

# Introduction

The articles in this edition of *Design Issues* track, illuminate, and reflect on the influences and trajectories that have shaped and are shaping South African design practice and production. In so doing, they succeed in highlighting the dualities and dilemmas of continuity and change in the development of design in this country and its reactive relation to unique cultural, social, and economic circumstances in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Three clusters of ideas are predominantly interwoven into the articles. The first of these is the extent to which design, in practice and in manifest form, has been molded by two major impulses. These are, primarily, the country's colonial history, essentially the political, educational and cultural dominance of Britain as well as the later ideologies of apartheid which many view as a form of internal colonialism, and secondly, design's intersection with corporate and consumer capitalism as powerful economic and cultural forces. Current debates and creative tensions between Africanism, South Africanism, localism and internationalism dictate and ensure that there is no easy path ahead and that it is not possible to view or review design within any single framework or category. The co-existence of opposites, ambiguity and contradiction demand a fluidity that crosses conceptual barriers and that questions the once secure boundaries that separated one category from another.

The second cluster of ideas relates to transformation and how this concept has been instrumental in promoting design thinking, action, dialogue and reflection by encouraging changes in focus, priorities, interests, allegiances and methods. The articles underscore just how deeply embedded in the South African psyche are the seminal events and themes that inform the new democratic dispensation brought about by the dismantling of the apartheid system. There is a keen sensitivity to the tremendous cultural variety of the country, a growing understanding of the value of indigenous knowledge and a clear articulation that the incorporation and recognition of previously marginalized groups in the design industry and design education are matters of some urgency.

The final cluster of ideas reflects a willingness to confront and understand the multifaceted contributions that design can make in many arenas. Achievements, opportunities, directions and options apparent in the design domain are delineated in the articles. The role and potential of design that emerges from these deliberations is comprehensive. Design is positioned not only in terms of products and symbols, but also in relation to policies, systems and interac-

tions. The need for designers in South Africa to demonstrate and develop the potential of design by working with government agencies, large corporations, private enterprises, educational institutions and local communities is unequivocal.

While common ideas link the articles, the scope and range of their subject matter is relatively wide. The intimate relation of the built environment to identifiable ideological underpinnings is examined by two authors. Two broad based commentaries of design developments, particularly during the last decade as South Africa embarked on a new dispensation, offer some assessment and evaluation of design's progress and its current state. In the two final articles, descriptions of design thinking and activities in the operational arena provide an insight into the pragmatic engagement with the challenges posed by contemporary circumstances.

Frederico Freschi and Jeanne van Eeden take the built environment in historical and contemporary review. Freschi considers the façades of some commercial buildings designed by architect William Grant Hood in the central business district of Cape Town during the inter-war period. He indicates how the iconographic meanings of the façades may be seen as a response to the South African urban context and the concept of modernity as the qualifying characteristic of corporate expansion and identity in colonial South Africa. Van Eeden highlights the continuing influence of the colonial legacy and its assertion in popular South African culture. She points to the perpetuation of mythical and stereotypical views of Africa in the articulation of space and the structuring of narrative for a prominent South African theme park and suggests that these tactics obscure the multifaceted nature and diversity of the country's culture and history. She emphasizes the necessity for engagement with issues such as identity in a more critical and sustained manner and proposes that South Africa represent itself with images and stories that reflect its diversity more candidly.

Ian Sutherland and Marian Sauthoff maintain that South African design is indeed starting to exploit the rich iconic nature of its diverse histories and visual culture and blend this with new material, technology and global trends in sometimes startling and unique ways. Sauthoff and Sutherland consider not only how manifestations of design echo, bear witness to and promote new considerations of identity, diversity, and transformation in South Africa. They also expose how design practice and education are under close scrutiny in a number of forums inside and outside the design arena in attempts to address historical problems and grapple with contemporary complexities. Both authors are complimentary and critical, suggesting that while much has been achieved, much still needs to be done.

Throwing the design net wider than the local context, Thomas Oosthuizen maintains that South African marketers and designers cannot avoid globalization nor easily choose their own path into the

future. What they can do is think and create innovatively to meet global competition on its own terms. He suggests that the divisive nature of South Africans as shown by their whole history, may be their greatest strength if only they can turn this weakness into an understanding that harnesses the inherent value encapsulated in the multiplicity of cultural forms and contexts prevalent in South Africa. Based on experience in the communications arena, Oosthuizen provides some practical guidance on how communicating across cultures may be approached.

Kate Wells, Edgard Sienaert and Joan Conolly reveal the power of collaboration and the importance of acknowledging socio-cultural milieu. They describe how a jointly conceived and undertaken HIV/AIDS intervention project was able to integrate design, development and communication strategies with indigenous knowledge, value systems and traditional craft skills to meet the needs and aspirations of a group of women in a rural KwaZulu-Natal community. Informed and sensitive to the women's needs, and truly embraced by the intended beneficiaries, the project has given impetus to sustainable economic development, pride and self-actualization.

In 1992 Clem Sunter, chief scenario planner and then chairman of the Gold and Uranium Division of the Anglo American Corporation, described South Africa as a microcosm of the world. He suggested that the problems and complexities facing the nations of the world as they strive to create better societies, are directly and proportionately mirrored in South Africa. Success in understanding these complexities and solving particular problems thus provides a wonderful opportunity for South Africa to contribute insights and to share experiences with developed and developing nations. Could one extend this aspiration to the more specific context of design? Does design from the periphery have something to offer? The articles in this edition would suggest that the potential is there: ideas from the periphery are multiple, pertinent and possess the capacity to enrich understanding and challenge design thinking beyond the borders of South Africa.

Guest Editors  
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