

FOR AFRICA

The visual identity for the Johannesburg Olympic Bid

An interview with designer Iaan Bekker

In August 1993, the Johannesburg City Council, through the National Olympic Committee, put out a brief to selected design agencies requesting an identity to support their bid against Cape Town and Durban to host the 2004 Olympic Games. The proposal they chose to use came from Lindsay Smithers-FCB.

*Although Cape Town finally won the bid, the editors of **Image & Text** found the Johannesburg identity interesting from a design point of view. They approached its designer Iaan Bekker, with an invitation to discuss pertinent aspects in the development of the identity.*

He was asked to explain how he had interpreted the brief from the Committee and to outline the thinking and investigation which contributed to the basic concept and configuration of the identity. He was also requested to describe considerations that had influenced key design decisions and to talk about how the identity was refined and then applied to finally produce a comprehensive and systematic identity programme.

THE BRIEF

The brief we received from the Bidding Committee defined two primary criteria. These were that the identity must encapsulate the spirit of the Olympics and be a united symbol that could stand for Africa as a whole.

Obviously there were secondary aspects to the brief. The identity would have to project well beyond the immediate needs of the Bidding Committee in 1993. It would have to be capable of communicating to the broadest possible audience the idea of an international event hosted in Africa with the intent to symbolise African unity. Of course it would have to be a professional identity that could extend into many arenas, and it would have to translate well in different media, considering especially what the technology of 2004 might possibly accommodate.

EXPLORATION - SEARCH AND RESEARCH

My reading of that brief was that it should be an international identity as opposed to a regional one. In other words that it should not be overtly weighted with signs or motifs that we know to mean Africa.

If the identity were to state that the Olympics had come to Africa, two important questions had to be answered: what was germane to the Olympic ideal and what was typical of Africa. I started by listing certain words which to me typified an Olympics in Africa. Obviously the physical associations of the

continent were important pointers. I decided not to focus on stylistic products, but rather on the physical aspects of the continent that people all over the world would recognise immediately.

Key associations that emerged were: Africa has a primary and memorable shape as a land mass which is frequently used to identify the planet. It enjoys a central position on world maps because it falls between East and West. It is sometimes used as a symbol for the emergence of man. It is speculated that man originated in Africa - that it was here where man first conquered the environment, where he transcended his physicality and started to make tools and to subjugate the environment.

Those were all associations that I considered good ones as opposed to the idea of darkest Africa - which I think is a completely colonial and imperial throwback to previous centuries. I tried to depoliticise the whole approach and to concentrate on a purely physical reference to the continent.

The other important aspect which the identity had to convey was the spirit of the Olympics. Obviously two aspects that typify the Olympics are the five rings and the flame - particularly the flame. It enjoys great significance in its symbolic passage from city to city. It links with the Promethean ideal of having the tools and the intention to deal with those tasks that define and strengthen human capabilities. So the second element I decided to work with was the Olympic flame.



Johannesburg
2004
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THE DESIGN PROBLEM

How to get those two things in register - that became the design problem - the physical graphic challenge if you like. I explored roots and permutations of how to transpose the two ideas into one. I decided after a fair number of exploratory sketches that the route to take would be to make the Olympic flame conform graphically and stylistically to the shape of Africa. I pursued this line of thinking until I found a solution which I thought successfully embodied this idea.

The question then became one of refinement - for instance, what type of line to use. Here the international and the regional consideration again came into focus. Was the line going to be rough? Was it going to be patterned? Was it going to be a hand-made sign? Was it going to echo other regional influences like Bushman-type drawings? Should it have those textures that would also say that this design for an Olympics in Africa, was in fact made in Africa? On the other hand should it be the sophisticated international hard-edged, flowing, bright type of line that one sees, for instance, used for multi-national corporations or other global concerns?

The decision fell on the latter option. If Johannesburg were chosen as the Olympic venue, internationality would be extremely important. I felt that the identity should therefore transcend the Africanness of its graphic appeal. Anyway, this had already been dealt with in terms of the content.

Once I had crystallised and formulated these core concerns, a small design team worked to develop the final identity. We went through a few cycles of refining the typical line of the motif and then also spent some time working out different colour sequences. The five Olympic colours are the

primaries with one secondary, green, plus black on a white background. The sequence in which the colour of the Olympic rings falls we treated with flexibility because in terms of the logo we had to use the lighter colours in larger areas to balance out the smaller parts with the darker colours. Eventually we chose the sequence of green, blue, yellow, red and black to keep the three primaries in the middle and so form an anchor for the design.

