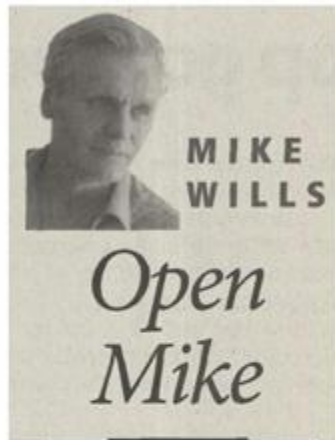


# Inequality takes shine off city's golden time



SO, WE now live in a World Design Capital.

Sounds flash, doesn't it? I confess that I'm still unsure about what that much-celebrated title for 2014 tangibly means but I can't help feeling a little surge of pride about our city.

It just makes us feel so damn cosmopolitan.

Actually, it's been a splendid few weeks for Cape Town for those with the bucks and wanting to feel part of the global community.

You could have heard two megabands, Coldplay and Kings of Leon, at the still sparkling stadium, watched one of Britain's great actors, Timothy West, at the classily renovated Fugard, enjoyed a T20 cricket international against Australia at a fireworks-filled Newlands, or been regaled with the tales of comic legend John Cleese at the ultra-modern CTICC.

And you can catch Janet Jackson, Josh Grobin and Tori Amos this month alone in the GrandWest Arena.

Boy, we have come a long way since those dark days of isolation when the best we could hope for was a has-been at The Three Arts, a never-was at the Good Hope Centre or some dodgy Yellow Pages Sanctions Busters XI getting thrashed at a dozy Newlands.

The CTICC is cooking at the moment, having hosted the World Aeronautical Congress, the World Veterinary Congress and a global

conference of professional management accountants inside a month.

This then is a golden time for Cape Town for those on the comfortable side of the gaping divide. For a relatively small metropole we are clearly punching well above our weight internationally.

But what's happening at the same time in the swathes of the city where these glittering events meant nothing other than a further example of bitter inequity?

What is the nexus between those two worlds, or is there a complete and dangerous disconnect? Does it matter that most of those occasions were relentlessly white in their audiences? Is spending more than R500 a ticket to watch Chris Martin do his thing our equivalent of those obscene bankers' bonuses which

have understandably enraged the Occupy movement protesters? How do we justify spending small fortunes indulging our musical whims in a R4 billion stadium while so many in our city do not even have access to a toilet? What use is being a World Design Capital to anyone other than an elite and well-educated design community? Are our priorities completely wrong?

Are those enough questions for you, because I do have more?

Sadly, I don't have any answers although I know plenty of people will claim they do with what's best described as "trickle down" and "pump prime" economics.

They will robustly tell me to stop the pathetic liberal agonising and understand that the top subsidises the bottom through rates, taxes, consumption and employment, and the better off we are, and the more of us who live and spend generously here, then the better it is for everyone else.

They argue that the city and the province must keep putting money into top-end venues like the CTICC, elite events like stadium concerts and fancy monikers like World Design Capital because that all polishes the Cape Town brand and generates economic activity which ultimately benefits everyone.

I regret I cannot share their certitude. I understand the core strategic principle of such an approach, but an awful lot of it sounds self-serving.

One small example. During the run-up to the design capital decision, there was an outcry that the city had apparently withdrawn financial support for the Design Indaba, which has run for the past few years. This mistaken report was allegedly "jeopardising" our chances of beating Bilbao and Dublin.

My shock was to discover that a city with such pressing needs was subsidising an event which sells out the CTICC at more than R5 000 a ticket! If, at that price, you can't run a self-sustaining event without your hand in the public purse then maybe the event is not worth holding.

And beware the accounting claims that go with every occasion demanding favourable treatment from the mayor or the premier. Each will produce a survey alleging at least R500 million worth of "spin-off" for the local economy, but these are often ginormous thumb-sucks.

None of which is meant to undermine our World Design Capital status. The licence fee for that crown is less than R2m, which seems cheap at the price. Our bid committee claim they'll use the year-long focus to help bridge our great divide and they argue passionately that good design affects everything including tackling poverty.

I really hope they're right. I want to enjoy some of the stimulating design events in the city in 2014 and would love to be able to do so with a clear conscience.