

TOPIC: STRATEGIC BENEFITS OF DESIGN FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

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A very good afternoon to you all I am truly delighted to be able to address you this afternoon on a subject which really is the culmination of two intense subjects, the one close to my heart, 'the strategic benefit of design' and the other, clearly of interest to all of us – the development of Africa - a continent bursting with potential, coming of age. The African renaissance.

The easy part of this title lies in the statement 'the strategic benefit of design'. It takes little understanding of beneficitation and applied commercial design to stretch the imagination to sense the effect appropriate design - applied with calculated strategy - will have on an economy or a region. This is not only of commercial importance but perhaps of greater need - it most certainly will encourage social upliftment.

To truly employ strategic design in this region, or greater Africa, let us understand that it can only be achieved as a conscious effort. An effort which will have to be fully embraced by trade and industry, public and private sector and central and regional governments.

Let us first take a look at trade and industry – as commerce matures and competes internationally – they are compelled to commercially focus on differentiation and they *will* respond as the profit motive is driven by competitive advantage, which of course commercial design delivers. Differentiation is paramount to international success. ***What better region to differentiate with – Africa lends itself to new thinking. It is truly coming of age – what a better time to evolve with applied design that will become a regional competitive advantage.*** Let me immediately qualify myself – and those of you who know me will know how strongly i feel about this – an African design culture does not meet cottage industry and craft – it will require intelligent first world solutions applied in a ubiquitous way to truly set us apart.

The phrase ***globalization***, first published by Harvard business school has become a reality. Most products and brands are now locally available – perhaps not in all of Africa – but certainly in its larger commercial capitals. Product parity is every day and generics are equally available. However larger brand owners and corporations are constantly on the prowl for 'something new'. In the well-developed 1st world economies there are little surprises – products are stereotyped, brands are established, entertainment and fashion shaped by trends and brand owners risk averse.

Africa – by reputation – is out of the box – it is almost expected to break with convention and be different. Our music – our fashion – our unique safari architecture – our customs – our determined social upliftment and it's applied design – our mass housing – our exotic resort design – our unique arms industry – our global brands – De Beers – Bell Earth Moving Equipment – Tanzanite – Kruger Park – Zanzibar – Masai Mara – pool cleaners – wind-up radios – Mandela – the list is endless.

But all of this is perhaps by coincidence. To be harsh for once – if Africa wants to benefit from strategic design – it needs a committed design strategy. A strategy which will need to be embraced equally by government, business and education. Governments will have to take the lead in enforcing a design strategy which is implemented with determination and absolute commitment – not as part of art and science – as part of trade and industry. Government will have to **directly incentivise both business and education** in order to develop a design lead culture. Central and regional governments must develop design leadership through skills development programs and reward business not only by recognition – but by means of direct, meaningful incentive.

Recognising that design is still in its formative stages in most African countries, a specific conceptual approach to lift the profile and effectiveness within the region will have to be created. Going beyond all current strategies – if there are any – government should define audiences, content,

Methodologies, and the desired outcomes of both an education effort and a business incentive programme. Then and only then with the commitment of sufficient funds – will it be Nike time – **just do it!**

What would be the potential outcome of such a programme? We have all recently been exposed to or even part of the South African 'proudly south African' programme. The presidents council developed a 'loyalty programme' launched in South Africa to heighten the awareness of South African products and process, brands and people both aimed at the consumer & corporate South Africa – it has had good effect. But let us be critical – commercially it is 5 to 10 years behind competitors like Taione, Korea, and more recently china. These economies have moved on from the 'made in -----' programmes **to the 'designed in -----' economies. They understand beneficiation, differentiation they consciously promote 'original design' and the economic benefit of intellectual rights or ownership that leads to added value.**

I did ask – what would be the potential outcome?

Design – when it becomes a core competence – is about what I would call – **design mindfulness**. As with total quality management at its best, design truly starts to make a noticeable difference – it becomes a way of life.

