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All fired up with Ceramics SA

Appreciating an ancient Art in modern times.

It's a warm Monday morning and I'm enjoying a flat white on the deck at RAAK, with Lydia Holmes and Margie Higgs. Lydia and Margie are both well known in ceramist circles in South Africa.

"We prefer the term 'Ceramist' to 'Ceramacist'," says Lydia.

"Ceramists see the world in a very different way," explains Margie. "We are constantly picking up objects that catch our eye, turning them upside down and examining them in minute detail."

As she mentions this, Lydia upends her empty coffee cup. "See here?" she shows me 3 little gaps in the bottom ring of the mug. "This deep depression inside this ring will collect dirty water in the dish-

washer. The evenly spaced gaps in the footring allows all that dirty dishwasher water to run out during the washing cycle."

"We are a tactile bunch. It comes with the job, and we sometimes get carried away with the mental exercises we put ourselves through, trying to reconstruct that piece in our heads."

I had my first brush with ceramics when I was a wee lad of about 10 or 11 years old, in art class at school. I remember being quite excited at the prospect of being able to make something out of clay, like I had seen people do on TV.

I ended up with a tiny mug-shaped thing fitted with a disproportionately sized handle (I thought the big

handle would help it look more mug-like). When it came back from the kiln, the handle broke off and I was left with untold hours of patient explaining to my elders what my Frankenstein-esque creation was actually supposed to be. While I was incredibly proud of what I had made, I was also quite miffed. It took way longer than I had imagined it would take, and it didn't look anything like the stuff in my mom's cupboard at home.

"That's a common misconception that most people have in their minds when they first begin," said Margie. "Absolute beginners expect to go home with something on the first night. Unfortunately it's usually a few good few nights before a beginner is

sufficiently skilled enough to have anything ready to be taken home."

"Clay can be an unforgiving medium to work in if you don't have a sufficient grasp of the fundamentals. So many things can go wrong. If you drop a stitch on a scarf, you can at least go back and rectify your mistake." Explains Lydia. "That's why the initial few sessions for a beginner focuses almost exclusively on how to work the clay. Remember that it is essentially just a lump of earth that has been taken out of the ground and cleaned up. Like a piece of iron, it needs to be properly manipulated and prepped before you can even think about shaping it. Air bubbles are quite dangerous and they need to be worked out."

Intrigued, I ask what will happen if you don't get all the air bubbles out. "It explodes in the kiln due to the differences in pressure. There is also a good chance that everything else you have firing in the kiln will be damaged or destroyed by the resulting shrapnel. In the end, it's a mistake that can cost you a lot of time and quite a bit of money." Warns Lydia. "We are an optimistic bunch though, and we always believe that when you open that kiln door something great will come out of it."

"Once the bug bites and you really apply yourself, the rewards are incredible." They both agree.

"You see, it's as much about appreciation as it is about producing something. When you first start out you realise that it can be quite a challenge to throw and shape a pot on a pottery wheel, your breath gets taken away when you attend a workshop and watch a master throw, and it seems so effortless. You begin to marvel at the connection this person has with the clay. And the more you learn, the higher your appreciation for the mastery of technique becomes. You begin to have an understanding of what a challenge it is to take mud from the ground and turn it into something. Prices for pieces of ceramics that you previously rolled your eyes at, start making sense because you can start to see the skill that was used to make it. I have been going to workshops for years and I am still blown away every time." says Lydia.

"South Africans produce to a high standard, and our work is much in demand abroad. Aside from having a broad depth of traditional knowledge where ancient techniques are still used, we produce amazingly beautiful and unique pieces that can be found nowhere else on earth. Europeans and Asians love what we make and can appreciate it for the skill involved. The problem lies in the fact that South Africans themselves fail to fully appreciate locally made ceramics."

"The huge influx of cheap, machine-made ceramics has definitely warped the public's perception of what we do, especially here in South Africa. It's quite an irony because while the focus is always on mass produced goods coming from the East, people living in the East don't value the cheap stuff at all. Handmade ceramics are seen for what they are: the culmination of the years of experience needed to master a set of techniques to be able to produce a piece of art. It is passed down the generations as precious heirlooms."

