

NEW SOUTH AFRICA DESIGN INITIATIVE

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A unique South African design culture will only emerge from a shift in attitude. Culturally and psychologically, the design profession will have to explore what it means visually to be African rather than European. This is the context for the framework of a design initiative proposed by Mervyn Kurlansky of Pentagram, London, in a discussion paper originally addressed to Blue Sky members.

South Africa is currently in the throes of dramatic political, economic and cultural change. This process of change will permeate all aspects of South African society, from urban development and educational policy to the direction of the manufacturing industry.

South Africa now stands on the threshold of a future in which it will be fully readmitted to the international community and will play a reinvigorated role in world trade. The opportunities are many but they must be properly identified and exploited.

Design can play a major role in this process in more ways than one - by creating better South African products for export; by improving the environments in which South Africans live and work; by designing better communications for a changing society and industry to put its message across to a world audience.

This paper introduces the idea of the New South Africa Design Initiative. It explains why it is needed and what form it should take.

An initiative of this kind demands a series of alliances - across colour and creed and across political boundaries. Above all, it calls for business, education and the design profession in South Africa to unite behind one banner.

The scope of the New South Africa Design Initiative is ambitious. But the means by which such a programme can be developed are practical and achievable. The

economic and cultural rewards of a design-led approach are obvious - as any analysis of the world's leading companies and most dynamic economies will testify. What is needed to get such an initiative off the ground is goodwill and positive commitment on all sides.

Why a design initiative?

South African business and society faces a number of important challenges as it moves into a new phase in its history. It must:

- attract more investment
- improve the quality and saleability of its products for export
- promote greater cultural harmony across all sections of society
- upgrade living standards and widen job opportunities

Support for high standards of South African product, environmental and graphic design - and the training of a new multi-racial generation of South African designers - will contribute to the achievement of these objectives.

Design means different things to different people. In the context of the industrial and social regeneration that this paper addresses, it is taken to refer to the design of:

- products - the development of new products and the restyling and upgrading of existing ones
- environments - the design of offices, factories, showrooms, shops, leisure centres, hotels etc. in which

South Africans live and work and tourists stay

- graphic communications - company identities, sales and technical brochures, annual reports, book and magazine design, posters and press advertisements - the images and information presented by business and government.

As South Africa promotes itself as a major tourist attraction and as its key industries and companies seek to widen their export markets in a post-sanction environment, it is imperative that South African design be used by business in a way which matches international practice. Those responsible for training designers, commissioning designers and implementing design policy in commerce and industry must be aware of new professional trends.

Designers give form to the objects and images that make up our experience of the material world. Their specifying power largely dictates the look and style of the modern city. Design is a powerful tool to enfranchise people. It enables them to subscribe to the values of a particular political and economic system by sharing in its visual culture. Design allows the visions and aspirations of people to be reflected all around them - on the streets, in the goods and services on sale.

The New South Africa Design Initiative is all about using design to create a better climate for South African business and society to succeed. It is an initiative that is greatly needed.

International parallels

The experience of South Africa in emerging after a long period of economic and social isolation to join the world business community is not unique. Other nations have faced a similar challenge - either after war-time destruction or a dramatic political shift. In nearly every case, a strong commitment to design has underpinned an industrial renaissance.

The first wave of design successes came in the years after the Second World War. Italy rebuilt from the ruins of Fascism during a period known as *ricostruzione* by concentrating on a strong design image. Italian companies in such fields as furniture, lighting, fashion and textiles quickly became internationally renowned leaders. Today such names as Armani, Artemide, Cassina and Fiorucci are world leaders.

Germany reorganised its industries after the defeat of the Third Reich with a combination of engineering, technology and design excellence. Clean and functional German design - as epitomised by such names as Braun, Bosch, BMW and Mercedes Benz - today enjoys a strong market advantage.

Japan slowly regained its industrial foothold after 1945, at first by simply copying Western designs and transferring technology. But later Japanese design gained the confidence to develop its own unique identity and culture. Today Japanese design reflects the market innovation, stylistic flair and technological astuteness of such names as Sony, Sharp, Panasonic, Nissan, Toyota, Mazda and many others.

