

# Thabiso Joyisa calls on SA's youth to create more, build more, love more

 By Sindy Peters 28 Jun 2019

Durban's Thabiso Knowledge Joyisa is a young architecture graduate on a mission, tackling social and physical boundaries through collaborative, innovative thinking. His journey in driving the transformation of the current academic and social space for Durban University of Technology's (DUT) architecture students began in 2015 during his second year at the institutio



Thabiso Joyisa

While the preliminary goal of his efforts is to build a new floor on the existing S block at DUT, the ultimate goal for Joyisa and the rest of the team that make up the Level Six project is to inspire students to come up with innovative ideas and solutions, drive synergy between students in different years and across disciplines promoting an interactive environment, and assist students with exposure to the private sector allowing them to further explore business opportunities and career paths whilst still studying at the university.

The current Level Six team consists of alumni and current students of DUT, as well as a professional team. The proposed structure will include a gallery for presentations, coffee bar, performing space, as well as space earmarked for art, music, and sculpture, and an interaction hub.

We chatted to Joyisa to find out more about what motivated him to launch the Level Six project, some of the challenges the team has encountered so far, where the project is currently at, and what he hopes it will achieve once complete.

## **Tell us a bit about yourself and your background.**

**Joyisa:** I grew up in Umlazi in a place called “Chicago” AA section, where I attended local schools. Growing up in an informal settlement, resources were very scarce. There was a lack of role models, not to mention the fact I also lost both my parents at a very young age - this loss moulded me into having a very robust desire to be around people.



Thabiso Joyisa

My first experience with 'space' that I called 'home' was not sufficient enough for privacy or personal use - everything was shared. It seemed impossible to break through the cycle of drugs, crime, and poverty, and the lingering pain of trials and tribulations within my community. However, it was also a place where I learnt about team work, togetherness, thriving, perseverance, protection, and how to be courageous.

Who knew that from the concrete a flowering seed would germinate - me, Thabiso Knowledge Joyisa, eagerly ready to shift the paradigm and share the untold stories and truths about these kinds of communities and usher in the change I want to see in these spatially segregated communities.

### ▣ ***What are you most passionate about?***

**Joyisa:** I am passionate about reducing inequality, specifically in South Africa and Africa. I have the willingness to reach out to marginalised societies. I believe everyone has equal potential power and everyone has unique gifts and talents, however, due to varying circumstances, many South African youth do not live to their full potential. I believe that if it took a planned system to disadvantage and bring inequality, it will also take a totally new system to bring change.

The South African context is characterised by many challenges - social, economic, environmental and political, that negatively impact the creative design industries. This should be perceived as an opportunity for such industries to re-think narratively and novelly in coming up with sound and informed decisions in the quest to challenge and redress societal issues in an engaged process.

### ▣ ***You started Level Six project in 2015. What motivated you to do this?***

**Joyisa:** During my second year at the Durban University of Technology, specifically while completing my internship service training at Omm Moodley Architects, I was inspired by design theories and methodologies and being engaged with one's surroundings. I was enticed and driven to question architectural learning sites (ALS) and practices - we are always designing interesting projects or buildings but are working or learning in non-inspiring spaces. We have an isiZulu saying that goes, "Umnikelo uqala ekhaya", which simply means character begins at home.

I have always had a very vigorous conceptual ability to perceive opportunities far beyond the apparent, to

redefine and transform space into place. Durban University of Technology presented me with what Prof Deborah Whelan, the former HOD of the Department of Architecture, called an "incubator" when I present the idea to her. Sceptical at first, she was later convinced by my dedication and work ethic towards my studies and this philanthropic journey I was willing to explore.

We are an architectural student movement that was founded in 2015, consisting of alumni members and current students. We are hoping, as part of the process for this project, to collaborate with other departments from the built environment. We have identified major problems within the university and industry, such as the high rate of youth unemployment, specifically unemployed graduates.

We as the Level Six team have come up with solutions that can solve not only the challenges at our institution, but the country with our approach. The Level 6 project is synergistic with the Department of Architecture's long-term vision in addressing the social problems within our department, as well as between students in the different years.



### ▣ ***What are some of the challenges you've encountered along the way?***

**Joyisa:** We encountered many problems from the early stages of the project as we were students who had to focus on and this was an extended programme for us. We eagerly wanted to establish something for ourselves, build a worthwhile portfolio, inspire our fellow students to be engaged with their surroundings, prefiguring solutions and equipping them with tools that they can use.

