The democracy of design

By Terry Levin   5 Mar 2006

What is the difference between a handmade leather sandal and the footwear that made an imprint on the moon? None, according to Amsterdam-based, Satyendra Pakhalé, speaking on the final day of Design Indaba 9 a week ago. They both have equal human value. Ironically they are both low tech.

Pakhalé is concerned with how we evaluate culture - east or west, old or new, high tech or low tech, modern or traditional, etc. Seeking to rise above extremes in search of universal truths, he describes himself as a cultural nomad.

No doubt he is a wizard who works in every material known to man including the rubber lining stuff out of aeroplane fuel tanks - actually this seems to be quite the hip material cropping up in quite a few of the presentations. Obviously every material requires different processes, different collaborations and his prolific examples are exhibited around the world. Check it out at www.satyendra-pakhale.com.

His most salient point: 'why industry burns so much money'. He cites the often ludicrous state of affairs whereby clients ask for designs to be turned around cheaply in a few weeks, but think nothing spending millions on advertising.

Spend the time where it takes the time, he advises.

Making sense

Dutch designer Ineke Hans works only with what makes sense. She identifies that human beings can't bear it when we can't understand things. In a way it is amazing that international design ensures that we can get around any airport... Like Pakhalé, Hans turns her hand to many materials - wood, recycled plastic, ceramic, flexible resin, laser cutting, welding - using old fashioned functional shapes to ensure user comfort and familiarity.

'Forest' bus-shelter style benches for schools are a beautiful idea and (South) Africa as a region could benefit from contemplating ideas that provide aesthetically relevant practical installations for use in disadvantaged areas, neglected civic spaces and public thoroughfares.

Design solves problems

Design is not about decoration or pretty colours - it solves problems. Like, if there is not shade over our heads, what are we going to do about it - that ensures our heads are cooled, our hearts warmed? When we sit down will we be comfortable, will the layout of the seating be cost effective, conducive to the sharing of ideas or inspiring us in some way? In this way design is the ultimate democratic gesture - we don't want anyone to feel lost in the airport, we want everyone to feel welcome, cared for, considered.

Every year the Indaba is opened by a Parliamentary Minister - this year it was Mr P. Jacobs, MEC for Cultural Affairs and Sport, reassuring us of the importance of design to our economy. Ineke Hans asks simply what do we need to do and where do we need to go? These are the building blocks of problem solving - personally, professionally, politically.

If, as keynote speaker, Yves Béhar, has pointed out, the knowledge economy is already over, then how are we going to communicate that the creativity economy has begun?

Indaba speakers come from all over and show us well-designed things like award winning garlic crushers, self cleaning knife blocks and lots of chairs - it is up to us to extract and apply their principles to solving our own problems.

Ineke Hans showed rings which have letterforms which are raised on the inside - so that when you take it off, the inscription 'Forever Yours' is left on your skin for a little bit (see www.inekehans.com). If the same principle was applied to public furniture, might a love of learning be inspired by children playing and interacting with impressed letter forms onto their own bodies? Might the light sensitive substrate shown by Béhar in his decorative sculptural forms, be used locally to solve problems of under-lit or unsafe areas?

Neither can we, when it is clearly evident that every designer in the world is getting their hands dirty working with these issues, simply scale the industrial age in favour of the digital.

It's time to cross the factory floor - connect with people, with process - to investigate, collaborate, demonstrate - evolve, build, sketch and LEARN.

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