Walking the Tightrope: Comments on Graphic Design in South Africa

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The necessity for post-apartheid South Africa to establish and develop local markets, compete in the global marketplace, and meet the requirements of social reconstruction and development afforded opportunities to review and reassess the role of design in the country. In the early-1990s, coinciding with the start of the post-apartheid period, design commentators Kurlansky[1] and Oosthuizen[2] envisaged a significant economic and social role for design, as well as new demands for design skills. Both present design as a powerful national resource.

Oosthuizen called for "a new design order" based on a holistic and integrated vision of design purposes. This perception acknowledged the pivotal position of design in society, and its utilitarian and sign functions. It emphasized the need to foster the development of a South African design culture that combines global trends with the essential and differentiating qualities of Africa, and it elaborated on the idea of a design imperative in crafting a competitive edge for South Africa in both the national and international arenas.

Kurlansky drew parallels with countries including Germany, Japan and Spain which have faced similar challenges, and where design has underpinned an industrial and cultural renaissance. According to Kurlansky, who proposed a "new South Africa design initiative," the significant role of design can only be actualized through the institution of a unique South African design culture. This includes a distinctive creative expression; acceptable standards of visual literacy at all levels of society; the accommodation of inclusive and representational perspectives; equitable staffing practices that acknowledge previously marginal groups within design industry sectors; and the support and promotion of high creative standards.

The complexity and diversity of the challenges confronting design practice in South Africa, initially defined in comprehensive proposals such as those of Kurlansky and Oosthuizen, preceded the proffering of a multitude of opinions, observations, and recommendations by practitioners and educationalists. A number of themes, each with a set of sub-themes, continue to animate deliberations about the progress and maturation of design in South Africa. Two themes that have been featured prominently in the exchange of ideas are South African identity and graphic design's intersection with

1   M. Kurlansky, "New South African Design Initiative," *Image & Text* 1 (1992): 11–14.

2   T. Oosthuizen, "Crafting a Competitive Edge: The Mission of Design in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Image & Text* 6 (1993): 13–19.

corporate organizations. While many points of concern and reflection in the areas of identity and corporate intersection demonstrate characteristics and content similar to those being debated internationally, these two themes recognize circumstances unique to this country.

This article comments on selected aspects of each of these themes in an exploratory review that seeks to establish the extent of design engagement with the demands of the evolving economic and social order. The intention is not to provide an in-depth interrogation of impulses informing the selected aspects. Rather, it is to present a broadly based interpretation of the current situation, and to contribute to the debate about the future of graphic design in South Africa by offering some perspectives on the opportunities, directions, and options available to design in this country. I contend that there have been significant developments in graphic design over the last decade, and that progress has been made towards the realization of "a new South African design order." The real need, however, is for a better balance and integration between the economic and social dimensions of design, aided by the development of a more comprehensive, coherent, and penetrating indigenous design discourse and practice, marked by critical introspection and supported by rigorous research.

The Quest for a Local Idiom
The new South African constitution was enacted on May 8, 1996. This event formally marked the end of official, legislative institutionalization of divisive social and political policies in South Africa, and laid the foundations for a democratic future. The significance of this event must be interpreted within the broader context of South African history. Beginning with the settlement by the Dutch of the Cape in 1652, the history of this country has been shaped by both imperialism and colonialism coupled with the indigenous counter forces of defiance and obstruction. After 1948, the implementation of apartheid policies entrenched a system and brand of internal colonialism that gradually resulted in international isolation, and gave rise to resistance movements that particularized the South African situation. With the release from prison of Nelson Mandela in 1990, and his election as president in 1994, South Africans faced the emergence from international obscurity and intimations of another, more inclusive national and cultural identity.

The capacity of visual domains to clarify cultural identity, forge a national consciousness, and contribute to the expression of a national identity was thrust into prominence. The specific role that graphic design could play in these processes still is being analyzed and debated in different forums. Two tracks are briefly considered below. The first describes the focus that has been placed on the crafting of an indigenous design expression. The second suggests that the critical assessment of graphic design's contribution to establishing identity does not end with the aesthetic, but must take greater

cognizance of how the new social, political, and cultural order is conceptually fixed and visually registered.

The need to explore and establish a distinctive and unique identity in graphic design has enjoyed considerable attention in published articles, conference papers, and in the work of South African designers during the last decade. The idea of an indigenous design identity essentially has been concerned with the search for, and honing, of a characteristic mode or form of expression and stylistic vocabulary peculiar to this country. Although the idea by no means is novel,[3] it was given additional impetus by the optimism and anticipation accompanying the social and economic changes offered by the new political order. Designers were forced to reconsider a number of previously entrenched notions. The observation that South African designers slavishly copy or imitate international design solutions, while ignoring what was happening on their own doorstep, increasingly was raised. The desirability of South African design work being heavily imbued with Western sensibilities and design values was questioned, and a more detailed consideration was given to the nature and qualities of a design approach relevant to its African context.

Variously and indiscriminately labeled a South African design language, visual language, style, dialect, or aesthetic, a cursory overview of its articulation and manifestations reveals that the quest for a local idiom essentially has been informed by three challenges. These are first, the symbolic signaling of a new political order at the national and provincial levels, as well as the indication by private enterprises that they wish to be seen as part of the new dispensation. The second is the strategic positioning and competitive differentiation of South African design in the global arena. Finally, the drive to satisfy individual and creative curiosity concerning the nature of a design aesthetic meaningful within the South African experience continues to challenge designers.

