

The SA design duo breaking into the US decor market

 By Lauren Hartzberg

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Pretoria-based sisters Morongwe (Mo) Mokone and Michelle Mokone lead the all-woman team behind Mo's Crib, a South African home decor business creating stylish products from recycled materials, and creating employment for women by equipping them with artisanal skills.



Michelle and Morongwe Mokone, owners of Mo's Crib. Source: Supplied

Mo's Crib specialises in proudly South African handmade homeware products made from recycled PVC. Attractive, durable and multi-purpose baskets and planters are created using PVC water pipes, which Mo's Crib employees source and collect from landfills and construction sites around the country. These are then cut into strips and woven over the course of a workday to create the brand's signature PVC product range.

After finding success among local home retailers, Mo's Crib has set its sights abroad, securing a partnership with popular US home decor store Crate and Barrel, which will begin stocking the locally-made recycled PVC range.



Source: Supplied

From side hustle to success

What began as a side hustle for Mo, who sold just one product at local markets in 2016, has evolved into a successful business with a growing range currently comprising 36 products. In 2017, Michelle joined Mo in the venture, and by July 2019 both sisters had resigned from their full-time corporate jobs and made Mo's Crib their sole focus.

The business is 100% self-funded, and driven by the sisters' mission to use Mo's Crib products to highlight and provide a solution to environmental and social issues. In a sentence, Mo's Crib seeks to create sustainable products made using sustainable material, to create sustainable jobs.

The company is staffed entirely by women, who are trained as artisans and provided with educational opportunities and access to a number of workplace benefits, including housing, meals, transportation allowance, and an on-site health clinic for basic medical needs.

In light of [Women's Month](#), Michelle shares more on the Mo's Crib vision and the company's journey to success.

■ ***What inspired you to launch your own decor products business?***

If we consider the homemade craft of crocheting strips of reused plastic bags into rugs, which Mo used to do as a little girl, then the idea for Mo's Crib dates back to the 90's. The actual business, however, started off as a hobby in 2016 when we took part in an annual Christmas market while working full-time in our corporate jobs.

The first product sold was origami art, which Mo learnt in London, and what we thought would be a slow sale fast became a phenomenon, selling out within days of the market. We introduced new products every year for two years until we decided to quit our full-time jobs in 2019 and get into the business full-time. We are both inspired by homeware and we wanted to create a design unit that offers well-crafted homeware for customers' homes.

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[View this post on Instagram](#)



A post shared by Mo's Crib (@mos.crib)



📌 Congrats on the partnership with Crate and Barrel. What does it entail, and how did it come about?

Our entire business model is premised around providing goods that are environmentally friendly, sustainable and recyclable. This is supported by our slogan 'Redesigning sustainable living' because we envision a future where customers begin sourcing products that are eco-friendly or address current environmental impacts faced globally.

This is indeed aligned to Crate and Barrel's environmental initiatives, which prioritise developing new products and manufacturing processes to expand the responsible choices it offers its customers.

As we are constantly looking at opportunities to ensure our products are accessible globally, it was a well-aligned decision to collaborate with a retail store that is globally inspired and is not limiting the reach of its design to only the US but incorporating African design, and an overall commitment to sustainability. This was well demonstrated when they fell in love with this unconventional craft of the recycled PVC range.

The relationship started during the national lockdown over emails to various homeware stores internationally, and Crate and Barrel was more eager to explore the opportunity further.

📌 How have you gone about getting noticed by retailers and getting your products stocked in their stores? What has this process been like for you?

Our first distribution channel was direct to consumer through local markets. While this valuable model served us in the beginning stages, as we worked full-time, it was not feasible when we decided to go into business full-time. While we remained consistent with our product offering, we wanted more people to have access to our products, so we decided to approach homeware stores with our products and had a positive response.

The process is not easy because you need to quickly transition from selling low volumes to high volumes, which require maximum quality and all the other added requirements – such as packaging and tags – which we did not worry about when operating at a small scale.

We first broke into retail in March 2020, the same week that South Africa announced its first Covid case. This was a challenging time but with some marketing, our products sold out once restrictions eased and this let us know that we were on the right track.



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■ ***The Mo's Crib brand seems strongly aligned to its 'handmade in South Africa' ethos. Why was this approach important to you?***

This speaks to the sustainability principle at Mo's Crib. Our goal stems from creating sustainable products, using sustainable material to create sustainable jobs. The use of handmade techniques ensures that we provide a significant number of jobs to our South African community members, creating skills and preserving talent.

While machinery ensures productivity, we would like to incorporate the artisanal element in all our products. 'Handmade in South Africa' also speaks largely to the sustainability of the environment, as electricity is not required to make some of our products, which preserves our carbon footprint.

■ ***In light of Women's Month and as female founders yourselves, what do you think is the biggest misconception about women in leadership roles?***

The biggest misconception is around fixed narratives around gender roles, and due to this old traditional way of thinking, when a woman occupies the leadership role, which comes with delegating, making decisions and leading a team, this is often looked down upon and thus not taken seriously. We have to learn to move away from narratives and embrace the changes that women and men are making in the modern world we live in today.



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■ ***What's been the most rewarding part of following your dreams?***

Being able to share the success of Mo's Crib with our employees. Being able to make a difference in the lives of those that are employed by Mo's Crib has been the most rewarding part because the small steps we took have now created an impact in the communities that we serve, and in the homes of our dedicated team members.

■ ***What advice do you have for aspiring South African designers, particularly women, trying to make a career out of their work?***

Be unique, have a product that tells a story and be willing to go beyond the standard practices as it pertains to design and art in the home space. Expose yourself to new ideas and look beyond the basic forms of art and creativity presented to you in your immediate environment.

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

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