

## The design experience

Cape Town's Design Indaba shows that the scope for designers to make a difference to society is wider than ever

I may be about to make you jealous. In February, I left the freezing UK to spend a week in Cape Town. Sunny, spectacular Cape Town. But it was all in the service of CR and you dear reader as my time was spent not sipping Shiraz (well, not entirely) but inside the Cape Town International Conference Centre for this year's Design Indaba.

I hadn't been to Indaba for five years, during which time it has continued to grow (it now boasts a music and film festival alongside the main design event and expo) and to burnish its reputation as perhaps the best design conference in the world. Through simulcasts in partner cities it now reaches some 6,000 South African designers, creatives and students: quite a daunting number for the assembled speakers.

At the end of every conference, the challenge is to make some sense of what has come before. Were there any themes? Any messages which emerged? Not easy when you are talking about nearly 30 speakers across three days. But I think that sheer scale and scope was the message of this year's conference.

Day one began with the oldest speaker – illustrator, artist and designer Seymour Chwast who is in his 80s. But it also featured the youngest – the eight students from Europe and North America who presented projects that afternoon. So there appear to be few age restrictions on design – teenagers and octogenarians both have something important to contribute. This may or may not be a depressing thought, but there appears to be no retirement age for designers.

Generational differences were



also apparent in the work on show which revealed perhaps the most exciting idea to take away from the conference – that the landscape or arena in which designers can operate today is to much broader than before.

Take design's role in the urban environment for example. In his presentation, type designer Matthew Carter (still rocking a pony tail at 70-odd) showed his elegant contribution to a signage system for Yale University: a classic means for a designer to impact their surroundings. But digital technology allows us to think about wayfaring in a much-expanded way. Alexander Chen is on the Google Glass team and showed the latest thinking driving that project forward: wearable technology that not only tells you where to go but links to very aspect of your social life as you do it. Incidentally, Chen raised a very interesting point. Google's back-to-front approach to developing Glass is to make a commercial for the imagined, idealised product first, then try to work out how to build it.

And what about the material environment of the city? Two Parsons students, Howard Chambers and Bland Hoke showed how designers can intervene in imaginative ways with their Softwalks project. In order to brighten up the scaffolding which typically stretches over pavements in US cities when buildings are being renovated, Softwalks provides a kit of parts including seating, tables and plant pots which can be attached to the scaffolding. This helps business-owners attract customers who may otherwise be put off by the works and turns a space which people would otherwise rush through into a more pleasant place to be.

From the temporary to the permanent, Dutch designer Daan Roosegarde showed Smart Highway, a series of ideas to improve roads. His suggestions include painting road surfaces in luminescent paint, affixing snowflake patterns which become visible when the temperature drops to warn of ice and creating charging lanes for electric vehicles. And these are not just studio concepts

– he is working with the largest road builder in the Netherlands to make them happen.

But a designer's role doesn't even have to involve creating a tangible object or service. Jeanne van Heeswijk works with disaffected communities to improve their lives. She was invited to participate in the Liverpool Biennial but, instead of creating an installation or painting, she went to work with the community in Anfield which has been struggling with the effects of various aborted development schemes. Van Heeswijk has worked with the community through workshops and meetings, helping them articulate an alternative to the council's plans. All these are 'design' projects in some way, but very different ways in which to affect the world around us.

This variety was reflected by other speakers. Take design and food, for example. We had New York designer Louise Fili who showed a series of crafted restaurant identities and food packaging. But we also had recent RCA graduate Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg who is working with synthetic biology and who developed a concept whereby the colour of our faeces could be used to detect diseases. Or what about design and music? Paula Scher was at Indaba, a designer who started her career creating sleeves at CBS Records. Contrast that with Nelly Ben Hayoun who designs experiences. Her involvement with music was to persuade NASA's research scientists to perform an opera about the Apollo moon landings.

I used to be quite skeptical of some of the expanded claims made for design – 'design thinking' for example. But that week in South Africa really brought home to me the incredibly open playing field design now operates in. We hear a lot of doom and gloom about the number of design graduates emerging from education and the lack of opportunities for them in the industry. But on this evidence, if you have something valuable to contribute, design can find room for you. 