-up would receive a fully sponsored ticket for Design Indaba including a cash prize and the third-place prize was a cash prize of R10 000. All remaining top 10 finalists received a cash

Markham says that the competition is not only a chance for students to compete for attractive prizes and top honours, but to distinguish themselves in the eyes of potential employers. Previous winners and finalists of the PG Bison 1.618 Education Initiative have gone on to receive job offers as a direct result of the competition, and to achieve successful careers. "We've had winners who have eventually come full circle to be competition judges, and those who have started their own companies or won other prestigious competitions," says Markham. "PG Bison believes this initiative is not only a means to support young South African talent, but to connect students with industry to help them prepare for their careers."

According to Sanette de Villiers, last year's 1.618 Education Initiative competition winner, the competition gave her more confidence in what she does. "It made me believe that anything is possible, says De Villiers, who is now in her final year of studying and yet to officially enter the working world. De Villiers adds that from as early as she can remember, she wanted to do something artistic and practical, something that would make a difference. "During high school, I did technical drawings as a subject (best subject ever) which really helped me decide that it is something I like and something I am interested in. Having friends studying architecture, I started asking questions and the rest is history. The thing that stands out the most is being able to see an end product to all the hard work and long hours," she says.



For De Villiers the favourite part about studying architecture at NMMU would be the open communication between all students of different years, and also being able to learn from each other's mistakes, the support of students in tough times and the fun late nights working at varsity.

The aim of De Villiers's project, named Pecus Astruo – Creating Space in a World of Densification, was to investigate, conceptualise and develop a residential design model, aimed at middle income households, to help facilitate their housing programme. The concept was to use a series of solid and void forms in clusters. "This system makes expansion possible as families grow without claiming new ground. The solid forms are used for the residential units and are flexible as spaces are created by light partitioning walls while courtyards are created for social interaction and safety. A Journey is created by primary and secondary circulation routes through compacted spaces and the primary pedestrian walkways connecting to the public street creates engaging street front and thresholds," says De Villiers.


Timber IQ asked De Villiers how she met the brief and what about her entry she thinks the judges most appreciated. "To understand every aspect of the brief, I divided it into smaller parts, writing down key words that I would incorporate into the design. I think the main goal was to create a building that houses expanding families without creating a skyscraper building, something that adds value to the everyday lives of the occupants. A space to enjoy," she explains.

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De Villiers says she was disappointed that the trip to Milan was cancelled because of Covid-19. PG Bison decided to award a cash prize instead, given the uncertainty of travel. "It has definitely been disappointing to cancel all the plans and not being able to use the money for planning my own trip, but I have come to understand that it could be used for more important purposes. For now, I am busy investing the money into a house that will be rented out. This way the investment grows faster, and I will then, at a later stage, be able to use the money in a better place. Maybe someday, starting my own firm or travelling with the profits, even having a down payment on a house. I'll see what the future holds," she says.

De Villiers has advice for young people considering studying architecture: "Do research, understand what it's all about, work hard and believe in yourself," she says. "Furthermore, I would like to say good luck to this year's entries. Just enjoy the ride. Whatever happens, happens for a reason. You might not have gotten as far as you have hoped but you have gained a whole lot of experience. Also, a great thanks to the PG Bison team with the planning of the event and helping with all the admin – you are great!" 

General design-styles.