The clearest indications and connotations of political change are conveyed by new or revised South African national symbols, regional identities, and redesigned corporate identities for state and private enterprises. Obvious examples that have emerged over the last decade are the official coat of arms, national symbols such as the Olympic logo visual identity systems for state departments including the Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology, and for large multinational organizations such as mining corporations Anglogold and Goldfields. These examples typify the approach adopted locally in forming identities that attempt to come to terms with self-unification, mergers and divestitures, and where design is instrumental both as means to achieve internal coherence and political solidarity, and as a competitive strategy. It is an approach that predominantly seeks to integrate indigenous impulses with a contemporary aesthetic. Such identities thus tend to be marked by an overt incorporation of the natural environment, wildlife, prominent

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3   The attempt by a group of white artists commencing in the 1930s under the influence of Afrikaner nationalism is a case in point.

cultural landmarks, and traditional ethnic symbols and craft motifs, as well as naive techniques and marks considered to be characteristic of Africa.

It is important to note that these examples demonstrate little variance from international design tactics and impulses that have been employed in devising multinational and/or international identities where competitive visibility and cultural legibility are critical design parameters. In an interesting exercise, Lupton[4] demonstrates how easy it is for multinational and international symbols and logos to degenerate into "weary archetypes," thus weakening unique recognition and communicative values in a globally competitive environment. Consequently, designers have attempted to reinvest multinational identities with specificity by means of a range of essentially humanistic techniques (e.g., painterly execution, and naturalistic depictions), more informal approaches, and the incorporation of signifying forms from other cultures and localities that are not already in commercial use. To ensure multicultural legibility, cross-cultural identities that simultaneously maintain and transcend cultural traditions increasingly have been developed. According to Steiner and Haas,[5] these identities "weave and transmute the strands of two contrasting traditions into a statement that is neither and both." In this process, culturally specific elements of iconography, typography, symbolism, and style are mixed, melded, and transformed by means of quotation, mimicry, and appropriation.

It is this strategy of cultural synthesis or hybridization that essentially underpins the articulation of an indigenous expression in South Africa. The aesthetics of "cultural mixing" perhaps are best exemplified by the local magazine *i-jusi,*[6] an open and experimental design platform first published in 1995. The magazine allows designers an opportunity to contribute to "an African stew"[7] by mixing and appropriating existing visual elements and expressions from different sources within the South African cultural matrix. The refinement of the experimental approaches adopted in *i-jusi,* and the crafting of a South African graphic idiom to meet specific communication and business objectives, mark the attitude and design strategies of a growing number of South African designers.

The portfolios of design groups TinTemple and Orange Juice Design[8] from the mid- to late-1990s serve as two good examples of the above-mentioned attitude and design strategy. The portfolios show that even annual reports, usually regarded as one of the most conventional of corporate documents, demonstrate South African graphic design's direct engagement with, and visual reconciliation of, history, localities, indigenous cultures, and urban vernacular expressions. For instance, the 1993 Moolla annual report, designed by Orange Juice Design, incorporates (juxtaposes and melds) contemporary and historical images, ethnic patterning, ghosted background images of African artifacts, and an over-varnish that subtly presents African icons. A natural African environment is conveyed by muted

4   E. Lupton, *Mixing Messages. Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 86–88.

5   H. Steiner and K. Haas, *Cross-cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), vii.

6   Published independently by designer Garth Walker of Orange Juice Design, the magazine is widely distributed throughout the design industry and the design education field. It has garnered international interest, and continues to play a significant role in the South African design arena. Roughly translated, the title is the Zulu word for "juice."

7   The origin of the term and design concept "African stew" is credited to Kenyan academic and designer Odoch Pido, and its popular use and promotion in South Africa to designer Garth Walker. See M. Sauthoff, "Portfolio of South African Designers: Garth Walker," *Image & Text* 5 (1995): 8–11.

8   TinTemple was established in 1996 by the young designers Carl Lamprecht, Daniel Matthews, and David Holland, who proclaimed a commitment to tap into the history, culture, and vernacular expressions of Johannesburg. Orange Juice Design was established in Durban by designer Garth Walker in 1995. One of its founding objectives was to take Afrocentric design into world markets.

colors, soft photographic treatment, and paper textures.[9] The 1997 Khula Enterprise annual report, from the TinTemple studio, contextualizes a standard approach to typography and layout by means of vernacular images and naive street communication. The cover of the 1998 Khula report seamlessly integrates bold colors, ethnic pattern, kudu horns, Africana[10] etchings, and contemporary images, all of which are formally and symbolically deployed as motifs throughout the report.[11]

The Delapse[12] studio, first established in 1996 and specializing in broadcast and interactive media, adopts a more radical approach to South African graphic identity and cultural hybridization. Their work shifts the focus from overt indigenous motifs and physical places to metaphysical spaces and ambient forces. The contemporary psychological landscape of Johannesburg with its "schizophrenic capacity to sustain both sympathy and an ordered urbane society and a predilection for anarchy and subversion"[13] forms the backdrop for much of their design. This polarity, according to creative director Johan van Wyk, generates a fertile space for a unique expression, and fosters an inclination for uninhibited transgression and appropriation of form and style without reverence for the specifics of origin. He suggests that urban tensions resulting from turmoil and instability, the idiosyncratic dualities of Johannesburg, and the hedonistic lifestyles indulged in particularly by the city's young inhabitants inspire a daring and provocative attitude in a new generation of designers. Coupled to aggressive digital experimentation, this attitude acknowledges the complexity of the emerging social and political climate within a specific urban environment.