So what you need to keep in mind is that taking up ceramic making isn't going to be easy. But even if it isn't a breeze, it doesn't mean that its not going to be fun.

"Our Eastern Cape chapter of Ceramics SA is a really great group of people. We are really down to earth, and I think newcomers will feel quite comfortable with us. While we have a membership of about forty five people, at any one time we are about fifteen active people strong."

"This year will be quite a busy one for us, as we will be hosting a number of fantastic workshops with both prominent local and international ceramists." Said Lydia. "Our workshops are held at the NMMU 2nd campus. All are welcome, and you'll definitely have a wonderful time."

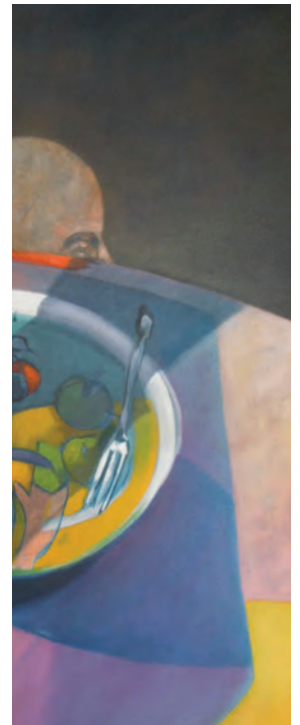
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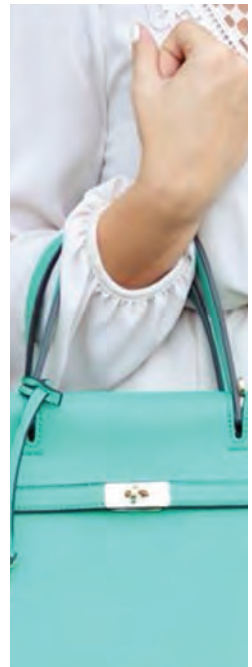
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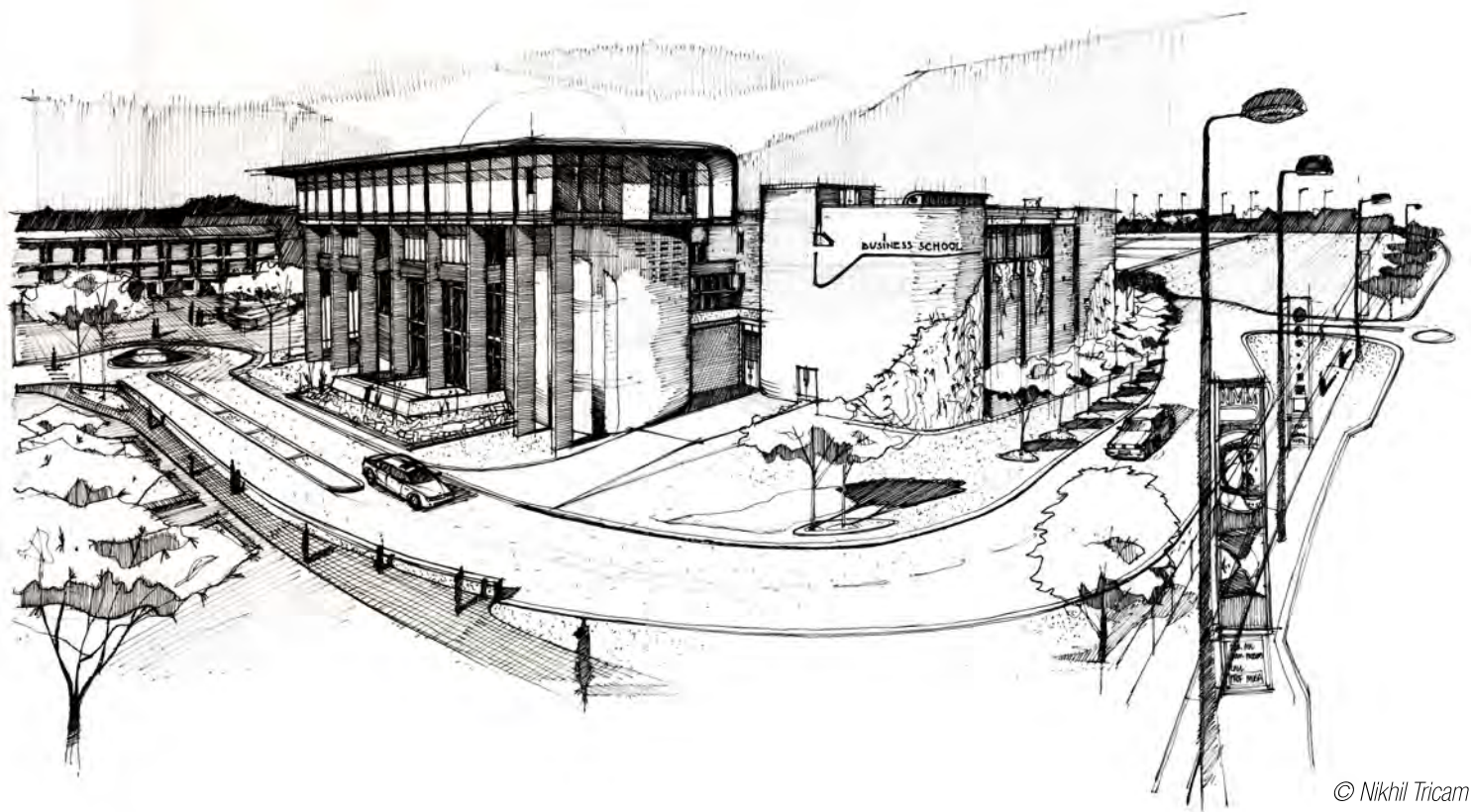
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Building the Future

