Industrial Design: Vision And Reality

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Two leading designers discuss the problems and challenges that face industrial design consultancies as South Africa enters a new era in its history. In the absence of a national strategy and a supportive infrastructure, boldness, imagination and alternative ways for design and development are called for.

The importance of design in the industrial renaissance of post-war Europe and more recently in the dynamic industrialisation drives of the Pacific Rim countries, has been widely documented. The emphasis on product development and the vital importance of devising a competitive edge are presented as ideals towards which nations and companies must strive if they wish to ensure their position in the marketplace and as world players.

Acknowledging the theory and defining the potential role of South African design are all well and good, but what are the realities of practice that currently confront industrial design consultancies in this country? In a series of recent interviews, leading designers Alexis Wadman and Allistair Wessels aired their views on a number of aspects pertinent to this issue.

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN IN SOUTH AFRICA

Both designers strongly feel that industrial design is going through a very difficult phase in this country. The 1960s, 70s and 80s saw a growth in the number and size of design consultancies. Wadman comments that during the mid-80s it was often difficult to find designers to fill vancancies in consultancies. Now the shoe is on the other foot. There are too many designers and not enough jobs. Consultancies have reached optimisation of their staff levels. Budgets have been cut and support organisations like the Design Institute have been downgraded and restructured. Wadman thinks that the blame cannot be laid purely on the economy, but that standards and excellence must be acknowledged as contributing factors as well. Some designers tried growing consultancies based on sub-standard quality and this has finally caught up with them.

Wadman and Wessels both describe industrial design in South Africa as extremely diverse with enormous variation in the quality of work produced. Practitioners vary from people without any formal education who operate as one-man bands and who perhaps have a flair or some industrial ingenuity, to others who are doing their level best but are perhaps not meeting an international standard in terms of their output and ability. At the other extreme, South Africa has some very competent designers who are doing work of an international standard for international clients. However, these are only a handful - four or five at the most can be singled out at this level.

Wadman contends that good local industrial design is not very visible in this country because most of the good quality work being done is not sourced here. It is being undertaken for international clients or local clients with international arms. More often than not, the whole design is taken from South Africa to where major manufacturing resources are located and produced there. Until now major international clients have been reluctant to acknowledge connections with designers from apartheid South Africa for fear of reprisal. Good South African design has thus not been promoted nor has it enjoyed public recognition either here or abroad.

Nevertheless, designers who have gone through the mill successfully in this country are quite sought after internationally. Wadman

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attributes this to the fact that designers here are forced to be realists. They are pragmatic and, although perhaps not as flamboyant as European designers, accustomed to working within tightly constrained environments and capital.

STATUS AND RECOGNITION

Industrial design practice in South Africa is very young, and the definition of its precise function is yet to be cemented. People know for instance, what an architect or increasingly what a graphic designer does, but they are not quite sure about an industrial designer's role. Wessels jokingly says that

> ... people cast you off as being just a person who makes things pretty. Engineers think you don't understand what they consider to be the real issue. And businessmen think you spend money.

Wessels contends there is little general understanding of the potential impact and chain reaction in terms of economic and consumer benefits of one piece of good design. Nor is there an appreciation of the overall contribution designers can make when allowed to participate in long-term planning and strategic development at boardroom level.

Wadman says industrial designers are often regarded '...as sort of on the fringe, people that, you know, dabble'. This lack of awareness and perception of industrial design not being a serious profession, has numerous consequences. Wadman feels that many talented potential young designers are lost to the industry. He attributes this not only to a lack of knowledge on the part of young people of industrial design and its career potential, but also to the status which they receive once they qualify.

To quote Wadman,

> Industrial designers are required to be as creative, as talented, as bright, as intelligent, as eloquent as others professionals, be they engineers or architects. But the recognition they get is not there.

He maintains that when confronted with options, many calibre students choose the better known academic routes, because these give them a widely recognised qualification to trade with.

Although Wadman stresses that at the end of the day designers trade on their portfolios, he says that when it comes to people recognising people, there is something to be said for the classical academic status of a degree qualification. He points to international trends, for instance the granting of degree status to the Polytechnics. Wadman feels that although the Technikons are moving in the right direction in their attempts to obtain parity with universities, the rate of change will be too slow to improve the status of industrial designers. Alternatives would be for Technikon courses to be affiliated to universities or for university faculties to introduce industrial design degrees.

Wessels affirms that the cream of young students tends to choose an academic route. He feels students should have the option of either a degree or a diploma. He points to the enormous synergy that has been achieved at overseas institutions where industrial design has been incorporated into architecture, engineering and fine arts departments.

MANUFACTURING

Notwithstanding the fact that economic and political circumstances in this country are not conducive to the practising of design, both Wadman and Wessels are critical of the attitude and mentality of local manufacturers and businessmen.

