

An Alternative Future For Industrial Design In Africa.

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Abstract

It is clear that the term Industrial design is closely associated with the development of first world economies, and by inference relates to the development of large scale manufacturing industries producing among other things consumer goods for the world market.

The term Industrial design is therefore one, which at the moment is primarily motored by the first world, but this may not necessarily be the only model that we can use to aid our own development.

The need to diversify the economy in Botswana has never been greater, and so it is an appropriate time to discuss what we mean by Industrial design in its African context, and whether perhaps a more appropriate indigenous model could be developed to create an innovative and sustainable future for the people of this continent.

In order to develop an appropriate Industrial design vocabulary for Africa, it is therefore necessary for us to confront important questions such as, what do we mean by Industrial design in our own context? Should our model be one adopted from the west, or one that we could develop ourselves? How do we create high value products? Who is going to motor this Industrial design development? and are there any starting points within indigenous culture that could inform a new Industrial design direction, which is uniquely African in nature?

Failure to have this debate may result in us missing a golden opportunity to develop a more appropriate industrial model which could address problems such as the death of rural communities, The migration of peoples to Urban centres, and result in a more appropriate and sustainable manufacturing future for Africa.

Keywords

Sustainable Design, Appropriate Design, Cultural Empowerment.

The archaeological record tells us that in pre industrial African society the makers of two and three dimensional objects played an important social role. They were the creators of the signposts which helped people navigate successfully through the culture group they belonged to, and the guardians of the patterns and objects that their group was identified by. It could be said that they were the glue that helped bind the social groups of the continent together. The creative vocabulary of these societies was made up of a small set of designs that occurred on a variety of objects. These repeated designs colours and combinations formed a single style which was part of an integrated design field within agro pastoral society in Southern Africa. In contrast to the present day western world, traditional African societies were more homogeneous and communally orientated. (Huffman. 2007.)

The makers of things therefore did not stand alone as individuals but had the social responsibility of pleasing the community. This meant that their primary role was not one of change but of perpetuating evolutionary continuity, or re iterating through the generations the ever changing creative vocabulary of the social group in question. Although some may wish to name these important pieces of social continuity as art, I would prefer to believe that the creative vocabulary that existed in pre colonial society was of far more social significance than that. I also feel that it has the potential of becoming the basis of a new creative vocabulary for the continent of Africa.

In most pre colonial societies the patterns and shapes created by these craftspeople generally had some culturally specific meaning. In many cases the designs and colours used also had symbolic significance. Red bands on a venda initiation

figurine for example would represent young unmarried women. (Blacking 1969)

In some parts of Africa the black graphite painted on pots signified being human, and in some parts they were treated as representations of living people. (Barley. 1994.)

The craft of pottery in most parts of Africa was associated with women, not because it was just seen as a female occupation but because the creation of hard fired pot from wet clay was seen as a transformation similar to that involved in creating human beings. Due to this most female potters were also midwives and so therefore were individuals who played a very important role in traditional society. (Barley 1994)

In Africa it is clear that within the prehistoric and historical record there is evidence of a visual vocabulary that was very different from the European model adopted world wide today. What I propose is that this vibrant and meaningful history be at least considered when developing an alternative future for Industrial design on the continent.

1. Industrial

Let us start by looking at the term itself and decide upon a clear definition. It is obvious that the term is made up of two separate words that on their own can have very different meanings.

The generally accepted definition of this term is large scale in nature.

The term historically generally relates to the period of Industrial expansion which began in Europe and especially the UK from the 16th Century onward. However we must remember that the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans in their own times were some of the earliest societies to develop large scale manufacturing capabilities. If we look at the ceramics industry of all these societies for example we can see that there were all the traits of what we would now call industrialisation-

Large Volume capabilities.

The development of technology to aid quick manufacturing.

Standardised Products throughout their domains.

Standardised Technology.

Standardised procedures.

Standardised quality standards.

We are all aware of the great social changes that took place at this time in Europe as people left their traditional rural areas and moved into the new Industrial centres in their search for a better life. New urban cultures developed which changed community life forever and not necessarily for the better. If we look further back at the history of Industrial development in the Western world it is clearly apparent that many of the Industries of today primarily developed from the smaller scale operations, which preceded them. If we look back further than that we will see that these in turn were developed from the small scale artisans and independent makers of things who learned their skills through apprenticeships and guilds during the middle ages. These guilds of craftsmen were very important and influential organisations of their times. The concept of Industrialisation in the northern hemisphere is therefore a very old one. We must remember however that it could not have occurred without the solid foundations of what went before.

2. Design.

The word design itself is relatively new, and primarily relates to the development of new products since about the beginning of the 20th century in the Northern Hemisphere. Manufacturing in the west at this time was production orientated and was primarily about function and cost.

The aesthetics of design and the construct of what design means today in the northern hemisphere has moved away from the everyday functionality of production and cost, to the more ephemeral areas of creating emotional experiences, status symbols and sex. Today design is sexy, creative and exciting and it is the reason why many students in the west study the subject. It is also the reason for the success of some of the global brands which we see all around us.

What we have to ask ourselves is how many of these global brands are African?

