

The Internet of Things

 By [Terry Levin](#) 2 Mar 2015

After their talk, speakers who had presented a session at the Design Indaba Conference, held annually at Cape Town's CTICC, were publicly presented with a [gold medallion](#) as a meaningful keepsake and token of appreciation from their hosts, which like an Olympic medal could be said to symbolise their ultimate achievement in the design world.

Over the duration of a three-day conference and accompanying EXPO event, Design Indaba has become known as the platform for the showcasing of the best contemporary examples of made things. At its essence, design is about a primeval and innate desire for humans to form partnerships with objects found forged. Objects can delight, comfort, invoke, evoke, symbolise, remind, connect, ease or unease us, and the best or most authentically produced ones, emerge as having these abilities amplified. Material things are also the basis of economies and resource management. Tracing a thread of material objectivity through Design Indaba 2015, reveals the contemporary Zeitgeist of Things and echoing the event's subtext: Make Change.



Something from nothing

When resources are scarce ingenuity needs to flourish. A fantastic, local example of Make. Change, is the Fonts for the Future initiative, presented by Joe Public ([@joepublicagency](#)), which turns children's handwriting into currency, inviting the purchase of fonts and an accompanying book of the fonts generated by learners, which become an object of enhanced meaning of beauty and value. Participate [here](#).

The hues of ewes

At the opposite end of the economic scale, but with similar ethos, [Hella Jongerius](#), last seen on the DI stage in 2007 and making a welcome comeback, manages to bring a spirit of conscious-making and the integrity of handcraft into such lofty commissions as the design of the Dutch Delegates Lounge at the UN Headquarters in New York and the first class cabins of KLM airlines - managing to work directly with crafter and suppliers such as spinners, weavers and dyers, even on such a vast industrial scale. She reveals her philosophies and universal human truths such as "design is not about objects it is about our relationship with objects, by appealing to our humanity and imaginations". For example her mindful cradle to-cradle approach is imbued into the carpets of KLM airlines, which are forged from natural Scottish wool blended with the blue fibres of discarded stewardesses' uniforms, "breathing an energy that will be sensed by travellers as a better experience". Energy in object is also achieved by celebrating imperfection, as an antidote to an

excess of industrialisation, for example the spectacular window covering for the UN project consists of a 7mx40m beaded curtain, from porcelain beads handmade by Dutch ceramic manufacturers who have been in business since 1572!

The hewing of pews

Across the globe, Kenyan designer Naeem Biviji of Studio Propolis, is working on building a cathedral in Nairobi, hewing scarce and found materials such as "badly machined timber usually used for the construction industry" into finely crafted pews as well as needing to make every component of its large scale bronze and steel pivot doors from scratch, even clamps due to unavailability of resources in the area. He demonstrates his understanding of relationship to objects with maker philosophies such as, "You have to live with the objects you make and understand how they affect people in a space. Something as simple as a chair can give you a whole education".

Material communications

The design thesis of multi-disciplinary designer Doremy Diatta ([@doremydiatta](#)), is attempting to turn the aforementioned examples of our very real responses to objects into a cognitive science via her design thesis at Parsons The New School University in New York. It makes sense that objects that we keep, collect and attach ourselves to and which can evoke such powerful emotions in us such as love, memory, etc, may also be used to prompt new emotional behaviours. Diatta's work, introducing the design of objects for therapeutic purposes, presented as part of a session for emerging creatives in Pecha Kucha format at this year's Indaba, may yet be regarded as one of its core themes.

[Doremy Diatta | Material Communications](#) from [remcatt](#) on [Vimeo](#).

A "leettle" man

The above case studies start to explain how the *Girontondo* or "Little man" (which becomes leettle man, when said with an Italian accent), product ranges designed by Stefano Giovannoni for Italian homeware empire Alessi in 1989 became worldwide bestsellers. His genius was in imbuing the products with a repetitive motif of a little cut-out man and later other recognisable pop icons such as cacti, birds, boats etc, the unwitting charm of which the 1980's consumer was helpless to resist due to the fact that the objects evoke emotion and recognition with the user and the designs made users happy on an amplified scale of just an ordinary product.