Wadman says that what South Africa should be doing, is developing world-quality products for export. He maintains that after 15 years in the industry, he has encountered very few solely South African owned companies that have the vision and the guts to do this. A few companies like Bell and some smaller companies are trading successfully, but the big

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nationals who are listed on the stock exchange revert back to what they are comfortable with (digging minerals out of the ground) in response to the slightest pressure. Business in this country does not have a core philosophy of product development and the adage 'cash is king' is very prevalent with anyone who has money here. This attitude is not compatible with the timeframes needed for product research and development.

Wessels emphasises that South Africa is very young, and that it is still a colonial place where many whites have retained a colonial mentality. People move from one secure thing to the next and are reluctant to enter into long-term involvement. The pioneering type of mentality that has been attracted to this part of the world, is a short-sighted one. These people, metaphorically and literally, dig in the ground to find some gold nugget and when a particular stake has yielded enough they leave it. In addition to this attitude, Wessels feels the business and political cultures here are characterised by a crisis management approach and a lack of proper strategic planning which is bold and visionary.

What South Africa desperately needs, according to both designers, is a national policy and the formulation of a long-term strategy, which will co-ordinate all aspects of industrialisation and provide an infrastructure which supports and promotes design and manufacturing. However, neither of the designers is optimistic about this happening in the near future. Both think that the focus in this country will be on the social dimension - housing, education, health and on sorting out inequalities and the heritage of 40 years of mismanagement. Unfortunately industrial design will not be considered significant in this scheme of things.

DIRECTIONS FOR DESIGNERS

Alexis Wadman feels that for industrial designers to be successful in this country, they will have to move away from the classical definition of the discipline with its accepted streams, and find alternative ways for design and development. He thinks that industrial designers must become involved in the wider spectrum of events which constitute the on-going continuum of new product development. He defines new product development as 'everything it takes from an idea right down to the point when that product is on the shelf and the consumer can purchase it'.

Most design companies offer a horizontally integrated service comprising different disciplines across a design band. Circumstances in this country have led him and his partner into what he calls vertical integration, which commences with design, goes into engineering, mass production and supplying. This is made possible by their own group of companies which integrate their activities in a sequential line to an endpoint which is a product on the shelf in the marketplace. The client therefore gets a total service and not just part of a solution. The philosophy of vertical integration has enabled them to successfully put up to a 100 products in the marketplace and to attract a number of off-shore clients.

For Wadman, there are two very clear routes that design in this country can take. The first is to focus on local demands. Third world design. For the industrial designer who wants to make a living in this country, this route presents good opportunities. The type of design where small industry approaches designers for a low-budget design challenge is going to develop and grow.

However, for most industrial designers, third world design tends to be unattractive. They want to be on the cutting edge of technology, making strides into new things. So the other route for South African designers is to focus the bulk of their efforts on attracting off-shore clients and to remain competitive in terms of the main flow of industrial design.

'Here the designer must have a world perspective. Wadman does not believe that there is room for anything like a South African style. For him, there is a world style and an international consumer aesthetic. He points out that it has taken Japan 40 years of playing the European game, and that it is only now that Japanese design feels it can afford to

impose its own view and introduce an oriental flavour into consumer durables and mass merchandising items.

Wadman thinks that South African designers should forget about venturing into European or American markets because they are too well established. They are going to have to develop very close links with the East, because that is where growth lies. He points to the promptness and reliability of Eastern suppliers, and the extensive and highly efficient infrastructures which have been established to support design and manufacturing.

Allistair Wessels thinks that it is inevitable that design in South Africa will have to shift to the reality of the present context. The bulk of design effort cannot be elitist, but must move into appropriate areas of activity, appropriate technologies and appropriate production systems. Wessels feels that the manufacturing sector in South Africa cannot be compared to Japan or Germany, nor can local marketing be compared to that of the Taiwanese or Americans.

Yet South Africans are very innovative and particularly competent at solving problems unique to developing environments. According to Wessels, South African designers and marketers should be asking where they could be different. Where could they be better? They live in an environment where they have a better understanding than anyone else, of how something may be done with limited resources, taking all the characteristics of developing communities into account.

Wessels feels designers should be looking to broadening the product base in this niche. Time should be spent on coming up with ideas and finding products that can be produced inexpensively and have mass appeal in unsophisticated markets. A lot of people in this country are not interested in CD players for instance, but there must be a multitude of other products that they are interested in.

In his view, this category of design is also exportable, particularly to countries with circumstances similar to South Africa. Any country that thinks design is about looking after the locals has missed the whole point, he maintains. Successful economies have all found products that appeal to consumers outside of their own countries.

