DESIGNING_
SOUTHAFRICA

DESIGNING __
OUR DEMOCRACY

ABOUT D_ZA __

DESIGNING_SOUTHAFRICA (D_ZA) is a not-for-profit organisation that through seminars, exhibitions, publications and online and media resources provides a tool to engage and connect governments, cities, designers, architects and the public.

Founded in 2009, just before the 2010 World Cup came to our cities, D_ZA was created as an organisation to facilitate a design-led dialogue around the World Cup and the significant urban projects that surrounded it. Since then the organisation has become a highly respected advocacy group for the proliferation of design thinking in nation building. From designing education to designing healthcare, D_ZA believes that the process of design that includes workshops, conceptual thinking, policy and an open, solutions-oriented dialogue between diverse role players and designers can assist in building a better nation.

Q&A WITH __

ANDREW MAKIN
ARCHITECT (DESIGNWORKSHOP:SA)
& THORSTEN DECKLER
ARCHITECT (26'10 SOUTH)

01 _____

In celebrating 20 years of democracy in South Africa, DESIGNING_SOUTHAFRICA has initiated DESIGNING_democracy, a new platform for investigating the role of designers in meeting some of the challenges faced by South African society, primarily through multidisciplinary collaboration. What immediate role do you think designers (understood in the broadest sense) could play in mitigating social challenges in South Africa?

AM: There is a direct relationship between difficulties and challenge, and creativity. Challenge asks new questions, provokes exploration into new territories, needs new ways of looking at things, and demands different answers to those that might have worked before. This is, by definition, what design is. Otherwise it's craft. Design innovates by an essential response to new situations, where craft retains and preserves for the essential need to remember; it provides context. The challenges we face in South Africa are new to us. We are having to face up to a reality that can't be converted into its potential by looking backward; although our heritage is the field we must plant our new seeds in. With imagination, ideas, insight and strategy as a unique set of attributes, designers must invent, be super-resourceful and add real qualitative and quantitative value.

TD: With the needs of the majority clearly in conflict with elitist design statements, we should see an ebbing in the stream of designer chairs, iconic buildings or pretty-picture master plans. There's a palpable commitment from designers to engage with the broader challenges facing society and the poor majorities demanding change. But before designers can 'solve' even the seemingly simplest problem they need to negotiate the massive divide separating them psychologically and often physically from these problems. With their focus on form and timelessness, entanglement in green dogma, building regulations, town planning schemes and corporate / public agendas architects have been blinded to some of the most obvious design opportunities. But in order to frame these opportunities as processes of engagement rather than problems to be solved, a necessary transformation in the design professionals' minds, their educational institutions and professional bodies, has to take place. In a time of exponential change and urbanisation, many people are building their own houses and cities without the help of professionals, these traditional institutions can no longer be seen as places of cutting edge, relevant knowledge if they do not engage with such processes in a pro-active manner, beyond research at arm's length. When one considers that self-constructed environments, as flawed as they may be, use up a fraction of the resources that the wealthy 10% consumes, the need for a fundamental shift is glaringly obvious and the notion that designers are experts who can solve really tough problems for ordinary people is becoming a 'killing joke'.

Designers can therefore begin to contribute to the re-framing of important questions concerning development and sustainability by themselves engaging across the professional social and economic divides of our society to find ways in which to evolve theory and practice through connecting with the everyday realities of the ordinary people as legitimate experts of their own living situations.

02 _____

Collaboration, while essential to problem solving and innovation, can be a difficult process, particularly where parties from very different fields and backgrounds converge. Do you have any advice to designers and the entrepreneurs that would assist them in enabling fruitful collaborations?

AM: Real value-adding collaboration requires there to be a shared Vision. Without a common and well-defined Vision, collaboration can be a collective waste of time and energy; collaboration might of course be a very effective way of pursuing a shared Vision. And it must be free of ego, i.e., free of the energy of personal gain. Protectionism is the death of meaningful creativity and the enemy of collaboration. At the same time, collaboration is not the be all and end all. There's a very interesting book by Susan Cain called Quiet that argues for individual, even introspective, problem solving and innovation processes.

TD: Designers need to be open and secure enough to hold their own in collaborative processes, not through taking defensive stances, or pandering to all, but through seeing the opportunity for expanding their understanding and enriching their design practice. Architects and planners need to understand that the point of socially relevant design is not glitzy pictures you take of a realised project, but the process itself which is intrinsically political in supporting the spatial agency people seek in living their lives.

03 _____

The lived experience of South Africa's marginalised directly shapes a perception of the nation. To what extent do you feel the under-provision of services in South Africa has influenced a national identity? Do you know of an example where collaboration and a bottom-up process helped improve service delivery?

