



MAGAZINE REVIEW

Design Indaba magazine

Reviewed by Deirdre Pretorius

First, Second and Third Quarter 2006. Price: R50.00

Broadly speaking, non-academic South African magazines dedicated to, or featuring graphic design fall into one of two categories: those that carry advertising and those that do not. Slotting into the latter category are magazines such as *Afro*, *I-Jusi* and *Sheet* which are self-published by graphic designers. Driven by the need to articulate experimental, expressive graphic design and freed from commercial constraints these magazines are published infrequently and are accountable only to the designers who create them. In

the former category, we find magazines that are published regularly and operate firmly within the realm of commerce, such as *Contempo*, *One Small Seed*, *Design*, *Enjin* and *Design Indaba*.

Design Indaba magazine was launched following the Fourth Annual Design Indaba conference in 2001 and aligns itself with the conference's primary aim which is to 'advance the cause of design as a communication fundamental, a

business imperative and a powerful tool in industry and commerce' (www.designindabamag.com). The audience for the magazine is described broadly on the website as the 'creative fraternity' and specifically as the 'image-makers and image merchants' of the marketing, advertising and design fraternity. The magazine, which is published quarterly, has a circulation of 5 000, is distributed internationally and boasts figures such as Terence Conran on its distribution list. The editorial commitment of the magazine is explicated on the website as consisting of four points:

to focus on non-western visual disciplines, create a high-quality record of high-tech and high-culture global content, deliver it using skilled and informed contributors rich in perspective and focused on design, showcase some of the world's best design across different disciplines and uncover the philosophy/thinking behind them (www.designindabamag.com).

The First, Second and Third Quarter issues of 2006 reviewed here all follow the same straightforward structure. An editorial page, followed by a contents page, thereafter a section named *designews*, and then between nine to twelve articles of varying length. Each issue is given a specific title that appears on the spine of the magazine, which creates the expectation that the content of each issue is built around the given title. This expectation is confirmed in the Third Quarter issue titled 'Spaceship Earth', as the majority of the articles in this issue directly relate to ecological matters

in design. The title of the First Quarter, 'Get your teeth into design' is broad enough to embrace the mix of profiles, interviews and articles on a variety of designers and disciplines contained in the issue. The most tenuous link between content and title is found in the Second Quarter issue titled 'A better future by design', an issue probably better titled 'A retrospective of Design Indaba 9'.

Each of the above issues covers a broad range of disciplines, including illustration, graphic design, photography, fashion design, architecture and product design. The focus is mainly on South Africa, with profiles and articles on South African design companies, designers, illustrators, photographers and design projects predominating. Furthermore, all three issues reviewed include articles on Design Indaba 9 and the accompanying expo with the most comprehensive coverage in the Second Quarter issue following these events. The remainder of the content for the magazine is derived from interviews with European and American designers who participated in the Design Indaba conference.

Because of the focus and combined coverage on South African, European and American design, the three issues under review fail to deliver on the magazine's editorial commitment to 'focus on non-western visual disciplines'. The interviews with a range of designers ensures delivery on the editorial commitment to 'showcase some of the world's best design across different disciplines', and does reveal the thinking behind these designs, albeit superficially.

The interviewers of the designers tend not to be credited, as is true of most of the contributors to *Design Indaba* magazine. Where contributors are acknowledged, they tend to be mostly South African and include writers such as Sean O'Toole and Adam Levin. In failing to credit the majority of its contributors in the issues reviewed the magazine casts doubt on its ability to deliver on the stated editorial commitment of utilising 'skilled and informed contributors rich in perspective and focused on design'.

In general, the contents of the magazines are uneven. It moves from insightful articles such as Adam Levin's 'Fashion Revolution' in the Second Quarter, in which he explores the development of a South African fashion identity, to the perplexing piece of information parading as an article 'Don't call me babe' in the Third Quarter, which informs of the dangers of disposable baby nappies. It is ironic that in this issue on green design, a snippet, which could easily fit into a quarter of a page, is splashed over a double page spread. With a circulation of 5 000 magazines per issue this means that 5 000 sheets of paper are used to carry a piece of information that can easily fit onto a more ecologically sound 625 sheets of paper.

The paper and printing quality are good and the production values of the magazines conform to, but do not exceed, the expectation for a publication with a R50.00 cover price. The front covers of the three issues under review are striking owing to the use of strong, simple graphics and bright colours. The bold masthead, set in an artfully cropped

uppercase sans serif font, nudges the boundaries of legibility and hints at the restrained typographic experimentation between the covers of the magazine. The internal layout is mostly based on a simple grid on which body copy is placed in columns, mostly horizontally but also vertically and at an angle. To be able to read the vertically placed text the reader must turn the magazine sideways, an act of forced interaction that I personally find distracting. Limited typographic experimentation with aspects such as letter spacing and text placement is visible in areas such as the contents pages and captions. Such typographic experiments were novel five years ago, and the *Design Indaba* magazine breaks no new ground in this area.

Design Indaba is a quick and easy read, only slowed down by the sideways turning of the magazine every now and then. The coverage of South African design is commendable, but unfortunately, the magazine's broad view inevitably leads to a sacrifice of depth in the articles. The magazine's agenda is clearly to promote the Design Indaba conference and expo and there is nothing wrong with that. However, you have to ask yourself, are you prepared to pay fifty rand for a lavishly produced promotional brochure?

Reference

www.designindabamag.com