

Face the future with optimism, creativity

By [Estelle Meiring](#)

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Nearly every industry is getting pummelled by the spread of Covid-19 and architecture is no exception.

The operational delivery of building projects has been put on hold by construction site closures and delays with getting planning drawings approved at council. On top of this, the length, intensity, and uncertainty of this crisis will impact both the funding of and the opportunity for construction. Paragon Group, however, has been fortunate so far in that most of our projects are still proceeding, albeit with delays.

Our employees have all been working remotely since the start of the lockdown in South Africa. Although we encountered some hiccups in the beginning, especially in relation to internet stability and bandwidth, these problems have been mostly resolved. Communication is paramount and we make use of a range of web-based conferencing and collaboration platforms. Our entire management team meet three times a week to discuss planning and resources.

Sense of belonging, community

Working from home can be isolating and we have been focusing on keeping a sense of belonging and community. One such initiative is the employment of a qualified pilates instructor to host online pilates classes for Paragon staff twice a week. This not only offers employees the opportunity to remain active during lockdown, but also to connect with each other for a few minutes before and after class.



Estelle Meiring, director at Paragon Architects

The human costs of this pandemic are horrifying, but we have been inspired to see how the national response has largely been characterised by care, compassion and connection. In our community, we are using Paragon's 3D printer to produce face shields for first responder medical teams. We are also in discussions with government, through our architectural institute, to see how we can assist with the construction of temporary hospitals.

Looking ahead, we believe that the Covid-19 pandemic will leave an altered world in its wake. In terms of the property industry, we are expecting retail and hospitality to be the hardest hit and architects will have a critical role to play in finding creative ways of repurposing and adaptation.



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Future of the workplace

How we think about the workplace will also fundamentally change. A wider acceptance of work-from-home policies and telecommuting is a certainty. Although this could reduce companies' staff numbers occupying office space, other health measures may well increase the amount of space required per employee. We are expecting a move away from open-plan layouts, with wider corridors and doorways, more partitions between departments and a lot more staircases. Furniture may change too – office desks have shrunk over the years, from 1.8m to now 1.4m and less, but there might be a reversal of

that as people need to sit further apart. We might even see legislation introduced to mandate a minimum area per person in offices, as well as a maximum occupancy for lifts and larger lobbies to minimise overcrowding.



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Investigating ‘contactless pathways’

At the moment, Paragon is investigating ‘contactless pathways’ in the buildings that we are designing. With 80% of infectious diseases transmitted by touching contaminated surfaces, we are looking at eliminating direct contact with communal services altogether. Automatic doors, voice-activated elevators, cellphone-controlled hotel room entry, hands-free light switches, blinds and ventilation all form part of this.

As a whole, we would like to encourage architects and designers to do what they do best: face the future with optimism and creativity. Take this crisis as an opportunity to really question what is essential and important and to put humanity on display in your communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Estelle Meiring is a professional architect and director at Paragon Architects. She serves a wide range of commercial architecture clients, offering advice and support right from the early viability stages of projects, through to the final design and construction. Meiring believes that architecture should be both functional and inspiring; and that designing a building that truly serves its end-users, practically and aesthetically, has the power to change lives.

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