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Weekender

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What's in a space?

The Design Indaba is making a large blip on the international radar, writes JANINE STEPHEN

IT IS often the simple ideas that make the biggest impressions. Take condoms, for instance: brilliant products that people need more than ever, yet the design hasn't really changed much since latex took over from sheep gut and other less savoury materials. They come in various flavours and textures in little foil packages, as they have for years.



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But now South African product developers ...XYZ have developed the condom applicator. No more slippery battles in the dark with less-than-perfectly designed packaging. As Bernard Smith of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Pretoria delicately put it, the applicator is "one of those rare products that bridges the divide between social, cultural, economic and international barriers by solving a problem common to all". ...XYZ MD Roelf Mulder says the improved applicator will soon be in shops.

Another example of innovative design: the Zenkaya prefabricated mobile house. It is factory built, using recyclable materials, and comes in a number of designs and sizes. Once completed, it's loaded on a flatbed truck, dropped where you want it, and plugs into electricity and waste systems. Moving house? No problem.

Products like these will, in time, go down in the annals of South African design as stellar events, much like the Creepy Krauly did (a design now used in 90% of pools worldwide). They are just two examples. It's not difficult to find more. These days, South Africans are interested in smart (as in clever), stylish, sometimes life-changing home-grown designs to wear, use and, crucially, invest in.

Some credit for this taste for designer goodies must go to the key event on the country's design calendar, the Design Indaba, a conference and expo. It was judged the best conference in the world at Barcelona's EIBTM awards. A three-day talk shop that has brought the global design elite to Cape Town since 1995, this year's event has collared speakers of the calibre of Brian Eno and UK designer Jasper Morrison, and is expected to attract about 3000 participants.

The scale of the Indaba's success has surprised even its energetic founder, Ravi Naidoo. "It's peculiar that here we are, on the bottom end of Africa, and we've got the biggest multidisciplinary design conference in the world," he says. "There's something so delicious about that, it's not the agrarian crap that the International Monetary Fund and World Bank promote. Why not use hi-tech, high art and high science as levers for social and economic renewal in Africa? It's less patronising, and more about investing in intellectual capital, ideas and people."

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Design's potential for development was behind the birth of the Design Indaba. "We are not about organising design soirées," says Naidoo. "Here's an economy that was moribund, dependent on commodities, and design creativity was the X factor: to transcend a commodity into a covetable product that will take SA further up the value chain. This industry has always been a bit of a Cinderella, and we wanted to give it the stature, gravitas and attention it deserves."



"Awareness of the importance of the design industry has grown," says Adrienne Viljoen, manager of the South African Bureau of Standards Design Institute. Government has identified the creative industries as one of the keys to economic growth.

"What all the priority sectors have in common is that they are labour intensive, rapidly growing sectors worldwide, suited to South African circumstances and open to opportunities for black economic empowerment and small business development," says Julia Nzimande, the deputy director of creative industries in the trade and industry department.

But there is a dearth of figures detailing how much design contributes to the local economy. UK figures highlight the potential. There, creative industries make up the third-largest sector of the economy. They contribute 8,1% to gross domestic product and employ about 2-million people.

In the past, SA's strengths were arguably in areas such as engineering design as opposed to interior, fashion or furnishings. Viljoen points to examples such as mining and agricultural equipment and armaments, as does Business and Arts SA CEO Nicola Danby. While SA still doesn't compete easily when it comes to designing things such as kettles, "there is an increased faith in the quality of work that comes out of SA and the cultural cringe factor is on the wane", Danby says.

Nowhere is this more apparent than the Design Indaba Expo, an exhibition of the best of South African design for exporters, retailers, buyers and the public. There you will find everything from furniture and interior design products to jewellery, craft and industrial design (the condom applicator and Zenkaya's prefabs will be on show this year).

Expo content manager Lauren Shantall says there has been "phenomenal" growth recently in local design. "Not only has a new generation of designers emerged, but established designers are experiencing successes with new product lines," she says. "Design is becoming a viable career option."

Young creatives will be represented at the expo thanks to sponsors, while the trade and industry department is providing funding for 19 mostly black economic empowerment and women-owned companies to display their wares. It will also bring foreign buyers to the expo — last year the department's buyers ordered products worth about R1,5m.

The strength of the Design Indaba is its all-South African focus. It faces stiff competition: design fairs have become de rigeur in many of the world's cities as they fight to attract their share of the lucrative global design market.

Top of the heap are probably Milan's Salone del Mobile, Paris's Maison et Object and London's 100% Design (New York's International Contemporary Furniture Fair is also not to be sniffed at).

"There are 15 design festivals taking place annually," London Design Festival director Ben Evans told the Financial Times last year. "I wouldn't be surprised if there are eventually 50. Everyone's getting in on the act."

Still, international buyers are heading south in growing numbers — from six in 2004 to 72 this year. Shantall believes this is because they know they will find something different. "The big international fairs do not have any national

preference — so Dutch designers show at Milan; Italian designers in London," she says. "The Design Indaba Expo is a showcase of only local design. Buyers are specifically interested in stocking innovative local product for the global market."

For all the positive news and big names such as Gavin Rajah, Monkey Biz and Brian Steinhobel (think Cobra taps, shark pods and Barracudas), South African design needs help. Design experts express a need for a cohesive government policy to grow the industry. Some believe there are not enough institutions teaching industrial design.

Finding money to manufacture good ideas, let alone fund events like the Design Indaba, remains a battle. Still, you can't keep a good idea down. "Design reflects what is happening in a country," Viljoen says. "We are becoming niche leaders in things such as primary health-care products."

She believes SA can make a difference by developing products for local circumstances and then offering them to the world — such as solar-powered hearing aids, Smartlock safety syringes that prevent needle stick injuries, or the Hippo Water Roller, which allows people to easily transport large quantities of water.

The Design Indaba conference brings together top individuals in many different fields to share concerns and ideas, so changing trends become more visible. A key theme that has emerged from past Indabas is the need for responsible design, which doesn't necessarily add to the waste mountain, is easy on the environment and is genuinely people friendly.

This year, the debates are likely to deepen with speakers at the Indaba including Alex Steffen, co-founder of a media collective dedicated to "exploring ideas for building a better future", and US architect Cameron Sinclair, the author of Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises.

And SA, with its peculiar mix of first- and third-world economies, is well positioned to play a large part, Naidoo believes.

||The Design Indaba conference runs from February 21 to 23; three specialist indabas (architecture, jewellery and lifestyle) take place on the 23rd. The expo runs from February 23-25.

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