

Conference highlights - Day one

 By Leigh Andrews

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Day one of the 2015 Design Indaba conference introduced us to the importance of collaboration in design and taking a step back and relooking at history to propel your design to the future.

Wednesday, 25 February 2015 was the first day of the three-day Design Indaba conference. It kicked off with MC Michael Beirut and co-host Michelle Constant explaining this year promised to be the biggest expo ever, with the largest simulcast audience in the Indaba's 20-year history and 36 speakers on the conference programme. This wasn't just hype, as it was by far the most engaged, attentive and responsive audience I've been part of, quick to voice their approval and pepper every single presentation with laughs, gasps, unprompted applause and far too many standing ovations to count - some before the speakers had even uttered a word, so strong was the sense of anticipation and excitement.

Below is a brief synopsis of each presentation from the first day of the 2015 Design Indaba conference, in case you missed it...

1. Pepe Marais and Xolisa Dyeshana

The creative engine of Joe Public United, [Pepe Marais and Xolisa Dyeshana](#), as Chief Creative Officer and Executive Creative Director respectively, spoke of 'purpose driving change in black and white', following a Michael Jackson dance tribute complete with hats and slick dance moves:

“ Our friends [@pepemarais](#) & [@XolisaDyeshana](#) take the stage to open [#designindaba](#) [#blackandwhite](#) [@joepublicagency](#) [pic.twitter.com/p65CLcwhlp](#)- FCB South Africa (@FCBsouthafrica) [February 25, 2015](#) ”

Marais explained that while much of the industry tends to be self-serving and "all about the awards," Joe Public made an active effort to switch this around and rather focus on exponential growth of their clients. Dyeshana added that they use this basis to ultimately grow the country through their work, too, because "without stretching yourself you won't grow, and without trying new ideas, you won't know if they'll work." He then showed a few examples of their work that does this to best effect. There was the [Tracker ad](#) targeted at car owners who already had car insurance, so didn't see a tracking device as an important purchase as they knew they'd be compensated if the car was stolen - but what about any lives that may be lost in the process? That's the human aspect Joe Public focused on instead.

Then there was the Nike ['Run Jozi' ad](#), which focused on getting people who don't feel safe in the heart of Joburg at night to embrace their sense of community and get out there and reclaim their right to run, which fittingly kicked off on Human Rights Day 2012. They also showed how effective their Brothers4Life campaign was, due to the [#hivarmy hashtag](#) on Twitter, which Dyeshana said "got the world's attention without spending a penny" - just click through to the hashtag search to see the amount of people who commented on just how many heartstrings were tugged.

Joe Public was also approached by Dial Direct, which was bleeding customers, so the Joe Public team set to work by focusing on human connection and the fact that for their client's clients, the cost of time wasted is far more important than that of fixing a car when you have an accident. That's why they created the ad you're sure to have seen, of the little boy doing all he can to save his mom time. The ad was first aired in January and had already effectively doubled sales in its first month. Marais said this shows advertisers need to pay attention to the fact that we're all so time-pressured lately - we need to rethink our thinking and what's really important in order to really make a change to the world. The ad's been embedded below, for your viewing pleasure:

Lastly, for client Nedbank, also this year's Design Indaba sponsor, Joe Public played on the idea of making ideas for change happen with the Design Indaba Nedbank ideas ATM - instead of simply having attendees take ideas from the conference, they wanted the creatives to also 'deposit' their ideas in it - that's why there was a clever ideas-themed cheque book-shaped notepad included in delegates' attendance bags, and great incentive to participate as the grand prize for the best idea includes a trip to next year's SXSW conference and actually having the top submitted idea for change brought to life before Design Indaba 2016.

2. Hella Jongerius

Jongerius explained her design mentality and working method, which all came into play with her work for the KLM world business class and economy class area redesign. I also attended a special presentation by Jongerius on the second day of the conference in a lunchtime preview of the weekend's expo - [click here for more](#). Jongerius also spoke of design in general, stating that instead of constantly striving for the new, designers should focus on art perspectives, as these stay new and fresh as they're "open and intriguing and embrace our humanness," a feature she feels we've lost in design. She also says not to be afraid to update your own classics and work within an archive, and that it's good to have a signature that is reflected throughout your work - hers is a love of circles - so that your work is absolutely recognisable, no matter what you've created, no matter which client it's for - doing so will enrich your sense as a designer.

