



Cape of Good Hope

On the Good Samaritan in Ravi Naidoo

While kicking a ball from Signal Hill into the direction of Green Point's new football stadium, Cape Town Mayor Dan Plato declares himself a proud Capetonian during the 100 days countdown ceremony to the FIFA 2010 World Cup. Meanwhile, he's also giving direction to where the action – read the city's energy and money – is going: football-wards. A bit further up the road the Design Indaba Conference & Expo has just closed its gates. Both alluring events – from head to foot – are the brainchild of 'commercial activist' Ravi Naidoo, another Capetonian who dreams aloud and well-awake about a better future for both his city and country through design... and football.



text & images WALTER BETTENS

South-African Ravi Naidoo hasn't been sitting on his hands the last 16 years. Since the advent of democracy in 1994 - when he launched Interactive Africa, of which he is the managing director - Naidoo, a positivist with lots of kinetic energy in his system, has been passionately involved in debating and shaping new socio-economic opportunities into tangible realities for his home country. One of the baselines on Interactive Africa's website gives the game away: 'entrepreneurs with a socio-political conscience'. And although dropping his name raises a few eyebrows here and there, whether from the hilly streets of Tamboerskloof to the lush lanes of Durbanville - high trees catch lots of wind, we guess - he is considered by many a true catalyst for the local creative industries, identifying design as a generator for social change in South Africa: a change through inspiration and education. 'It's hard sometimes to be a Good Samaritan,' he sighs.

Segregated State of Mind

Naidoo, the son of Indian parents, grew up in Durban on the east coast, where he witnessed injustice from very close in the days when apartheid was a daily routine. It has formed the boy who became a man and the pragmatist self realised that it's time to move forward

and build a solid equity-based future for the nation. 'South Africa is two countries in one, both on the level of social dynamics and between the private and the public. Today the biggest challenge is the government, who's out to lunch and not in sync with the public sector,' he says. Visiting Cape Town some 200 years after the abolition of slavery (in the then colony) and only two decades after apartheid was officially banned, one realises that society here is still in a very segregated state of mind, with all the contradictions and schizophrenia about the haves and have-nots that this brings.

Interactive Africa established itself as far more than the average, conventional marketing and communications agency. Operating instead as an engaged platform that incorporates social action and balances between business and creativity, it reaches beyond the blue-chip clients in tourism & sports or the high-tech giants such as Vodacom, with initiatives such as sustaining South Africa's bids to host the FIFA World Cup in 2006 and 2010 - together with the SA Football Association. But we've been told that in Cape Town Naidoo is best known for project-managing entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth's campaign on his First African in Space mission in 2002,

'Commercial activist' Ravi Naidoo on his office rooftop

Green Point Stadium: the old and the new (facing page)
One of 10 new South African stadiums to host nine matches including the semi-final of the FIFA 2010 World Cup.



1. Street scenes: Ravi Naidoo pointing at Crime Prevention car

2. Street scenes: Downtown Cape Town's eclectic mix of architecture

3. Eames Demetrios, Doug Pray and Gary Hustwit on Documenting Design during the Design Indaba Conference © Design Indaba

(facing page)

1. Li Edelkoort, Ravi Naidoo and Table Mountain

2/4/8. Street scenes: Warming up for the World Cup

3. Spoons by Aboda Designer Gifts at the Design Indaba Expo © Design Indaba

5. Born and Bred Design's baskets / vases at the Design Indaba Expo © Design Indaba

6. Street scenes: Downtown Cape Town's eclectic mix architecture 2

7. The 10x10 Low-Cost Housing Project by Luyanda Mpahlwa (MMA Architects) in the township in Freedom Park at Mitchell's Plain, © Design Indaba

9. Street scenes: Druk knoppie to cross the road

and - of course - for Design Indaba where he established worldwide recognition. Not so strange if you know that the 'busy bee' in the South African beehive personally shares many passions at the same time: business, design, technology, sports and... life. 'Interactive Africa: The place where dreams are made into reality' sounds a bit cheesy as yet another baseline, but maybe they are right this time and we're the pessimistic curmudgeons.