Three conspicuous attributes of a South African graphic idiom may be extracted from the design portfolios mentioned above. The first is the movement from the blatant appropriation of vernacular images characteristic of earlier South African work. This overt incorporation gradually has paved the way for a closer observation, underplayed references to indigenous color combinations, and Africa's heritage of shape and pattern; the use of regionalized visual metaphors; and oblique rather than direct allusions. The second attribute is a particular proclivity to remain connected to international design developments and trends. A seamless blending of indigenous elements and iconographies with Western aesthetics and formats has resulted in a Euro-African design amalgam. The third attribute intimates a conceptual commentary that goes beyond a visual aesthetic, and hints at the acknowledgement of a designer's dual position both within and outside of a culture. A direct engagement with an immediate environment and its vernacular manifestations, subcultures, tactile qualities, ambient forces, and lifestyles is encouraging local designers to draw on the intrinsic capacity of design to offer acute social and political observations. These above-mentioned three attributes contribute to the evolution of sophisticated and complex visual nuances in contemporary South African

9   M. Sauthoff, "Portfolio of South African designers: Garth Walker," *Image & Text* 5 (1995): 8–11.

10   Africana is the term used for books, pictures, *objects d'art,* and diverse rarities of South African provenance or interest.

11   M. Sauthoff, "Portfolio of South African Designers: TinTemple," *Image & Text* 8 (1998): 9–14.

12   Based in Johannesburg, Delapse has been the recipient of numerous national and international awards.

13   J. Van Wyk, "Place of Gold," *Design Indaba Magazine* 5 (2001): 60–63. See also *Bladerunner Aesthetics: Order, Disorder, and the South African Graphic Image* (Unpublished paper presented by Van Wyk at the 2001 Icograda Congress in Johannesburg).

design that demand the forging of lateral connections and a high level of visual literacy from audiences. A sustained local rhetoric that evidences a range of possible modes of expression and recognizes a plurality and variety of design voices is emerging, rather than a singular and uniform identity, an idea that seemed initially to guide design thinking and production.

Commentary relating to an indigenous idiom generally is underpinned by celebratory attitudes and assumptions of progressive integration and unification. It largely is driven by two impulses, namely the subjective domain of the designer and the competitive global context. Conference papers and published reviews tend to focus on creative innovation, personal inspiration, and showcasing design outcomes. Indigenous sources are traced, charted, and categorized, often without the benefit of any analytical perspective or much additional information. The urgency of strategically positioning South African design in the global arena is consistently reiterated, thus underscoring design's economic dimension. The importance of a differentiating visual aesthetic and the value of design skills honed in a complex multicultural commercial setting continue to be espoused by prominent members of the design and communications industries.

On the whole, a great deal of discussion appears to be marked by an attraction to surface appearance and attention to formal qualities. Currently, very little explanatory and/or critical analysis has attempted to comprehensively place local developments within frameworks that adopt complex, multifaceted, or contrarian views of identity. For instance, few designers question whether the prevalent dialectic of the international and local might signify that South African design continues to be determined by imported design models and thinking. Topics such as the semiotic and semantic capacity of a forum like *i-jusi,* or recent developments in terms of the unfolding of content themes that touch on controversial political and social issues, [14] have yet to elicit serious consideration. Innovative practices in the magazine have tended to be interpreted as a pragmatic or experimental redirection of formal design production.

Aspects of South African graphic language and its relation to change, more specifically the extent to which fundamental social change actually is supported and/or reflected, have commanded even less attention. For instance, the democratization of the language policy,[15] and how this should be visually articulated, holds stylistic and symbolic implications with regard to the presentation of indigenous language design applications. These appear not to have garnered acknowledgement from the design community.[16] The graphic devices and styles of the liberation movements, their connotations of social transition, and their integration into current political and national symbology as signals indicative of fundamental change have yet to be granted serious recognition and comment. Observations and reviews of the evolution of a distinctive South

14   Themes explored in recent editions have taken a more critical stance, and deal with aspects of crime, urban violence, religious beliefs, pornography, and immigration.

15   South Africa has eleven official languages.

16   Designer Zhukof (Steiner & Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design*: 204–211) provides some relevant insights in this regard in his discussion of designing for the United Nations. Here, the conceptual foundation of the organization as equality of peoples and nations is of paramount influence, and demands the fair and equal visual and stylistic treatment of mediated communications irrespective of alphabet, language, cultural, or geographic audience.

African graphic idiom seldom note that it blatantly evidences many salient characteristics of postmodern design or critically comment on its links with post- and neo-colonial impulses. Discussions of identity in graphic design remain fairly unproblematized, one-sided, and unconnected to wider discourses.

Broader Visions of Identity

A growing number of prominent scholars and intellectuals agree that identity is one of the major socio-political issues of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This implies that professional and academic disciplines increasingly must possess and provide an adequate insight into, and an understanding of, individual, group, national, and global identities. If graphic design is to make a meaningful contribution to ideas of identity in this country, a more penetrating, extensive, and considered examination of the multidimensional nature of identity, and how ideas of identity are registered and interpreted in visual imagery, is demanded. Designers must, of necessity, develop a critical framework that allows them not only to address the designed object, but also the sites and circumstances of its production and use.

An inherent duality in the production and interpretation of contemporary graphic design is neatly encapsulated by Jobling and Crowley.[17] They contend that contemporary design is essentially marked by a visual language of appropriation, parody, pastiche, and the contextual revalorization of graphic forms coupled to greater subjectivity and individuality in the use of accepted design conventions. All of this clearly signals a change in societal values. Jobling and Crowley suggest, however, a divide in interpretations of the nature and identity of the society represented. For some commentators, contemporary design mirrors a new attitude that encourages a "knowing" and exploring spectatorship, a celebration of diversity, and a progressive recognition of pluralism. In essence, this is a recognition of different and individual racial, social, and gender identities and nonconformities, and an acceptance of the presence of proactive viewers who are willing and able to extract and construct their own meanings for their own purposes. Alternatively, design is perceived to represent a wholehearted capitulation to the forces of consumerism that deaden differences by converting them into commodities. This propensity, the reliance on intertextuality and the recycling of ideas, images, and symbolism have led to definitions of "a kind of promiscuous and apolitical culture," one in which there is no position "from which to speak that is in advance, or even outside the general position." [18] Sadar [19] adopts a more radical stance that equates current consumer culture with the blatant exploitation of non-Western cultures and the continuation of Eurocentric colonial suppression.

