



# FURNISHING THE CITY

**The Western Cape Furniture Initiative is working towards a robust furniture industry, says CEO Bernadette Isaacs**

## **What is the Western Cape Furniture Initiative (WCFI)?**

It is a section 21 company supported by the Provincial Government of the Western Cape and was established through government and industry partners to build a framework of mutual collaboration between designers and manufacturers. The WCFI aims to promote good design by supporting local designers and manufacturers in the furniture industry. We facilitate the creative visions of designers, helping them turn these ideas into well-made products with excellent commercial and social value.

## **What is the WCFI's relationship to The Fringe?**

The WCFI is a partner of The Fringe and is looking at opportunities to be based in the area.

## **What, in your opinion, does the furniture design industry in Cape Town need to do to improve its offering?**

Cape Town's furniture design industry needs a fresh vision and brave attitude that supports local designers who have original designs and innovative ideas that make contextual reference to Cape Town and South Africa. Truth is, the old commercial practice of copying and producing an international design is no longer feasible since the entry of China into the market. Local designers who continue to produce yet another fanciful furniture item or chair with a

high price tag will continue to struggle on the international stage. Every year Milan furniture fair is filled with hundreds of similar high-end designs vying for everyone's attention.

The world has always celebrated designers and products that offer clear cultural and social relevance, however. The Campana brothers from Brazil have gained an international reputation for furniture made using ordinary local materials and distinguished by their very original intentions. Australian designer Marc Newson used local surf culture as a reference in his work and made furniture that caught people's imagination.

To quote from UK Design Council's book *The Good Design Plan*: "Good design is a verb, not just a noun. It is a sequence of steps that defines problems, discovers solutions and makes them real." South Africa offers ambitious designers a unique opportunity as there are many problems to tackle. Think of space-saving furniture for the townships. Imagine what kind of furniture can enhance a learner's school experience. What kind of design can counter our crime-ridden streets and be vandal proof?

This is not to say that the furniture design industry is responsible for solving all of South Africa's social problems. It simply means that once the furniture industry starts to foster and promote local designs that are original and have strong social relevance, we will be off to a healthy start. Cape Town's shortlisting for the 2014 World Design Capital title

shows that the world is watching in anticipation for local designers to shine.

As a designer, I am very excited to be part of such a new vision, to be working with WCFI, Design Indaba and SANParks in developing the 2012 WCFI design competition brief, which requires entrants to propose ways of using invasive plants as a source of furniture material. The combined effort is producing a brief that promotes true sustainability and problem solving and also helps foster public awareness around these issues.

## **What kind of innovative furniture design has the WCFI produced?**

The 2011 round of the WCFI design competition saw Aram Lello win with his design for a community bench. Lello's design addresses the need for street benches that can be modular, secure, yet easily replaceable. It has a strong social relevance, but it is not compromised aesthetically or functionally.

## **Finally, could you name a few local furniture designers who are involved in the WCFI?**

Y Tsai, Heath Nash, Haldane Martin, Pedersen + Lennard, Liam Mooney, Adam Court, Aram Lello and Aidan Bennetts.

## **Bernadette Isaacs is CEO of the Western Cape Furniture Initiative**



Italian architect and designer Aram Lello, living and working in South Africa since 2005, recently won the Western Cape Furniture Initiative design competition at the 2011 Design Indaba Expo. Photo: Courtesy of WCFI.