



tinTemple™

Portfolio of South African designers:

Marian Sauthoff

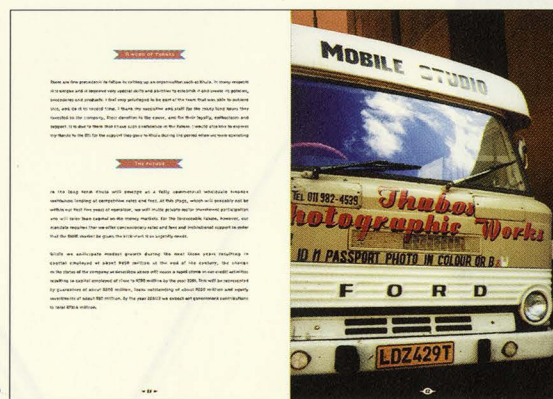
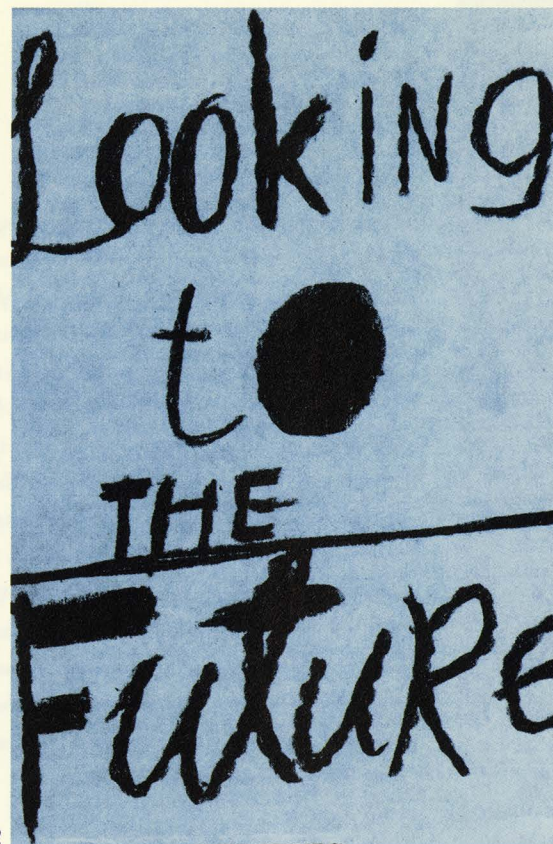
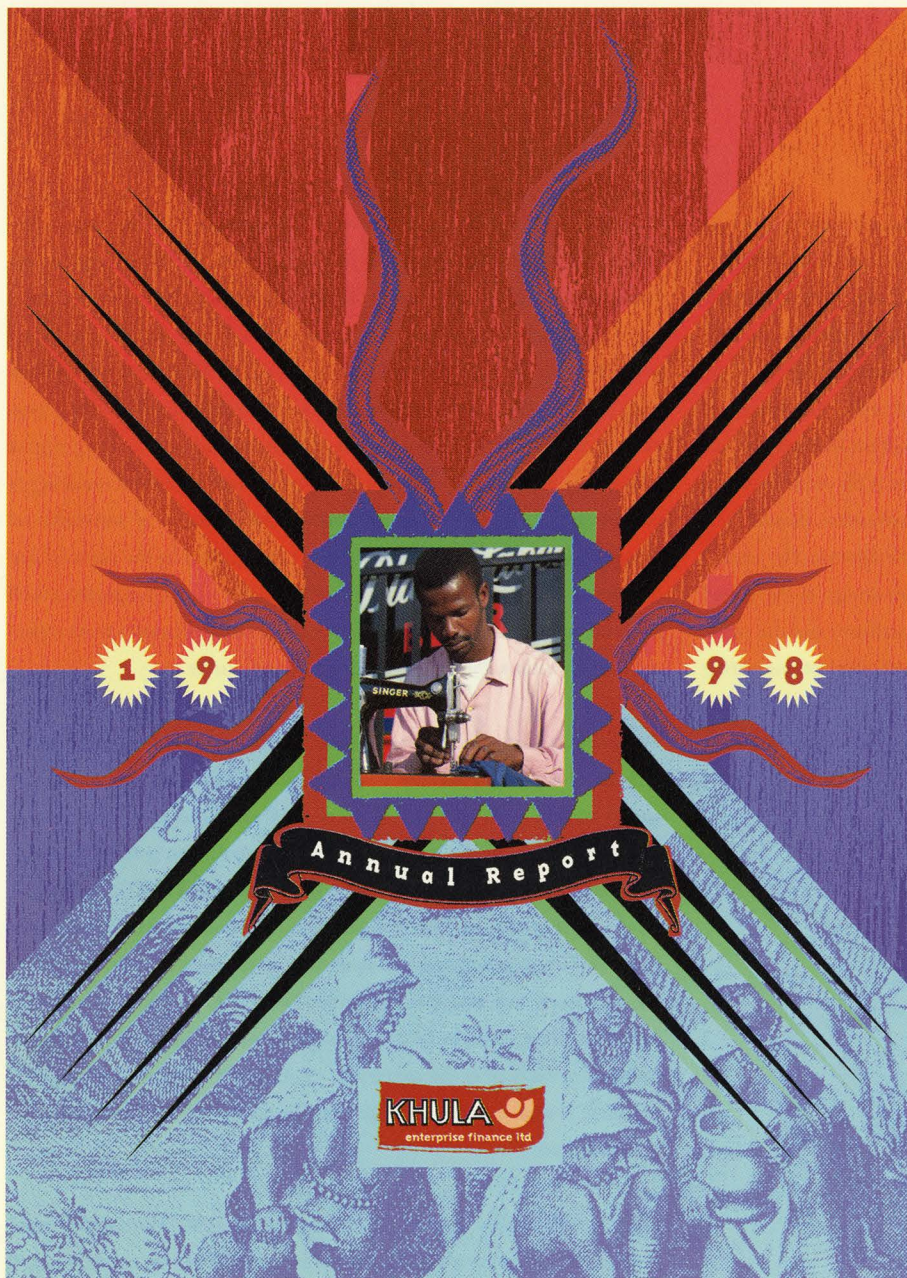
The need to explore and express indigenous influences as key elements in graphic design has enjoyed considerable attention in published articles, conference papers and in the work of South African designers during the last decade. Although the idea is by no means novel, it was given additional impetus by the optimism and anticipation accompanying the social and economic changes offered by the new political order. The issue of a definable South African visual identity and style within this context has essentially been informed by two challenges. The first is the drive to satisfy personal curiosity about the nature of a design expression shaped by a creative exploration of that which is uniquely South African. The second relates to the strategic positioning of South African design in the global arena. The importance of a differentiating visual aesthetic and the value of design skills honed in a complex multi-cultural communications setting continue to be espoused by prominent members of the communications and design industries like Thomas Oosthuizen (1993), Kees Schilperoord (Kaplan 1998) and Roy Lucas (1998).



