

SA should be creative design hub

The University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) forum, 'Is South Africa Design Ready for the Future Economy', featured Ravi Naidoo, founder and MD of Interactive Africa, a media and marketing firm, Nathan Reddy, CEO of Grid Worldwide Branding and Design and Gaby de Abreu, group creative director and co-founder of the Switch Design Group, a brand consultancy.

Held on 22 October 2009, the speakers felt that South Africa could become the next hub for the design and production of creative work for the global economy, just as India did for the global information technology sector.

"I've got this feeling that if we get it right, if we coalesce and we collaborate today so that we can compete tomorrow, the creative industries in this country can be a huge contributor to GDP," said Naidoo.

"I really think that where India is in terms of outsourcing back-end services for IT, we can be the front-end, he continued. "We can do the ads, the brochure ware, the publications, the commercials and the films."

He said that if he were to reinvent his career, he would become a creative broker and sell South Africa's creative talent to the FTSE 100 companies in London. "I would regale them about South African creativity and the fabulous skills we have in this country." In addition to the talent, South Africa also has the advantage of its rand-based costs.

Naidoo cited a recent job quote for Vodafone, the London-based multinational mobile phone company. Vodafone's advertising agency came in at £1.8 million pounds for a job that included the production of a coffee table book, CD-ROM and brochures. The same work could be done in South Africa for £800,000 pounds, including the cost of shipping the materials to Vodafone's headquarters in Newbury.

SA examples

"South Africa is one of the creative hot spots in the world," Naidoo said, adding that locally produced work was increasingly being noticed internationally. He pointed to growing recognition of the quality of South Africa's creative industry by highlighting a number of projects, which local companies had won against international competitors.

One was the ad that Network BBDO did for Virgin Atlantic's new business class seats. The ad was flighted around the world. Blackheart Gang, the Cape Town-based creative collective, has also won international acclaim for its ad for United Airlines, the US airline.

Reddy concurred with Naidoo, pointing to a number of South African design works which have won international praise, including the Airport Company's navigation signs at OR Tambo airport which were praised by Richard Quest as the best that the CNN anchor had seen during his recent travels around the world.

De Abreu said that the biggest hurdle was that South Africans lacked self-belief. "I don't think we ever pat ourselves in the back. We need to give ourselves a little bit more credit. We have the ability to design for

first and third world," De Abreu said. "South African designers are able to adapt, we understand first world and third world branding."

De Abreu also showcased the creative work that South African companies have done for multinationals like the Coca-Cola Company and FIFA, the mother body for international football. On how South Africa could build on its achievements and turn this country into one of the world's biggest creative hot spots, Naidoo said government had a big role to play.

Government support

As the biggest commissioner of design-related work in the country, government needs to be well informed about how it commissions design work. Naidoo cited Judge Albie Sachs' running of the Constitutional Court commission as "a great example of a fabulous public commissioning."

He criticised government for its failure to recognise the creative sector as a growth opportunity. "Fifteen years on, government has yet to produce a white paper in design or for the creative industries, which is bad," Naidoo said.

For the design industry to become the best globally, competition locally is important. "You need great rivals, you can't have three companies holding sway in design," Naidoo said. "Rivalry and competition raise the bar."

Venture capital needed

The country's creative industries also needed support from the investment community. "We need to see some more venture capital funding going into creative industries," Naidoo said. "I would love to seduce more business guys to go and reconnoitre the creative industry and understand what Khensani's business (the clothing label Stone Cherrie) is about."

Naidoo said that if South Africa's creative industry is to thrive locally and internationally, the creative entrepreneurs needed to find their business muses. This was the development model that some of the world's best-known fashion houses like Prada had followed to take their brands globally. "What we need more of in this country is the right brain and left brain coming together in concert."

South Africa's creative companies did not escape criticism from the panel members, who said that the industry had yet to organise itself so that it could collaborate to compete effectively against international competitors. "It needs a bit of maturity, this whole idea of collaboration today to compete tomorrow. We don't have a national design council. That's pathetic," Naidoo contends.