Because the logo in itself is only the centrepiece, or a visual keyword in understanding what the bid was about, it had to be supported by other graphic elements. Those elements were first of all the logotype and then the payoff line.

For the logotype, *Johannesburg 2004*, we chose a popular and international serif font, Galliard, because we felt it aided the readability and also added to the sophistication of the whole bidding effort. The payoff line *For Africa*, in Gill, punctuated the total idea of the bid concisely and economically.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Having developed what we thought the solution should be, we measured it against the criteria that had been laid out in the brief. Does this look like a unified Africa hosting an Olympic Games? We were satisfied that it did say that. Does it speak about Johannesburg specifically? And we said yes it does, because all the lines seem to go towards the southern part of Africa and that was good enough. We felt this solution kept the door open - no matter which city got the bid, this identity would still be an appropriate one, because it speaks about the Olympics in Africa. The specific role of Johannesburg came through in the underwriting. This could later be

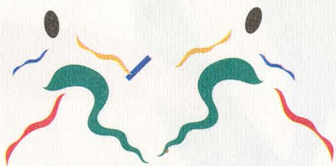
replaced by the name of any city in South Africa and the idea would still remain intact.

Then for good measure, we compared the identity to other identities that had been created for previous Olympics. And this comparison again supported our assumption that it should be an international identity primarily, with secondary regional connotations.

One that inverted the assumption to a degree was the identity for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics which was obviously extracted from a Miro-esque Catalan style. But then I think it should be remembered that this style has been known, used and recognised for a good number of years. It was as internationally recognisable as it was regionally founded.

In Africa we have nothing like that to draw from yet. We were satisfied with our choice of the African continent and beyond that our decision not to incorporate patterns of triangles, or a specific Ndebele type of ethnicity. What we ended up with is something that is informal, dynamic, but still sophisticated in terms of its international appeal and recognition.

To support the mark as a viable identity, we put it through the standard tests that we normally subject every identity to. Does it work in one colour? Does it work reversed out of any one of the colours acting as a background? Does it reduce? Does it enlarge? Can it be (and it has been) built into flower beds! In other words does it translate well into other media. How will it animate, should it be used as a leader in a run-up to a television programme? Could it be deconstructed and reconstructed meaningfully? When we were happy that it conformed to standards, we looked at compiling the items which would be included in our proposal.



APPLICATION ON STATIONERY ITEMS

1. letterhead 2. business card 3. comp slip 4. envelope 5. folder front cover and back 6. folder inside

1



OWC CENTRE FOR Leadership Johannesburg 2004
P.O. Box 1000 Johannesburg 2000
Tel: RSA (011) 483-7311 Fax: (011) 483-7311
Tel International: (011) 483-7311

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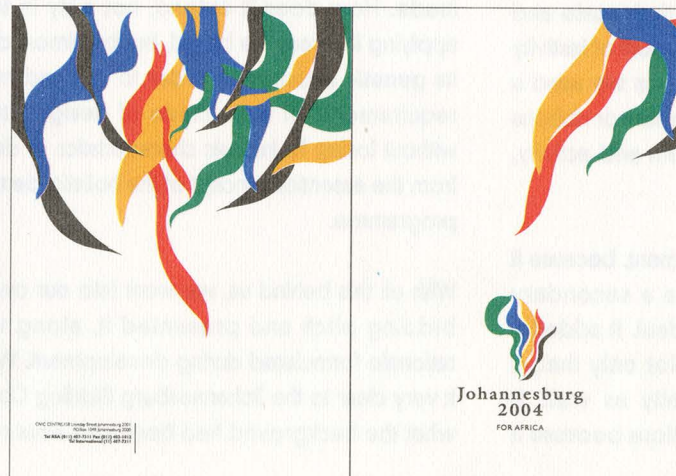


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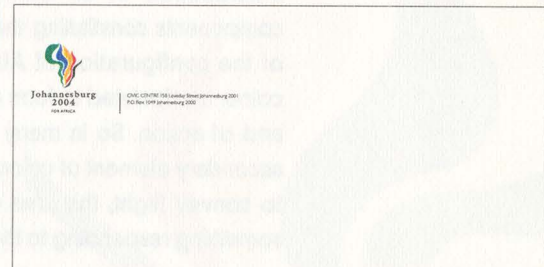
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APPLICATION AND EXTENSION

Naturally the design is only a sign when it remains just a logo in itself. It only starts to work and to become an identity once it is applied and proliferated in various ways.