3. The Workers

Ross Cairns and Tommaso Lanza of the cleverly titled agency 'The Workers' work in London, and though they admit they struggle to actually define what they do, they've settled on the fact that they love challenging digital technology and that they're collaborators at heart. One of their pet hates is the 'designer, simply recreate this PDF' mentality - how is that in any way invoking a sense of creativity, they ask. They spoke of their work on the Britain Tate Afterdark exhibit in August 2014. It was essentially a tricky brief as they had to find a way to showcase 500 years of British art and attract an audience who

had potentially not seen any of the art greats before.

They realised this sense of discovery was possibly more important than simply driving feet through the door, which is why they wove a sense of mystery and intrigue into the campaign by placing four robots in the gallery space, which were radio-controlled and equipped with sonar, to run around after dark and offer a preview of the art at night through any of the screens that are ever-present in our lives, effectively controlled by anyone in the world, with some of those taking control as far away as Canada. The reaction from the public was simply fantastic, with some going so far as to try to recreate the experience in their living rooms with flashlights. Watch their teaser embedded below and [click here](#) to find out what the robots are up to now.

4. Stanley Hainsworth

Hainsworth spoke us through his career, starting out as a waiter at Hamburger Hamlet in Hollywood, where he waited on all sorts of famous stars and referenced the '[Six degrees of Kevin Bacon](#)' game, which is a source of connection and social good, and the idea behind the #infinitebacon cards that were present at the conference as a networking aid. Hainsworth said that lots of elements of acting come into effect with design - in particular, going into a meeting is just like acting, as we need to work at identifying the main characters involved, learn our script, make nice, play at being someone else, and get used to presenting ideas and having them shot down.

He spoke of his work at Nike "before computers were on all corporate desks," which is where he learned all aspects of design. Hainsworth said to enhance creativity, you need to always have something going on in your mind, whether it's your own project or simply something you're passionate about, as by keeping yourself entertained the work ideas will flow. That's because it's the non-work specific projects - where you simply grab an opportunity and simply run with it - that really make a difference to your career.

On his work at world-renowned companies like Nike, Lego and Starbucks, Hainsworth said "it was like working for a religion and looking for converts - that's what it's like at most corporates, there's little hope of collaboration." That's why Hainsworth says the most freeing thing about working for your own company is that anyone can potentially be a work partner, allowing you to effectively spread your work for good across the globe.



Hainsworth and his impressive hair

5. Studio Propolis

Kenya-born architect Naeem Biviji runs Studio Propolis with his wife in Nairobi. He spoke of his own work projects, stating that if you run out of clamps, the design is probably going well. His talk was focused on a Design Indaba favourite - the chair. But not just any chair - Studio Propolis ended up making their own jigs and templates and importing Cypress timber to create bespoke seats for a cathedral in Nairobi. "You can't just go and buy dried timber," he explained, which translates into so much of design that you actually have to innovate and fix yourself to get your intended end result. Biviji wasn't allowed to show too much of the project to us, but ended up with pews that allowed for kneeling on padded sections on the back of the wooden bench. They also effectively managed to get more people into the cathedral by reducing the space between the pews. Biviji concluded that there's nothing new in the way architects work, it's mainly about absorbing new ways of making into design thinking, taking a deficit and making it an opportunity, and tapping into an economy that allows the two to coexist.

6. Global design graduates

Design Indaba's [Pecha Kucha](#) format was used to give 10 design graduates the chance to showcase their work.