Manufacturers in the northern hemisphere realised long time ago that function was not enough. Functionality is still an important aspect of a well designed product, but it is now clear that people buy products for a multitude of other reasons in

addition to function. These include status, belonging, emotion, fun and experience.

3. Conclusion

Industrial design is in some way a confusing term. Industry is about being cost effective, mechanised and process orientated. Design on the other hand is about creativity, added value, emotion, sex and other ephemeral. Putting these two together in a meaningful way is both difficult and challenging; the important thing to remember is that by their very nature they are different beasts and should be respected as such. These issues should also be considered when designing any template for the contemporary development of Industrial design on the continent of Africa.

For the last hundred years at least the creative vocabulary of Industrial design has clearly belonged to the northern Hemisphere. This raises a few pertinent questions which we should ask ourselves.

If we use a vocabulary developed by someone else, how can we compete?

If we use a vocabulary developed by someone else, doesn't that mean that they control it together with future directions?

If we use a vocabulary developed by someone else, how can we create high value unique products that are outside their control?

In contrast to what is happening in the northern hemisphere Industrial design in Africa is still primarily orientated around process and price. If Industrial design products are to compete on the world market stage on any other basis than price then serious attention must be given to the development of the design profession skill base. Great attention should also be given to developing unique products that can command a high price and offer a high level of control over the market.

Although Design as we have seen is a vital component in the development of global brands, and plays an important part in creating national wealth, it is sadly a profession that is greatly undervalued on this continent. Unlike many other professions it remains a low status low pay area of employment. Individuals are far more likely to be encouraged to take up higher paid professions such as medicine or law by their families. These professions are obviously important to any society but they do not create the wealth that sustains

national economies. Without strong manufacturing infrastructures who creates the wealth to pay these public servants? It is therefore vitally important that the true potential of an indigenous Industrial design industry be realised in Africa by raising the importance of its status, and encouraging new innovative product development by financially valuing its designers.

An important part of this development is the provision of adequate design education that offers a whole range of design courses ranging from Graphic Design to Fashion, Product and furniture, and also encourages entrepreneurship in its graduates so that they can become the motor for the development of small scale high quality design based industries. If we look at the design education system in Africa in general we see that it is poorly funded and often ill considered. Its status as a subject remains low, and this in turn reflects the quality of the design industry and the industrial design landscape of the continent in general. The creative vocabulary used is northern hemisphere by nature due to the fact that many of the courses developed were initiated or encouraged by western NGO's or expatriates. The model has been northern hemisphere in nature but this is no reason why we should continue along the same line. In contrast there is no doubt that Industrial Design in the western context has greatly benefited its economies, and in parallels the political power of those countries that control it. It is no coincidence that the USA, politically one of the most powerful nations on earth is also one of the largest manufacturing countries on the globe. In addition, Britain has one of the most well developed Industrial design training infrastructures in the western world, and it is no coincidence that it also has one of the strongest Industrial design industries in the western hemisphere.

Einstein said that Imagination was more important than knowledge. What he meant by this was that without the application of imagination we are in danger of ending up in an endless loop of mediocrity that stifles our true potential. It also stops us questioning assumptions such as "Is design an international global language controlled by the northern hemisphere or are there alternatives?" As I have already said, it is clear that in the modern world market a product is not just about function. It is also about identity, emotion, belonging, and added value. Failure to

take this into account may result in the development of Industrial Design practice that is out of touch with contemporary customer requirements around the world. It is therefore important in any new plan for industrial design expansion in Africa to take these important issues into account.

You already have strong creative foundations on which to build your Industry. You have your unique culture; you have your unique historical way of dealing with the realities of life. However in some ways you make the mistake of not considering these areas as opportunities for industrial development.

In this regard there is still a kind of colonialism of the mind which considers anything traditional to be old fashioned and of no value. It also inhibits the development of culturally specific design solutions. There are some moves to develop the potential of traditional herbal medicines, but the same approach is needed in seeing the potential of traditional crafts and culture as a starting point in the development of contemporary Industrial products.

The history of African Industrial design is one in which the continent became a cheap producer of raw materials and goods designed for markets elsewhere. I propose that a more indigenous vocabulary be developed to create ownership and to create African products for African people. For example, Visit any home in Africa and you will see the same furniture and kitchen fixtures as you find in the northern hemisphere. But how many of these products fit the culture group that is using it?

The plates are western orientated and so may not hold the food correctly.

The sink in the kitchen is too small for the large cooking pots you use.

The storage facilities in the kitchen are too small for your cooking implements.

The furniture in your house is too heavy and cumbersome, and are great landscapes for many insects to live in due to the inappropriateness of materials and their application in this hot climate.

In another regard, taking into account the extended family system in Africa perhaps the bedrooms in our houses are too few and too large? These are important questions that we should be asking ourselves before making any plans to develop an Industrial design industry that can create new home and export markets.

What is clear is that while ever we use the northern hemisphere vocabulary it will be impossible to create new markets and new products that fit this continent. It is therefore very important to seriously question the assumptions we all make about what products are for, what they mean and how they can create totally new markets. The African middle class as we know grows each year, but how many Industrial designers are looking at these markets, analysing what they need and creating new exciting culturally specific products?

