**PRESS RELEASE**

New Director of Architecture (Africa) at AECOM highlights the importance of diversity

**21 July 2021:** The multidisciplinary work environment at infrastructure consulting firm [AECOM](http://www.aecom.com) presents unique opportunities for its architects, who normally work in their own studios. “It is quite rare to be in a professional environment where you sit side by side with engineers,” comments **Melissa Truscott**, who was appointed Director of Architecture (Africa) six months ago. “That fluid relationship allows for a much more collaborative approach to projects and problem-solving than a traditional silo-based approach.”

Speaking on the occasion of Women’s Day on 9 August, Melissa explains that she began her career at AECOM five years ago as an Associate, followed by Practice Area Lead and now her current role. “I have been really fortunate in terms of the support I have received from AECOM management to boost my career,” adds Melissa, who has a Bachelor of Architectural Studies degree and a Bachelor of Architecture (Advanced) degree- equivalent of an MA in Architecture, both from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban.

Melissa effectively manages AECOM’s architecture business in the Africa region, working with three teams in Durban, Centurion and Cape Town. The architecture business unit forms part of Buildings + Places, and mainly carries out design and interior design work for the successful delivery of a range of multidisciplinary projects. It functions as a single combined practice that is 16 people strong, ranging from highly experienced architects to senior technologists, more junior team members and interns.

Commenting on her career to date, Melissa says that working at AECOM has afforded her numerous diverse highlights over the years. “Here I am referring specifically to the opportunity to be able to work on large projects with large teams. Those kinds of opportunities are rarely available to architects, especially in South Africa.”

Melissa says the challenge of being a woman in a male-dominated industry has not been the same since she began working for AECOM, which is both highly supportive and diverse. “I have seen that at a lot of different levels within the company itself. However, as your career progresses, you also develop confidence and an understanding of your own role, and learn to carry yourself accordingly.” This assists to negate the stereotype that women in the profession only have a supportive role, whereas in reality they are integral team members.

“As to whether I think the profession has transformed sufficiently, the answer is definitely no. There are still not enough women in architecture and engineering, and certainly nowhere near a representative balance. However, it has improved. I think the key is to encourage girls and young women to embark on tertiary studies in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) careers. Architecture is obviously not a traditional STEM career, but in our multidisciplinary environment it is. These career paths are not only open to men, and that needs to be made known,” says Melissa.

In terms of women’s contribution to the profession, they bring a different approach and dynamic to leadership, team management and mentoring. “Such diversity is of real value, and any industry can stand to benefit from adopting this approach.” Melissa points to the plethora of awards now open to women in the property and construction industries as an example. “I also think it is important that we have role models for young engineers and architects rising up through the ranks to look up to so they can see just far they can ascend.”

Aside from the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Melissa says women have traditionally struggled to maintain a work-life balance. “‘We are expected to work as if we do not have kids, and we are expected to raise our children as if we do not work’. You actually need to do both 100%, which is physically impossible. That balance is not easily attainable. For me, it is a daily struggle between work and life. I have four children. However, it is not only about work and life, as you also need some time to yourself, which is critical.”

Melissa has progressed from a staunch supporter of being in the office every day to a cautious adopter of the ‘new normal’ ushered in by the pandemic. “Since architects traditionally work in a studio environment, it is very important for me to be there for my team. Architecture is a collaborative process, and we enjoy working in such an environment.”

However, the flexible work-from-home strategy adopted by AECOM to comply with the lockdown regulations since March 2020 has been particularly beneficial for young mothers and families, who are able to complete their work at a time that best suits them. “Certainly, the more flexibility that team members are given to get on with their lives means they have more opportunity to achieve a work-life balance. Most team members benefit tremendously from such a high level of trust and responsibility placed on them,” says Melissa.

Her main role models remain her parents, as her father is an architect himself and her mother a self-made businesswoman. “That was a huge inspiration to me growing up, as there was no expectation that I would have to accept a traditional women’s role. Instead, I was encouraged to have an education and to pursue a career of my choice.”

As for her message to girls and young women contemplating a similar career path, Melissa concludes: “You do not need to have all of the answers. And do not think either that because you do not know how to do it, that you will never know. It really is okay not to know everything; what is important is just to get out there and start learning and practicing to the best of your abilities.”

**Pull Quote**

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**Notes to the editor**

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