Thinkers & Doers

From the full list of activities – where business meets creativity - Design Indaba is definitely Naidoo's favourite. It's the man's adrenaline. It has grown from a local event with two handfuls of speakers and lots of scepticism in 1995 into one of the world's most attractive stages for international thinkers and doers, criss-crossing diverse creative industries, from architecture & urbanism, industrial & graphic design, publishing & advertising, film & broadcasting, music & fashion, visual art & craft, performing arts & new media. This year's edition embraced Alejandro Aravena, Bruce Nussbaum, Gary Hustwit, Ronan Bouroullec, Harry Pearce, Michael Bierut, Troika, Li Edelkoort, Eames Demetrios, Tord Boontje, Christien Meindertsma and many, many others.

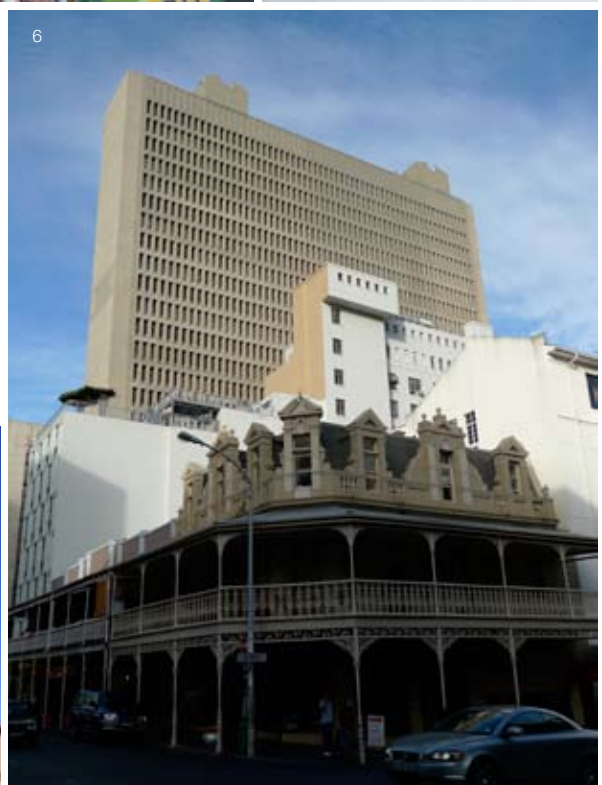
But Design Indaba is more than just talking blah-blah: along with the conference in the Convention Centre, the annual Design Indaba Expo is South Africa's main design & crafts fair. Over the years they have also created a heavyweight design syllabus for South African schools. Not to forget the other brave initiative that proves that it's not only show and talk, the 10x10 Low-Cost Housing Project. Out of ten proposals – including international Design Indaba speakers Shigeru Ban, Tom Dixon and Thomas Heatherwick twinned with local architects – the winning entry by Luyanda Mpahlwa (MMA Architects) is based on indigenous mud-and-wattle building techniques, proving that sustainable design and traditional construction methods can offer contemporary solutions. In the meantime Design Indaba completed ten such houses for single-family homes in the township of Mitchell's Plain. The initiative is an exercise in finding answers to the country's ongoing shortage of decent low-cost housing. As we all know, in the nearby future 75 per cent of the world's population will be moving towards urban areas, so this idea is also applicable beyond the borders of South Africa. A planned construction project with Chile-born architect Alejandro Aravena takes its aspirations to a higher level.

The idea is to implement Elemental's 'Half-houses' into a small-integrated community of ten grouped residences on a school campus, eight for the teachers and family, one for a nurse and another for a policeman, most probably planned for the Belleville area.

