

Minister of Public Works
Ms L Sizani, Chief Director: Ministerial Services on behalf of Ms S Sigcau
29 November 2002

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Graduation of Fashion Designer Students at Kaoz Afric Designers

The Master of Ceremonies
Chief Executive Officer of Kaoz Afric Designers, Xoliswa Ngulu-Hudson
Graduates
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thanks for giving me an opportunity to talk to young fashion designers, at this crucial moment of their life when they've got to make decisive choices about their future.

We know that this day was preceded by many months of hard work during which you were trained to apply theory to practice. In the process you also forged relationships with one another thereby laying the basis for future networking opportunities.

At face value, fashion designing might appear like frivolous pursuit, driven by a desire to enhance one's looks. To many it might seem like obsession with the material world of shallow elegance and gross commercialisation.

The truth is that fashion designing like architecture is deeply imprinted on the soul of the nation, giving a unique character to the people and helping entrench their identity and set them apart, thus incurring them the respect they deserve from others.

Seen within a context, fashion designers like the designers of our built environment, are a part of the social and cultural institutions, using their imagination and skills to design attires meant to preserve the history, and herald the future.

If one compares fashion designing with architecture, one realises that since time immemorial, men and women of the construction industry have visualised about, and designed remarkable structure in various shapes to create a legacy for subsequent generations.

Today the awesome pyramids of classical Egyptians, the mystical relics of the temples and shrines of the Inca people of central America, and the Great ruins of the Monomotapa kingdom of Zimbabwe, stand as monuments to the human spirit to create, preserve and bequeath that which is valuable to their existence.

These structures are helping current generations to shed light on the way of life and the psyche of the communities and nations that lived in those bygone times. It is proper to emphasise that these structures did not just mushroom out of the earth. They were imagined, designed, created and preserved for prosperity.

In their times, these structures played a significant cultural role - either accommodating the nation or serving as places of worship to strengthen the moral fibre of the society. As people interacted with these structures, one would imagine, they wore different garments denoting various levels and intensity of the interaction. For example a high priest will dress in a certain robe to perform a certain ritual.

The above example helps to demonstrate the role of the fashion industry in our cultures. It is said that by culture we mean the way of life of a people but most importantly the way that life expresses meanings and values through social institutions such as family, schools, places of worship, customs, and fashion.

Who can forget the legendary umbhaco of the AmaXhosa, the isicholo of the AmaZulu women, the minwenda of the VhaVenda and the mitsheka na shibelani of the Tsonga? The same can be asked of the BaSotho blanket, the Scottish kilts, the Japanese Kimono and the Arabian turbans.

According to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a fashion designer must be aware of the important aesthetic, social, cultural and technical forces of their time. It goes on to add that fashion students are exposed to influences and issues that must be understood in order to achieve an informed, imaginative, and professional approach to the creation of fashion.

A strong fine arts background is an essential asset in fashion design. Students are encouraged to explore as many of the fine arts and design areas as possible. Knowledge of painting, architecture, fibre and sculpture is often reflected in the work of students.

Earlier I made reference to gross commercialisation. I wish to state for the record that there is nothing wrong with you graduating here today and going out to establish your own fashion design businesses tomorrow. As a country and a proud nation, we need to see the proliferation of the Nandipha Madikizas.

Given the reality of globalisation, we as government would like to see you, as entrepreneurs, taking advantage of numerous incentives and other trade agreements, to build a strong domestic industry that will compete internationally meanwhile earning much needed foreign capital and creating jobs, especially for other youths.

The Department of Public Works is already leading by example with regard to creating economic opportunities for unemployed youth in the construction industry. Together with the National Youth Commission, we invested R50 million in the Youth for Environmental Accessibility Programme which is intended to physically modify public buildings and make them accessible to people living with disabilities.

More than 400 youth mainly from the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo were given basic training and employed in the conversion of 267 public buildings throughout South Africa. On 17 March 2001 I personally launched the programme at Grahamstown not far from here where as part of the programme we had physically converted entrances to a hospital, schools and other government buildings.

On other programmes of the Department such as the Community Based Public Works Programme, women and youth are targeted for employment during the construction of basic but essential infrastructure in the rural areas of South Africa particularly those very impoverished. In 2001/2002, the Department expended R374 million to physically build 562 community projects in six provinces, creating job opportunities for 25 124 of which 10 300 (44%) were youth. This is the track record we have come to be proud of.

Fashion designers like the rest of our cultural workers must take their rightful place in the renaissance of Africa. There is no contradiction between economic prosperity and the values of Ubuntu. Necessarily fashion design must reflect about who we are in the realm of humanity.

May I take this opportunity to reinvigorate government's campaign against the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This campaign is inseparably linked to a campaign to stop violence and abuse against women and children. To the youth of our country the message is loud and clear, Abstain, Be Faithful and Condomise

As you stand on the threshold of a brighter future, we wish you all the success with your planned endeavours. May the spirit of South Africanness be literally sewn into your designs so that your creations can carry and fly high the South African flag. We look forward to a nation that will be clothed by your imaginative designs.

I thank you.

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