The Japanese experience in particular has important

lessons for South Africa. Japan has achieved its own unique design culture which incorporates but is separate from European and American styles. What is needed is the emergence of a design culture that is unique to South Africa - a design approach that fuses the cultural experiences of all races living in South Africa with creative influences from the rest of the world.

In more recent years, other nations have re-emerged from a period of isolation to use design as a lever for international recognition. Spain joined NATO and the European Community at the end of the 1970s after the death of Franco and the restoration of democracy. Since then it has used design strategically to signal its new industrial and cultural vibrancy. During the 1980s, Spain became a world leader, a feat climaxed by the honour of hosting the Seville Expo and Barcelona Olympics during 1992.

Hungary and Czechoslovakia are now poised to rejoin the free market economy of Europe. Many observers suggest that these countries will use their proud design heritage and artistic traditions to re-emerge successfully on the world stage. However the economies of Eastern Europe are currently facing unprecedented hardships. The South African economy, while in recession, is in better shape to mount a design-based initiative.

The business benefits

The South African economy is heavily reliant on the mining of minerals, which accounts for fifty five per cent of the country's exports. But manufacturing - which currently represents twenty two per cent of Gross Domestic Product - is becoming increasingly important. Design is a total process which can enable South African companies to export value-added products at

premium prices - and so increase margins - rather than just ship out raw materials. It can also provide a defensive strategy for companies seeking to protect their local and regional markets from new competition from overseas.

Product design embraces the creation of new technical concepts and stylistic innovations, the identification of new market opportunities and the adoption of emerging technologies. All of these bring benefits to business.

Environmental design ensures that offices and factories are well-planned and are pleasant and productive to work in; and that showrooms, reception areas and exhibition stands present a positive image of South African companies to the outside world. These factors are essential to attract customers and investors and retain a loyal workforce.

Graphic design and communications ensure that South African businesses put their message across in the most positive light - with coherent corporate images, well-packaged products, intelligent sales and marketing brochures, and well-designed stationery, instruction manuals and annual reports. A high standard of graphic design communicates images of quality and reliability to consumers and suppliers at home and around the world.

Graphic design is particularly relevant to the South African service sector where the product is often intangible and consumers rely on perception, image and printed information to make their choice. Finance, insurance, real estate and business services, which account for fourteen per cent of the South African economy, represent a growing area of service activity.

If South African companies want to expand internationally, then they must show the same commitment to design as the global players. In computers, IBM set the standard for information technology companies with a sparse, distinctive, modern image carried right through its buildings, products and printed literature. Apple has achieved a similar success in projecting its values globally, using a more informal design framework at diametric opposites to IBM.

In audio systems, Bang and Olufsen of Denmark has achieved a quality image by design, the sleek styling of its equipment the embodiment of its identity. In the same field Sony has achieved global appeal through close attention to design in every detail.

In fashion and retailing, Esprit built an international empire based on a unique design culture of inspired merchandise presentation and shop interiors. The Gap, Benetton, Armani, The Body Shop and others have done the same.

In consumer products, Philips, Siemens, Polaroid and Toshiba have all created strong design management systems to consolidate their hold in world markets.

All these successful international companies are characterised by one thing: a total design culture which permeates the organisation. South African businesses must aim for the same heights.

> The cultural benefits

Design is not just a tool of business. It is a cultural barometer which reflects the lives and aspirations of the people who come into daily contact with design in their

homes, at work and on the street. As the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass memorably remarked, 'Design is about debating life'.

In its cultural context, design can offer many benefits to South Africa. It can help to define the personality of the post-apartheid society, creating a new visual language which draws on both the Black and White experience of the country. It can help attract more visitors by upgrading tourist and visitor facilities; trade, catering and accommodation currently comprise around twelve per cent of the South African economy, offering considerable scope for growth.

In cultural terms, no national design tradition is based on purity of development. British design, for example, combines a unique native wit with the Swiss penchant for functional expression and an imported American dynamism. North American design culture draws on the crafts heritage of the early settlers, the traditions of indigenous Indians and the ethnic diversity of its large immigrant population.

South Africa has the opportunity to develop a new, socially cohesive design culture which expresses the ideas and hopes of all sections of society. The South African design profession will be most successful in achieving this if it embraces a more multi-racial perspective.