The continent of Africa already has a design template from which to work and is based on the traditional Crafts of the continent. Creating small scale viable producer organisations within rural areas not only creates incomes for individuals but allows people to remain in their traditional areas rather than commute to urban areas in the search for employment. Like in the European examples used earlier there is no reason why these small organisations could not develop into high value producers over time. The industrial development in the northern hemisphere split traditional communities and in some respects created some of the urban social problems that can be seen in any major western conurbation today. Africa has the opportunity to choose a different road to Industrialisation. It has the opportunity to develop one which takes into account community, sustainability and the well-being of nations as a whole. The products you should be developing are high value ones that respond to the new purchasing criteria of emotion and added value. It should also be looking at the very large market of Africa and developing products that fit the continent, rather than forcing culture groups to fit the available products. Africa can only control markets that it has created itself. All others are controlled by outside forces. I therefore propose that a new area of product development be investigated, one which could result in the development of unique products for export and the market of Africa. Being product development leaders is clearly a much better place to be than product followers. Followers remain at the mercy of creative leaders who are clearly in charge of the next direction. Contemporary African artefacts clearly have a market and I am not suggesting for one minute that these industries be abandoned while we search for a new direction. What I am suggesting is that a thorough re-evaluation of the historical creative vocabulary be made so that it

can be used in the future to inform a totally new and unique creative direction.

If Africa could seriously consider all these issues and not just accept the western construct of what Industrial design should be then who knows what would be possible?

Let's take a look at the visual language of this continent. Traditionally all things had function. All things were produced for a use. African masks were telephones through which people could talk to the ancestors. Pots were seen in some areas as people, so much so that if one was broken a sacrifice would have to be offered. Strange shaped objects were used for initiation, and a whole cosmology existed that was completely African, and more importantly completely outside the experience and control of the western world. Culture is like a rain forest. If we don't value it we may never know what we destroy for the future. We many never know what of value we have destroyed until it is too late. An immediate question springs to mind. How could Africa use its original tradition of meaning, and its own culture to develop modern products for the world? When Fulani women in Ghana want to become pregnant, they have a small clay figure made by a local potter and wrap it in their clothing around their stomach. The idea, in their way of seeing the world is to attract a soul from the heavens.

Once pregnant the clay figure is stored in the roof of their house. This is an important aspect because should the child die in infancy then it is possible to wrap the same figure in order to attract the same soul back to the mother.

An interesting story we may say, but how can this be developed into a new product?

If those people were to injection mould a small figure in bright colours attached to a key ring it would be possible, with the addition of the ethnographic story, to sell it to couples in the west who were contemplating starting a family.

A functional contemporary creative object with meaning that could only have come from the Fulani. Could only have come out of Africa.

In traditional society in parts of Nigeria, women would always give an indication of how they were feeling by choosing different bowls in which to present the meal. If they were in a good mood they would use the bowl that would convey this meaning. If they were in a bad mood they would communicate this in their choice of food receptacle.

If we leap in imagination we can see the potential of a new export product. Perhaps the bowl may be of a simpler nature, but the message could be conveyed by the application of a stylised happy or sad face logo in the base of the form.

I am not suggesting that we subject women to a lifetime of cookery servitude. What I am suggesting is that buyers overseas if offered the bowls with the ethnographic story may see humour in the idea and purchase a set for their own use.

A functional contemporary creative object with meaning that could only have come from Nigeria. Could only have come out of Africa.

4. Conclusion

Africa should be building its own Industrial Design network that is clearly based on its own traditions rather than those of others.

It should be moving away from the traditional view that Industrial design is only about functionality, process and cost and realise the potential of factoring in the consumer needs and desires that we discussed earlier.

It should be asking itself not what Industrial design is now but what it may be in the future.

Design is not a single global language and so Africa does not have to necessarily accept the Industrial design model of the northern hemisphere. We have seen that Africa can develop its own indigenous direction using its own historical foundations that create the important aspect of ownership and control.

The continent of Africa historically had its own creative vocabularies that it used to create its own unique products, and ones that it controlled. It is time to revisit this history and have pride in it.

Africa does not have to create large scale industries that empty its rural areas and destroys its cultures. It can create small scale industries that give people the opportunity to stay within their traditional area. The cultural strength of those areas can be used to create unique products for the export and home market. There is great potential in Africa for knowledge based industries such as educational holidays, natural materials internet based search engines and other non product based design.

That its design entrepreneur graduates can be the motor for the development of Industrial design in Africa. Some kind of government support for these small scale industries in their initial stages would greatly improve the success rates of these creative industries.

Here is an opportunity then for Africa to re discover its lost inheritance, and its rich and vibrant way of seeing the world.

Here is an opportunity for Africa to develop its own product development model and supply the culturally specific requirements of its own peoples and that of the continent.

Here is an opportunity for Africa to use its rich history to develop Industrial design industries that are totally unique and outside the control of the northern hemisphere.

During the colonial period the western world failed to see the real meaning and potential of this continents design heritage.

I hope that the people of Africa themselves do not make the same mistake.

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