Although Cape Town may seem a remote spot on the map, Naidoo's stream of energy hasn't gone unnoticed by the outside world. Two years ago he entered the hot 50 list of Design Week, the UK magazine honouring people with the biggest impact on the international design scene. A few months ago he was appointed the Agency Leader of the Year nominated by the South African Financial Mail AdFocus Awards. But maybe this went unnoticed to all the beautiful people out there. Could you spare a minute to read out loud his mouthful list as commercial activist within a mix of socially embedded South African organisations? So here we go: co-founder of CITI (Cape IT Initiative), participant on the board of Captour (Cape Tourism Authority), executive director of the National Labour and Economic Development Institute, member of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System and the Management Sub-Committee, head of the Editorial Sub-Committee, consultant to the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games company, advisor for the Policy Review Panel for the Department of Trade and Industry, the Council of Statistics South Africa, the ILO Advisory Panel for the Social Dialogue and Poverty Alleviation in Africa, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and a humble servant to the advisory board of Earth Equity,... and we are sure that the list is completely incomplete. By the way, please forgive us our style, this little pamphlet almost sounds like a love-in.

The Potency of Creativity

Anyway, Naidoo's biggest match for South Africa is not a football game: his winning goal is to see his golden team of creativity, innovation, design and branding beating the living shit out of the mining sector in terms of GDP. And Naidoo has other dreams in store. His first concern is most probably not the South African football team beating the Brazilians in the semi-finals at the new Green Point stadium – although you never know - but turning Cape Town into one of the next World Design Capitals. And another - why not – would be assigning a political mandate to his role as creative advisor for the municipality or on a national level – Minister of Culture, perhaps? In the meantime we kicked the ball in his direction with a few Qs.





DAMn°: What are the biggest challenges for Cape Town in the near future?

Ravi Naidoo: It would be on the policy and education front... We still do not have a national or regional policy document on creativity, design or innovation... And I find too many bureaucrats adrift of current thinking and best practice. Secondly, we have more work to do as regards education, both at school and tertiary level. Education is indeed the biggest challenge facing the country – because it's widely accepted that given the budget allocated to it, we are not getting the results and impacts that we need as an emerging nation. There is a huge skills deficit – and too many of our graduates are not adequately prepared for the rigours of enterprise.

DAMn°: How can Design Indaba trigger these challenges?

RN: First off, we act as a catalyst and an ideas exchange – and have done so since 1995. We have advanced the idea that creativity, design and innovation could help us re-imagine Africa, and be the source code for a socio-economic renewal here. Secondly, we drive projects that serve to demonstrate the primacy and potency of using creativity, design and innovation in solving the challenges facing our country.

For example, corralling the best architects in South Africa, and the world, in the Design Indaba 10x10 Low Cost Housing project, with houses being built for

families in a squatter camp, and designs given to the government as open source, is one such project. Or the creation of the first design syllabus for South African schools. Or the hosting of leading designers from around the world, at all our tertiary colleges for free workshops - to 'train the trainer' and inspire the students - in over 35 week-long workshops to date. These are but some of the activities, beyond the event, that characterise the activist spirit of Design Indaba.

DAMn°: How do you evaluate Design Indaba 2010 and how did the event evolve during its 15 years of existence?

RN: It was important to keep scale after our first recession in 17 years, and the general global economic downturn – so we are happy that the conference was sold out, and some 30,000 people went to the Expo. It's important to keep the momentum, even when the prevailing conditions are not advantageous – and give courage and opportunity to our many creative entrepreneurs that are inspired by the conference, and are able to market their wares at the Expo. We have to take up a leadership position and lead the charge... and give direction to a fledgling sector that's just developing critical mass now – after so many years of nurturing and investment.

A Good Samaritan's work is never done.

www.designindaba.com

1. 'The President' Peet Pienaar, performance artist turned graphic designer in his Cape Town Studio

2/4. Street scenes: Warming up for the World Cup

3. Moçambique Collective Ujamaa's head baskets at the Design Indaba Expo © Design Indaba

(facing page)
1/5. Street scenes: Warming up for the World Cup

2. Casamento at the Design Indaba Expo: Hello Hella Jongerius... © Design Indaba

3. Moçambique Collective Ujamaa shaking hands at the Design Indaba Expo © Design Indaba

4. Street scenes: Africa by Brett Murray, a sculpture featuring Bart Simpson in Downtown Cape Town

6. Alejandro Aravena at the Design Indaba Conference got a standing ovation for his exposé

7. Bruce Nussbaum in Haldane Martin's seating system at the Design Indaba Conference © Design Indaba

8. 'War against Waste' - wall graffiti in township of Gugulethu