

WHAT IF! Design: 2025 SA DESIGN COMPETITION BRIEF

A Collaborative Call to Imagine and Reframe

This competition, presented by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (DEFSA) in partnership with the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture (DSAC), reaches beyond traditional boundaries. It asks emerging designers to envision new products or services and entire systems and futures. It is a platform to speculate, critique, and express a new kind of design thinking that fully acknowledges our cultural heritage, strives for deep sustainability, and seeks to harmonise technological advancements with human values. The journey will culminate at the DEFSA Conference, titled **Design+**, where the finalists' works will be showcased, discussed, and celebrated.

THE CHALLENGE

WHAT IF DESIGN...

"How can design disrupt conventional paradigms to reimagine a sustainable future that balances technological innovation, cultural stewardship, and empathetic, human-centred solutions to address the world's pressing challenges?"

This is not just another design challenge. This brief invites you to engage in speculative design thinking—imagining alternative presents to spark debate and discussion about critically designed futures. What if design could become as transformative and influential as artificial intelligence yet remain grounded in local contexts, cultural integrity, and ethical responsibility? What if design could serve as a bridge, enabling us to preserve ancient narratives while unearthing new ecological and technological languages for tomorrow?

We call on South Africa's next generation of designers—high school learners, tertiary students, and young professionals—to explore design as a radical act of creation. Present visions that unsettle assumptions, embrace our heritage, and cultivate innovations that could lead us to a more equitable, inclusive, and regenerative world.

Judging Criteria

Submissions will be evaluated on:

1. **Originality & Design Language:** Does your concept present a unique perspective with a coherent and compelling design identity?



2. **Creativity & Innovation:** How effectively does your work challenge conventions, inspire fresh thinking, and propose visionary pathways?
3. **Sustainability Integration:** Does your design embed sustainability principles—ecological integrity, cultural resilience, social equity—at its core?

The judging panel will consider the level of critique in the judging criteria per category.

Entry Requirements

1. Eligibility:

- High school learners
- Tertiary students
- Young professionals (30 years or younger, with up to 2-3 years of experience)

2. Geographic Requirement:

- Participants must reside in South Africa.

3. Submission Details:

Online entries must include:

- Full Name and Surname
- High School or University Name (for student categories)
- Contact Number
- Email Address
- Final design and a 200 to 500-word synopsis describing your design and concept (see guidelines for more information)
- A certified declaration stating that the final design submitted is your own original work and has not been submitted for another competition.

Key Dates & Recognition

- **Deadline for Submissions:** July 18, 2025
- **Finalists Announced:** At the 2025 DEFSA Conference, **Design+**

Awarding the winner and finalists

- **Winner's Recognition:** The overall winner will receive mentorship opportunities, visibility among industry professionals, and potential avenues for project implementation or continued development.
- **The top Ten Finalists of all three categories Will gain a platform to showcase their work at the DEFSA Conference - Design+**, network with industry leaders, and publicly acknowledge their visionary contributions.

Competition Guidelines & Copyright

- Guided by the competition brief and judging criteria, entrants must submit their design outcome digitally with a 200 to 500-word synopsis. The synopsis should provide an overview of your design and how it speaks to the speculative provocation: ***What if Design...***
- There are no restrictions on the final design outcome, and all design disciplines are encouraged to enter.
- Examples of design outcomes you can submit and things to consider;
 - Images in JPG or PNG format ensure that the quality is high
 - Mp4 video formats not longer than 10 minutes
 - Artworks or illustrations, garments, 3D models done by hand or designed digitally (submitted as high-quality JPG, PNG, Mp4 file, publicly accessed website link, etc.)
- Individual and group entries with a maximum of three co-designers will be considered.
- Entrants retain copyright to their submitted work but grant the competition organisers the right to feature all submissions—with full credit—in promotional, educational, and exhibition materials.

This is your chance to reimagine, to speculate, and to provoke:

Imagine design as a transformative tool for building futures we have yet to conceive, bridging the best of technological possibilities with the richness of cultural narratives. Join us in asking, “What if?” and be part of shaping a design discourse that looks boldly ahead.

For more information, contact us at secretariat@defsa.org.za