- First up was Ackeem Ngwenya, who spoke of growing up in a rural township in Malawi and how clever design of a wheel that could be recreated on the often-rocky roads effectively made it easier for all to access water, navigate rough terrain in wheelchairs, and even allow the unbanked access financial services - [click here for Terry Levin's overview](#) and to view a video of the wheel in action.
"Who said you can't reinvent the wheel? @Design_Week <http://t.co/Uzt8uAFTf> pic.twitter.com/cYBjKzUikU- Dean Rowland (@Dean_Rolo) [February 27, 2015](#) "
- [Carla Kreuser](#) of The Jupiter Drawing Room explained the making of her illustrated book based on a friend's poem, and left the audience pondering the great typography question of where words really end and images begin. She also created all the speaker profile cartoons sent throughout the Design Indaba conference which many adopted as their Twitter profile pics:
"@michaelbierut: Thanks to the brilliant @Skallakind for my new profile portrait, created for @designindaba pic.twitter.com/7UHJt4nC2e" Day made- carla kreuser (@Skallakind) [February 26, 2015](#) "
- [Doremy Diatta](#) spoke of the process of design making the world a better place through a material communications approach, by redesigning the way family health issues are tackled.
- Kathryn Fleming attended the Royal College of Art and spoke of how she learned about nature through TV documentaries, leaving the audience pondering grizzly/polar bear hybrids and future-designed orchids that would display the ovulation cycle of females who live in the vicinity.

“ Graduate Kathryn Fleming presents her imagined future species, designed to "continue to evolve".

[#DesignIndaba2015 pic.twitter.com/5RGHIC4UKK](#)- M&G Friday (@MG_Friday) [February 25, 2015](#) ”

- Marc Dubois spoke of gaming and new ways to play, intersecting real life with onscreen action by incorporating common items from IKEA with existing gaming systems.
- Teresa van Dongen graduated in the Netherlands after research into using nature as a source of energy - she thinks of fireflies as "little winged flashlights," and used algae and bacteria found on octopus skins to create a light called the [Ambio](#). Tia Blassingame, soon-to-be graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, looking at the issue of race in print and screenprinted leaves picked up in the skin tones of slaves, based on her research in the area, thereby embedding references to slave history in her current artwork.
- Tyler Pratt of Carlton University explored unorthodox use materials for design during an internship and designed a mosaic modular food board to encourage interaction while preparing a meal as he found that eating at home seen as better than eating out, and that we're more likely to do so if we eat with others.

7. Larry Harvey

Harvey is the man behind the Burning Man experience. He literally drew a line in the Nevada desert and said "From here, everything will be different." What began as an impulse in 1986 has turned into the biggest art expo in the world, with last year's effigy as the largest yet, with the original ones at just 2 meters tall. "It actually hurt your neck to look up at it, combines feelings of jeopardy and awe as you might just topple over," said Harvey, explaining why this year's man to burn will be on a slightly smaller scale. "Show me art that doesn't have the unknown in it and it's not art," said Harvey, adding that we tend to take the middle out of everything - he prefers to start with action and the excitement you need to leap into an experience. Unfortunately the commodification of everything means we're constantly cutting corners by looking at ways to affect the context but not the content. Harvey feels Burning Man is at its heart a symbol of the pervasive giving economy and the rise of creating art that has a social purpose. [Click here for more on the Burning Man experience](#) and watch it in the tweet embedded below.

“ Wondering what Burning Man 2013 looked like from a nearby mountaintop? Answer: AMAZEBALLS.

<https://t.co/ea05KfcpyT>- Burning Man (@burningman) [January 21, 2015](#) ”

8. Michael Bierut

The final speaker of day one was Michael Bierut, conference MC and partner of Pentagram New York. He spoke of being truly honoured and scared to be speaking at Design Indaba as it's quite an act to follow, as he's watched the speakers at Indaba for the past five years. His talk was about a logo that changed his life - as a young boy he was going to get haircut with his dad when a forklift truck went by and his dad pointed out that the L in the logo was lifting up the A, showing what the company actually does far more effectively than words. Bierut said that's the essence of great design, in taking the pains to put in a little moment of pleasure or delight for consumers. He's put together a book on what he's learned over the past 40 years of his design career, saying that it's all too easy to destroy the world with graphic design if you don't think it through properly - it's all about being timeless while being fashionable - so of the moment as well as extending it forward. Therein lies the trick as you want your design to look new each time it's seen, offering your audience lovely little moments. It's possible to do so by literally looking at a brand in smaller sections, and you often need to look at the old to gain the new. Bierut summed up his speech and the theme of the day by stating design is all around us, it's up to you to make sure it gives pleasure and solves problems more than merely pushing a brand message.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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