

Design

2009 is about time

By Nadine Botha

Design can get a bad rap. It can come across as ostentatious, self-indulgent, fickle and playing to the wealthy elite.



What purpose do million-dollar couches, bridges made of paper tubes, cathedral-sized installations of plastic straws, gold-plated Boeings and clingwrap ball gowns serve other than spam fodder and confirming the schism between me and my skadonk, and the way those other people live?

While entertainment and eye candy are not ignoble motivations, this ignores the broader insidious nature of design. Design is everywhere.

The invisible hands of a designer have touched your clothes, your toaster, your cellphone, your computer, this very magazine; right down to your nail clippers and those little plastic things on the end of your shoelaces, not to even mention the new-car fragrance that comes pre-manufactured in a bottle.

The cordless iron, the round navigation of iPods, the red record button and the triangular play button on any media player, in-ear headphones and more...

At root of all of these is a

design decision: choosing a form for the object to better fulfil its function.

One might see this ubiquity as sinister but that would be dismissing the immense responsibility that lies with the designer. When a single design decision is going to be implemented on a million or more sneakers, each material, production technique, point of production, travel and production run will have a tangible effect on cost, environment, community and social factors.

For instance, Nike's decision to use just 3% organic cotton in its T-shirts and socks in 2006 equated to a reduction of 330 tonnes of toxic chemicals being dumped into the environment over a three-year period.

As we embark on 2009 with headlines screaming "recession" and "global warming", now is the time for design to shine. Designers look towards the Great Depression of 1930, which saw their ilk creating modernist solutions for the average person. The

economic limitations saw designers incorporating new materials such as plastic, resin and plywood; using cost-effective production methods such as modular manufacturing and assembly lines; and developing groundbreaking construction methods such as reinforced concrete stilts and non-supporting facades.

It's come full circle: today designers punt alternative materials to plastic and concrete, prefab production methods, energy efficient implementation that reduces the need for electricity and cradle-to-cradle construction (the notion that every part can be recycled once it fulfils its lifespan). Not to mention keeping it geographically localised to reduce the environmental impact of transporting raw materials and end products.

Take Cape Town architect Luyanda Mphalwa's use of sandbags to solve the Design Indaba 10x10 low-cost housing challenge. By using a wooden framework filled with sandbags,

Mphalwa reduced the building cost of a so-called RDP housing unit while allowing for the floorspace to be doubled. Ten prototypes are currently being built in Freedom Park.

Other local designers have risen to the challenge. Heath Nash's Other People's Rubbish Lamps are made from recycled plastic bottles and display in some of the most luxurious institutions across the world.

Carbon d'Affreeque's clutch and laptop bags made from recycled billboard vinyls are a fashionista must-have and Koop's austere furniture made from alien timber add a considered element to loft living.

South Africa's design feat certainly lies in its social empowerment collectives. Designer craft collectives such as Streetwires, Zenzulu, Monkeybiz and Design Afrika have elevated our country's ingrained street creativity to a level of international desirability.

Design Afrika's Xhosa-style gourd baskets are made by the

Design Indaba Expo runs from 27 Feb to 1 Mar at the Cape Town International Convention Centre. Featuring fashion, architecture, product industrial design, craft, jewellery, visual art and more, it is a celebration of the best South African creative solutions. Tickets are R50 at the door.

Masizame Women's Project in the Eastern Cape and distributed across the world in the Conran Shop. These projects have made a significant economic contribution to the participating communities.

Besides the designers though, the responsibility also lies with the consumer. The virtues of buying local—as the economic and environmental challenges of 2009 unfold—is no longer merely a matter of nationalist pride. While the price tags on knockoffs and foreign goods can be alluring, consider the environmental impact of imports and the social impacts of a weakening local infrastructure.

While the Great Depression was the heyday for popularising and bringing elegant solutions to the masses, it was the market that demanded it first. With limited disposable income, the market demanded reasonably priced, durable and beautiful merchandise that they really liked and would want to treasure for a long time. The throwaway culture and weekly changing trends of the past few decades are so last century.

In the lean years ahead, "there will be less design, but much better design," predicted Paola Antonelli in the *New York Times*. "This might be the time when designers can really do their job, and do it in a humanistic spirit," the senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York continued.

I hope to see 2009 as the dawn of a meditative, quiet period as consumers become self-reflective and designers take the time off from the greedy side of capitalism to consider issues of infrastructure, housing, city planning, transport and energy.

We're all going to be pinched, but there's no reason to panic—there's going to be an abundance of one of the biggest luxuries of all: time.

It's about time for design.

Opposite page: Cape Town architect Luyanda Mphalwa's use of sandbags to solve the Design Indaba 10x10 low-cost housing challenge.



Above: Heath Nash's Other People's Rubbish Lamps are made from recycled plastic bottles

Left: Design Afrika's Xhosa-style gourd baskets are made by the Masizame Women's Project in the Eastern Cape.

Below: Koop's austere furniture made from alien timber.