NMMU alumni helps to shape the look of the varsity's future.

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University has just spent R116 million in developing and building a cutting-edge new facility for its Business School. For the University it represents a massive, yet savvy, investment in its sustainable infrastructure.

Nikhil Tricam is a talented young architect (and NMMU graduate) who worked as part of the incredible design team from The Workplace Architects. He was a part of the squad that participated in the two-stage national competition to determine the project team, and design direction of the new NMMU Business School, which has just been completed at the university's 2nd Avenue Campus. Their work made such an impact that it won them an award.

"This is a very significant building for a number of reasons," says Nikhil, "though it has changed significantly from the competition-winning submission, the elements that make it special certainly remain. It is the first Green Star SA rated educational building in the city, and in South Africa, with a rating of four-stars. This rating [from the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA)] means that it has achieved a level of operating efficiency and environmental-friendliness worthy of global acclaim. It is also the first public building in South Africa to be accredited by the GBCSA."

"It's a significant landmark for Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, as it signals a new direction of thinking for them. That is to say that the institution as a whole is adopting an ethical, sustainable growth and development pattern.

"It also signifies the consolidation of the previously scattered pre-merger institutions into a homogeneous entity, the end result being that it serves to further put Port Elizabeth on the map as a destination of choice for international businesspeople looking to fortify their knowledge."

The new 5500m² building, which is now open for business, uses "green" materials, such as low VOC paints; "smart" glass and timber that is approved by the Forestry Stewardship Council (an international body promoting the sustainable management of forests). The smart glass, for example, assists in reducing unnecessary heat gain, keeping lecture rooms and offices naturally cooler.

From an energy and water savings perspective, it has been estimated that the new building will use 60% less energy than a similar building, and 75% less water due to low flow fittings, the use of air-cooled chillers, water wise irrigation and six 5000m³ rainwater harvesting tanks for use in the toilets. Mechanical engineers will ensure that the

new systems operate at peak efficiency during the first year to achieve optimum performance since the building will be used on a daily basis by more than 1000 people, both during the day and at evening classes.

Currently based in Durban as project architect at the prestigious Designworkshop: SA (formerly the OMM Design Workshop), Nikhil won numerous awards from national and regional competitions in architectural and urban design during his tenure as a student at NMMU. He was also named top student in the subject of design at NMMU for the third, fourth and fifth years of his studies. "I can say with great pride that NMMU is an incredible institution with dedicated and committed staff. Testament to the strength of the department is the fact that it is fully accredited by the Royal Institute of British Architects, which has a vigorous judging process, and has in the past revoked the accreditation of certain institutions in this country."

