Book Review

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See Kayamandi, see yourself - social responsibility and citizenship project for visual communication design students

There is currently an increased emphasis on social responsibility and the role of community engagement within higher education, both nationally and internationally. In light of this, universities throughout South Africa are encouraging individual departments to be more proactive in introducing research and curricula-related community engagement modules into undergraduate courses. Traditionally, owing to the nature of training for some service professions, such as the Health Sciences for example, it is easier to initiate and implement such modules into the curriculum as they lend themselves well to interaction with a community. As a lecturer at a Visual Arts department myself, I can affirm that it is quite challenging to implement a formal community engagement module, particularly for Visual Communication Design. Considering this, the book, *See Kayamandi, See Yourself – Social Responsibility and Citizenship Project for Visual Communication Design*, even before being reviewed in more detail, is already significant.

The book is essentially a collection of student work that resulted from a project of mapping the Kayamandi township in Stellenbosch in 2010. The project was completed by second year Graphic Design students under the supervision of Dr Elmarie Constandius, senior lecturer in visual communication design at the Department of Visual Arts at Stellenbosch University, as well as Sophia Rosochacki, the guest lecturer. Accordingly, both Constandius and Rosochacki are credited for the publication.

At first glance the book may be misleading in that it may appear as a mere compilation of typography projects. This is not incorrect because the student's work presented does take typographic form; however, it is the social themes of the typographic narratives that are meaningful. As noted in the preface, '[t]he collection of layouts is as much about the conversations themselves as it is about the content that was discussed and articulated in typographic form.' The project, titled Mapping Kayamandi, formed part of the Citizenship and Social Responsibility module and as such, the University students collaborated with Grade 11 learners from a high school in Kayamandi. The students and learners were tasked with exploring a number of themes related to the environment in which they found themselves; this was done in preparation for the final typographic design deliverable. Considering worldwide developments in the field of democratic and critical citizenship, the project was divided into the following themes –globalisation, tradition, family, risk and democracy – all of which have a strong social underpinning and this is also in keeping with the human-centered nature of contemporary design theory and practice.

The preface, albeit relatively short in length, is a substantial text. It is central to the understanding of the contents of the book as it introduces the social and historical backdrop of South Africa that forms the motivation for the citizenship module as well as the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the project. The references to Henri Lefebvre, Paolo Freire, Martha Nussbaum and to initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals displays the broader, "global perspective" taken in the book. The "local context" and "the citizenship module" subheadings which follow in the preface also set the tone for the subsequent display of student work that comprises the bulk of the book.

The typographic projects are, firstly, a display of the application of design knowledge, both in terms of copy generation as well as layout. Secondly, the generation of new knowledge stems from the reading the written information embedded within each of the individual projects. The way in which the students have approached their chosen topics is rather personal and this makes their writing reflective in nature. From the use of written reflections, it is evident that there is a strong focus on pedagogy; written reflections are generally acknowledged as one of the four main components of community engagement. Reading the projects presented also reveals that the overall aims of the project have been achieved, that is to establish a mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration between the curriculum, teaching, learning and scholarship of academic staff and external partners such as the Kayamandi community.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Book Cover*, See Kayamandi, See Yourself – Social Responsibility and Citizenship Project for Visual Communication Design, 2*012.

African Sun Media.

Furthermore, it is mentioned in the preface that the 'projects which take as their focus education for democratic citizenship, can play an integral role in the "cognitive transcendence" necessary to realise and sustain real social change and transformation.' The following excerpts, presented chronologically, from one of the projects, namely Soccer in Kayamandi, highlight the changing perception of a student before, during and after the project:

> Hearing our first project would be based largely in the near-by township of Kayamandi was something I felt somewhat apprehensive about, as I have never been a social-service driven person.

… our second visit to Kayamandi was much more successful. Having learned in our initial encounter that Mabhunti was a soccer fan, I decided to talk to him about sport and immediately realised this was a topic we both enjoyed … mutual enjoyment of sport …

… my experience of Kayamandi has many different facets. First and foremost, it taught me about life and history of a nearby community I previously knew nothing about. In one way it was an eye opener to the atrocious living conditions within townships and the fact how differently Mabhunti and I have experienced life. In another way, however, it showed me just how vital sport is within the South African culture.

It is clear in the book that the students grappled with a number of different issues and engaging with the community allowed them the option of choosing a topic that they wanted to pursue and ultimately which may have resulted in something more

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meaningful for them. This personal engagement and interest in the topic is evident in the abovementioned excerpts. The final designs therefore serve as a form of documenting dialogue. In the preface it is noted that 'the interactions themselves provide a platform to explore issues of cultural difference, citizenship, collective identity and national memory', and the student projects in the book bear testimony to this. Ideally, community engagement should be mutually beneficial and therefore it would have been valuable to see a few written samples from the Kayamandi community in the book, specifically from a few of the people with whom the students interacted. There are some anecdotes in the projects, but these are presented and positioned by the respective Graphic Design students.

Over and above the content, the typographic and "mapping" format of the projects also go a long way to substantiate the relevance of the book in that mapping and diagramming form an important component of Visual Communication design and is an area that should be given more prominence within a South African design education context. Also, the choice to present student work does not disregard the need for the book to be aesthetically pleasing and visually accessible to the intended audience. The fact that each project is given four pages and presented in its entirety makes them quite substantive as independent, stand-alone narratives. As a result, the projects can be viewed independently under their respective subheadings or build on one another for a more holistic overview of the theme, depending on the intended use of the book.

Overall, the clear academic stance adopted lends credibility to the book, especially in terms of its potential as an academic resource. Although the book is targeted

primarily at design educators and their students, the form and content do not mimic that of a textbook. Unlike a textbook, the book does not delve into detail about the requirements of a community engagement module, for example, but rather contextualises the project and presents the student work. This also implies that the book is not a popular design book as that would be more accessible; one needs to have a prior understanding of the overarching theme and be familiar with the pedagogic aims of community engagement to fully grasp the contents of the book and for it to have meaning. Despite this, it is likely that it may serve as an encouragement to other design educators to pursue more projects of this nature. In addition, owing to the general lack of national publications on design and more specifically community engagement within a design context, the book makes a valuable contribution to design research and could be used as a valuable resource by both students and educators.