The above formulations pinpoint some of the dilemmas contained in post- and neo-colonial situations such as South Africa

17 P. Jobling and D. Crowley, *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation Since 1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 271–288.

18 Ibid., 298 and 297.

19 Z. Sadar, "Do Not Adjust Your Mind. Postmodernism, Reality, and the Other," *Futures* 25:8 (1993): 877–893.

that have to contend with mainstream cultural globalization and consumerism, the development of decolonized cultural sensibilities, and the recognition of internally colonized groups. Issues that have been stressed in many post-colonial contexts have, as yet, to receive serious consideration by South African graphic design. These include the ethics and politics of cultural appropriation, representations of previously marginalized groups, the recuperation of indigenous histories, tracking the work of unrecognized and/or exiled professionals, and acknowledging the inherent tensions in the conceptual positioning of South African design relative to African and first-world contexts.

South African graphic design freely and generously uses and draws from its rich cultural and ethnic mix. The indiscriminate appropriation of imagery often results in cultural forms, indigenous creative expressions, and visual traditions being symbolically devalued, commodified, and invested with alien meanings. Many traditional items and visual elements are legally unprotected and available for incorporation into the work of professional designers. Cultural groups, particularly developing rural communities and those with little economic or political leverage, generally have no control over the trivialization of indigenous forms or the revalorization of historically charged symbols for mainstream consumption. The ethics and politics of cultural appropriation are given perfunctory mention in South African graphic design circles. Questions of who holds the right to cultural material, its appropriation and dissemination, and which evaluative frameworks legitimately apply seldom are broached.

The recuperation of African writing systems, and symbolic graphics of African origin and how they may contribute to design, have not received the type of consideration comparable, for instance, to studies such as those of Mafundikwa,[20] a Zimbabwean designer. Personal design experiences and interpretations of the problems of integration, domination, transformation, and indigenous expression posed by the Western/African dichotomies have yet to be granted the type of exposure in South Africa comparable to those documented and articulated by, for example, black Kenyan designer Pido.[21] Nor has South African graphic design attempted to understand its conceptual positioning relative to the West through in-depth explorations and considerations that invoke a center-periphery model in reviews of design, similar to those, for instance, of Asia[22] and the Latino community of the United States.[23]

Rather, it has been cultural theorists, and art historians in particular, who have considered South African material culture in terms of post- and neo-colonial studies, and identified the duality and dilemmas of continuity and change implicit within the broad domain of design. These interpretations sometimes have considered aspects of graphic design, but they have, to a larger degree, relied on semiotic readings of contemporary culture and mediated commu-

20   S. Mafundikwa, *Afrikan Alphabets* (Unpublished paper presented at the 2001 Icograda Congress in Johannesburg). See also E. Gunn, "Ziva" *Upper & Lower Case. The International Journal of Graphic Design and Digital Media* 25:3 (1998): 7–11, 41.

21   J. P. O. Pido, "Made in Africa. A Designer's View of East Africa," Design Review 15:4 (1995): 30–35.

22   R. Ghose, "Design, Development, Culture, and Cultural Legacies in Asia" in *The Idea of Design. A Design Issues Reader*, V. Margolin and R. Buchanan, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

23   R. A. Greeley, "Richard Duardo's *Aztlan* Poster: Interrogating Cultural Hegemony in Graphic Design," *Design Issues* 14:1 (1998): 21–34.

24 Interpretations that typically highlight these issues are B. Buntman, "Selling with the San: Representations of Bushmen People and Artefacts," *Image & Text* 4 (1994): 12–16; T. Du Plooy, "Madam and Eve: A Change Agent in the New South Africa," *Image & Text* 9 (1994): 19–26. M. Erasmus, "Lion, Camel, Man" *Image & Text* 6 (1996): 25–31; J. Van Eeden. "Mickey's African Adventure" *Image & Text* 5 (1995): 3–7; J. Van Eeden, "Malling, a Postmodern Landscape," *Image & Text* 8 (1998): 38–42; R. Van Niekerk, "Humour at the Horingboom Oasis," *Image & Text* 8 (1998): 4–8; and C. Wolfaart, "Of Mice and (Wo)men: Disneyland and the Cultural Aesthetics of Entertainment in the New South Africa," *Image & Text* 7 (1997): 10–14.

25 Kieser (*AdFocus, Supplement to the Financial Mail*, 1999:162) suggests that corporate image and identity design in South Africa has followed three movements over the last two decades: disinvestment, privatization, and globalization.

26 See K. Schilperoort, J. Sampson, and L. Selsnick on design and branding in the *Encyclopaedia of Brands and Branding in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Affinity Advertising and Publishing, 1998). See also the unpublished paper "The Use of Kinetic Design to Leverage a Brand Identity," presented by K. Schilperoort at the seminar *Design and Technology: Britain and South Africa, Partners in Opportunity.* Also the unpublished paper, "Design as a Strategic Asset: Exploring the Link Between Design and Economic Success" presented by J. Lange at the same seminar. See also J. Lange, "A Front Runner in Employer Branding in *The Encyclopaedia of Brands and Branding in South Africa.* (1999).

