

THE BRIDGE

Rick Andrew and Jeff Rankin

Five years ago, The Bridge, a post-graduate unit linked to the Department of Graphic Design, was established at Technikon Natal by lecturers Rick Andrew and Jeff Rankin. Sixteen higher diploma students and fifteen certificate students have qualified at the unit, which was founded with very clear objectives in mind.

RICK ANDREW EXPLAINS ...

Our primary aim was to establish an educational platform from which to concentrate on practical visual communication in the South African context - a context which is multi-racial, multi-cultural, politically problematic and at the interface of the so-called 'first' and 'third world'.

Our second aim was to provide a studio for those students who sought to develop a personal style and approach to visual communication through self-motivated enquiry and practice. We wanted students to have the time to explore techniques and concepts - to pause for creative self-reflection before submitting to the demands of the design industry.

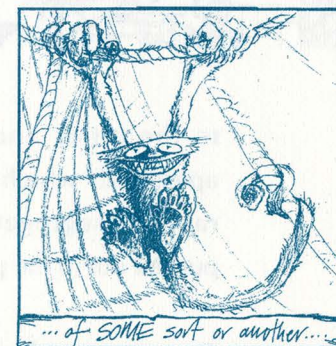
I would like to examine in some detail those areas which prompted the establishment of this unit.

The Educational Reality

With the advent of apartheid, Technikon Natal (it was then called the Natal Technical College) was set aside for students of the European race only. M L Sultan Technical College was earmarked for 'non-whites'.

So, because we had no African students, our vision tended to be Eurocentric and, in many ways, blind to the reality of our situation in Africa. In the Department of Graphic Design

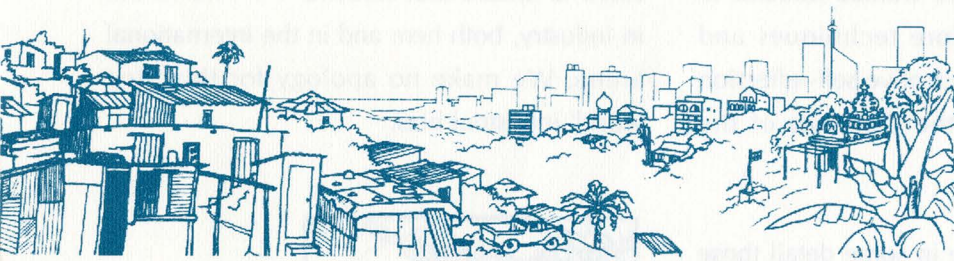
we take our direction primarily from 'first world' trends in technology, design, advertising and the marketing of consumer goods. Ours is a vocational course and we strive to ensure that students will find favour in industry, both here and in the international arena. We make no apology for this 'first world' industrial bias.



However, there are always some students who are drawn to their African context and who are keen to discover ways of using their skills in the service of the wider community. We established The Bridge in response to such needs.

The Regional Reality

There are three major race groups in Natal: African, European and Indian, but religious, political and cultural groupings are diverse and do not necessarily coincide with race. Land ownership and population distribution has been determined by a colonial past, exploitative economics, a general migration



to the cities and also by the system of apartheid, which forced people to live in racially segregated areas with the poor pushed out to the periphery.

Our present landscape is one of great diversity. The city centre with its high-rise hotels and air-conditioned offices is within viewing distance of the squatter camps where the poor survive as best they can. Minimal services are provided and old sheets of corrugated iron, used timber, and bits of discarded plastic are commonly used materials for the construction of rudimentary

shelters. The vast imbalances between rich and poor tend to haunt the mind and challenge the design aesthetic of the glossy magazines.

The words of novelist Octavio Paz, although referring to Mexico are just as relevant here:

We are the prodigal sons of a homeland we cannot even define but which we are beginning at last to observe.

Our territory is inhabited by a number of races speaking different languages and living on different historical levels. A variety of epochs live side by side in the same areas or a few miles apart, ignoring or devouring one another. Different heroes, customs, calendars and moral principles live under the same sky.

However, the diversity and imbalances are not as important as the fact that these diverse peoples are interdependent economically, ecologically and culturally. There is a network of relationships that undergirds our communal lives. A designer or communicator who seeks to be effective in this region needs to be sensitive to these diversities and their interconnections.



