

Western Cape design project nominated for global Human City Design award

Western Cape design project, Better Living Challenge (BLC) which encourages innovation and affordable solutions in low-income housing, is in the running for the \$85,000 Human City Design Award, organised by the Seoul Design Foundation. The winner will be announced on Thursday 26 September in Seoul, South Korea.



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The Human City Design Award recognises projects that contribute to a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between people, society, the environment, and nature. It is hosted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, in partnership with Human Cities Network, the World Design Organisation, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (of which the City of Cape Town is a member) and the Korean Federation of Design Associations.

The BLC project is funded by the Western Cape Department of Human Settlements and the Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism. It has been managed by the Craft and Design Institute (CDI) for the past seven years and was a flagship project during Cape Town's tenure as World Design Capital in 2014.

"It is a great honour to have one of our projects nominated for a top global design award," says Erica Elk, CDI executive director, who will travel to Seoul for the ceremony.

"This project is an excellent example of how design-led processes can unlock new thinking and ways of doing. It has been a great experience to watch the BLC take shape and grow over the years and continue to produce innovations. Over time, these will catalyse better living conditions for thousands of families living in low-income communities."

Home improvement design innovation

The first phase of BLC took the form of a competition challenge to manufacturers, inventors and entrepreneurs to design innovations that meet the needs and increase the choice of products available to the home improvement market, specifically in low-income areas.

The project supported the development of affordable and environmentally-friendly products for home improvement: water saving and harvesting, insulation, fire warning systems, alternative materials, and off-grid energy use. Three professional and two student winners were selected from over 130 entries, and the winners received bespoke support to commercialise their products to the value of R500,000.

The second phase, still in process, has involved extensive research and user-testing using design process methodology, with a focus on how to create an enabling environment for the incremental upgrades of homes in informal settlements. The research revealed that people needed home improvement products, systems and services as well as access to information (how to improve their homes and where to access support) and skills development (how to build better, how to design better building processes, and how to use different materials and solutions effectively).

Phase two culminated in a pilot two-week Design + Build Incubator. This offered 15 small-scale builders working in the informal housing sector the chance to develop their technical design and building skills, as well as their business acumen. The goal was to help them design and build better structures in local communities and to improve their livelihoods.

Upskilling local communities

This training programme brought together industry experts such as local community organisations and architects to share their insights with the small-scale builders. The incubator covered various subjects, from financial management and basic building skills to marketing skills and personal development. All these subject areas were designed to assist small-scale builders with skills they could use to improve how they work, and more importantly, to improve how they build.

All 15 participants continue to be supported through a mentoring programme, says Elk.

"The BLC team is currently securing two pop-up builds in rural communities. This will give the current participants the opportunity to pass on their skills and knowledge to another cohort of small-scale builders. This brings to life the South African adage of 'each-one-teach-one'."

In addition, a Materials + Tools bank prototype is being tested. This includes the development of a mobile application with an international engineering firm; and specifications for an on-line Knowledge Platform, enabling the ongoing dissemination of information to small-scale builders and home dwellers.

"The most recent work we have done with the 15 local builders, who are still highly engaged and motivated in their learning and development process, is inspiring," says Elk. "The network of stakeholders and the active involvement of our funders, partners and enthusiastic supporters – who generously give of their time and expertise – is what continues to drive us to deliver this programme."

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