The initial incorporation of the natural environment, wildlife, naive techniques and marks considered to be characteristic of Africa, and traditional ethnic motifs into graphic design, have gradually made way for a more aggressive visual experimentation which blends indigenous iconographies with Western formats. Lately a focus on the direct engagement with an immediate environment and its vernacular manifestations, coupled to European deconstructionist influences and empowering digital technology have captured the imagination of local designers resulting in the production of work that has gained the attention of international design commentators. This is perhaps best exemplified by the national and international acclaim garnered by Garth Walker's i-jusi magazine which presents 'an African stew' by mixing existing visual elements from different sources within the South African cultural matrix.

TinTemple, a design consultancy based in Johannesburg, epitomises the attitude of a growing number of South African designers who choose to engage directly with their immediate physical and cultural environments in a visual exploration and the creation of a South African graphic language. Established in 1996 by Carl Lamprecht, Daniel Matthews and David Holland, three young graduates from the Technikon Witwatersrand, the enigmatic name TinTemple proclaims a commitment to tap into the history, culture and vernacular expressions of urban Johannesburg. The name was derived from the colloquial term for the corrugated iron buildings in Eloff Street, which from the turn of the century to 1914, served as temporary municipal offices. It is also the site on which the Technikon Witwatersrand is currently located.

Their motivation for setting up in business together immediately after graduation, without undergoing the recommended and accepted route of serving an initial period with an established consultancy, was fuelled by a desire to experiment with impunity. Their utilisation of digital technology was not matched by industry and they felt that their creative energy and



commitment to exploring the richness and vitality offered by diverse and colourful indigenous sources and localities would be hampered by the dominance of marketing and business considerations. This perception echoes a comment by Rick Poyner (1998:95) about two cultures which divide graphic design into '... smaller, younger teams dedicated to the pursuit of creative freedom above all other goals and the larger, mainstream companies who see design primarily as a business and subordinate creative goals to the imperatives of commerce'.

As students Lamprecht, Matthews and Holland individually and collaboratively started to explore a visual aesthetic and themes influenced by the place and spirit of the immediate surroundings of the design school in downtown Johannesburg. This was in response to some of the points raised by postmodern theorists and as a reaction to their training which they felt was to a large extent based on the conventions and practice of continental modernism.

The fascination with vernacular expressions and their relevance to South African design continues to inform their professional work. Their focus has been broadened to include inspiration not only from Johannesburg's urban landscapes, but from other localities in South African as well. Sampling vernacular imagery is an old idea, but what it actually implies, has taken on a multitude of interpretations in graphic design. In its historical and literal sense vernacular refers to a verbal dialect used by a group, but which is not the standard or official language of the community. In contemporary design usage, it includes forms and messages that reflect local customs, commonplace styles and the naive and unknowing visual expressions generated by individuals from outside the design profession. Lupton (1996:111) maintains that the vernacular should be regarded as a broad

The meaning of khula (to grow and prosper) is woven throughout the annual reports for Khula Enterprise Finance Limited, a wholesale finance company which assists small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) through a variety of financial products. The conventional approach to typography and layout in the spread for the 1997 annual report (3), is contextualised by the image of Thabo's mobile photographic studio, shot in downtown Johannesburg, which serves as a visual metaphor for the impact Khula could have on SMMEs. The potent comment 'looking to the future' on the back cover (2) is taken from vernacular street communication and conveys a dynamic and proactive message to a corporate readership. The bold colours, pattern, kudu horns, Africana etching, and image of a working situation which are harmoniously integrated on the cover of 1998 annual report (1), are formally and symbolically used as motifs throughout the report.



The logo for Holbay International, suppliers of corporate gifts, simultaneously emphasises the surprise element of a gift through a jack-in-a-box and a spontaneous greeting 'Hi' reflecting the company's name. The use of bright colours and repeat patterning on the business card, letter-head and wrapping paper demonstrate a development from the earlier appropriation of vernacular images, to the close observation of indigenous colour combination and Africa's heritage of shape and pattern (4).

TinTemple logos chart the evolution of the company and reflect its shifts in emphases. The hoenderpoot (5) on corrugated iron is a subjective interpretation of a united trilogy depicting a certain cultural attitude as well. The second logo (6), using Thornface, a typeface designed by Jan Erasmus, signalled a tribute to Erasmus during the period of their working alliance. Finally, energetic youth and experimental typography have been distilled into the current hut/arrow symbol (7).

territory with a range of dialects and a potentially infinite series of visual languages. These could include corporate idioms, the insider codes of sub-cultures and 'the mass-market hieroglyphics of national brand names'.