27 Restructuring, multicultural, and multiethnic employee compositions have accentuated the importance of corporate culture as a management asset: "... that stands on a par with labour, material, capital, and information." (A. Micklethwait and A. Wooldridge, *The Witch Doctors: What the Management Gurus Are Saying, Why It Matters and How to Make Sense of It* (London: Mandarin, 1997), 262.

nications. Typical sites for analysis include advertising, cartoons and comic books, and shopping and entertainment environments. Although graphic design has remained an incidental consideration rather than a focus of attention, its implication in a number of themes periodically come under review. These reviews offer critiques of the visual representations of stereotypical gender, racial, and national identities, and provide revelations of the continuation of specific historical and colonial visions of Africa, the extension of cultural imperialism, and the entrenching of capitalist hegemony. Alternative interpretations of media images highlight the potential of design to contribute to nation building by upholding and promoting the ideals of democracy, to provide dissident voices within the new dispensation, and to integrate once-separated cultural identities through the creation of better multicultural communications.[24]

On the other hand, the growing significance of visual identity in the marketing mix has encouraged prominent South African designers and consultancies to initiate a dialogue in the professional domain that seeks to demonstrate how concepts of identity can contribute to both long-term strategic and immediate business and marketing objectives. Closer scrutiny of visual identity and image management by local designers has resulted from corporate restructuring and (re)positioning,[25] but also because of a greater recognition of the importance of branding (group, service, product and region/country/nation) in competitive differentiation. Not only have new design services and applications been devised by local consultancies, but designers also increasingly and actively explicate design/visual dimensions, processes, and conceptual approaches to visual branding. Aspects such as the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of brand value have been related to color, typographic configurations, visual impact, stylistic devices, and visual continuity.[26] In a similar vein, the expanding presence of digital technology has stimulated designers to indicate the specific importance of visual identity in interactive advertising and e-commerce and its contribution to facilitating accessibility, developing a cohesive voice for the brand, and supporting the strategic integration of media.

The manifested presence of visual identity in the South African public environment indicates an acceptance of its value. Less clearly articulated or promoted in the professional arena is how successful designers have been in facilitating the integration of visual identity programs and precepts into the systems and culture of client organizations in terms of both operational/functional and reception/acceptance dimensions, and as a means to promote internal cohesion and corporate values.[27] Nor is it apparent to what extent design has assumed responsibility for clarifying and fostering an understanding of the pervasive quality of visual identity and the extended articulation of the core values it should embody in all organizational applications. For instance, the importance of symbolic coherence and the need for credible and consistent visual

argumentation/reasoning goes beyond the provision/application of visual standards, to visual interpretation, sustained visual rhetoric, and an ongoing manifested visual articulation of values. The question that arises is how well has design been considered as a means to support management imperatives in the internal environments of South African organizations, from both theoretical and practical perspectives?

Organizational Imperatives

In a consolidation and review of Western management theory, Micklethwait and Wooldridge[28] suggest that the three themes that have dominated contemporary management thinking are the changing structure of organizations, globalization, and the nature of work. These have generated four streams of debate. The first stream relates to assumptions of the size, strength and structure of organizations. The second and third are the use and management of knowledge and information; and corporate leadership, strategies, and accountability. The final stream deals with the impact of change on the world of work and workers, namely where do people work, whom do they work for, and what do they do. These observations are echoed in a more specific and South African context by the management view of strategic issues, polled consecutively from 1996 to 1999 (albeit with varying priorities). Identified issues are growth opportunities, global competitiveness, improving skills, human resource issues, vision, social stability, transformation, state legislation, information technology, affirmative action, and product development.[29]

Local scenario planners[30] concur, suggesting in a more compact manner that the values shaping the South African business environment are information and information technology; global cultures, but national identities; pluralism; ethics, accountability, and transparency; and social responsibility. They also suggest[31] that sustainable development in this country lies in the interrelationship of economic growth, environmental issues, and the quality of human life. The recent *King Report on Corporate Governance* [32] strongly reinforces this sentiment by stressing that the achievement of balanced economic, social, and environmental performance (the triple bottom line) is fundamental to contemporary enterprises. Corporate organizations thus are directly implicated in issues that traditionally were considered to be outside their accepted domains and boundaries. For instance, basic information, education, and promoting lifestyle changes related to identified areas and topics (health, literacy, energy, and water) to all sectors of the organization and society have been placed within the ambit of corporate concerns.

Designers are obliged to consider how graphic design might be assigned to support strategic and operational business objectives, to confront social issues in an organization's macro and micro environments, and to identify conceptual frameworks that could guide desirable roles for design. A concept that presents possible sites for

28 Ibid.

29 *Sunday Times/Business Times,* "Strategic Issues for the Next Four Years" (April 18, 1999).

30 C. Sunter, *The High Road: Where Are We Now?* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau Tafelberg, 1996).

31 B. Huntley, R. Siegfried and C. Sunter, *South African Environments into the 21st Century (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau Tafelberg, 1989).*

32 *Released in 2002, this is the second report on corporate governance complied under the chairmanship of advocate Mervyn King.*

appropriate graphic design contributions is a humanistic management paradigm.[33] This paradigm suggests that an organization is continually challenged to consider, in a holistic sense, how it represents itself and how it is required to make itself transparent in ways that assist both empirical and cognitive orientation and interaction within the organization. It must seek ways to support individual development, facilitate the operational tasks of employees, and acknowledge "other" value systems.

