

Director of Paragon Architects, Estelle Meiring, chats on going the extra mile for people – set yourself apart!



Estelle Meiring is the Director of Paragon Architects. With an uncle and a great-uncle as architects, Estelle always saw architecture as the perfect blend of science and art, and completed her degree at the University of Pretoria in 2002. Following her return to South Africa in 2005 to join Paragon Architects, Estelle was offered Paragon's first ever Associate role in 2008,

and a Directorship in 2016. In 2015 she obtained an MSc in Property Development & Management from the University of the Witwatersrand – this knowledge and her keen interest in the entire property development and management process have equipped her to service Paragon's clients better by looking at buildings with a more holistic view.

At Paragon, Estelle oversees one of three large production teams that delivers a wide range of architectural projects including industrial, office, student housing and education. Her portfolio includes overseeing the financial aspects of the company, including introducing an integrated ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) system into the Paragon Group and revolutionising the way that the company handles accounting, planning, pricing and tracking of projects.

What got you into the field you're currently in?

I always loved the idea of combining science and art – something that the discipline of architecture is all about.

What excites you the most about your role?

Being creative every day. Working in a team and seeing how the strengths of each person can combine into something truly fantastic. Mentoring.

In what ways, do you think, your organisation/business is enhancing the South African economy?

Apart from the job opportunities within our firm, Paragon Architects has been focussing a lot of energy in the last few years into specifying more local products and seeing more product development of South African products. There are some great local alternatives to some of the more well-known international building material brands, but they need more exposure.

Do you think your field is diverse in terms of gender equality?

My field is traditionally a 'man's world' and a lot of gender in-equality still exists. That being said, the industry has made massive progress and I'm seeing a lot more women in leadership roles than I saw 10 years ago.

What are your top 3 tips for ensuring the success of women in your field?

- Dress the part – Dress professionally when going to meetings so that people can see you are serious about what you are doing. Especially when you are relatively young.
- Prepare, prepare, prepare – Whether you are doing a presentation to a client, or having an informal meeting with a building contractor, know your project and your facts before you go and have all the applicable information at hand.
- Go the extra mile – As a woman in the field, you are going to have to prove yourself a lot more than a man would have to. Of course it's not fair, but the sooner you face this truth, the sooner you can move past it. Go the extra mile for your clients, in your project teams and with the teams in your office. People will get to know you over time and trust that you always bring that extra something.

What have been some major obstacles in your career, as a woman, and how did you overcome them?

Self-doubt. I still struggle with it at times; but then I remember how far I've come and how many previous times I have surprised myself with what I achieved. In my early career I was very worried about starting a family and how this would negatively impact my trajectory. Now I feel silly for making this such a big issue. With a wonderful husband at my side who does his part, having kids has not slowed me down one bit.

What are your goals for the future?

I'd like to expand the warehouse/distribution centre part of our business. I find this building typology incredibly interesting and fun.

What important/life-changing books have you read?

Lean In: Woman, Work and the will to Lead by Sheryl Sandburg had a huge impact on me and how I saw my career. It made me aware of the limits that I was putting on myself without even realising it. It came at the right time for me, when I felt that I was at a crossroad and had to choose either career or having a family. It made me realise I could have both!

What advice do you have for young women entrepreneurs who aspire to work in your field?

Go and work for an architectural practice that you admire and learn as much as you can from them. If you then decide to start your own practice later, you will have seen great examples of how to tackle things and you would have built up a good network of professionals in the field. My wish for women in South Africa, is that they will look inside themselves and see what incredible beauty and strength lies within; that they will use their strength to cut a path for themselves, and at the same time, help steer this beautiful country of ours to where we know it should be.