

# Architect of change

By Kim Kemp

**Hard hats are the norm on construction sites. What isn't, is women in hard hats. This imbalance, however, is being addressed by young women who are succeeding in this male-dominated sector and its related industries.**

According to [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za), there are more women than men in South Africa, with women comprising 51% of the total population.

However, despite making up just over half of the population, women remain comparatively disenfranchised in positions of authority and power. This is acknowledged by South Africa's Constitution, which sets out gender equality as a founding principle. The Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill in particular, calls for 50% representation in decision-making

positions, underscored by the recently amended Construction Sector Code.

Although South Africa has made great strides, gender representation is still below the 50% mark for positions that come with any degree of influence and, by way of illustration, according to data from 2014, women comprised 32% of Supreme Court of Appeal judges, 31% of advocates, 30% of ambassadors, and 24% of heads of state-owned enterprises.

*The Civil Engineering Contractor* (CEC) caught up with Alexandra Slaviero, project architect for Paragon Architects,

and discussed how she made the career choices she did and how she is faring as a successful young white professional woman, in a predominantly male environment.

**CEC: Alexandra, please can you describe how you came to do what you do?**

**Alexandra Slaviero (AS):** Architecture for me was not an accident! I developed an appreciation and curiosity towards architecture and design from an early age, being more interested in building Lego structures than playing with dolls.



Slaviero is presently working on the Rosebank Link, located in what is now known as the Rosebank Mews and forms part of the R7-billion facelift that has been undertaken for the past few years.

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I embarked on a journey to realise this passion by studying at the University of the Witwatersrand, obtaining my MArch (Prof) in 2012.

As a candidate architect, I knew that the process of licensing to practice as a professional would require a quality mentorship and a strong design directive in order to give me the preparation and poise I needed. My work experience at Paragon Architects has given me that guidance and training for the past five years. I have been fortunate to be involved in a variety of typologies of architecture, ranging from industrial and commercial to retail and residential.

**CEC: As a project architect, what are your greatest challenges working in a male-dominated environment?**

**AS:** Statistically, yes, the profession is still largely male dominated and the reasons are multiple, and gender-related assumptions still endure. Despite university statistics showing a lean

towards more women in architecture graduating, in the field we see a lot fewer women as practicing professionals. I believe that this is directly attributed to the lack of mentorship and guidance young women professionals are exposed to.

During my career, I've been incredibly fortunate to know and work with confident, powerful, and independent women (and men) who have guided me to succeed in this field based on talent, work ethic, grit, and determination.

As a young professional, I was constantly comparing myself to the male-dominated field. However, realising that focusing on your work, your team, and the final product sets you apart and will help you excel in your career, regardless of whether it's in a male-dominated or female-dominated industry. My attitude and competence set the tone, and others' perceptions and responses followed suit.

I do believe that encouragingly, we are in a time of great change. My experience working in a firm with 51% female presence is that the ground is shifting. The 'boys club' has been infiltrated. It just shows that at the end of the day, talent is talent and once exposed, it can come from the least expected place.

**CEC: What gets you up in the morning; what excites you about your career?**

**AS:** The appeal of the job we do is not only evident in the built product, borne out of a creative process, intense collaboration, and design development with other professionals — it is in the ability to assume multiple roles and to re-imagine different ways to resolve a challenge.

**CEC: What is your message to graduates in your field?**

**AS:** The many years of studies hones your skills, challenges your resolve, and develops a strong work ethic. Use these acquired traits to further develop your craft — there is always something to be learnt or improved on.

Lead with your strengths and don't try to mimic someone else's leadership

style, which may not come naturally to you.

Don't take things personally. Design is frequently subjective and often quite personal; a critique on your product is not a critique on you. ■■



Alexandra Slaviero, project architect for Paragon Architects, believes that the many years of studies hones skills and challenges resolve.

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