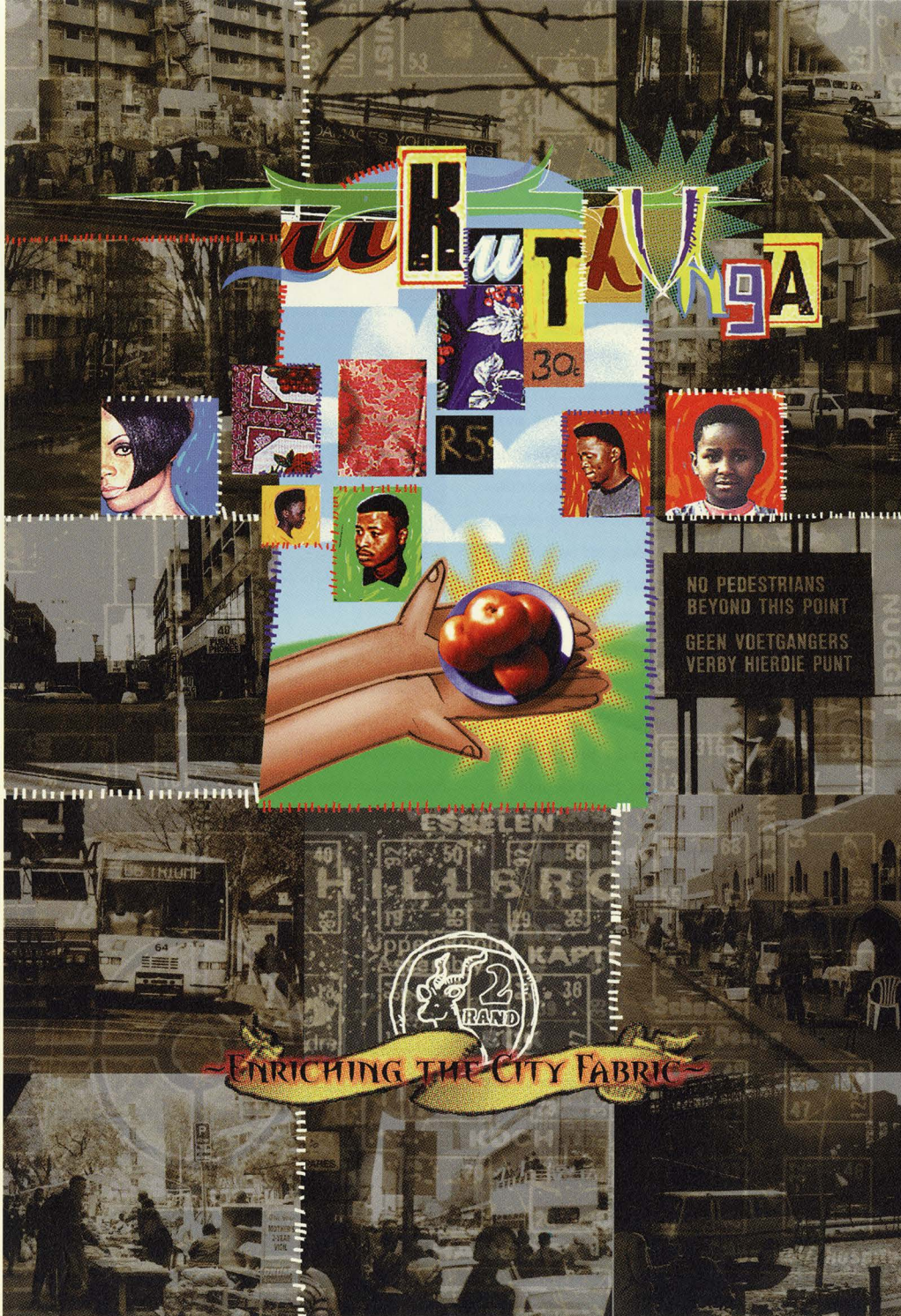
It is to this broad definition of the vernacular that Tin Temple subscribes. The everyday vocabulary of a particular locality, the unpretentious objects of daily life and the ready-made commercial aesthetic of mass-consumption and brand images, are transformed in their work and given new meaning and invested with unique communicative power and value. The wine label and in-store promotion for the 1995 SPADA Student Awards and the 1997 *Chakalaka* yearbook and interactive CD-ROM for Technikon Witwatersrand's graphic design department, are apt examples of vernacular appropriation and derivation. According to Lamprecht (1998) they would like their



