

'Still not enough women in architecture, engineering' - Aecom's Melissa Truscott

Speaking on the upcoming occasion of Women's Day on 9 August, Aecom's recently appointed director of architecture for Africa, Melissa Truscott, says she has been fortunate in terms of the support she has received from the company's management to boost her career.



Melissa Truscott, director of architecture for Africa, Aecom

Truscott 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. She effectively manages Aecom's architecture business in the Africa region, working with three teams in Durban, Centurion and Cape Town.

Truscott 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, says Truscott.

Industry transformation

"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 Truscott.

In terms of women's contribution to the profession, they bring a different approach and dynamic to leadership, team management and mentoring, she says: "Such diversity is of real value, and any industry can stand to benefit from adopting this approach."

Truscott 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 how far they can ascend."



Gender empowerment will thrive in inclusive workplaces that allow people to be their authentic selves

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Aside from the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Truscott 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.”

Truscott 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 Truscott.



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'Get out there and start learning'

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, Truscott 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.”

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