Shared Vision

Also to be considered with regard to the establishment of The Bridge are the experience and the shared vision Jeff and I brought to this undertaking.

Having practised for many years as a satirical artist for the *Sunday Tribune*, Natal's major weekly newspaper, Jeff brought to The Bridge a link with journalism, a concern with visual communication in a society torn by politics, as well as an interest in book publishing and the illustration of children's books.

As a painter my focus was on the landscape. Initially seduced by the exotic and visually





picturesque aspects of the landscape, I became increasingly aware of the social and psychic realities that underlie this textural sprawl and splendour. Frequent visits to the townships were instructive.

Both Jeff and I shared a vision of reaching out of the Technikon 'fortress' to include the 'others'. We wanted to engage our context and, wherever possible, to upgrade the standard of visual/graphic material produced for the 'third world' sector. We believed, and still do, that good graphics and illustration are as much a source of education as text.

Experiences at The Bridge have brought me to the point where I believe that although techniques and technologies are essential, effective communication in our diverse society is primarily dependent on enlivened imagination and compassionate human contact. A process of affirmative action is needed for all South Africans - we have all been spiritually injured by the system of apartheid and rehumanisation is essential.

JEFF RANKIN CONTINUES ...

I want to expand on the concept of rehumanisation, particularly in the context of

design education, by examining three further motivational influences in the unit's establishment.

1 The process of steering design educators toward our African context coincides with the need to extricate ourselves from some damaging conventions. I have felt since joining our Design School in 1982 that it is our responsibility as directors of education policy, particularly in the formerly 'white' and well equipped institutions, to submit to Africa's needs with all of the implied learning and difficulty for ourselves. Without getting into the detail, we would like to see a shift in the undergraduate design syllabus, giving Africa her long overdue place.

At the post-graduate level The Bridge provides an avenue for students to explore their homeland in greater and more relevant depth, an aspect seriously lacking in undergraduate design courses.

2 The second influence I want to mention is the 'disciplinary apartheid' which has been institutionalised in Natal. As a student of Fine (Graphic) Art at

the Technikon in the seventies, I completed a foundation year which touched on many aspects of art and design, before selecting a major course of study for my second and third year. This system allowed each student to make a choice based on personal experience, across a multi-disciplinary spectrum. There are several reasons why, in the early eighties, the

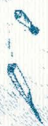


foundation-level ties between Fine Art and Design were finally and completely cut at

Technikon Natal. The reasons are debatable, but the effect on students' options has in my opinion, been crippling.

Technikon Natal is the only centre in the province which offers, under one roof, major courses in the various Design disciplines and in the Fine Art majors of Painting, Sculpture





and Printmaking. And yet our own brand of mutual apartheid means that, for instance, a student of Graphic Design has no practical exposure to any Fine Art activities, and vice versa. To extend the analogy, 'ethnic cleansing' is a perfectly accurate description for our educational self-determination. And while I speak as a design lecturer I must emphasize that our Fine Art Department shares the responsibility for this situation.

In any event, the nett result is a culture of ignorance. Some (design) lecturers are active in getting their students to exhibitions, in expanding students' options and hopefully seeing the reflection of this in their work. But this sort of against-the-odds approach surely does not belong in a college of art and design. I hear with sadness that colleges elsewhere in the country are considering the separate approach. We shouldn't be severing these ties; in the technically-bound design disciplines, the students are limited enough as it is.

