

# Function, form and our history

Cape Town has been named World Design Capital for 2014. Amid the euphoria, there are pertinent questions about how the city plans to use this status and if people with influence understand what it should mean, write **Byron Qually** and **Lorelle Bell**

**T**HE WORLD Design Capital award is conferred by the International Council for Societies of Industrial Design (Icsid) and the Mother City will benefit from exposure to this organisation's global support base. A year-long programme of design events is the reward for winning the title.

Understanding design and its capacity for social impact could go a long way towards using the discipline's people-centred, problem-solving methodology to find effective solutions to Cape Town's socio-economic challenges, particularly in service delivery. While the 2014 programme is a series of branded design events, the legacy should be the promotion of design and design education, and the adoption of design as a way to generate the innovation necessary to develop sustainable solutions for the city.

Cape Town's bid benefits from the story it is able to tell of existing public projects that contribute to rebuilding, reconnecting and resourcing communities disconnected, denied opportunities and marginalised by a legacy of colonisation and segregation.

Historically, design was used to separate people – think legislation like the Group Areas Act and the labour preference policies, the design of buffer zones and railway routes that dissected communities, and the CBD's unfinished ring road. Post-1994, public projects were "designed" to begin reconnecting them.

The public places programme created spaces across the metropole close to public transport hubs and other municipal buildings. Integrated development projects began to be implemented to provide dormitory townships with access to education, health and social services. The non-motorised transport routes and Bus Rapid Transport system (BRT) have been designed to provide accessible, sustainable, public transport options to everyone in Cape Town. These are a few of the public initiatives which could demonstrate the positive social impact design can have and how it can create an inclusive, connected city.

But we're a long way from achieving this ideal. Public spaces placed close to public buildings rather than where communities



**RIDE ON:** Cyclists on the cycle path in Paarden Island next to the BRT lane. The BRT, particularly the reason for favouring some routes in the Eastern Metropole, is inadequately communicated, while cycle paths in Khayelitsha go unnoticed and are little used. PICTURE: BRENTON GEACH

prefer congregating, without the benches and toilets that are the preferred priorities of communities, are under-used. Cycle pathways in Khayelitsha go unnoticed and are little-used. The BRT, particularly the reason for prioritising some routes over the densely populated eastern metropole, is inadequately communicated. All of these instances reveal an absence of

design thinking which emphasises engagement with user-communities, testing and communication before final implementation.

While it is heartening to hear politicians suddenly talking up design, too many public messages focus on anticipated increases in tourism and investment. We should learn from having had similar expectations from 2010. We need to

build on Cape Town's design story and realise design's potential for truly transforming the city and this requires a much more considered understanding of design, and a much greater commitment to it.

A good starting point might be to develop an agreed understanding of design: a task less easy than you would think.

Ask any designer to define design

and you'll understand the scope of the problem. This is exacerbated by the public perception of design as a sub-sector of craft, or arts and culture, or alternatively as part of the umbrella "creative industry" tag.

Then "design" is loosely applied to a range of products which have more to do with "designer" labels than actual design; or, alternatively, assumed by those who would more



**INTERRUPTED:** The unfinished CBD ring road is a relic of previous urban engineering.

accurately be described as stylists, decorators and crafters.

John Heskett points out, "Design should be the crucial anvil on which the human environment in all its detail is shaped and constructed for the betterment of all".

How then does one ensure that design is, and who a designer is.

Then there is the question of measurement of design, specifically determining when objectives have been met to understand the impact of design interventions. And finally, and most significantly for Cape Town, South Africa and the continent, the city

needs to articulate what legacy it envisages for the World Design Capital 2014 programme and how it aims to achieve this.

Perhaps the most useful definition of design is one favoured by Cape Town-based academic Professor Johannes Cronjé, dean of informatics and design at CPUT, who says, "design is about problem solving". The beauty of this seemingly obvious definition lies in its implicit expectation that the designer clearly understands the problem before any solution can be proposed. This is an important step in a design process. It necessitates research and interrogation, so that the designer addresses the "problem" in all its contextual intricacies, and only then develops appropriate and effective designs.

Identifying who qualifies to be a designer is also critical. For endemic to design's problem-solving role is the notion of responsibility.

It places on the designer the onus for understanding the user's needs against the seemingly invisible background of constraints. Though Cape Town has patent needs, the solutions may prove more elusive. The acknowledgement that the context is unique, and that international solutions may not be adequate, is a good step. However, it is acceptable to fail en route to good design. Unlike arts, culture and craft which allow for individual

interpretation, design has to consider utility and the end user. Many design iterations will fail, but each will ultimately point to the solution.

And perhaps this is where the ultimate responsibility needs to be embraced by designers, local government and disenfranchised communities who have been denied solutions for decades.

Design is not static, it needs to be cognisant of historic events, it needs to be implemented from a reflective viewpoint, and most important, it will never be the ultimate solution. All should remain in dialogue on how their world can be redesigned and improved.

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**'We must focus on design's potential to truly transform the city'**