Wessels, like Wadman, realises that the thought of simple and functional design, in the Victor Papanek mould of social appropriateness and village context, makes up-market and high-tech designers want to run a mile. They have been trained to look at sophisticated products, sophisticated consumers, sophisticated production, sophisticated technologies. Here Wessels thinks it is important not to discard the baby with the bath water. The more sophisticated elements of the production and manufacturing sector currently in place must be retained and developed. Perhaps not as a national initiative, but certainly at a corporate level or under the protection of appropriate umbrella organisations. For instance, the concept of EPZs (export protection zones) have a lot of potential if they are properly promoted and managed. Envisaged EPZs are demarcated areas close to air- and seaports for tax-free trading, adjacent to which manufacturing sites will be developed.

He stresses that designers and manufacturers should be exploiting natural advantages and indigenous resources. In his view they are also not tapping existing cultures sufficiently or utilising the rich images that surround them. South Africa offers a very colourful and different dimension which should be capitalised on.

INDUSTRIALISATION

Wessels doubts that he will see the benefits of good design in his professional lifetime, but he feels that it is crucial for design to be seen as a long-term investment, which should be initiated immediately by means of a broad based industrialisation process. Three aspects are critical here.

Firstly, small manufacturing concerns and grass roots industries, like pottery and weaving, where vast numbers of rural people

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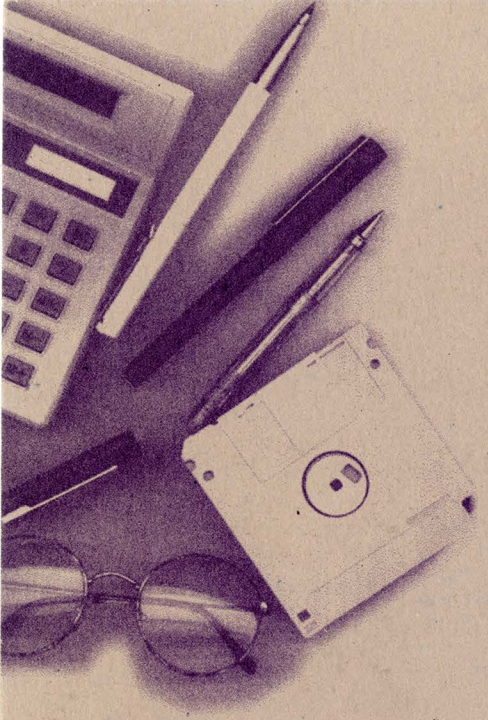

are encouraged to make things, must be stimulated to form the base of the industrialisation process.

Secondly, a good basic design education in both primary and secondary levels must be considered, not only in the interests of having an educated consumer, but also as a source of personal enrichment and to encourage creativity and non-linear thinking. Tertiary education must include the appropriate dimension in curricula, so that young designers come to understand the needs, aspirations and cultural values of the greater part of the population.

Finally, all levels of society must be brought into a design dialogue. There must be strategic debate, but ordinary consumers should also become aware of the impact of design on their lives. Wessels would love to see consumers given the opportunity to air their views about products which enrich their lives and those that do not. He suggests 'a bad design award', where members of the public can vote for their worst domestic product.

INDIVIDUAL DESIGNER'S CONTRIBUTION

Wadman emphasises that the development of industrial design must be driven by the recognition that it can make a difference to a nation's economy, that it is a strategic resource for the country and that it needs dedicated infrastructures and aggressive promotion. He feels education is the primary area through which design can be promoted. Two facets of education are important.

The first concerns the industrial design fraternity itself. New blood must be brought into the system through a re-evaluation of industrial design education and the introduction of increasing numbers of calibre designers. Secondly, industry must be educated to understand and make use of this service. It is the latter which will perhaps require the most effort.

Is the problem so big that individual designers would be wasting their time trying to make a contribution? In response to this question Wadman says:

> I don't think it is a waste of time, but I think you have to be pragmatic in your expectations of what you are going to achieve. After about five years of trying to change the world, going to design conferences, talking about design and the future and all that stuff, there are two areas where I think I can do something. I can improve the standard of design in this country by getting involved in teaching. Secondly, I can pioneer good design by just going out there and doing it myself, whether I'm recognised or not, whether I win awards or not. My partner and I have have been able to put 80 to 100 products in the marketplace - successful, selling, doing their job. Now, we've influenced approximately that many clients, and hopefully we've influenced the masses. That's the contribution an individual designer can make.

Wessels agrees that a designer's most effective language is his work, but adds that designers should also be actively projecting and promoting their profession to society and the business community. He thinks that as designers are often not good at speaking about their discipline, it is important for articulate people who are interested in design and understand it, to create public awareness through the spoken and written word.

He affirms that the growth, even the survival of industrial design in this country, is dependent on some form of national strategy. In the meantime Wessels feels it is critical 'to get the debate going', and for designers to participate in an on-going discussion of all aspects related to design activity. This will encourage thinking about design and stimulate the generation of novel ideas and tactics, both within and outside the design community. It might even bring the impact of design to the attention of people with vision, perhaps persuading them to support a revitalised design initiative.

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