

## Couch Confessions - Nicola Holden (Part 1)



After initial introductions on [LinkedIn](#) in response to a post I left on a group page, and after nearly six months of networking, the fast-paced life of interior designer Nicola Holden finally hit a plateau long enough for me to get in some questions about life growing up in Mugabe-land and what African design means to her.

**ME:** So, Happy very belated New Year! How were the holidays?

**Nicola Holden:** Wonderful and much needed! I headed to Ireland for Christmas with my sister and her family. It was great to get a pause because as always it was a very busy time trying to meet all my Christmas deadlines.

**ME:** I can imagine! So tell us about growing up in Zimbabwe. Thirty years ago...it must have been a bit...scary?

**NicHol:** I think I had a pretty idyllic childhood growing up in Zimbabwe despite the fact that I was born into a civil war. Thankfully the actual fighting was mostly restricted to the rural areas and so being a city girl it largely passed me by as a child. My memories of my childhood are of long, hot summers, the swimming pool in our garden, and lots of fun and laughter with family and friends. Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980 when I was 7.

**ME:** Do you remember even back then being interested in design?

**NicHol:** Not really! I was particularly interested in architecture or design at all growing up, although I was forever rearranging my bedroom! My love of architecture actually came later when I started traveling around Europe. Growing up in Zimbabwe *did* however influence my love of space and light, of color and texture, whether designed by man or from nature - and it is these elements that find their way into my work today.

**ME:** So you have like a "eurofrika" design palette?

For me, the best of African design comes not particularly from using it on its own, but from integrating it into a scheme which then gives rise to an eclectic mix, whilst retaining the African undertones. I ask myself to what extent is African design compatible with my other favorite styles of design? How can African design fit in with other trends, and how do I fit it all together?

**ME:** So how *did* you end up in this business?

**NicHol:** Not directly, that is for sure. I spent 8 years working as an engineer, installing production lines to make engine components at Ford Motor Company. As time went by I realized that, although I was good at what I did, there was a huge artistic side to me that was being starved. Interior design allows me to use both my engineering skills (the best kitchen I have ever worked in, I laid out as a production line!), and my artistic skills. Interior design is definitely now my passion.

**ME:** How has the industry changed since you transitioned to design full-time?

**NicHol:** Well, soon after starting my own business I became an Associate Member of the [British Institute of Interior Design](#). I think that the interior design industry as a whole is doing more of this - becoming much more professional, more network-centric. It is a great benefit to be a part of such an organization especially because interior design is also becoming more challenging as more and more products are now available directly to the consumer online, which means we all have to be a lot more transparent about pricing, and provide a value-add service that clients are really willing to pay for.

**ME:** So, what is on the agenda for 2013? What are you working on these days?

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**NicHol:** The job market has been pretty quiet for me and other designers I know since this past summer, largely due to the Olympics (which were just an amazing experience for London). Since then things have picked up again and I am working on a cozy en-suite bathroom for one client, a niche project for one of the embassies here in London, and a much larger project starting in West London soon – transforming a tired family home into a space designed for a now retired couple whose son has flown the nest.

**ME:** What has been your favorite project so far?

**NicHol:** I love working on projects where the client wants you to push the boundaries and deliver something really unique and different. Those are the most enjoyable projects. I had one brief from a male client which read “dark, red, retro, and funky”. I had great fun creating a bachelor pad for him that was the envy of all his friends.

**ME:** You are based in London now but being from Zimbabwe must have made you want to put a special emphasis on local artisans?

**NicHol:** Yes, but the extent to which that is possible depends on the project, the client and the budget for the job. Sometimes I can find exactly what I want off-the-shelf, but there are other times that I have to get custom pieces made to create the look I am trying to achieve. Regardless, I do love visiting trade and craft fairs and seeing what creative talents are out there.

**ME:** Besides trade fairs, where in the world do you fantasize about visiting for inspiration?

**NicHol:** Oh gosh, where in the world *don't* I fantasize about visiting? I absolutely love traveling, and am lucky enough to have taken two round-the-world trips already. Morocco is definitely near the top of places to visit, but I would also love to go back to India and Barcelona as I visited both of those places before I became an interior designer.

**ME:** Since you like traveling, how do you think African design is different from other regions?

**NicHol:** It is the appreciation for the handmade and the traditional, the concept of protecting small industries, thinking of and leveraging the natural environment (i.e. mud, grass), and knowing that less is more. Although a poorer continent, it recognizes it has so much richness to offer compared to other places.

**ME:** Where do you think the interior design industry is headed in Africa?

**NicHol:** Africa is such a vast continent, it is hard to generalize, but I think that, like the mobile phone industry, interior design is an up-and-comer. Certainly thinking of Zimbabwe where I grew up, the African people are quite a showy people, and having a home to suit their status in life is becoming more and more important. Therefore I think that interior design has a great future in Africa.

*Me thinks so too - Thanks Nicola!*

To contact Nicola Holden, check out [www.nicolaholdendesigns.co.uk](http://www.nicolaholdendesigns.co.uk)

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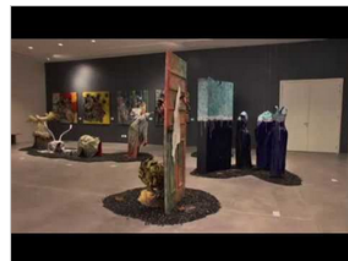
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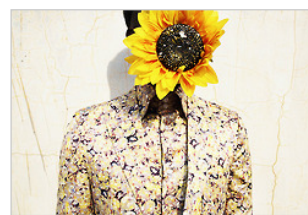
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