

By Darren Gilbert

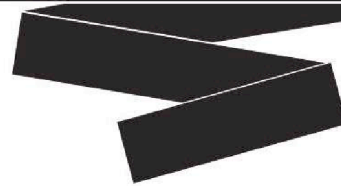
It's difficult for me to put into words my experience of this year's *Design Indaba* without sounding overly passionate. Those who attended this year's event, and perhaps even those who have headed to the *Indaba* in the past, will probably understand what I mean. For those who haven't been, I'll paint the best picture I can for you. Spread across five days between the end of February and the beginning of March, attendees were given unrivalled access to some of the best creative and innovative minds in the world. It proved to be a stretch of time that changed my perception of design – and my approach to creativity – forever. It could change yours, too.

If you think I'm being melodramatic, I'm not. Perhaps I should qualify that statement though – before attending this year's event, my 'relationship' with design was limited. I'll go so far as to admit that in my mind, 'design' was nothing more than an exotic word assigned exclusively to creatives. I couldn't have been more wrong. Design is not 'just a word'. The limit on what design can be is, in fact, almost limitless. Good design can offer solutions to problems, provide a platform for social change, or even prove a key opportunity with which to better our world.

Design aside, creativity and my attitude toward it was something I thought I had a grip on. I work in an industry in which creativity is necessary. There is so much more to the idea of creativity (note: I didn't fall into the trap of calling it a word) than I had grasped. It isn't linear, or at least it shouldn't be, and there is no finite route to originality. Some may suggest that there are no original ideas left, only different slants on the same idea, an argument I put to Project M founder John Bielenberg following his presentation on the first day of the *Indaba*, and he agrees. However for him – and this is something he wants everyone to embrace – it's not about finding a new solution. In challenging our current outlook on creativity, we need to look not at the end solution but rather at the method of how we get there. We also need to understand that we are victims of what he calls "our heuristic pathways". To fix that, we have to begin to "think wrong".

DESIGN INDABA 2012:

Thinking differently for a better future



"In order to generate truly original ideas, [you need to] disrupt [your] learned behaviour," says Bielenberg. It's not so much about finding a radically different end solution as it is about "the process of idea generation" and ensuring you have as many pathways as possible to choose from when seeking a solution. True creativity comes when you bypass what you know is the right path (usually known as the tried and tested method) and embrace new, uncharted routes. In order to do that, you need to be around the right people, believes Bielenberg. For *Design Indaba* founder, Ravi Naidoo, those people can be found at his event.



Built on the back of an upsurge of confidence in South Africa's post-apartheid future, *Design Indaba* has grown from a biannual conference featuring nine speakers to a smorgasbord of design and creativity that has extended past the initial imaginations of its organisers. One only has to look at the events calendar to comprehend its transformation into a grand-scale production. With 24 speakers across the three-day conference and 600 exhibitors at the curated expo, *Design Indaba* is a hotbed of creativity and innovation.

Naidoo believes this is a necessity, adding that it's about "inspiring and triggering ideas that will give people the courage to take the leap and follow their ideas". No one is a bigger poster child for this than former 'adman' Porky Hefer. It was at *Design Indaba* a few years ago – after listening to a presentation – that he decided on the spot to follow his dream. He promptly stood up and walked out, turning his back on a successful 16-year career where he was within touching distance of the top. He now owns and runs Animal Farm, a creative initiative that aims to tackle branding and communication challenges and organisation problems.

This year it was Hefer's turn at the *Design Indaba* podium and what he said in his presentation, a 40-minute talk of sheer brashness mixed with a fresh take on creativity for good measure, stayed with me well after. For Hefer, when approaching the formulation of new ideas, the way forward comes down to "thinking in quantum". Yes, you read right. Some may argue that true art is a science but Hefer takes it to a new level, likening ideas in the mind to atoms that have the ability to switch to higher energy levels – and thus allowing for them to be properly explored and evaluated.

"It's about testing something that everyone else has deemed impossible and showing them that it is possible." Take a look at how you approach the way you think creatively. Can it be done better? Of course it can. All roads lead to Rome, right? Forget about what everyone else says about how you should generate ideas. Step out of that pre-determined box that has been drawn around the topic and redefine it for yourself. That may seem a little anti-establishment but isn't there a piece of that – however small – at the core of creative thinking? In coming up with fresh ideas, you're already stretching the boundaries of what was previously deemed acceptable and satisfactory.

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Someone who pushes the boundaries of creativity like no other is award-winning Danish architect, Bjarke Ingels. He does it via a method he likes to call "hedonistic sustainability", a view that is less an apologetic remedy for human existence and more of a mindset that creates positive environmental experiences. Design is meant to create a better future for all of us. However, this can only be achieved if we reorganise our attitudes around creative thinking and what we can achieve when there are no limits.

One of Ingels' proposals – a chimney at a trash incinerator factory in Copenhagen that blows smoke rings while doubling as a ski slope – bucks the trend of the usual slender, cigarette-like smokestacks or winter holiday destination that you're likely to find. While it remains an idea only – the city of Copenhagen believed it would be bad for the environment – it makes you rethink how your surroundings should look. Who says that what we currently see on any city skyline is the right way to build? Who says there isn't a better way of using the space that we have available to us?

For three days, the *Design Indaba* conference provided an ideal opportunity for the swapping of different views around design and creativity. Who says a good idea yesterday is a good one today? You might find that it isn't. In challenging our own heuristic pathways towards creativity, we can only move forward.