

Reshaping architecture: how women thrive at Boogertman + Partners

Interviewed and written by
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What does real gender transformation look like? For the women at Boogertman + Partners, it's not about ticking boxes. It's about mentorship, flexibility and a culture that allows women to thrive.

From left to right:
Kirsten Smith, Elzanne Pieterse-Fanner,
Trishal Ramjee, Lila Gouws, Heleen Grimsehl
and Gabriella Clayton



We've made meaningful progress, but transformation is a journey, and there is always more work to do.

In the early 1990s, a young **Heleen Grimsehl** approached the managing partner of the medium-sized firm where she was a candidate architect. She needed on-site experience to qualify as a professional architect. The managing partner's response was a brutal and unvarnished lesson in the gender politics of the built environment at the time.

"He said to my face, 'A woman's place is in the office, and besides, it would be a bad financial decision for me to enable you to graduate because then I'd have to pay you more,'" Heleen recalls. That moment crystallised everything wrong with the industry at the time. It also set her on a path to Boogertman + Partners, where she has now been a director for 26 years.

Heleen's experience with her then-boss would never cut it today. At Boogertman + Partners, she insists, the experience of women in the built environment is defined by support systems, mentorship, and a culture that allows women not just to enter the profession, but to thrive within it.

The real measure of transformation

Still, Heleen insists, "We don't pretend to have all the answers. We've made meaningful progress, but transformation is a journey, and there is always more work to do."

She says that the conversation needs to shift from one of simple representation to one of sustained career progression. She has a clear vision for what this might look like at Boogertman + Partners. When asked about her remaining ambitions, she says, "Having more women around the boardroom table. I think I would die happy if I knew there were lots of ladies in the boardroom."

She believes this is "incredibly attainable" in the next few years. The firm currently has two female directors, but the pipeline is strong, with several women at associate level ready to step up. At the broader workforce level, the firm is close to a 50-50 gender split – the firm is just two shy of being 50-50, with 55 women in the Waterfall City (Johannesburg) office alone.



Heleen Grimsehl



Elzanne Pieterse-Fanner

It's not just about hiring women; it's about how a company adapts to their lives.

Elzanne Pieterse-Fanner, an associate at the firm, provides a powerful definition of what true gender transformation looks like. It's not just about hiring women; it's about how a company adapts to their lives.

"How does your company accommodate major life changes, like motherhood, while still making room for career growth? Part of the challenge is that the years between 30 and 40 – when most professionals are climbing the corporate ladder – are often the same years in which a woman might choose to start a family and raise children. So how do corporate structures need to change to retain and empower women who make that choice? Real transformation isn't about helping women fit into a system built around men's life stages – it's about reshaping that system to accommodate women's as well. That's how you get more women onto the board. If a company can achieve that, to me, that's success," says Elzanne.

Retaining talent in practice

"Architecture is a tough industry to rise in," says Heleen. "We prefer promotion to come through growth rather than parachuting people in." This is why retention is so vital. The firm has learned that supporting women through motherhood and other life stages is not just a moral imperative but a business necessity. Losing a brilliant woman at a pivotal point in her career is a loss the firm cannot afford. As Heleen puts it, "The people that are here are here because they are the best of the best," and keeping them requires a deliberate, ongoing commitment.

The women at Boogertman + Partners are at various stages of their careers and share a common experience: the firm, despite being one of the biggest in Africa, does not conform to the impersonal image of a typical corporate structure.

This culture is perhaps most evident in how the firm supports women through major life transitions, like motherhood. **Gabriella Clayton**, a team manager who is expecting a baby, experienced this support firsthand. When she received a promotion

while pregnant, she worried about the timing. Her director, **Bob van Bebber**, was emphatic. "That's got nothing to do with it," Gabriella recalls him saying. This contrasts sharply with the anxiety many working women feel about being seen as a burden.

Lila Gouws, an associate who works on Heleen's team, specialising in hospitality architecture, echoes this sentiment. She cites the company's willingness to accommodate her needs as a mother, allowing her the flexibility she needs while her children are young.

"I am blessed to work for a company that supports women through all stages of their lives," Lila states.

This support is crucial for retention, allowing women to stay and grow rather than being forced out by inflexible structures.



Gabriella Clayton



Lila Gouws

Julia du Plessis, associate director and lead of interior design at Boogertman + Partners, says, “There are always going to be sacrifices, but there are ways in which you can keep growing while having a family – it just looks different.”