The diversity of operational tasks individuals are required to perform within South African organizations has been amplified by decentralization and the devolution of functions and responsibilities/accountability, owing essentially to two main factors: digital technology and business process reengineering. Both cut across all functions and departments, generating a multiplicity of communications options. These tendencies have contributed to the volume of information in internal circulation and served to democratize design functions. Everyone potentially is a designer, brand manager, strategist, and media communicator, and by implication should be able to understand and apply visual and design principles in the effective and efficient transmission of ideas and information.[34] This must include the ability to not only assist the flow and cognitive accessibility of information in the internal environment, but also to ensure the maintenance of visual continuity and a cohesive voice for the organization. Design-specific understanding such as, for instance, appropriate visual strategies and audience specific graphic techniques, as well as participative and collaborative design processes, thus are essential requirements for effective internal communication. Designers are called on to cultivate this insight through an informative interfacing with all levels of a client organization.

Although the value of an informative interface has been emphasized by South African designers, there is little documented evidence to indicate whether, or to what extent, appropriate initiatives have been adopted or implemented. Personal observation suggests that promotional material such as corporate profiles, newsletters distributed to clients, and interpersonal contact between design companies and clients sometimes fulfill an educational function. Individual designers have indicated a commitment to an educative role for themselves in a number of areas. Once again, there is little documentation describing the content, methods, or success of such efforts. Oosthuizen[35] intimates that it is not common practice in South Africa to inform and align all levels of the organization behind communication strategies. In considering the overall approach used by South African designers in the provision of design services and design recommendations, Temple[36] suggests that designers are unable to explain their conceptual methodologies or articulate their role as communicators. Other commentators propose that a perceived inability to present design rationales does not engender confidence in client organizations and that this often inhibits design acceptance

33 G. Puth, *The Communicating Manager* (Pretoria: J. L. van Schaik, 1994) presents historical trajectories in the development of a humanistic management paradigm, describes its salient characteristics, and details implications and principles for management communications.

34 Lam-Po-Tang illustrates how extensively the electronic media and electronic commerce channels intersect with internal departments and functions in an organization, compared to more traditional design media. (A. Lam-Po-Tang, "Managing a Design Association" (Unpublished paper from the conference *Viewpoints in Time: Sydney Design 99*).

35 T. Oosthuizen, "Communications: A Commodity Business?" *Image & Text* 6 (1996): 14–17.

36 M. A. Temple, *Visual Aspects in Integrated Marketing Communications* (Unpublished MBA dissertation. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1997).

and use. Furthermore, design credibility is questioned because of a poor research basis and a lack of relevant data. This deficit is regarded as being particularly problematic, since it has resulted in the superficial understanding of social and development issues pertinent to South Africa.[37]

According to the World Bank, more than fifty percent of South Africa's population (about twenty-two million) live in "third world" conditions, and about thirteen percent can be categorized as first-world in terms of education and income.[38] Social inequality, multi-ethnic employee profiles, and diverse levels of employee literacy are key challenges facing organizations. An essential aspect of equity in a working environment must be creating access to an information culture for segments of an organization that are routinely excluded from it. Graphic design inherently offers the means to decipher intricate information, simplify processes, and construct frameworks that lead to understanding in a manner compatible with individual circumstances of use. Again, there is little documented information to indicate whether, or to what extent, South African graphic design attempts to make the working environment "visible" to all of an organization's employees.

Anceshi[39] suggests that the concept of "visibility" defines the essence of both what the designer does and the discipline of graphic design itself. He suggests that we "...live in an optical and visual world, but certainly not a visible one."[40] Thus, while the general tendency is to emphasize the importance of the visual in daily life and future scenarios, an oppositional view throws "a civilization of blindness" into relief. This situation may be characterized by an excess of visual stimulation; a lack of symbolic order; and concealed information. Concealed information within an organization may be by intent, for instance, a competitive culture of secrecy, or by inadvertently blocking access to information. Poor or inappropriate cognitive ordering of information; obtrusive and obstructive organizational frameworks; and the factual complexity produced by an organization's activities and structures frequently limit accessibility. Anceschi proposes that, in a world of declining visibility, the designer's role is not one of art and visual problem-solving only. Design competencies must include that of critical consultant able to reveal broader and complex problems, and to take up the position of users in negotiations with managements.

These matters relate not only to way-finding systems or how policies, procedures, and processes are rendered more transparent in the daily life of employees, but also to how specific issues are dealt with. For instance, transformation is a critical and multidimensional concept in South African organizations. Graphic design is intimately connected to ideas of transformation in its thinking, articulation, and final form. Lange[41] identifies some ways in which design may assist organizational transformation in South Africa. These deserve greater exploration and clarification. Another critical issue in South African

37   These issues have received ongoing commentary. See R. Harber, "Making Ideas Affordable and Comprehensible," *Design Education for Developing Countries* (Pretoria: Design Institute, 1993); A. Kalsi, "Mass Production for Production by the Masses" in *Design Education for Small Business Development* (Pretoria: Design Institute, 1995); J. Lange, "Strategic Design in a Transforming Communications Ecology" *Image & Text* 8 (1996): 33–37. M. Southwell, "Magic by Design: Technology Transformed," *Image & Text* 7 (1997): 3–9; J. Van Eeden, unpublished summary of proceedings from the seminar *Postgraduate Studies in Design* held at the University of Pretoria, 1994; and K. Van Niekerk, "A Conspiracy of Mediocrity," *Image & Text* 2 (1993): 33–36.

38   G. Addison, *The Hidden Edge: South Africa's Quest for Innovation* (Johannesburg: Engineering Association, 2000).

39   G. Anceschi, "Visibility in Progress," *Design Issues* 12:3 (1996): 3–13.

40   Ibid., 5.

41   J. Lange, "Strategic Design in a Transforming Communications Ecology," *Image & Text* 6 (1996): 8–13.

organizations is the need for an increasing sensitivity to the incorporation of indigenous value systems into management thinking. An example is the current debate concerning the practical application and implications of Western management techniques drawing on the deep-rooted *Ubuntu* principles of African culture.[42] The *Ubuntu* tradition is based on ideas of participation, dialogue, cooperation, and the human spirit. Although not yet widely accepted as a viable option for dealing with complex dilemmas in the field of business, design commentary has made perfunctory mention of the argumentation surrounding this topic,[43] but has not pursued design implications in any great depth.