"My time at NMMU definitely had a direct hand in helping me land my current job. The studio I am at now is an internationally renowned and highly regarded firm in the industry. They are known for being the recipients of the most architectural awards of excellence in the country. The level of care put into every building from inception, through concept, to construction is staggering and inspiring, and I wouldn't have been able to fit into this environment without my education and experiences gained, in PE."



Bright Ideas

NMMU turns an innovative idea into an everyday reality.

Cool stuff gets invented all the time in South Africa. Remember that professor at Stellenbosch University who just a few years ago invented a teabag-sized water filter? It was so effective that he conducted an astonishing demonstration during the 7pm news, where he safely drank (through his filter) water taken directly from one of the most polluted rivers in South Africa. What happened to this game changing device? An invention of that nature could end so many of our water-related conflicts in this country, and the rest of the world, in one fell swoop. But it's been four years since then. Why can't I buy these filters at my local Spar?

The simple answer: marketing. Or rather, poor marketing. You see, before any new invention gets into your local store, it needs to be brought to the metaphorical marketplace where investors and

buyers can purchase and develop it further.

Universities, by virtue of what they are set up to do, don't sell physical commodities directly to the public, and that is usually where the journey for all groundbreaking inventions end. Inventing something is just half of the equation. The other half is getting the right people to take notice of what you have made. NMMU realises this and has set up a department whose speciality is to make sure that all the wonderful innovations developed by its scientists come to the attention of people who can make these ideas and inventions an everyday reality. It's called the Office for Innovation Support and Technology Transfer.

One such device under its auspices is poised to appear on our doorsteps any day now. This device

is the mind-blowing Twerly street light. NMMU has licensed the intellectual property to businessman Nikolas Jankovich who is successfully handling the marketing of this amazing device. As you read this, the device is ready for mass roll-out.

So what is a Twerly? Before you start snickering at the idea of a solar-powered streetlight, bear in mind that it generates and stores its own electricity during the day through solar photovoltaic cells and a wind turbine, and uses it at night to light up its surroundings. We spoke to Dr. Russell Phillips of NMMU's Centre for Energy Research, who was involved in the project that developed the Twerly.

"There is every reason why you would want to install a Twerly over a traditional streetlight," he said. "Think about it, we power kilometres and kilometres of streets using fossil-derived fuels. It makes no sense at all. A Twerly is incredibly environmentally friendly because aside from clean power generation, you also don't have to bury kilometres of copper underground. It circumvents the problem of copper theft. You can also install a Twerly far away from the national grid. You can effectively put up an independent streetlight in some of the most isolated and hard to reach places in the country. It's also small, as it's meant to be retrofitted onto a traditional streetlight."

Dr. Phillips brings up an important facet of green power generation that I had not previously thought about: not all devices are suitable candidates for a green power source.

"The reality of wind and solar power generation is that sometimes you won't get sun for a week and at the same time the wind won't blow for a while. A streetlight is a perfect candidate for a green power source, because you can survive without a streetlight for a night or two in a year."

The Twerly has two methods of power generation: a solar photovoltaic panel and a wind turbine. Although it is a hybrid street light, the maintenance on the Twerly is extremely low. The only moving parts are two bearings on the wind turbine, which is an upright one (called a Savonius turbine) that makes virtually no noise when compared to the windmill-type turbines seen springing up all around the Eastern Cape like giant white pinwheels. The photovoltaic panel itself will last for about 20 to 30 years. The battery installed to capture all that energy has a lifespan of about three to five years.

"People will only start investing in green technologies when it starts to make economic sense to them. That time is now. The technology is comparatively cheap when viewed over the long run and is becoming increasingly reliable. This is not going away, this is the future," he said.

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Editorial

An Athenæum building can be found in most major cities in the world. It is the default traditional meeting place for intellectuals and scholars.

The Soapbox is proud to announce that we are moving our headquarters to our very own beautiful Athenæum building in Central, just down the road from the Donkin.