She argues that work and parenthood need not necessarily be at odds. “I need the intellectual stimulation of work to be a good mother,” she says. “But my work needs to be balanced, too. If you support women and give them flexibility, you get more out of them. By putting your faith

in women, you allow them to thrive, and that’s something that I think a director like Bob, who supported me from a very early stage in my career, understands. He also understands the way life changes, and that support has allowed me to grow.”

Heleen reflects on how this culture was built and how it has evolved. “We learned through our mistakes,” she admits. “As a board we reflected and asked ourselves: What can we do differently to not lose another fabulous woman?” This is transformation in practice, a conscious effort to retain talent by creating an environment where women can thrive.

Mentorship: the power of those who went before

A key factor in the career development of many women architects is mentorship. The women at Boogertman + Partners speak not of formal programmes, but of a culture of empowerment and support where directors actively nurture their teams.

Julia du Plessis

Kirsten Smith, a recently appointed associate specialising in healthcare architecture who joined the firm about a year ago, credits director **Henry du Plessis** with creating an environment that empowered her from the outset. She particularly values the trust and autonomy she has been given in her role. “What I’ve found over the past year is that you’re encouraged to work independently and take ownership, rather than having someone think or make decisions for you.”

This sentiment is echoed by Gabriella, whose team is made up predominantly of women. This isn’t about tokenism; it’s about a director who respects and elevates his team. Gabriella explains the difference in leadership style: “Bob respects your values and makes it clear that you have your position because you are qualified and capable.”

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Kirsten Smith

Trishal Ramjee, an associate who has spent most of her career with the firm, found mentorship in strong female leaders and experienced female colleagues. “I am the architect I am today, in the boardroom and on construction sites, because of that mentorship,” she states. At the same time, she is adamant that everyone she works with at the firm is an ‘A-team player’. “You feel like you are part of the best of the best because we are curated for our skills, irrespective of background.”

Trishal now tries to pass that on, particularly encouraging younger women to be more confident in their abilities.

Trishal Ramjee



Projects that define a career

For architects, projects are the tangible outcome of their passion and hard work.

Heleen’s pride is the Houghton Hotel in Johannesburg, which is remarkable for

how its process integrated architecture, interior and landscape design from the concept stage. “That is part of Houghton’s beauty, the flow of that building from inside to outside,” she says. It became a blueprint for how they approach hospitality projects.



One of Elzanne’s most memorable and formative projects has been Sandton Gate, which she has worked on for the best part of the decade, from the moment she joined the firm. This remarkable precinct – which launched its

second phase, Sandton Gate Central earlier this year – pioneered the precinct rating tool for the GBCSA, which for the first time measured sustainability on a precinct level rather than only individual buildings.



Lila’s most cherished project is Lefika Villas, part of an exclusive luxury expansion at the Sun City Resort by Sun International in the North West. The project allowed her team

to work with local craftsmen and source art from up-and-coming South African artists. “It wasn’t just another commercial push-through-the-system type of client,” she explains.