The conditions enunciated above advocate a more inclusive, knowledge-based form of design professionalism aimed at combating the interpretation of clients' needs in terms of one's own disciplinary strengths. Designers need to move away from the focus on very narrow portions of organizations, and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the workplace and how it is changing. This requires a practical consideration of discipline and role convergence, and the definition of strategies that acknowledge both strong design specialist expertise and design generalists who have the intellectual range to relate that expertise to a broad range of activity.

Realignment and New Connections

Ideas of a more inclusive form of practice suggest that design consultancies must see their interaction with corporate organizations in terms of understanding, co-operation, and negotiation regarding graphic design as a complex and diverse practice. Designers need to interact with client organizations across a broad spectrum. This may range from a championing interface that advocates, promotes, clarifies, and informs; through all the mediation and explanation demanded by design projects; to a counseling interface that cultivates a climate of acceptance and understanding of design, its use and application in both general and specific ways. The best alignment of design to the characteristics and requirements of the organization are of primary consideration. This could include, for instance, the transfer of inherent designing skills such as design analysis and interpretation, visual presentation, graphic facilitation, strategic visioning and the promotion of a better appreciation of the sociocultural dimensions of design and how these can be of value within organizations. A holistic vision of design is presupposed, echoing the growing emphasis in the literature of design on aspects including total design environments, strategically integrated systems, scenario planning, and fourth-order design.[44]

The traditional perception of graphic design in this country has tended to favor the compartmentalization of design into inwardly focused segments that offer defined design services based on core competencies. Most corporate organizations in South Africa commission graphic design projects on an *ad hoc* basis. This selec-

42 E. D. Prinsloo "*Ubuntu* Culture and Participatory Management" in *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, eds. (Johannesburg: International Thomson Publishing, 1998).

43 R. Van Zyl and M. D. Sauthoff, "Buchanan's Matrix: A Framework for Strategic Alignment (unpublished paper presented at the 2001 Design Education Forum conference held in Johannesburg).

44 L. Keeley, "The Strategic Palette," *Communication Arts* 34:2 (1992): 134–139; L. Keeley, "Transform: Reinventing Industries Through Strategic Design Planning" in *The New Business of Design: Papers from the International Design Conference in Aspen* (New York: Allworth Press, 1996); C.T. Mitchell, *New Thinking in Design: Conversations on Theory and Practice* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996). A. A. Moles, "The Legibility of the World: A Project for Graphic Design" in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism,* V. Margolin, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); R. Buchanan, "Branzi's Dilemma: Design in Contemporary Culture," *Design Issues* 14:1 (1998): 3–20. And T. Golsby-Smith, "Fourth Order Design: A Practical Perspective" *Design Issues* 12:1 (1996): 5–25.

tive, project-based use, rather than a culture or understanding of design as an organizational resource, leads to a fragmented rather than an integrated, holistic or synergistic use of design. An impetus to broaden the scope of design services offered by South African practitioners may be inferred from the current debate and initiatives in the practicing arena regarding alternative modes of practice. For instance, multidisciplinary professional configurations, cooperatives and alliances, and strategic and integrated approaches that in- or outsource design expertise in accordance with dictates appropriate to devising an optimal solution to clients' projects, are variously being implemented.[45]

A more inclusive vision of design also is being presented on platforms that expose the multidisciplinary scope of design to business audiences. This has been the aim of a number of conferences during the last few years.[46] Various design associations and industry publications have launched both promotional and explanatory initiatives in attempts to broaden understanding of design.[47] The general thrust of these ventures is to entrench the professional status of design, clarify the nature and procedures of interactions with clients, promote ideas of accountability as integral aspects of design practice, and orient clients towards changes in media, services and design techniques. Efforts primarily are targeted at the realization of business objectives rather than indications of social and cultural involvement or the systematic integration of design into client organizations.

Other tracks that attempt to define a more encompassing and inclusive vision of design are being activated, but outside the direct intersection with corporate organizations. A good example is the recent *Interdesign 99* Water initiative[48] that demonstrates the viability of cooperative, multidisciplinary design exploration in the search for solutions to critical social problems. It typifies design experimentation in thinktank and scenario situations that foster a broad vision, innovation, connectivity, and inter- and cross-disciplinary participation centered around identified themes and alternative solutions to specified problems. This is an option that increasingly should be considered as a means to understand and deal with the complexity and scale inherent in the contemporary South African environment.

Another endeavor to cultivate a broader vision of design that deserves mention is the promotion of postgraduate studies, theory, and research in design education. Over the last decade, three trajectories may be discerned in bids to confront research and theory in local design education. The first examines the nature of design research in a broad sense: for instance, the scientific/academic acceptance and status of design, the difference between design methodology and research methodology, and the distinction and categorization of types of research in design.[49] The second considers the relevance of works of practice as legitimate equivalencies to research outputs. The

45 *AdFocus.* Supplement to the *Financial Mail* (May 21, 1999).

46 Typical examples are *Design: 2000 and Beyond* held in Pretoria in 1997, and *Design and Technology: Britian and South Africa Partners in Opportunity* held in Johannesburg in 1998.

47 Design South Africa (DSA), a professional design association, has launched numerous initiatives targeted variously at government, education, professional practitioners, and the buyers of design services.

