

# Paragon Group celebrates its women associates and directors



A culture of diversity, inclusivity, innovation, and attention to detail is the main driver of the Paragon Group, an architecture and interior architecture practice that has about 45% female representation at present.

As South Africa prepares to celebrate Women's Day on Thursday, 9 August, Paragon Group Human Resources and Operations Director Cindy Faux comments that Founding Directors Anthony Orelowitz and Henning Rasmuss were sufficiently forward-thinking in 1997 when they established the Paragon Group to entrench these values.

"The ultimate message that we convey to our staff is that, while we deal with spaces and buildings, everything we do at the end of the day impacts on people. It is about the relationships we establish with our clients, and our investment in those relationships. We have a passion for what we do, which translates into us being one of the leading architecture and interior architecture practices in South Africa. However, we would not have reached this level if we did not invest in our staff, and this investment shows in their passion and vision," Faux comments.

"That is one of the things I really value about the Paragon Group. Neither race nor gender has ever been an issue, and this is from the level of top management down. It is just about the work at hand, and ensuring that we deliver the best solutions for our clients. Our achievements in this regard are relative to us being a small practice. We are innovative and progressive, and also have an impact on the broader design and construction industry."

Faux was promoted to her current role in 2016, having joined the Paragon Group in 2007. Qualified in personnel management and industrial psychology, she cites her major achievement to date being the staff training programme she has shepherded. This has made a major contribution to the inclusivity and diversity of the staff make-up. With a large proportion of young people coming through the ranks, Faux highlights that not only are they training the young professionals of the future, but assisting in changing the mindset of what continues to be a male-dominated industry.

With a slew of local awards under its belt, what gives the Paragon Group its competitive edge is its combination of architecture and interior architecture, allowing it to offer its clients a complete design solution. Paragon Interface, the interior architecture and workspace planning company within the Group, operates as a smaller and highly flexible team within the larger practice. Under the directorship of Claire D'Adorante, it has worked on some of the most iconic projects in the redevelopment of the Sandton business and financial district.

D'Adorante has a unique perspective on the industry, having worked in Australia until returning to South Africa and joining the Paragon Group in 2012. A lifelong passion in art and design saw her study at the Greenside Design Centre, completing her BA Honours in Interior Design in 2001. "It is different in South Africa. In Australia, you will find a project team being lead by a woman. Women are engaged with more, and thus afforded more respect from a professional point of view."

However, perceptions are slowly changing, with D'Adorante pointing out it is not uncommon at present to see women on construction sites. "This changes the entire dynamic, as you are no longer the sole woman. Whereas in the past you would hesitate to walk around a construction site as a single woman, now we are just part of the larger team."

Kirsty Schoombie, an Associate at Paragon Interface, points out that the issues confronted by the design and construction industry are structural to a large degree, being broadly entrenched in South African society. She herself is an excellent example of how successful the Paragon Group has been in terms of diversity and inclusivity, having started working at the firm in 2007, after studying interior design at the Design Time School in Cape Town. Her main focus at Paragon Interface is space planning and workspace strategies, assisting companies in adapting their working environments in order to bolster the corporate culture.

"While this is currently seen as a trend, it is a fundamental part of what we do as Paragon Interface. Given the large amount of time that people spend at work, it is critical that their office environment is comfortable and promotes their wellbeing," Schoombie points out. Her interaction with clients ranges from site to boardroom meetings.

Associate Kirstin Cavanagh adds that Paragon Interface being largely female-driven is such a fundamental part of its make-up that it goes largely unnoticed as a differentiator. "Often at site meetings you can be the only woman in the room, which is not daunting as much as it is a situation you have to manage and be prepared for."

Paragon Architects Director Estelle Meiring agrees. “In our office, we are unaware of gender. It has always been like that, and it is fantastic. But when you go out there, it is still a male-dominated industry, which means that often you will be the only woman in a meeting. We are lucky in that we have long-standing relationships with clients and contractors, earning their respect over time. However, it can be a challenge when embarking on a new project, and dealing with a team whom you are unfamiliar with.” Following in the footsteps of her architect uncle and great uncle, Meiring explains that she has always perceived architecture as the perfect combination of science and art. Graduating from the University of Pretoria in 2002, she had a stint in London before joining Paragon Architects in 2005. She became the Group’s first-ever Associate in 2008, and a Director in 2016. In 2015, Meiring completed her MSc in Property Development and Management from Wits University. Her main role at Paragon Architects is client relationships and business development, which exposes her to many different aspects of the architecture and construction industries.

“My advice to young women coming up through the ranks is that you are going to have to prove yourself more than a man would need to in a similar position. It is simply a fact that you will have to work harder. Ensure you are always well-prepared when going into meetings, so that you can speak with authority. We are, however, lucky here at Paragon in that the Group’s excellent reputation in the industry helps to lay the groundwork for respect and trust in new relationships,” Meiring confirms.

Faux concludes that the Paragon Group does not focus on gender differentiation, employing an equal number of young men. In terms of staff growing with the company, and reaching the stage where they become mothers and start families, this does not change their professional perception in the workplace. “We have worked very hard to ensure we are family-friendly and accommodating. Our fundamental ethos is that of a large family.”