

Cape Union Mart Group launches design studio to drive localisation

By  Lauren Hartzenberg

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With a goal to produce 65% of products locally by 2028, the Cape Union Mart Group has launched the Green Thread Studio, a creative hub to facilitate the growth of local clothing design and production.



Credit: Tegan Smith Photography

The design studio will be the core design and production hub for Poetry, Old Khaki and Keedo, and its establishment has created 220 jobs in manufacturing and 33 in design.

“We have a multi-billion rand investment in this country. We've got a massive distribution centre, we've got two factories that employ nearly 600 people. We have some 300 stores, and we have over 3,300 employees. We are totally committed to South Africa,” Cape Union Mart Group’s executive chairman Philip Krawitz said at the launch event.



Credit: Tegan Smith Photography

The family-owned retail group plans to provide its retailers with more product lines that can be made locally at a competitive price, with the same (or better) quality standards expected from international suppliers. By accelerating localisation efforts, it also aims to support communities with job opportunities and generate more business for local fabric and trim SMME suppliers.

The group has set itself the target of running 280,000 units and 385 styles through the design studio in 2023, and aims to grow this to 360,000 units with more than 500 styles in 2024.

“We’re more than just creating jobs, we’re thinking ahead. We’ve always sent buyers overseas to see what styles are available ... What’s wrong with us? We’ve got great creative people, people with incredible imagination and wonderful taste. We have to change the negative mindset that everyone overseas is better, because local is lekker. Let’s have faith in South African design and creativity...” said Krawitz.

The Green Thread Studio will give the company better control over the evolution of product creation, and allows for closer collaboration between buyers, designers and production teams.

Krawitz added, “Most of the big retailers are wanting to convert more production locally, especially on the back of a challenging two years which has made everyone aware of the risks of supply chain. To produce locally, businesses need to have the correct set-up to support this strategy, and we wanted to set ourselves up for this growth according to best practice.”



Cape Union Mart Group executive chairman Philip Krawitz. Credit: Tegan Smith Photography

Upskilling new talent

Growing local production often requires an investment in manufacturing training to allow for the transfer of technical skills developed by previous generations of pattern makers, cutters and machinists who worked in SA's apparel industry when it was globally competitive. Training can also equip manufacturers and suppliers to build production capacity sustainably.

Cape Union Mart Group owns two factories in Cape Town - K-Way Manufacturers in Ottery, which produces for Cape Union Mart, and Green Thread Manufacturers in Paarden Eiland, which produces for the group's other retail brands and from which the new design studio has been created.



Credit: Tegan Smith Photography

The group has been aiding the introduction of fresh talent into the clothing manufacturing industry, with facilities to train and upskill newcomers with the aim of creating employment for them.

There is a great focus on ensuring the machinists are multi-skilled and able to flex to different commodities as the needs and demands change relating to trend and supply. According to the company, this is a major consideration in safeguarding the success of the group owning its own CMTs.



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As a design-led retail group, it made sense to invest more in the design segment of the business, Shelley Prinsloo, GM of Poetry and Green Thread Studio, said during the event. She explained that having the design operation previously located in Paarden Eiland wasn't ideal, and that bringing the design centre closer to the head office could improve collaboration so that "every design element was considered and designed from conception stage to production."

Now, with the Green Thread design studio located alongside the retail group's head office in the Cape Town city centre, it provides the opportunity for buyers and designers to work closely side-by-side on creating and reworking products as needed.



Credit: Tegan Smith Photography

On the ground floor of the design studio is a small factory focused on pre-production manufacturing, shortening the time between conception of an idea to the mock-up of a product. By producing more locally, Cape Union Mart believes it can improve efficiency and ramp up speed to market.

Prinsloo said, “We’re conscious about streamlining our production lead times. For every style that you create there are often multiple samples that get exchanged between the buying team and the supplier. What the design centre enables is for the buyers and designers to work closely together. It eliminates some of the wastage and it also reduces carbon emissions because we’re not transporting samples all around the world.”



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Sustainability was a core value that drove the creation of the Green Thread Studio. According to the group, it’s now better equipped to develop and evolve its fabrics and fabric prints with a focus on increasing the number of sustainable fabrics used.

Determined to eliminate materials going to landfill, the group employs a minimal waste approach where fabric off-cuts are upcycled to minimise the amount of waste that occurs through sampling. About 500kg of offcuts are rewoven and reused monthly by the group, and scraps are also donated to NGOs that upcycle them into products that they sell.

“Sustainability is really a journey on its own and we’re learning as we go. We’re bringing it to the forefront of our thinking. Our design ethos has always been to put endurance, style and quality first, and this ethos has given birth to our commitment to sustainability,” Prinsloo said.

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