

Conference Report

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'Make a plan' – Design Policy Conference

In October 2011, following a successful bid, the city of Cape Town was designated as the World Design Capital (WDC) for 2014. This designation is awarded biennially by the International Council for Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID). The WDC initiative began as an attempt to motivate cities to consider design as a strategic development tool. More specifically, the initiative encourages cities to showcase their existing investment in design, nurture the creative industries and promote additional design-related activities and initiatives for social, economic and cultural development. Within design discourse it is evident that design is increasingly being considered for innovation purposes, both on a corporate as well as a social level. This social stance is evident in Cape Town's chosen theme for the year, namely *Live Design. Transform Life.*

Cape Town is the fourth city to hold the World Design Capital title since its inception. The previous cities were Torino (2008), Seoul (2010) and Helsinki (2012), and the next capital is Taipei (2016). During their designation year, cities are required to host a number of activities under the World Design Capital banner. One such signature event is a Design Conference. Accordingly, Cape Town hosted a conference on design policy in September this year. The two-day event was held at the Greenpoint Stadium, an unusual but interesting choice of venue which recalled another international gathering, namely the FIFA Soccer World Cup in 2010.

The theme of the conference was 'Make a plan', which to South Africans, conjures up the well known Afrikaans idiom that *'n boer maak 'n plan* ('a farmer makes a plan'). It was therefore no surprise when the Cape Town premiere, Helen Zille, also made this reference in her introduction on the first day of the conference. Zille noted that 'South Africans can and do make plans to overcome our challenges.' The rest of the conference continued this trajectory of thought and saw a range of people

from different backgrounds and nationalities engage in conversation about the link between design and policy. Such discussions escalate design to a much broader platform where it is viewed as having a place amongst national discussions.

Gisele Raulik-Murphy, the first keynote speaker, presented a convincing and compelling view of design policy in practice. Raulik-Murphy is currently a design management and innovation consultant at DUCO, a design consultancy in the United Kingdom. Her presentation drew heavily on her PhD research on design policy at the University of Wales. Her study investigated the design strategies of four countries, namely Brazil, India, Finland and South Korea. More specifically, she studied the design programmes of the respective countries from the initiation phase to implementation, if and where the programmes were implemented. Her sample included countries at different stages of economic development which seems to have influenced their design policies. Europe and Asia, for example, have seen the implementation of their design policies and as such, provide best practice examples. In comparison, developing nations first need to develop their industries and infrastructure before policies can take effect. Although Brazil was representative of the global south in her study, in general there seems to be a gap in design discourse on design policy within an African context. Therefore, the conference was the first of its kind in Africa and was certainly an opportunity to explore 'what design can do' for the developing world.

At the onset, Raulik-Murphy defined design policy as 'the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions in order to develop national design resources and encourage their effective use in the country, in other words, desired change in the real world.' Nelson and Stolterman (2012), in their book *The Design Way*, theoretically that design is intentional change in an unpredictable world. Similarly, from a pragmatic perspective, design policies and plans are intended to initiate change in an engaging and direct manner. The information on design policy in practice was presented by Raulik-Murphy in a very accessible manner and since she referred to numerous examples, the audience certainly saw enough qualitative as well as quantitative evidence to believe the value that design policy can play at a national level. Considering both the conference theme and venue, it was fitting that she referenced Yale School of Management's article on Germany's win at the 2014 FIFA Soccer World Cup. She used a successful game of sports as a metaphor to elucidate the fact that successful design policies are a 'triumph of management' and are contingent on their implementation. With regard to the success and implementation of policies, this sports metaphor pre-empted a number of recurring themes which were evident during the conference. The first notable theme was the need for communication, collaboration and

consequently, communities of practice. Secondly, there was a strong focus on customisation and therefore, contextually appropriate policies.

In terms of collaboration and coordinated efforts, international best practice was discussed by means of case studies. For example, Ludo Campbell-Reid shared an Australian perspective by discussing The Auckland Plan, Auckland's spatial and infrastructure plan as part of his presentation, titled the 'Rise of a design-led city'. The fact that the city of Auckland has appointed Campbell-Reid as a designated Design Champion is exemplary of the support that governments need to provide to both private and community sectors in order for design to flourish on multiple levels. Similarly, Pradyumna Vyas, the Director at India's National Institute of Design, spoke about the value of an integrated design policy in light of crucial sectors such as healthcare and education which ultimately need to address the masses in different segments of the population. To this end, he noted that 'design helps in generating insights which are touch points for understanding the target audience, their ability to connect with communities, adaptation to the proposed model and ultimately, taking benefits out of the proposition in an effective manner.'

Closer to home, Mugendi M'Rithaa, Professor in Industrial Design at Cape Peninsula University of Technology and president elect of ICSID, presented an African perspective on the creative industries. He presented the role that the creative industries can play in unlocking the potential of the continent. He observed that when Africa is the topic of conversation, too often the focus tends to be on the lack of resources. For that reason, M'Rithaa's presentation proved motivating and refreshing to the delegates to see the potential that Africa has to join the global discussions on design policy if African countries capitalise on their indigenous knowledge and local resources. Dr Hester du Plessis, Head of Humanity Faculty at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, spoke about the steady developments of design research in South Africa. When discussing product design in particular, du Plessis made reference to the seminal initiatives of the SABS Design Institute which helped to bring South African design into the international spotlight. Furthermore, du Plessis recognised that, unlike previously, design in South Africa is not trying to emulate European design, but instead design and creativity are being unlocked in locally meaningful and relevant ways. This speaks to M'Rithaa's argument for design solutions to encourage conviviality and civic responsibility. It also resonates with Lou Yongqi and Ezio Manzini's sentiment during their panel discussion that a design policy will assist African nations to move from 'an economy of competition and scarcity' towards 'co-design practices.'

One of the highlights of the conference was that the presenters were not only

professionals, and the line-up of speakers included a number of students who shared valuable insights about their design practice and related design policy experiences in different African countries, including Ghana and Kenya. These presentations also highlighted the context specific nature of the theme as well as design's potential as a catalyst for innovation and growth at local and national levels.

In keeping with the role that design can play for entrepreneurship and nurturing local craft and design, the conference coincided with exhibitions and a food market. The exhibition, titled 'Makers and Thinkers', showcased South African design and its name was very apt considering that the conference reaffirmed that design is not just about making things but is increasingly being adopted for its iterative and strategic way of thinking and problem solving. The 'Transforming Cities' exhibition showcased design's sustainable solutions (from urban planning to products) in international places such as Bavaria, Paris, Dublin, Taipei, Accra, Qingdao, Seoul, and Gwanju, and in turn showed design thinking in practice.

Returning to Raulik-Murphy's advice that the success of a design policy depends on its implementation, the success of the conference depends on putting into practice the discussions about the development of a design policy in South Africa. Ultimately, the message was that design is not lacking in South Africa but policy is and hence, design leadership needs to follow suit. This was eloquently captured in the final keynote by architect and urban planner Laura Lee who asked 'How do you inject design into policies, across policies and in the design of policies?' and in response offered the following advice: 'We need to look at what exists and amplify it with design. In South Africa you have an innovation system and a National Development Plan. You need to take all of that and see how these things are related, how you establish a foundation and how you move forward.'