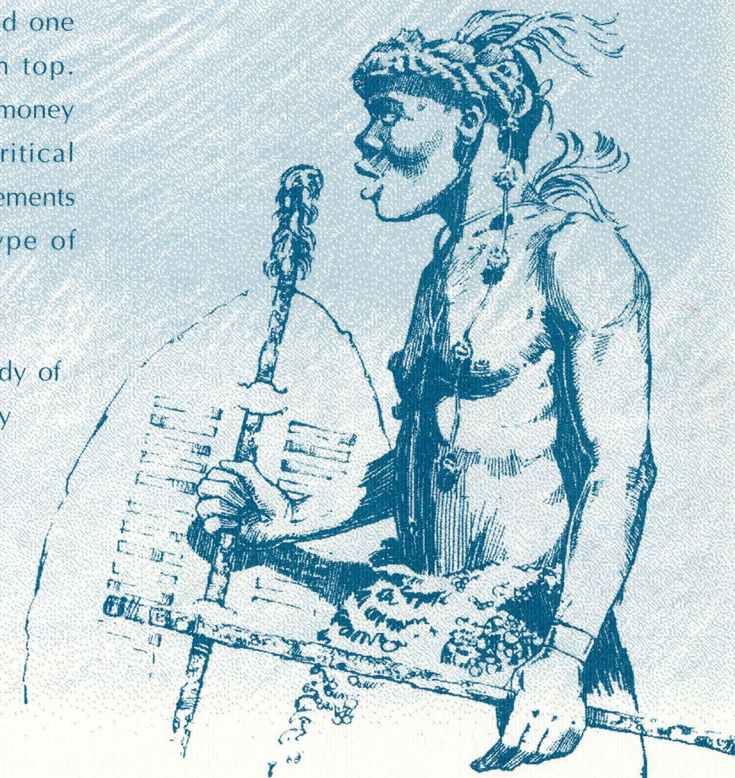
The Bridge with its option for informality, and by taking in students from other backgrounds, has gone a small part of the way toward countering our disciplinary apartheid. This was a strong influence in the unit's founding. In fact I find that The Bridge's name owes as

much to this very specific need of discipline-bridging, as it does to the wider notions of bridging which Rick has already described.

3 The third influence worth noting is what I loosely term the industrial colonisation affecting design education. Perhaps this has been a reverse colonisation, where industry has been tacitly invited to dictate policy to the respective design disciplines. My view on this is encouraged by the number of students who have expressed their frustration at the constraint of a training-oriented design course.

The training versus education debate is ongoing in our schools of design, and one often feels that the trainers are on top. Industry is impatient, the time-equals-money rule is applied at the expense of critical thinking and thorough practice (two elements fundamental to learning in this type of course).

It is therefore no surprise to find a body of students who are intellectually complacent. Harder times may have shaken the hold of job-security; perhaps the educational colonies will now be able to act more independently, with employers





preoccupied at home base. The promise of this process is very positive for educators, students and ironically (in the long term) industry itself.

Collaboration

Although The Bridge was a response to the demand for independence in its own area of design education, students collaborate with many commercial organisations. The ongoing work with publishers Heinemann-Centaur, for instance, is special and has encouraged several processes. Bridge students are able to use the unit's contacts for income while practising their skills. The collaboration has fed across to the Graphic Design course, where we have an annual publisher's project and award at second and third year level; and we are now seeing activity in the neglected area of type and text design.

There is a mutual pay-off through this collaboration, and I hope that more members of the commercial sector will see the benefit of working as fully with their feeder courses.

Despite the disagreements which would arise in any designer/client situation, the staff at Heinemann-Centaur approach members of The Bridge as 'learning professionals'. Part of my own job description is that of liaison, as far as possible maintaining a consistency to approach and result.

Over the past four years this work has consisted mainly of book-cover design and text illustration. This year has seen a focus on the design of text and other typography in the educational book format. In the past South African publishers have seen fit to rely on the expertise of mainly European book and text designers. In our specific case, the publishers have decided to avoid the problem of 'alien' design and to work with home grown solutions. This collaboration has helped students identify areas which some had never considered, for example the political history of educational publishing in South Africa.

Looking Ahead

Slowly, and in spite of the complex background of conservatism and security in their breeding and their learning, the students are allowing a more humane range of influences to be part of their thinking. We

have to be very patient as The Bridge goes through its development. It is a concept based very much on idea, in a studio setting which doesn't boast wonderful facilities other than a comfortable space and the permission to think. We must be patient with the pace of change in an educational environment, patient with the bureaucratic obstinance which inevitably prevails, with students who have to rediscover their individual needs.

We must be patient with the shedding of our institutions' whiteness, with the politicians and with the priorities of a changing homeland. At the same time, things tend to have a life and momentum of their own, and so it is with The Bridge. We, Rick and myself, have a sense sometimes of standing by and watching as it moves through different stages, dependent above all on the demand and vision of that unpredictable animal we call the student.

REFERENCE

Paz, O. 1985. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.