

BLUE SKY: *A new creative spirit in South African design?*

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South African designers operate in a vacuum - overtly territorial about their clients, their work and interests. All agree that communication is crucial to the development of an indigenous graphic style, yet few forums which encourage open channels of communication exist. Blue Sky, founded by a group of leading graphic designers, aims to bring designers together in an exploration of what South African design should look like.

The foundation for the Blue Sky movement was laid at the Conference of Graphic Designers, held at the University of Stellenbosch in September, 1988. Founder members and leading South African graphic designers Koos le Grange, Cliff Webb, Clive Gay, Gerhard Schwekendiek, Roy Clucas, Marc de Jong, and Ernst de Jong saw as their objective the creation of a unique graphic design culture.

The first meeting of the group was held at Ernst de Jong Studios in October, 1988. The name Blue Sky was adopted and it was agreed that a new South African graphic style be developed. It was decided that the movement would be run on an informal and relaxed basis, with each member individually taking responsibility, on a rotating basis, to host a meeting.

At the five subsequent meetings, held between November, 1988 and July, 1989, the essential characteristics of the movement were established. The members decided that the conventional 'ethnic' look be avoided and that the emphasis be on the creation of a unique design style based on South Africa's diverse cultural heritage and natural influences.

Initially suggested core words for the definition of Blue Sky were: *NON-COMPUTER/MACHINE, HORIZONTALITY, FREEDOM, ORDER, LIGHT, SPACE, RHYTHM, COLOUR*. It was later agreed that no definition be formulated, but that the following words be used as a guideline in the development of a graphic portfolio: *BLUE SKY, SPACE, HORIZON, FREEHAND, LIGHT, RHYTHM, AFRICA*.

After the sixth meeting held in Cape Town during July, 1989, the movement was put on hold. At this time in the history of South Africa, the downturn in the economy was being experienced by everyone, including designers. The political situation was worsening, violence was increasing and a general state of apathy resulted.

There were, however, significant spinoffs resulting from the early Blue Sky meetings. A team of four designers was commissioned by the South African Reserve Bank to design a series of five new South African banknotes. Many of Blue Sky's aesthetic ideas were incorporated in the new designs. The team, consisting of Clive Gay, Koos le Grange, Cliff Webb and Ernst de Jong, formed a new company called Skynote and successfully completed the notes, which will be distributed later this year.

This year also saw the emergence of a renewed interest in the Blue Sky movement. In June, the seventh meeting of the founder members, and the first general meeting was held in Pretoria. A total of 23 designers from 14 different studios attended. Reports and papers by Clive Gay, Gerhard Schwekendiek and Mervyn Kurlansky of Pentagram, London, were tabled at the meeting.

The paper submitted by Gerhard Schwekendiek contained some thought-provoking ideas on the way Africa has hitherto been exploited by various European artists and art movements, without their actual comprehension of the spiritual essence of Africa.

Schwekendiek claimed that South African design has never been true to Africa, and expressed the need for design to have a spiritual base. In his words:

South African design is guilty of slavishly following European standards when it is essentially in possession of what creates good design in the first place - spirit and gut.

He said that until recently the prevailing attitude was that South Africa was merely an extension of Europe, until, '...political circumstances awakened even the most ardent sleepwalker to the fact that we live on the African continent and have to identify ourselves with it'.

Schwekendiek proposed that South African designers be true both to their European and African heritage, and that they immerse themselves more than ever in the culture of this land:

Behind the curtain of violence and strife there is an exuberance of colour, rhythm and design that awaits discovery. The 'Blue Sky' concept is the attempt to rally those designers who, by attitude and talent, are eager to forge a design culture that truly represents the spirit of South Africa. Ultimately it will enrich and broaden the world of design and has the potential to inspire a tired old Europe.

Founder members view this meeting as the beginning of a drive to broaden the membership base and to direct the efforts of the movement towards making an impact on the whole South African community.