A multi-racial perspective

Commercial design in South Africa has been regarded as an all-White province, as it has admittedly been in many other countries. Black people have tended to express their creative spirit in art, music, sport, dance and theatre. Design has been regarded as a reflection of

the prevailing economic, political and social system from which they have been excluded. Design has also been an expression of controlled creativity, but Blacks have had no control.

Black people have had no role models working in commercial design. Consequently they have not had the motivation to enter the profession and this cycle of exclusion has been self-perpetuating.

However the climate is now changing in a country with less than five million Whites and more than 25 million Blacks, Coloureds and Asians. South Africa is becoming a more open society. If one takes the spectrum of design to include 'everything from a spoon to a city', it is imperative in the long run that more young non-Whites train as designers and bring their own cultural perspective to the design of South African products, environments and communications. That way, the visual expression of South Africa will include the non-White experience and enable everyone to share in the values of the society. In addition, a wider entry base for the design profession will make it a larger and stronger force in South African commercial life, and one capable of embracing the viewpoint of the multi-racial consumer.

Making it happen

The South Africa Design Initiative - aimed at improving the financial, material, cultural and spiritual condition of all the people - depends in the first instance on a number of things happening.

A Design Symposium should be convened to be attended by representatives from South African government, industry, education and the design

profession. The aim of this Symposium should be to develop a framework for the Design Initiative, a systematic programme of action aimed at four key audiences:

- business managers
- educationalists
- design professionals
- the general public

Activities aimed at business managers could be as follows:

- case studies presentations showing the effect of design on profitability
- seminars on how to work with designers, including briefing and evaluation
- conferences on the role of design in specific industry and market sectors
- publication of magazines and books addressing the issues of effective design management in business
- awards schemes backed by government giving recognition to well-designed products and companies with successful design policies

Activities aimed at educationalists:

- development of teaching materials to assist curriculum development of vocational design courses in higher education
- programmes to encourage visual literacy in primary and secondary schools
- input of design studies into business management courses
- funding for academic chairs of design research at universities
- organisation of student design competitions and award schemes
- establishment of a South African education centre for

design excellence on a par with Yale or Art Center in the USA or the Royal College of Art in the UK

Activities aimed at design professionals

- a nationally recognised design awards scheme (along D&AD or AIGA lines) to support high creative talents
- in-service training programme for working designers to focus on such issues as business effectiveness, working with clients, green issues etc.
- encouragement for design consultants to forge closer links with business schools
- exhibitions showing the professional design process at work

Activities aimed at the general public:

- museum and art gallery exhibitions showing the cultural contribution of modern commercial design
- television programmes and videos about design for screening on national television
- promotion of media coverage of design issues in national newspapers and magazines
- programme of public lectures about design careers in the townships
- programme in the workplace to inform office and factory staff about design

The aim of the South Africa Design Initiative will be to create a matrix of activities between a range of events (conferences, seminars, exhibitions, publications, lectures, competitions etc.) and a range of audiences (industry, business, government, designers, education and the public). By a constant process of cross-fertilisation between different interest groups and disciplines, the initiative will build momentum and establish short term, medium-term and long-term goals.

The way forward

It will be argued in some quarters that South Africa's social and economic problems are currently too severe for design to play a major role, that design is a luxury, an add-on that the nation cannot afford to consider at this time. However analysis of the economic performance of other nations reveals that design is not a marginal factor in economic growth - it is integral to industrial and cultural regeneration.

The aim of the New South Africa Design Initiative is to mobilise those forces that can exploit the country's natural advantages and make a difference in the way that it faces up to the inevitability of change. Design can make the difference so that:

- South African companies are more active in exporting
- South African industry attracts more investment
- South African tourism expands successfully
- South African society achieves a higher degree of social cohesion

The way forward is for interested parties to unite behind the idea of a Symposium which will launch the New South Africa Design Initiative and develop its programme. The initiative will unite the range of design-based activities that already exist in South Africa as well as encourage new ones.

South Africa's leading companies should be invited to participate in the development of the initiative and act as role models in their management and appreciation of design. From the Design Initiative it is hoped that a spirit will emerge dedicated to propelling the new South Africa towards the top of the league of industrial and civilised nations.