

SA not rising to its creative, job-generating potential

Globally, the creative industries are seen as vehicles of strong economic growth but South Africa lags in promoting and advancing these opportunities.

 By Mike Freedman 8 Dec 2008



Cities in the UK have been counting creatives, a ponytail and shaved head at a time. In London, 650 000 people are involved in the creative industries - that's more than the financial industry; more than manufacturing and construction combined or health and education.

The creative industries in London generate £20 billion a year. Between 1995 -2001 the creative sector was responsible for one in every five new jobs created.

London has a support resource for creative industries that:

- identifies the value chains
- encourages clusters of specialisation
- protects intellectual property.

Other cities in England, from Gateshead to Brighton, are also clustering their creative blessings. Brighton discovered that it creates 30% of the educational software produced in the UK, which led the council to encourage subsidiary services. As Fred Astaire said: accentuate the positive.

The biggest exhibition of contemporary African Art, Africa Remix, toured Europe and Japan in 2007. At the same time, New York gaped as South African artists turned St John's, the largest neo-gothic cathedral in the world, into a palette of inspiration.

SA movies were awarded a Golden Bear and an Oscar. We have more Nobel prize winners for literature and Cannes winners for commercials than most of Asia. A retail concept from the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands popped up at Liberty's London.

There are many points of light, yet no general illumination.

Creative destruction

South Africa is a creative work in progress. We have one of the greatest living playwrights and a few movies gaining critical applause but our world-class artists are not a movement. Our most successful fashion designer employs less than 30 people. Carlos Miele from Brazil gives work to more than 1500.

There is little public art to treasure, few distinctly modern and proudly African architectural statements. We have a rich cultural heritage but it can be a straitjacket as well as an inspiration. Picasso said every act of creation is first an act of destruction, yet we are too timid, or too politically correct to vigorously critique our traditions.

Unless we throw paint at the old masters, smash some guitars on stage and outrage the new establishment we are in danger of speeding down a creative cul-de-sac of our own making.

We are so busy looking at what was, that we do not see what is and what can be.

Abraham's father was a maker of icons. Abraham smashed them and left the city of Ur to find his own truth. He destroyed to create. The Impressionists were rejected by the French establishment and created the Salon of Rejected Art. Presley dissed Sinatra and Bing Crosby, Punk scorned over-engineered, overblown concept albums. Iconoclasts become enemies of the state before being accepted.

Disturb

Creative pioneers disturb us, they confuse us; we cannot tell the difference between posers and the genuine article. They force us to reevaluate. They break before they make. Shakespeare put the lunatic, the lover and the poet in the same boat. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry says no-one has ever discovered new lands without first having the courage to let old horizons fade completely from view.

South Africa needs to cluster our talents and find the courage to break the mould. It is far better to live dangerously than to die quietly.

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