Q. Why did you start Designing South Africa in 2009?
A. Designing South Africa was founded to create a discourse about city making—at that time in reference to the World Cup. Successfully hosting, designing, and developing an event of such scale was a sign that South Africa could apply that expertise to other megaprojects, such as health care, education, and housing. We wanted to engage governments and designers and get people to think about South Africa’s most urgent needs in the same way they thought about the World Cup.

How is design important to an event like the World Cup?
Fundamentally, design is about solving problems. Governments that value the role of design in building their nations are better positioned to provide sustainable solutions. The World Cup gave South Africa an opportunity to design systems as well as spaces.

Were there any examples of design projects for the World Cup that had lasting positive impacts in South Africa?
One case was the new Cape Town soccer stadium and the development around it. It was built in a wealthy, formerly whites-only neighborhood. Local residents initially opposed its construction, but when the stadium was completed, they embraced it. The aesthetic of the design was one of the deciding factors. The stadium is not being used now as much as it could be, but the positive change really came in the bigger picture—a sense of pride that South Africa was taking on something so grand and amazing. There is a new level of confidence in what the nation can achieve with talent and collaboration.
How does what you did in South Africa relate to what you are doing in Brazil?
The World Cup, which Brazil will host in 2014, provides a platform for two developing countries to share information and knowledge in a contained way. Designing Brazil proposed that the Brazilian government invest more in design and the creative economy. As a reference, we created a book that showcases the work we did in South Africa. We made that part of our presentation to the Brazilian government officials, architects, and designers.

How do you get to know a city, such as Rio de Janeiro, when you visit for the first time?
If I don’t have to head straight to a meeting or lecture, I drop my bags at the hotel and wander. I like to get lost for a little bit and then find a local place like a café or juice bar or little ice cream spot. I figure out where the locals go and then hang out and people-watch. When I lose myself in a city, it usually leads to chance meetings with people whom I either befriend or incorporate into my work.

Did that openness to random encounters lead to any fruitful connections in Brazil?
On my first work trip to Rio last year, after an exhausting morning of meetings, I went in search of a good restaurant for lunch. I ended up at Sushi Leblon, in the Leblon neighborhood, and took a seat at the counter. None of the waiters spoke English. I looked to the person to my right and asked if he spoke English. He did. He said he lunched there every Friday, so I asked him to order for me. It turned out he was a senior director at TV Globo, the largest TV network in Brazil. When my book [Reflections & Opportunities: Design, Cities and the World Cup] launched last year, he was instrumental in getting it featured on the prime-time news.

ZAHIRA ASMAL’S FAVORITE PUBLIC SPACES AROUND THE GLOBE

1. PROMENADE ON IPANEMA BEACH
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
“Absolutely every type of person in Rio comes here, where city meets ocean. On Sundays, a section of road is closed to traffic and you see people walking, jogging, and rollerblading along the promenade, and playing volleyball on the beach. Most travelers frequent the Copacabana side, where you will find the beautiful black-and-gray mosaic promenade designed by Roberto Burle Marx. I like to run along the other side of the peninsula, between the Leblon and Arpoador neighborhoods.”
Praça Coronel Eugênio Franco 1

2. THE SERPENTINE
London, England
“The Serpentine is a gallery in Kensington Gardens. It’s a place where nature and culture converge. Each summer the gallery commissions international artists and architects to create a pavilion for concerts, talks, and presentations. The 2012 pavilion was a collaboration between the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and the architects Herzog & de Meuron from Basel, Switzerland.”
Kensington Gardens, 44/(0) 20-7402-6075, serpentinegallery.org

3. SESC POMPÉIA
São Paulo, Brazil
“Architects should be cultural agents who are concerned with both good and functional design. For me, Lina Bo Bardi and her raw, modernist architecture exemplified this. She really thought about the people who would use her spaces. My favorite example of her work is SESC Pompéia, a cultural center where old and young gather to play soccer, swim, enjoy theater and dance, or just stroll along the boardwalk.”
Rua Clélia 93, 55/(0) 11-3871-7700, sescsp.org.br