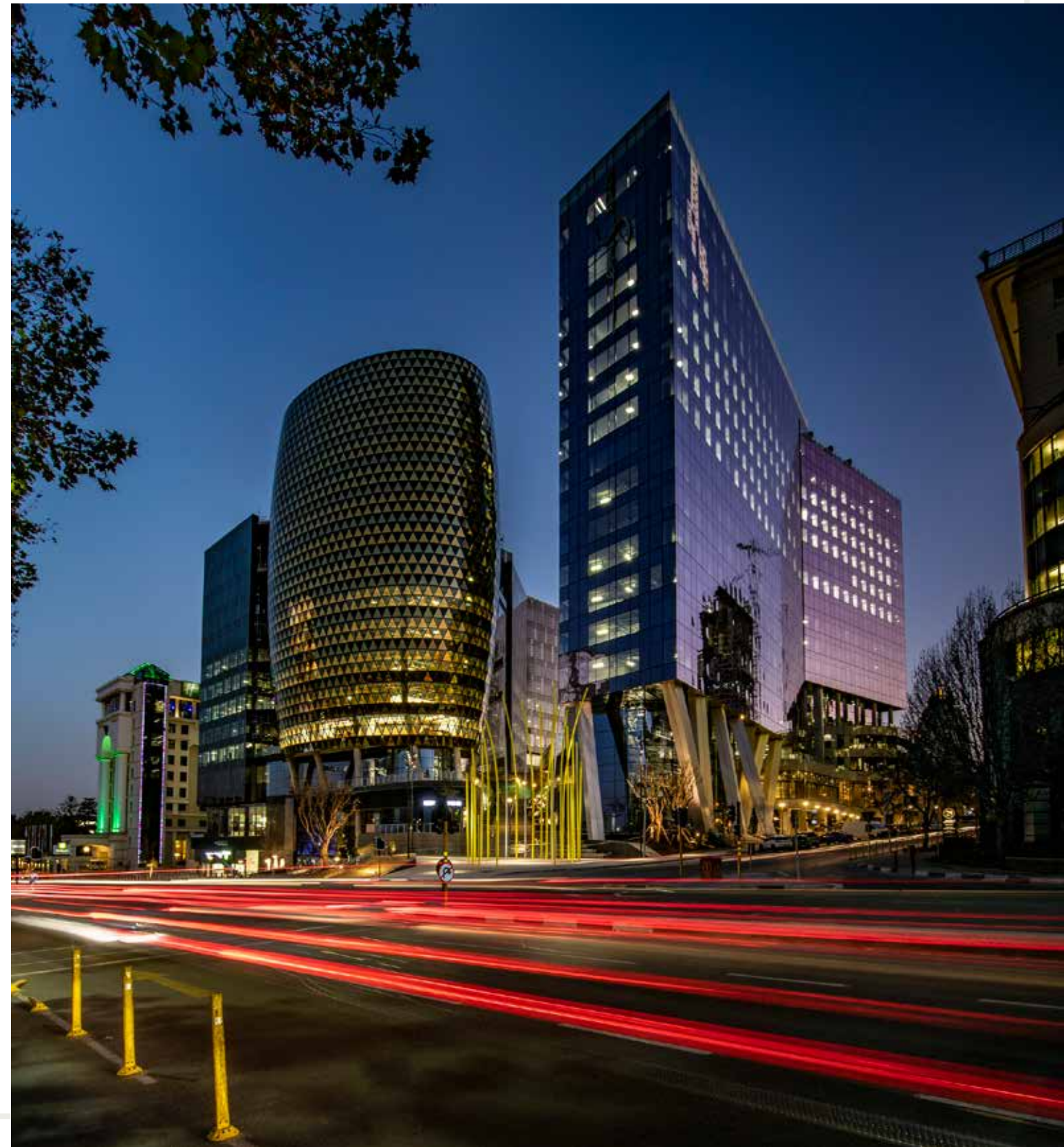
Paediatric burns facility at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital

Kirsten finds deep meaning in the impact her work can have on people's lives. "I think I'll always love working on hospitals because you can see the difference they make and the impact they have on people's lives." One project that has remained particularly close to her heart is a paediatric burns facility at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, for Surgeons for Little Lives, which she worked on while with Graceland Architects. "That project touched my heart in a different way," she says. In her time at Boogertman + Partners, her involvement in the Lowveld Eye Institute has been a standout achievement.



Among Julia's most memorable is the ENS Africa Tower in Sandton. Julia began her career in architecture before moving into interior design. "That was a pivot project for me because we worked

on architecture and interior design. My learning curve was vertical on that project. I grew immensely. It was tough, but it shaped me. It was both career defining and character building."





God's Window Skywalk in Mpumalanga

Trishal's career has been defined by being trusted with projects from a varied range of typologies early on by team director **André Wright**. One of her more memorable early projects was a historical chapel restoration. Recently, she worked on The One, a student residence in Stellenbosch that won numerous awards, and looks forward to taking the God's Window Skywalk to site, a major tourism infrastructure project that will soon break ground in Mpumalanga.

Gabriella is leading a massive, multi-year renovation and expansion project for the global headquarters of a multinational organisation in Kenya, which she will see through until 2029. Her experience on this project has given her a new appreciation for the firm's capabilities. "As the lead design consultants on an international professional team, you realise just how good we are," she says.

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An ongoing journey

While the culture at Boogertman + Partners is progressive, the women are clear-eyed about the challenges that remain, both within the firm and in the wider profession. While the industry has changed and being the only woman in a room full of men is no longer the norm, gender transformation is an ongoing journey.

Many of these women at Boogertman + Partners acknowledge that the change achieved so far – and crucial opportunities and support in their own careers – has been due in large part to the women who came before them. In no small part, that support is what drives them to carry the legacy forward. 



The One: a student residence in Stellenbosch
Render credit: Launchbase