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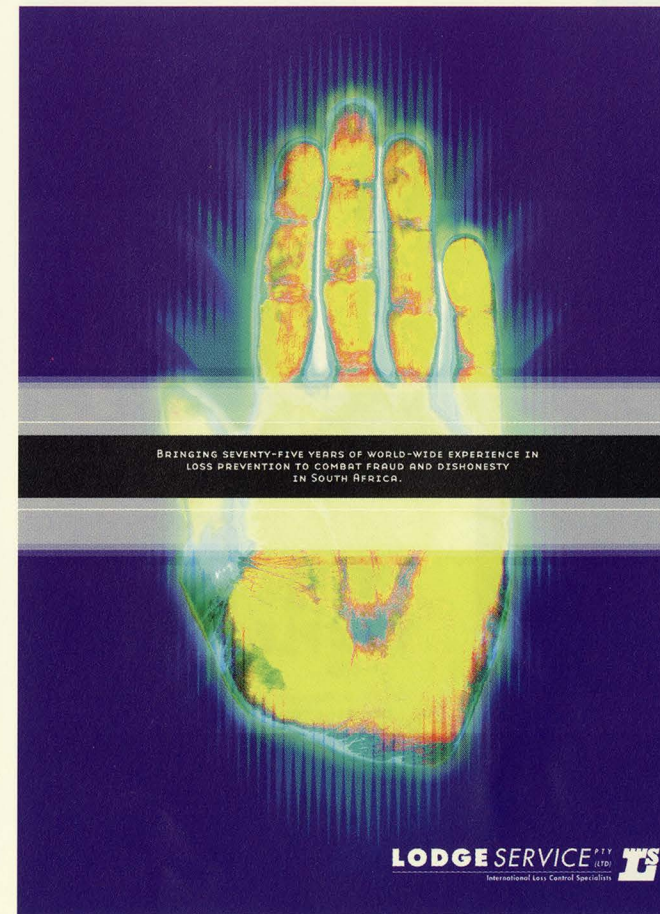
The SPADA 95 wine label and in-store promotion for a hypothetical wine estate Oudemuragie sited in the Klein Karoo, were inspired by two weeks of travelling and photographing the Karoo environment (8).

work to be viewed not only as a South African visual aesthetic but as conceptual commentary. It is important for them as designers to not only observe, document and record the South African environment, but to experience it. To capture the spirit of the African identity the designer needs to acknowledge his position both within and outside a culture. Their more recent work, like the 1998 *Khula* Annual Report and projects for the Mozambique Investment Company, Avianto and Holbay International, exhibit subtle and interesting refinements reflecting a greater formalistic distillation of the patterns, colours, tonal values and energy of Africa.



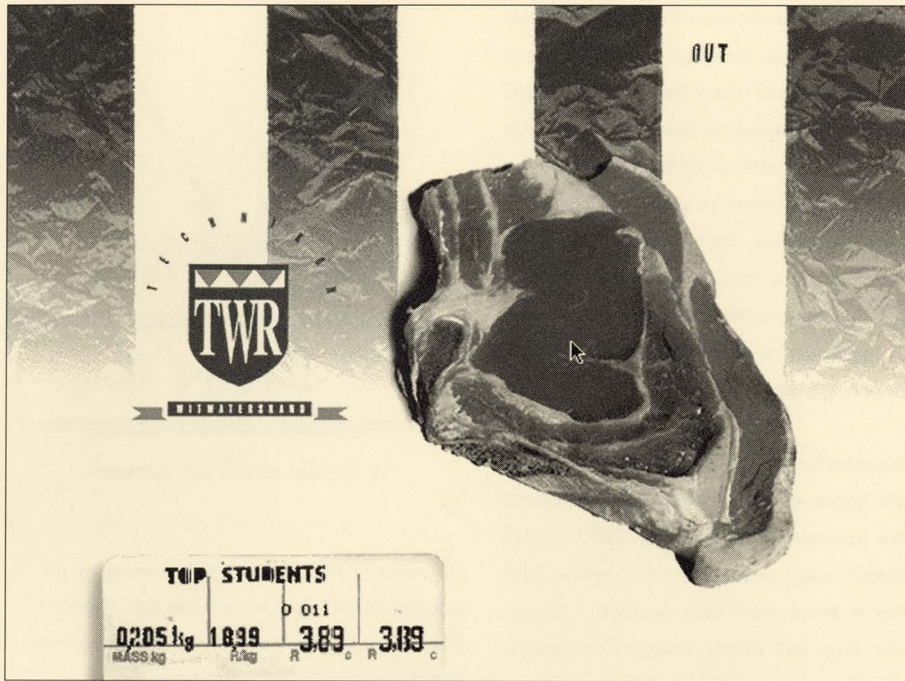
As their approach found a resonance with clients and they received more extensive and complex commissions, the three young designers realised that they lacked business expertise and the analytic and objective insight that develops with design experience. While their training had skilled them in visual representation, they possessed insufficient understanding of technical considerations and the importance of specific communication objectives. As a case in point, the *Chakalaka* yearbook for Technikon Witwatersrand which is visually very daring, demonstrates scant consideration for editorial content or a reader's potential intention to engage with the tex-

