

## Claire D'Adorante: Architecture and Design professional of the year



**Claire D'Adorante,  
Director at Paragon Interface**

**C**laire D'Adorante, Director at leading interior design practice Paragon Interface, won the Architecture and Design Professional of the Year for the 2019/2020 period, awarded by the SA Professional Services Awards (SAPSA) sponsored by Sanlam and W. Consulting.

**Africa Surveyors conducted an interview with Claire D'Adorante, and she reveals her love for workplace design!**

**Tell us a brief introduction about yourself and the firm – Paragon Interface**

Paragon, established in October 1997, is an internationally-active African design business, based in Johannesburg. It delivers commercial architecture, master-planning, strategic workplace solutions and interior design for all property sectors. We offer a complete turnkey design service for our clients. Paragon is a space where one constantly strives to do things differently, better, more innovatively and with more exciting ways to push the boundaries. In terms of my own individual design philosophy, I'm quite flexible and open to new approaches, which is the underlying ethos of Paragon as a whole. We aim to give our clients exactly what they want, but encourage them to explore the opportunities that new space can provide. This means we do not have a 'house style' as such. Our work is varied, due to our broad client base and project diversity.

**Recently you were crowned the Architecture and Design professional of the year 2020, how would you describe your professional journey?**

I have over 20 years' professional working experience in the interior design industry. I began my career in commercial interiors, then explored the different world of retail and residential interiors, but ultimately returned to my love of workplace design. Travelling to Australia in 2007, I worked for a large multi-disciplinary practice there for six years,

which helped me to grow my personal design style and experience level. Returning to South Africa in 2012, I took on the role of Director at Paragon Interface, which has been an incredible experience, where we secured two of the largest fit-out projects in the country – namely, the new Head Office for Sasol (67 000 m<sup>2</sup>) and the new Discovery Campus (112 000 m<sup>2</sup>).

**Which project (s) that you were involved with, do you consider to have been a breakthrough in your profession?**

The Discovery Place project in Sandton stands out. Its scale was significant, given that you are looking at a 112 000 m<sup>2</sup> project. Very few people in the industry can speak of being part of a project of that magnitude in their entire careers. It was an overwhelming feeling standing in that atrium when we delivered the building. I am proud of the outcome we achieved and how it has been received by the industry, both locally and globally. The project won a 2020 German Design Award for Excellent Architecture – Interior Architecture. It was also the Office Design Winner at the prestigious SBID International Design Awards 2018 in the UK. The space itself people's lives better every day. The staff there love the environment, and nothing is more rewarding and fulfilling than that.

**What challenges have you encountered that helped you perfect your profession skills into creating a successful career?**

The construction industry has traditionally been quite male-dominated. When I began my career, it was not unusual for me to be the only woman in a meeting or on-site. Also being young at the time, I was often not taken seriously and often felt uncomfortable being on-site alone. In my personal experience, women in this industry have also had to work harder to be recognised. You need to be determined and sure of yourself to get ahead.

**Are you where you imagined you would be when you joined Paragon Interface? How different are you today?**

The quality and innovation in our interior design work has shown immense growth over the last eight years. We are the 'go-to' practice in terms of commercial architectural interiors at the moment, which is something that I didn't expect to achieve. I have also built a close and amazing team who share a similar design ethos. I am hands-on with my team; I get involved in guiding people in the direction that they are going, including their career paths and growth in the industry, and believe in a collaborative design process that allows people's creativity to be explored.

**How do you picture yourself 10 years from now?**

I'll definitely still be here at Paragon Interface. It's an incredibly dynamic company where we are constantly exploring new and innovative ways of design – which will ensure that I'm never going to stop learning! The world is also changing, workspaces are becoming shared and more temporary now, with short-term rental solutions being offered and community and collaborative working becoming the new norm. Covid-19 has also had such an impact globally on the way of work. People are unsure what will happen next, and hence there is even a greater need now to bring innovative design solutions to meet all of these challenges.

**What advice would you give to upcoming or aspiring architects?**

It's a wonderfully exciting and diverse career. It requires a lot of hard work and dedication, but at the same time it's a very rewarding industry that's never boring. You need to trust yourself and learn as much as you can early on. Find a good mentor and a good company to start your career. 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. I believe in having a very strong work ethic, and putting a lot into anything that you want to make a success out of. Design should be seen as a way of life. If you see it as just a job, you won't make it – that's just my personal belief. You need to be passionate about what you do, believe in the work that you put out there – and strive for excellence in all you create.

**If you were to choose an alternative profession, what would that be?**

I don't see myself having done anything different. It's been a wonderful journey. For me, there is nothing more rewarding than to be able to create physical space that impacts others positively on a daily basis.