So what is this way of life?

- It becomes part of every product or service development effort – not as a clip on or after thought.
- Design becomes a state objective which is talked about at every opportunity – promoted – acknowledged – rewarded.
- It becomes a corporate goal just like quality, bee or environment.
- It is represented at ministerial level.
- It should be evident in every thing that emanates from the government

Then and only then will design become the strategic resource that is central to wealth creation. Only then will it have a critical influence on the delivery of African products and services.

Moving on to the second of our teams in this equation - business or the private sector. It seems obvious to some of us why they should readily embrace strategic design application – however business is always focused on **ROI & profit**, and therefore often sees design as a clip on; a creative luxury; an expense and perhaps even a cost to company that is unaffordable.

With a conscious effort of promotion and reward – both in recognition and financial incentive - will corporate Africa employ design. They must literally be forced to see the benefits and immediately be incentivised because design has an expensive lag built into its life cycle. More urgently, companies must be exposed to professional design management to encompass all principals of design application effective design is integrated design.

Business often thinks that competence in marketing, production or project management transfers easily into an equivalent competence in managing design. Equally – experienced designers tend to think they are efficient design administrators. Wrong. Business and designers must learn each other's language. How encouraging - seeing some of the world's leading business schools present MBA programmes in design. We now come across design directors appointed to boards of major multi-national companies acknowledging design as a mainstay of future business.

As with government, we will have to see corporate Africa invest in design

They will have to:

- Consciously develop a design strategy as part of annual business plans.
- Acknowledge strategic design as a core competence in their products and services.
- Develop in company design management programmes.
- Participate in government grants, incentives and reward programmes.

- Promote a design culture.

Managing design involves considerable interaction among different specialists. This is a source of many critical problems. Therefore, the discipline should be taught in an interactive manner – allowing the different stakeholders to work together. Finally to business – implementation is the real test-bed for ideas in design management – building on the collective experiences of all to become a rich source of competitive advantage.

In my opinion business is the simple partner. Given the correct incentives and a constant reminder why – business need only smell the taste of success and they will embrace good design strategy as a core competence. Rewards will follow and the effort will self perpetuate. Turning to the third and final partner in this triangular equation – the design practitioner.

In my opinion the group most liable with responsibility. Here allow me to reflect on the southern African situation. Design education in South Africa has been good – fine engineering faculties – excellent architectural education – good industrial and product design education by universities and technical institutes.

However the big downfall is broad based, ground roots education. Design has only recently crept into the syllabus of our schools. Little emphasis is placed on design and least of all design in all its guises is not promoted as a serious career.

Design education and design promotion will have to be far more intense to achieve the desired effect of an influence which will contribute to a regional outcome. The grip of the partnership lies in the handshake between business and practitioners. But it starts in my opinion with the practitioner. In order to be acknowledged – to be taken seriously – to be appointed to corporate boards - to influence seats of government – designers will have to take themselves more seriously. They will have to stand up and be accountable to industry.

They will have to become more business like. Design education will have to start younger and stretch further - go the extra mile and extend to tertiary and post graduate business education. Design management will have to be taught in design faculties and business schools alike and business principles taught in design schools. Our practitioners will have to follow our European and American colleagues and perform business management in practice, delivering that ultimately all important profit and differentiation which corporate Africa will demand.

Remarkably we have the skills – our designers hold their own the world over – they travel well and are technically, strategically and creatively recognised the world over. Some of our finest designers have built successful practices internationally – lead design teams for formidable companies like Ferrari - strategised and build successful design strategies for world brands, globally. Today, here in the audience, is an ex colleague of mine, born and bred here in Johannesburg, now the global design director of the world's largest design consultancy, enterprise e.g. Mr Kees Schilperoort. Sadly we have to caution that our talent does not become our greatest export. Africa must offer the opportunity – it must be the playing field to nurture the culture that will then self perpetuate. Long live design – long live Africa.