tual information. Their need for 'design wisdom' initially led to the formation of a working alliance of five months with award winning designer Jan Erasmus, an experience they found invaluable and enlightening. At the end of 1998 they persuaded Roy Clucas to join the company as a fellow director. From the time he was with Grapple-group as a founding member in 1971, Clucas has remained on the forefront of innovative graphic design in South Africa and has been a prominent voice in championing the design cause. He brings to the young company a design experience of considerable breadth and depth.

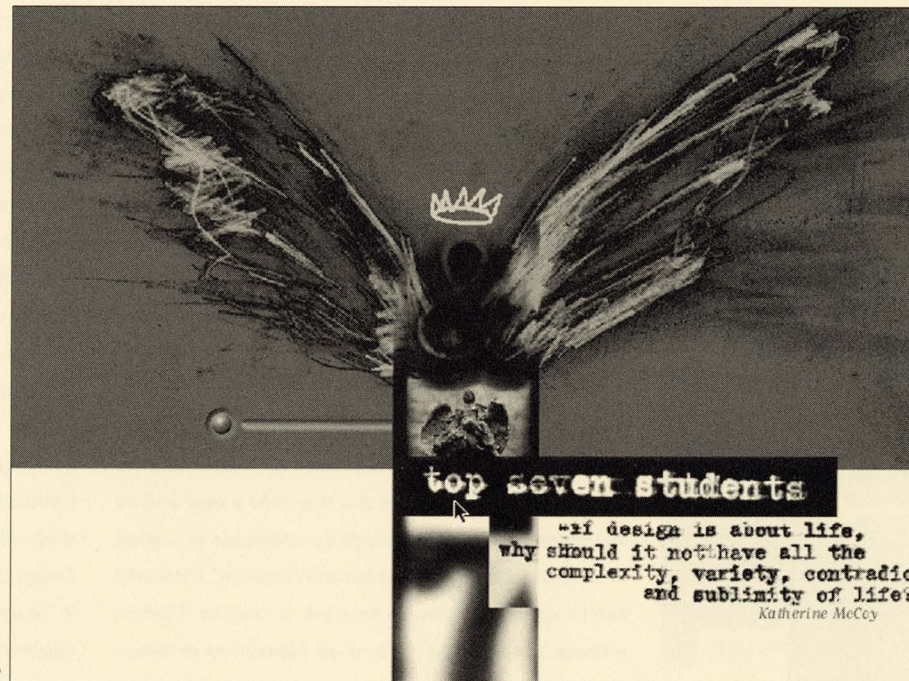


(9) The illustration for urban open spaces contextualises the design solutions generated for an international competition by masters students in architecture at the Technikon Witwatersrand, and conveys the possible impact of open spaces on inner city dwellers.

(10) The two key elements of humanity and technology are united in the brochure cover for Lodge, a loss control company. The hand, which is organic, is used to signify 'STOP' but treated as though it were a security scan.



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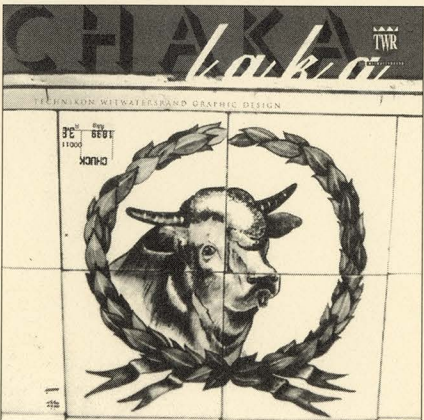
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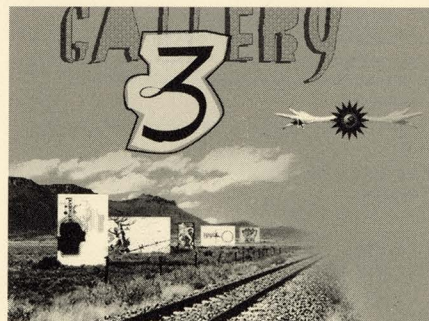
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The Chakalaka 1997 yearbook (11) and interactive CD-ROM promote graphic design studies at the Technikon Witwatersrand and provide a virtual gallery of graphic design student work. The title sites the institution firmly in the environs of Eloff Street, Johannesburg by making clear reference to the traditional dish of pap, vleis en sous served by pavement vendors outside the Technikon. Drawing inspiration from diverse sources like the muti markets of Johannesburg, commercial media and packaging and the South African landscape, the CD-ROM interfaces adopt a cutting edge approach by fully embracing that interactivity is about individual discovery, rather than prescribed direction and response.