AM: Identity means, "being what something really is". To some extent Steve Biko knew half the answer to this question: each individual must believe in their own inherent worth and, together with that, their inherent potential to change their own lives. The central idea of apartheid, the system that created the marginalised, was to break the core worth of each individual who was not white, then break the collective bonds that joined them, then isolate both the individuals and their societies from opportunities to heal the breaks. The final and most powerful blow was that it made the state into a paternal "giver and taker of all things". This indoctrination remains strong today, if not deepening. Dependency on someone else to provide is a form of slavery, not only in one's own land, but more so in one's own mind. Bottom-up means self action, common action, the true revolution of individual self-empowerment and collective civic action. I don't know of any examples at the scale of a nation, but I know that South Africa can be one in our lifetime. But it won't happen through neo-feudalism.

TD: If we are talking about those living in informal or precarious conditions we need to be careful to not romanticise or reject outright the solutions people have produced to house themselves. Designers need to (be invited to) engage in processes of development that are people driven. The work of the SDI Alliance in Cape Town and Gauteng has supported these processes and has resulted in certain settlements (such as Ruimsig in Gauteng, Sheffield Road in Cape Town) delivering their own development through re-blocking, lobbying the city, etc. City officials have taken note of this grass roots mobilisation and have largely come out in support of it. Designers can add value through developing and enabling spatial qualities which reflect people's needs.

04 _____

Considering the areas of health, education and housing. Which area would you consider to offer South Africa's greatest challenges, and which area presents the greatest potential for rapid improvement, should the right minds and energy be dedicated to it?

AM: Selecting which of health, education or housing offer the most potential for rapid improvement is similar to choosing which body organ is the most important. The body itself is the most important thing. There is, of course, no body without the organs, but there is also no body if the organs are not systemically connected. Systemic connectivity is therefore what offers the greatest potential for change. We must settle in a much more compact way, whether in the urban or rural settings; have all the elements of life – healthcare, education, housing etc. – much more spatially integrated; be much more physically connected to each other and all our activities; and share public space as neutral territory. The potential of individual elements is exponentially lower if they are not in the context compactness, diversity, connectivity and public space in our fundamental settlement pattern.

05 _____

The practice of traditional design fields such as architecture, urban design, graphic and industrial design would have to change in order to facilitate more inclusive, collaborative and socially minded projects. This is difficult given existing professional constructs, expectations and profit margins that are difficult to mould. Has your practice, or understanding of traditional design practice changed in order to face South African social challenges?

AM: First we must work through what we are "practicing" for. What, for instance, are we practicing architecture and urban design for? What do we intend to achieve? If we are clear on this, then the structure of our practice and our relationship to other practice can be defined for that purpose. If not, then there is little motive or reason to change from "how it's always been". Perhaps this is again the question of common purpose. Nelson Mandela's government called it Nation Building. If we all share a common Vision of who we can be and what that might be like, then there will be common purpose, and we can structure ourselves to achieve it. Profit motive will, by and large, fall into its proper place. Our office was established to contribute to the construction of a new country. For a while we felt that we were part of a massive movement to deliver the potential of our democracy. Over time this has almost disappeared. True to the pattern of our history, we South Africans have reverted to our tried and tested "rape and pillage" mode. It got into full swing in the gold and diamond rushes, became institutionalised in corporate capitalism that emerged from those holes, and has become a mass movement in consumerism and the alignment of material wealth with personal identity. Our office did not escape this decline. We are therefore in a process of refocusing on our original intentions, restructuring our mode of "practice", and constructing ways to contribute to common benefit.

TD: Most certainly and most dramatically at the very moment we were asked by evicted households to design layouts for the resettlement of land which would allow them to construct their own houses (shacks) with immediate effect. Are we as 'designer' going to tell them they need to wait until the country's housing backlog of 2.3million dwellings is met and their turn on the housing list (if they are on it) comes up? Or can we workshop layout options for settlement patterns which allow for growth and formalisation over time? We adopted the latter approach and in so doing have had to explore the limits of the formal mode of thinking we have been moulded in order to become more flexible and open and to develop a 'lighter', more responsive form of architecture and urbanism. This, in turn, has lead us to the realisation that what we need is a mode of practice which creates a platform for multidisciplinary teams to engage with multiple stakeholders including residents and city officials. This platform, the [in]formal Studio (IS), is currently being developed.

DESIGNING_democracy __

In 2014, South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy. Peacefully moving from a nationalist, apartheid regime to a constitutional democracy was a significant achievement for the nation. Democracy is however elusive, and its boundaries somewhat porous. Everyday democratic values are challenged in South Africa as government, citizens, businesses and organisations test its outer limits. The process of nearing democracy is a considerable feat that can only be accomplished through problem solving, innovative thought, creativity, lateral thinking and significant strategising by civil society, government and individuals. Design is the process through which solutions are found, and realising democracy as a product of design is an important step to creating an inclusive and effective nation.

South Africa is a young country – 49% of residents are under the age of 25. South Africa is also a creative nation, alive with young entrepreneurs, musicians, artists and designers. Vibrant cities form a canvas for diverse cultures to express their ingenuity and ability. More directly, cities inspire residents to challenge the status quo be it through a creative energy inspired by proximities created by higher density living, or cities functioning as centres for academic exchange, trade and tourism.