We had to prove ourselves in many ways - we wanted more than what was offered by the curriculum and decided to extend the programme for ourselves, creating a group with other creative students. As the project became more technical we extended our team and included a dedicated professional team that wanted to make a positive contribution to society.



■ ***At what stage now is the project? What does the timeline look like?***

**Joyisa:** We had a meeting this week with DUT management to further discuss the Level Six project. We are working with the institution in terms of allocating funding to the project since R25m is the estimated total cost for the project to be physically built. Deputy vice-chancellor Dr Issac Machi has advised us that the project is undergoing internal processes just like other similar projects that are waiting for funds allocation. He also noted that should we have an external funder committing to fund the project, it would be implemented without the need to wait. DUT has adopted our project as its very own - the first student-led project guided by professionals.

The institution's management executives will be meeting this month to discuss the master plan for broader infrastructural development - our project is included in the master plan. Following this process, the professional team that forms part of the Level Six project will assist with its refinement, guiding us towards the construction phase. Our ultimate goal is to establish a relationship with the professional sector or bring them into our institutions to help mentor and guide students with all the relevant technologies, strategies, and regulations of the industry. This will be the first project in the built environment at DUT that will offer practical experience.



It is unfortunate, however, that should the university fund the entire project, in line with its policies on tender procedures, the project would go out to tender and the professional team currently on the project that has been part of our narrative journey thus far would be left out. If we do manage to outsource and secure a

committed funder that would fund at least half our project, it will go to the implementation stage and not through DUT procurement policies, meaning we would be able to keep our professional team, which is ideal for us.

We are also in the process of registering a company, to be called Levelsix Design Tank, for all future projects that will promote the advancement of design. We are a young, dynamic, creative, technical, informed, curious team that want to make a difference in the space of design and innovation in South Africa and the rest of Africa. This first pioneer project is the starting point for Levelsix Design Tank; there are many more projects that we would like to venture into that would make an impact.

South Africa needs youthful companies that are inspired and driven to have impact on society. We believe we are the future of responsive design.

### ▣ **What do you hope to achieve through the project once it is complete?**

**Joyisa:** Our vision was to build a new floor/level on the existing S block at DUT with the institution's concept of student-centeredness in mind and its strategic plan to improve facilities and infrastructure. We believed that our innovative idea was a worthy project that needed to be included in the broader infrastructural development of the institution.

Our ultimate goal is to create a space that allows social interaction between students that would benefit them. While the building was our main objective, we acknowledged that students from all respective years have knowledge and skills to share. We hosted presentations, exhibitions, and events that created a culture among our fellow students, and mentored students, guided by the professionals. This experience enabled students to build a portfolio for themselves. We wanted to inspire students to come up with innovative ideas that would offer solutions to industries and South Africa at large.

We provoked the desire to work with what they have and use their skills to make something for themselves rather than waiting for government and job opportunities. We inquisitively challenged our institution by looking into lost spaces, looking to harvest all these spaces to create an architectural masterpiece that will be appreciated by fellow students for generations to come, to turn waste into craft - an object of beauty - through the application of responsive architecture that is centred and inspired by people in place and time.

We are hoping that both the department of architecture and DUT as an institution will adopt our vision and empower and support student initiatives and encourage entrepreneurship at an early stage.



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### ▣ **What advice do you have for other young South Africans who have similar goals to make a difference in their communities/industries?**

**Joyisa:** This Youth Month I would like to acknowledge all those who fought in the struggle, as the current generation is harvesting the benefits of all their efforts. I say *la lotta continua* to the current youth. Just start, explore, try, create, wonder, engage, be empowered, collaborate, grow, and do not be afraid to fail, this is part of learning.

I have failed in many things in my life and I have gained tremendous experience. We often confine our worlds to what we see and what lies before us, lacking that imaginative power that transcends all limitations and presents one to a world of possibilities. We as young people, especially the graduates, have been liberated and empowered with skills and knowledge, therefore it must be our core ethos to create jobs, opportunities, supporting what is needed in the working environment and the market. We need to be flexible, adaptive, innovative, informed, and ready to take advantage of all the opportunities that present themselves.

I want to advise young leaders to collaborate more with each other, push boundaries, be courageous enough to follow your passion and desire and match that with dedication and hard work.

I encourage institutions to support talent and channel it accordingly. To all young leaders and upcoming designers, life is what you make of it, let's make a difference while we can. Create more, build more, and, most importantly, love more.

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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