48 *Fresh, Bulletin of Design South Africa* Interdesign '99 Africa 2 (1999): 1, 4.

49 See J. Butler-Adam, "The Dilemma of the Educator of Creative Disciplines and Formal Research" in *The Need for Research Development in Design* (Pretoria: Design Institute, 1992). Also see M. Sauthoff and J. Lange, "Developing a Culture of Research" (Information Design at the University of Pretoria) in *The Need for Research Development in Design* (Pretoria: Design Institute, 1992).

mode of theoretical support that should accompany design outputs and dealing with entrenched academic conventions are ongoing questions.[50] The third trajectory deals with nurturing a culture of design research in terms of standards, content, and the dissemination of results.[51]

These developments have introduced a measure of critical reflection and debate into design, but they also have served to highlight a number of difficulties. There is an extreme lack of insight and expertise (in graphic design and other design disciplines) in relation to theoretical and methodological aspects that enable coherent and sustained research. Few verified empirical data on the nature and structure of the graphic design industry and local circumstances are available. As a mode of practice, graphic design has not been subjected to much objective description or critical attention. Even a popular graphic design critique, which would encourage general understanding and informed assessment of design, is almost non-existent. While a degree of analytical scrutiny is routinely given to art or films in the popular media, graphic design is seldom submitted to critical review. Very little concentration has been expended on exploring the indigenous dimensions of graphic design and establishing a local discourse. For instance, the literature on South African architecture that reflects, and reflects upon, the rich diversity of style, influences, and imperatives that have emerged in three centuries of interaction between indigenous factors and broader international impulses, cannot be remotely matched by considerations of graphic design in South Africa.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

Graphic design in the post-apartheid era has developed into a sophisticated practice and industry that projects itself as capable of delivering international standards of design and servicing large corporate clients. A unique graphic idiom that acknowledges local circumstances gradually is emerging. Professional design activities and status are being systematically promoted and entrenched, and there currently appears to be a growing recognition and exploration of graphic design as a resource and tool in certain well-defined marketing areas. While acknowledging these positive directions, this article suggests that graphic design neglects to stimulate an understanding of its wider socio-cultural role or to adequately address issues related to the totality of its national environment and culture. The current confluence, dichotomies and interaction of first / third world and Africa / West have been neither satisfactorily confronted nor properly conceptualized by South African graphic design.

Considerations of identity seem to indicate that design practice and commentary continue to align themselves with and aspire to the predominant Western and entrepreneurial design paradigm, with its emphasis on competitive differentiation and consumption. Concomitantly creative production and deliberations tend to focus

50   This is a longstanding debate. Critical points are encapsulated by J. Fourie in the unpublished paper "The Challenge Pertaining to an Accountable System for the Recognition of Visual and Performing Arts Research in South Africa." This paper was read at the *Workshop on Arts Research Subsidy Funding for Artefacts and Other Research Outputs at Technikons and Universities* held in Pretoria, 1999.

51   In this regard, *Image & Text,* the only academic design journal in South Africa, has consistently attempted to foster a critical attitude toward design and to develop local design writing and readership. The journal was first published by the University of Pretoria in 1992.

on the values of visual impact, novelty, entertainment, assertiveness in image creation, fluidity, and the continuous revalorization of graphic forms. Very little thought has been expended on locating graphic design within the broader parameters and problematics of visual integration, domination, transformation, and indigenous expression. Insufficient attention has been directed to establishing a local discourse that allows for a deeper engagement with social context, or interrogates cultural meaning or monitors mainstream applications in relation to popular reception. Fundamental and penetrating considerations of the articulation of a South African graphic language as a search for values, understanding, and identity within the broader contexts of change in South Africa only now are beginning to emerge.

In looking at graphic design's intersection with corporate organizations, this article speculatively supports a perception that design appears to focus primarily on external constituencies, and does not devote suitable thoughtfulness to internal constituencies and the integration of design into the functional and cultural environments of client organizations. The broad thrust of interaction with client organizations seems to be on the expansionistic role of design and on clarifying its professional status. This article hints at a reconciliation (albeit simplistically) of design as a humanistic endeavor situated within the particular circumstances of an organization, and as a response to the impact of both information technology and contemporary management processes. This attitude recognizes the value of collaborative initiatives and the integration of many kinds of knowledge. It honors progressive transformation, the acknowledgement of traditional differences, explanation and mutual understanding, and the rational analysis of economic, social, cultural, and individual needs. The article supports a view of an extended and more encompassing role for graphic design that presupposes the adoption of a holistic understanding of design, and reinforces the importance of designers having a sound theoretical basis from which to practice. This includes the ability to elucidate conceptual methodologies, provide an informed appraisal of design, and place the optimal utilization of design within an increasingly complex environment.

If South African graphic design truly wishes to make a significant contribution to the achievement of sustainable economic and social development in this country, a number of points become evident. South African designers must move from a position that privileges creative intuition, the subjective domain, self-development, and tacit knowledge to the adoption of a multifaceted confrontation and wider engagement with historical and contemporary circumstances relating to design in this country. This movement must take design beyond "showing" and persuasion to fundamental explanations that comprehensively expose the semantics of design, and clarify its contributions to contexts of culture and use. A nascent

design discourse is introducing a measure of objective description, critical assessment, and reflection, although this currently is fragmented, uneven, and eclectic. There is an urgent need to establish a systematic basis and accumulate a body of knowledge that will aid the integration of relevant aspects of the discourse into the practicing arena. Clearly, the above points indicate a model that suggests that it is essential for graphic design education and practice in South Africa to adopt multiple and defensible viewpoints, follow their implications in the broadest possible way, and permit these considerations to influence design development in this country.