The first phase of application related to how the identity would be utilised to communicate the bid itself. Numerous audiences - the public, financial committees, the sporting fraternity - had to be informed of and about Johannesburg's intention of hosting an Olympic event.

We prepared many aspects - all the stationery, the proposals, the document, the folders, the covers and so on. Then it went into its more public application - flags, banners and billboards, T-shirts, mugs and caps. Everywhere we saw a promotional opportunity, we tried to apply it.

What I thought was quite an innovation, was the introduction of an element of flexibility. The components constituting the identity were taken out of the configuration of Africa and their scale and colour manipulated to form a graphic motif of festivity and of action. So in many of the items we used a secondary element of coloured streamers or ribbons to convey flight, the idea of freedom and activity, something responding to the wind.

This proved to be a very helpful element, because it extended the identity. It became a secondary support to the Olympic idea and ideal. It added a tremendous amount of energy. Not only that, it supported the identity graphically as well. It enhanced the format of the applications because it

directed the attention to the centre-piece of what we wanted to communicate.

The second phase of application dealt with the identity should

Johannesburg ultimately be chosen as the Olympic venue. It was applied to items associated with the event itself - print applications, signage, apparel, pictograms and so on. The electronic environment and how the sign could be mediated was

considered, as was how this identity would ultimately be integrated with standard elements like the torch and rings, which are customarily used for the Olympic Games.

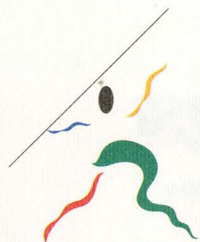
It is really here where the true test of an identity is made. How does it extend, not only in terms of applying it across the board, but by almost changing its genetic structure in order to suit and meet the requirements of a multitude of design situations, without losing its intrinsic characteristics or detracting from the essential concept of the holistic identification programme.

With all this behind us, we went into our own minor bidding pitch and presented it, along with the rationale formulated during development. We made it very clear to the Johannesburg Bidding Committee what the background had been and what research

had been carried out. It was important for them to understand that what we were showing them was not something that had just been plucked out of the air, but that it was a product of methodological and systematic development.

MANAGING THE IDENTITY

As a concluding thought, I think it is essential to mention how important it is for patrons to be made aware of their responsibilities concerning the strategic and tactical uses of an identity. Control of the identity must be ensured through their own understanding of all aspects which could possibly impact on the stringent application of the identity. An identity manual and consultation with the designer are critical if the strength and the continuity of the identity are to be secured and maintained.

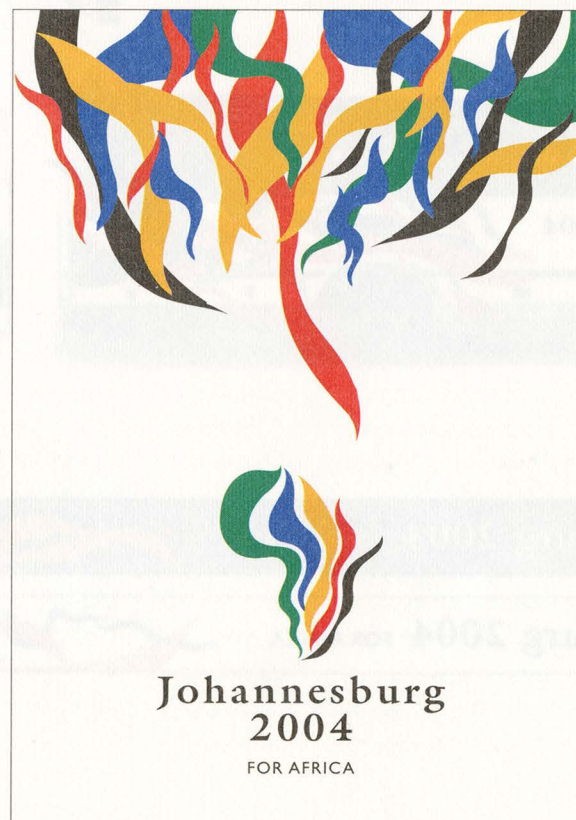


APPLICATION ON PROMOTIONAL ITEMS

1. cap 2. poster 3. hand flags 4. paper bags 5. bumper stickers



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4



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APPLICATION ON SIGNAGE

1. billboard 12 by 3 2. billboard 6 by 3 3. bus application 4. billboard 30 by 1



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2

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3

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