This issue in your hands was the very first to be put together under its roof.

Named after the original Athenæum (which was a school founded by the Emperor Hadrian in Rome, for the promotion of literary and scientific studies), she has been the proverbial mother hen for interest groups and cultural activities in the City for close to 160 years. Run down and neglected, she was brought back to her former glory by the good folks of the Mandela Bay Development Agency in 2010.

Deeply entwined with the history of the City she started off life as a little room in the city hall building, alongside the official library; fire and police station. As time went by, and the City grew, each department moved to its own building.

It is an honour and privilege for us as The Soapbox to be able to call the Athenæum our new 'home'.

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Where no man has gone before

The rapidly growing Pop Shoppe one year later.

Last year in May, we brought you the story of Candice Smith (a full time mother of two little girls) who was about to undergo a profound career change with her creation, the Pop Shoppe. Candice had for years dreamed of opening a communal space where female entrepreneurs could collaborate with each other, much like the traditional marketplaces of old. When we conducted our very first interview with her, she was just about to take the plunge into the unknown.

Fast forwarding to the present we find ourselves sitting in the busy, stylishly decorated café area of the Pop Shoppe, ready to conduct the interview you are about to read.

For us the change in Candice's character is immediately noticeable. We can sense the transformation from well-intentioned, wanna-be entrepreneur, to smart and savvy businesswoman.

"I have learned three very important lessons in the last 11 months," says Candice. "Firstly I have learned that as soon as you lose sight of your destination, you'll go off track. Think of firing off an arrow: if you are even a single degree off from your target, that deviation will multiply and translate into you missing your mark by a huge margin."

"Secondly: there is no place for sentimentality in business. There has to be a separation between your work and private life. While professional working relationships and respect are very important in the workplace, friendships must unfortunately take second place. You need to actively look after your

own interests, because you can't expect others to do so for you."

"Lastly, I have learned that you can't be a wall-flower in business. I now know I have something of value to offer people, I don't doubt it anymore. Just that one simple truth has definitely made me more confident in my dealings with others. You can't apply the usual polite social niceties when trying to conduct business. Shyness will get you nowhere. If you think there may be an opportunity somewhere, don't be afraid to ask. Likewise, don't be afraid to put your foot down and enforce your boundaries."

Candice is keen to showcase the Pop Shoppe's Coco Café. "Weekends are absolutely packed! I am delighted at how rapidly it has grown since it first began."

The Coco Café is the brainchild of none other than Candice's Mum, Charmaine. Trade in the Coco Café has grown so rapidly that Candice's brother, Neale, has also joined her in the venture. "Saturdays were always hectic, and I found myself rushed off my feet in the kitchen," said Candice. "so like any responsible adult I ran to my mom for help!" she laughs.

"I was a conveyancing secretary for 30 years, when Candice approached me to ask if I was interested in taking on a greater role in the catering side of the Pop Shoppe," said Charmaine. Previously, Charmaine supplied the Pop Shoppe with curries and sandwiches, made when she got

home from work. But when she started selling out every single day, she saw an opportunity that she just couldn't resist. "We sat down and had a look at the sales figures. I had to admit that the numbers looked really good. We decided to name it the 'Coco Café' and it has since expanded from a tiny tea, coffee and snacks counter to a full blown coffee shop. We've been so busy that Neale and his fiancé decided soon after to come on board. They are responsible for offering deliciously decadent smoothies to our clientele. While resigning from a secure job was scary, I realised that it was an opportunity I knew I would regret not taking. What helps is knowing I'm coming to work alongside my son and daughter."

Mother and daughter soon agreed on a name for the new venture: The Coco Café. It is fast becoming known for its delicious smoothies and highly sought after custom build-a-burgers.

"If I had the opportunity to do this all over again, would I?" mused Candice. "It's a stressful job. I'm no richer. I'm probably a bit poorer. It has redefined my relationships with my husband and children. Its swept through my life like a tidal wave!"

"Would I do it all over again? In a heartbeat. This has been my life's personal journey and it has helped to define my character. I did it because my kids deserve to have a Mom who knows exactly who she is. I know who I am, now."

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