Segments of the chunk of meat in the opening interface light up as the mouse rolls over it, while the butcher's meat label indicates which section will be activated (12).

The status of the top students is conveyed by the number seven (the perfect number) and the image of the angel, while their talent is intimated by the strength and virility implicit in references to the blood mixtures and aphrodisiacs purveyed by the muti markets of Johannesburg (13 & 14).

The interface for the section on advertising uses commonly recognised objects like the dustbin, billboard and television as buttons for print, outdoor and television advertising (15).

Reflecting the vast spaces of South Africa as places of creative inspiration, individual works are exhibited in the 'Gallery in the Karoo'; the reader can click on pieces which can then be viewed in detail (16).



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Considerable insight into contemporary graphic design technology and its sophisticated levels of application are revealed by the 3D renderings of engineering products in the Concor leaflets.

The new configuration at TinTemple with its scope for the cross-pollination of ideas and input of specialist knowledge holds the promise of a dynamic future for the company. There is nothing tentative about the vision they set themselves. Obviously they intend to continue the exploration of all things African and to interweave this into their designs where appropriate. Their exploitation of the digital medium and honing their digital understanding and skills to greater finesse and sophisticated use are important. Lamprecht (1998) would like to foster a better understanding of the intrinsic values of black culture and of socio-political issues. He laments the absence of black designers and their potentially powerful contribution to design. Clucas (1998) states that they hold a view to craft and develop themselves through a combination of '...good basic intuitive belief, experience and reasoning'. He would like to see them pursue a measure of creative freedom without compromising the business imperatives of clients.

Both designers would like the professionalisation of design in this country to receive urgent attention. Lamprecht feels that the ideals and standards currently being set out by Design South Africa, the professional design body, should elicit serious consideration from the design community. Clucas maintains client education is crucial to professional credibility. The strength of design and the complex nature of the design process are generally not well understood. Clients need to realise that each design problem must be solved in a uniquely appropriate manner and that design expectations and judgements should not be based on a studio's portfolio of past solutions which were each devised to meet a very specific set of circumstances and requirements.

There is a stated intention by the group to individually and collectively help move the standards of South African design forward. Lamprecht and Clucas agree that the intuitive approach adopted by the majority of South African

designers needs to be complemented by stronger intellectual integration, a greater exchange of ideas between designers, rigorous debate and critical design studies. Clucas maintains that a cursory review of South African graphic design will reveal that the essence of Africa has not been adequately confronted. A conscious absorption of African references which moves away from superficial packaging and stylistic appropriation must be encouraged. South African designers are also required to address the issues that are impacting on design globally, particularly technological and humanistic ones.

Entire new strategies for the way designers want to communicate in the future must be laid down. In fact, Clucas thinks that the upcoming *Continental Shift 2001 - World Design Convergence* design conference which will be held in South Africa in three years time, presents a unique opportunity for local and visiting designers to 'rethink design in the bush'.

The concern and integrity with which the designers at TinTemple approach their profession across a broad front is commendable. Their commitment to the fundamental purpose of graphic design and their desire to create powerful communication by remaining alert to all outside influences and potential sources of ideas, brand their consultancy as one out to make its mark.

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a venue made in heaven

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The identity for Avianto, a conference centre on the Crocodile River designed in a Tuscan style, combines the classical typeface Trajan, the olive branch and an Acacia thorn in a Euro-African amalgam.



MOZAMBIQUE INVESTMENT COMPANY

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The logo for Minco, an investment company in Mozambique established by the Commonwealth Development Corporation, integrates finance with Africa in its derivation of simple shapes and subtle reference to patterning traditionally used on African walls and fabrics.