The inherent density of urban environments infers that while they function as productive, innovative centres, they also experience an amplification of societal challenges. The city is where internal and international migrants come in search of work and where people find themselves under-provided for in marginal circumstances. The wealth of cities also attracts crime and corrupt practices, where security companies own the street for lack of trust in policing structures. Cities expose the greatest pitfalls of society such as stark inequality, unemployment and poverty. They are the democratic battlegrounds of the 21st Century.

South Africa faces a significant challenge in providing adequate housing, education and health specifically to an underprivileged majority. Through design, these challenges become enticing briefs for creative minds eager to collaborate with specialists in order to devise social solutions. DESIGNING_SOUTHAFRICA has identified an opportunity for design in its most diverse forms to assist in shaping a more equitable, resilient and socially empowered South Africa. Through a five-track approach, DESIGNING_democracy will interrogate opportunities for design synthesis and collaboration in the essential fields of housing, education, health, identity and cities.

Despite their stark inequalities, South African cities function as social nuclei. Cities are the country's front door, its primary destinations; they shelter struggles and suffering while inspiring positive, empowered futures. Any attempts to discuss and better a national identity, housing, education and health are motions centred on the city.

Cities define the culture and diversity of a nation. Design can redefine the identity of the country through creating a sense of national, not nationalistic belonging. Here, urban space, the city and language are central to creating a cohesive and inclusive identity through celebrating diversity. Design elements that provide opportunities for legibility and expression, such as considered signage, public art, public maps, urban icons and images offer a means for designers to reinterpret and collaboratively shape South African identity in all its complex facets through the city.

Similarly, designers can reimagine South African social housing rollout. The sprawling replication of inadequate houses built with little difference and little consideration can be better challenged. Here, innovative solutions are plentiful as have been presented by the likes of Elemental in Chile, or 26'10 south Architects in Johannesburg. These too are significant urban tasks as cities struggle to meet housing backlogs, adequately service many residents and house people in economically opportune areas.

Reconceptualising and rapidly improving education in South Africa is one of the nation's most pressing needs. The innovative, intellectual and creative capital of cities allows them to function as national centres of education. Innovative programmes to reconfigure historical imbalances offer some scope for levelling the socio-economic education divide.

South Africa's health infrastructure has, much like education, been carved into private and public provision. While the standard of medical care might not differ significantly between the two, the services, facilities, equipment, levels of customer service and patient numbers certainly do. Designers have already demonstrated their innovative ability through partnering with medical professionals to improve healthcare equipment and facilities throughout the world. There is vast opportunity for similar exchanges in South Africa.

Innovative solutions to urban challenges can go beyond creating vibrant, sustainable cities. They can radically redefine society. Through enabling the right partnerships, collaborations and exchanges between designers and society's diverse role-players a democratic vision of a more equal and prosperous South Africa can be honed, alternatives to routine practice reimagined and opportunities for social innovation celebrated.

Join the DESIGNING_democracy programme:

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NOTE FROM THE FOUNDER __

ZAHIRA ASMAL
FOUNDER & MANAGING DIRECTOR (DESIGNING_SOUTHAFRICA)

In order for a nation to be a democracy, all citizens should have an equal opportunity to participate in its development and partake of its services – through political, social, cultural and economic engagement. In South Africa, most people are unable to access basic services in healthcare, education and housing and are not equipped to provide these services for themselves. Good design features at a point where technical skill, creativity, culture and social need meet, with our environment carefully considered. With DESIGNING_democracy, we wish to explore ways that good design may better serve our society to afford dignity to our people. We will engage key role players in these sectors by way of research, discussions and collaborations to ultimately present the possibilities, for good design to take a lead in social development, to governments locally and globally.

With DESIGNING_democracy, we will examine the themes that are at the heart of our nation and that require immediate action. We will explore ways in which designers may converse with other professionals to create a happier, healthier and smarter society. We see this gathering as a first step in engaging professionals and the public in a greater discourse on design to better serve our society. Thank you for joining us here today. We invite your participation in designing our democracy – please contact us should you wish to be a part of the programme. Initiatives such as this one can only succeed when like minds meet. **@ZahiraAsmal**

PROGRAMME __

29 AUGUST 2013
CO-HOSTED BY THE OPEN DESIGN CAPE TOWN FESTIVAL

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION TO DESIGNING_democracy
Zahira Asmal: Founder & Managing Director, DESIGNING_SOUTHAFRICA

DISCUSSION: DESIGNING_cities
Prof. Edgar Pieterse: Director, African Centre for Cities
Sithole Mbanga: CEO, SA Cities Network

TALK: DESIGNING_services
Aditya Kumar: Regional Technical Coordinator, Slum Dwellers International

TALK: DESIGNING_identity
Andrew Makin: Architect, designworkshop:sa

TALK: DESIGNING_housing
Thorsten Deckler: Co-founder and principal architect, 26'10 south

TALK: DESIGNING_healthcare
Prof. Harry Hausler: CEO, TB/HIV Care Association

TALK: DESIGNING_education
Brad Brockman: General Secretary, Equal Education

CLOSING

DESIGNING SOUTHAFRICA