One of the problems with mobile phones and other tech products might be said to be that they lack any of this kind of soulful or human symbology. Sadly Giovannoni tells us, that the success of the iPhone ensured that the [Mister Eye range of phones](#), which he had imbued with personality in the form of a responsive eye motif and human profile in 2010, were never launched. It is arguable that a market now so saturated and dependent on relationships with devices, would be ready for another go at bringing these delightful products to market.

As one of the pantheon of the world's design elite, it felt right that Giovannoni's material mastery was back on the Indaba stage after an absence of nine years.

Raw materials

It goes without saying that the act of making requires a deep knowledge of both materials and processes. The work of Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin and their company Formafatasma is also quintessentially Italian, their forms emerging from the earth like archaeology. After mining the roughest, rawest and most evocative natural materials of their region such as resin, agricultural waste, limestone, lava, basalt, charcoal or leather they create sublimely refined contemporary artefacts that evoke and are imbued with the timeless legacy of European craftsmanship.

It is no surprise to learn that the pair are currently teaching at the (aptly titled for this article) Department of Well Being, at Design Academy Eindhoven, the syllabus of which, as stated on the Academy website is outlined as: "Things, environments, and experiences that are designed to enhance life and enable us to thrive... with a view to integrating ...human experience; you look at projects from a physical and emotional perspective, practical and poetic, individual and social. One eye sees, the other feels".

Human relationships with tech

Now as the concept of wearable tech rears its head, the above techniques of imbuing objects with spirit or meaning to add enjoyment to the user experience, may come to be more valued. UK designer Dominic Wilcox showed his GPS shoes, which seemingly engaged in a dialogue with the wearer via embedded intelligence, showing their owner which direction to walk, to any given destination. What is seen in that the existing holes in the Brogue-style shoes his home town is renowned for, are used for the required LED display, seamlessly introducing tech to enhance the wearer's relationship with an already familiar and beloved object. Wilcox also comments that if the tech were taken out he would still want to wear the shoes demonstrating how to take the user experience in account, not just from an ergonomic, but also from an emotional, point of view!

Connect the World to Art

It is inflaming me now as I write this, that art is barely taught in South African schools and that when it is, it is only the handful of those that show a talent or interest. Art is our universal human legacy, in fact in the form of rock art, it is the only freaking legacy we have from our distant ancestors, yet we have allowed generations of children to be cut off from their common heritage, their democratic rights to participate in art. Most of us do probably not think that art is particularly important, do not have the context to evaluate it, heck, do not even know how to look at it or express how it makes them feel. I am aware that you cannot eat art but it can be used to feed our souls.

We might do well to consider an initiative like the IK Prize, the inaugural competition issued by the Tate Gallery in the UK. The objective of the prize is simple: "Connect the world to art". Presenting the case studies of their prize winning solution called "After Dark" at Indaba, were London based design duo Ross Cairns, ([@RossC1](#)) and Tommaso Lanza ([@tmslnz](#)) of [The Workers](#).

Their prize-worthy idea, was to let four robots loose in the Tate Gallery at night and allow anyone to log on and take control of the robots, which would succeed in giving them the experience of being all alone in the vast museum at night. Apart from the baffling number of factors that would have needed to be addressed to make the tech work, the idea is ingenious because it is about the individual using technology to literally bridge the perceived gap between a modern day person and great old work of art that they might otherwise have walked straight past. Miraculously the tech succeeds in making the art more relevant for the modern individual, giving them a completely new perspective via a fun, almost gaming like interface. It also uses tech to evoke emotions, like you might feel a little bit naughty (you're not supposed to be there) or voyeuristic (there are after all, a lot of naked bodies in art galleries), and in this way the tech and the art come together to amplify the connection a person might make with the original painting or sculpture and even allow them to feel the thrill of what it must feel like to be that esteemed person who discovers a work of art for the first time. Check out [After Dark](#).

To tell you the truth, I would not really want to be the person to have to enter the 2015 Connect the World 1

Art competition after that, but if you're interested there are some awesome ones shortlisted for the 2015 prize [here](#).

And so, dear friends, the case studies from designers of many inter-related disciplines layer over each other over the course of the three days of Design Indaba - providing a newly laminated understanding of our shared 30,000 year relationship with the material world, our shared heritage and the shared human future of making and having "stuff".

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