


Free

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# Cape Chameleon

changing faces changing places



**Piercing the**  
THE VEIL

# Township Patterns

## A FAIR-TRADE FASHION BRAND

**WORDS** Robin Ancilotto

**PHOTOS** courtesy of Township Patterns

It is common knowledge that townships are filled with crime and numerous social issues. Yet, according to Nicole Marie Iresch, founder and chairman of the Township Group (a pioneering social enterprise model), there are other aspects of these settlements, which need to emerge. 'There is love and happiness. And our goal is to show the world these qualities. The idea of the townships must change.'

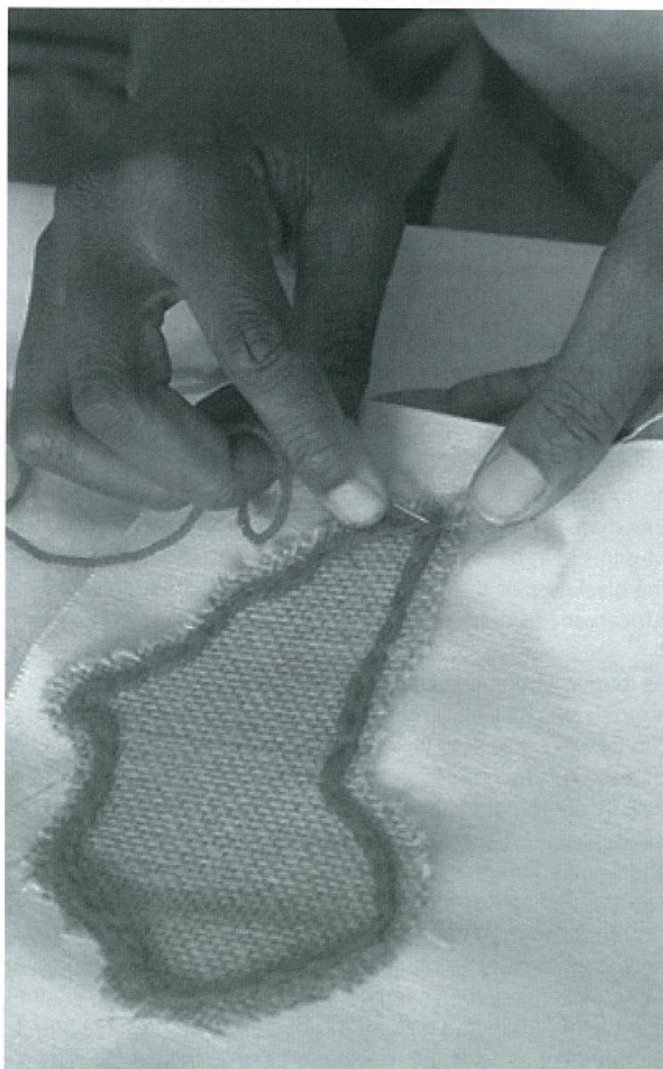
### A colourful idea

Nicole Marie visited Cape Town for the first time in 1987 and her attention was captured by the colours and the fascinating patterns visible in the townships at first sight. 'Their living spaces express what they are and the way they think. They use recycled packaging for the inside walls and they matched the colour of the exterior perfectly. They know how to do everything by themselves.' Once Nicole Marie realised the potential hidden behind the seemingly poor appearance of their environments, her task was to help the people understand their capabilities and bring them out.

Over the past years, Nicole Marie spent time collecting hundreds of images of the townships. She grouped them according to colours and textures and she ended up creating a range of new fabrics – totally inspired by recurring shapes and patterns found in the shanty towns.

Therefore, after months of hard team-work, the new range of fabrics became an exciting new brand called Township Patterns. It was finally ready to launch its first collection of prêt-a-porter and accessories and since last December, the collection is available in the first Township Boutique at the Cape Quarter, in Green Point.

The path reaching this achievement, however, started many years ago in the late 90s, when Nicole Marie decided to move to Cape Town permanently. During her first visits to the townships, she was approached by women asking for jobs. 'I listened carefully to what their needs were and what they were able to do.' She realised that the best way to help them was to create job opportunities within their settlements, because they were already able to sew, the first idea was to produce environmentally friendly bags. 'At that time, everybody told me: you'll fail. Other people tried something similar before without success.' Yet, she never lost faith as she had the type of enterprise in mind so that she could succeed.



▲ Garments are made with 100% African non-GM cotton.

## The innovative social enterprise model

Township Group is made up of three different subjects: 'Afrique du Sud, Bidonvilles' (French translation 'South Africa Township'), the NPO whose purpose is to provide the women with the necessary management and technical support; the self-owned sewing cooperatives (currently seven), each consisting of ten women from the Townships and the Cape Flats and lastly, Township Patterns whose task is to design and market the products manufactured by the cooperatives.

Township Pattern is also a World Fair Trade Organisation accredited company. In order to better match the characteristics of a sustainable social enterprise, in fact, each product is paid to the cooperatives according to the WFTO outlines. The three parts of the group are strongly linked to each other, but the marketing aspect is essential to ensure the success of the project.

## The visionary behind it

While she was still living in France, Nicole Marie was employed by a major airline. After experiencing South Africa, she could have gone back to her safe job, but she didn't. Besides the patterns and the colours, it was the attractive spirit of the local people that captured Nicole Marie to the point of being unable to return home to Europe. 'They never tried to teach me anything, but just by being in touch with them I could change and today I'm happy about the person I've become,' says Nicole Marie.

Actually there is one lesson she received from them. When she was approaching her first big client for the eco-friendly bags, she was really anxious and she shared her fears with the women she was worked with: 'I clearly remember the mamas saying: 'Just go, we pray for you. We were in! That gave me the key to overcome any challenges and I simply stuck to that rule, every day since then.'

While the mamas helped to motivate her, Nicole Marie had the necessary talent to capture the beauty of the ordinary elements she had right in front of her. The result of her ability shows in the original and exclusive 100% African non-GM cotton fabrics she created together with a team of designers from Paris. The choice of the right people was essential for the success of the business.'



▲ Fabric textures are inspired by the fascinating colours and patterns of the townships.

Sharing her private and business life with her husband, Christophe Labesse who manages the Group, Nicole Marie can devote herself completely to the creative and inspirational side of the project. But what matters most to her is to change the way people think about townships and their inhabitants.

At the moment, the best tool to achieve this is represented by the Township website. Totally innovative, this website has an 'A to Z' encyclopedia of the township's life. While busy designing it, Nicole Marie's aim was to go beyond the standard multimedia window about their project and the products available. 'My goal was to build a sustainable educational website.' She explains, 'I wanted to create a lens through which people around the world could see things as the people in the townships.' The homepage, therefore, is linked to several pages, where it's possible to find information about South African culture, transport and security matters and a lot more related to the townships communities' life.

Nicole explains, 'I'm usually approached by people with my same vision. They have a clear idea of what the enterprise of tomorrow will be: open, free, transparent and reaching out to others.'

Perhaps if there were more people who thought and felt like Nicole Marie, talent would be put to good use instead of being hidden in a township. ©

▼ The sewing cooperatives are wholly owned and managed by women living in the townships.



▼ Samples of items included in the township's new prêt-à-porter collection.

