

wanted



TIME KEEPERS

We go large on the latest
haute horlogerie in
our special
watch edition

BEHIND THE SEEN

DESIGNING WOMAN

BEHIND THE SEEN

Zahira Asmal chats to **Heather Formby**
about world cup legacies and her project
Designing South Africa

When Zahira Asmal was just 17, she skipped a day of school in order to have tea with Nelson Mandela, who was visiting a family friend close to her hometown of Blythedale Beach, nestled between Kwa-Zulu-Natal's sugar plantations. Perhaps recognising an ambitious glint in her eye, Mandela asked her what she was going to do when she left school. "I want to be a designer," she answered. "South Africa needs creativity," Mandela apparently said.

But, coming from a good Indian family, her father wanted her to become a doctor or an accountant. After placating him by studying for a Bachelor of Business Science degree, Asmal worked her way through the design world from Lisbon to London.

"I don't have a title, but I would like it to be WOW, which stands for Woman of the World," she says, when we meet at a busy breakfast café in Camps Bay, the Cape Town beach suburb where she lives when she is not hosting editors in contrasting corners of the country, opening doors for them to research articles for her latest project, Designing South Africa.

Asmal conceptualised the project "to document the urban, architectural and design impact of the 2010 Fifa World Cup on South African host cities". She feels so passionately about her idea that she has funded the project herself by contributing more than R500 000. "I've cashed in my savings and put my reputation at risk to make this work," she says.

It was while helping London-based architect David Adjaye with his book *African Metropolitan Architecture* that she had an idea for a design services store promoting South African designers abroad. But she wasn't quite sure how to make it happen.

"While working for David, I learnt a lot about global collaborations and the sense of sharing information, which inspired me to find a way to introduce South African designers' services globally. Then last year, when I was working as the international communications manager for the Lisbon Experimental Design biennale, I recognised the media curiosity for South Africa, particularly since the football had attracted the world's attention. I decided to bring their curiosity to the country."

Her first step with Designing South Africa was to invite the editors-in-chief of 10 of the world's most illustrious design, architectural, cultural and financial titles—such as *Wallpaper*, *Icon*, *Design Week* and the *Financial Times*, as well as European TV channel Euronews—to visit SA to write a story on a topic relating to design and

development in the cities that were transformed for the soccer world cup.

"I gave them the subject and introduced them to the relevant people, but obviously what they say in their stories is up to them," Asmal says. "But, it is not just the stories that they have been invited to write that will emerge, as other stories have been generated along the way which, I hope, will help give the rest of the world another view of South Africa."

But Asmal has far greater ambitions for what started as the documentation of design relating to a football competition. Designing South Africa, which was launched last month, will also produce a book of critiques, editorials and photographs, as well as transcriptions of panel discussions about world cup legacies and the lessons learnt.

It will also become an exhibition, launched during the Design Indaba in Cape Town next year, but which will travel to London and Sao Paulo too, before returning to a permanent location in Johannesburg. "I believe this project will change stereotypes about design. It will highlight the links between design and development and show how they are interchangeable. Most importantly, it will provide a shop window for the achievements and possibilities in South African design."

Asmal initially conceptualised the project as a two year one but, with interest from Brazil as the next football world cup host, she anticipates it being extended to four. "I've met with world cup organisers from Brazil and invited them to use the project as research," she says.

And then, Asmal hopes to use Designing South Africa to fulfil her initial idea of providing design services for South African design around the world. "I would like to develop the concept here and collaborate with the international connections I have built. I would like to take South African design to different parts of the world."

"But ... I will need the support of the government, the Department of Trade and Industry and other official organisations. I have already received enormous support from designers, as well as the International Marketing Council of South Africa and South African Tourism," she says.

Asmal believes South Africans already excel in the areas of graphic design and architecture, but, in other areas such as product development and fashion, help is needed with supply chain management and production. "We need to create centres of excellence. The world cup helped give South Africa confidence and showed us what we can really achieve. I hope this project can build on that."

www.designingsouthafrica.com