

**“From the tree to the dugout....but the canoe is letting in water”**

- *an exploration of partnership and shared initiatives in the local and global context*

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Presented at

**FOURTH INTERNATIONAL DEFSA CONFERENCE**

**“Mapping New Territories in Design Education”**

sub-theme session : The New Awareness

**10-11 SEPTEMBER 2001, MUSEUM AFRICA, NEWTOWN, JOHANNESBURG**

## **“From the tree to the dugout.... but the canoe is letting in water”**

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Africa - a history awash with external intervention.....the cure of souls, civilizing missions, colonial pacts, aid, post-adjustment partnership. A continent prone to sporadic famines, cyclical *coups d'Etat*, bloodstained dictatorships, ethnic massacres, endemic corruption. A caricature of senseless brutality amidst a frenzy of private accumulation. Perhaps no regime conjures up this image more potently than that of Idi Amin in Uganda. But encountering the reality firsthand, other images of Africa assert themselves..... rich red murum roads winding their way through the lush green beauty of the landscape; cities with their dusty streets, bustling markets and teeming taxi-parks; but above all else..... indelible memories of the vitality, generosity, resilience and sheer spirit of the people.

Today, the impression gained on visiting Uganda is of a community working for a secure future born out the efforts of numerous individuals and organisations, committed to restoring the country's wealth through enterprise and collaboration. Wealth is not necessarily the accumulation of money – it is based on the word ‘weal’ which means well-being, to prosper in a healthy way and improve the quality of life of the whole community. It is of this experience that I wish to speak.....

During the third week of May, under the guidance of a visiting artist, Nuwa Nnyanzi, 20 children from the Kitgum District, on the northern border of Uganda with the Sudan, discovered their voice. Ten were children who had escaped after being abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA); the other ten children were AIDs orphans.

Nnyanzi presented one instruction to the children, that they use their brushes to depict images that, until that day, had remained deep inside their hearts. The children gathered together to create a visual statement about themselves and the world around them – the past that haunts them, the uncertainty of every day and, most predominantly, their hope for the future. Images came to life in vibrant colour - a large home with sturdy walls, a church for prayers, a smiling girl in a red dress, a student reading a book, a gun that once meant captivity and a helicopter that meant rescue from the LRA.

To the backdrop of a rhythmic drum and the gentle notes of an adungu, the children of Kitgum told a story of abduction and fear, of suffering and sadness; but also of latent potential, the ability to flavour the present with joy, and belief in a future coloured by peace.

As the workshop drew to a close, Nnyanzi asked, “ Does anyone feel there is something they need to add? Does anyone feel there is something missing?” One child came forward to make a statement for the children of Kitgum. Over the river that had divided the canvas since the first day, this young artist built a bridge. With a shared hand, 20 children of Kitgum have created their testimony of struggle, of life and hope.

*“ ....it is important that the prestige attached to the arts should not lead to the neglect of countless, modest imaginative undertakings that inject a vital substance into the social fabric...”* “Our Creative Diversity” World Commission on Culture and Development report.

Elsewhere, attention is being given to the sustainable development of creative entrepreneurs - helping people to help themselves. The Uganda Small Scale Industries Association, working together with Appropriate Technology, UK (APT), has supported the growth of grass roots enterprises – locally owned and managed, using readily available raw materials and the ingenuity of the local people. The emphasis is on **viability** –producing efficiently what people need, at a fair price and for a profit. For example, a thriving industry of brick making and pottery has sprung up along the Entebbe road.

These ventures are dynamically bound together and created by people collaboratively using their talents - **investment in people** is a key factor in their success. By meeting local need rather than by stimulating artificial wants, artists, designers and craftspeople can contribute to the health and prosperity of the nation.

Throughout Africa, inequalities in access to education and training persist. During the colonial period a western heritage and tradition was forged in many of the art training institutions in Africa. The role played by the international community in shaping educational agendas continues to be controversial. But creativity is not divorced from its' geographic origins and the problem is not only what is taught but **how** things are taught. What are the continuities and discontinuities in art and design education in Africa, the relationship and interaction between the academically trained and the self-taught / traditional artists – for the distinctions between 'academic' and 'lay' knowledge are breaking down.

Tradition may be understood as emphasizing the connection to received forms, serving established functions, more than the invention of the individual artist. But this is to ignore the maker's appreciation of innovation, willingness to adopt new ideas and forms and their ability to respond to changes in external circumstances - employing creative talents for different purposes. All traditions are part of elastic continuum of incremental transformation and development.

Development may be defined as the widening of opportunities and choices, embracing tradition not as a static entity but as a continuous process of change, giving expression to cultural exchange. It is culture that connects people together and cultures are neither isolated nor static, but interact and evolve.

We are becoming increasingly inter-dependent with different - but not necessarily equal - consequences. The tree.... the culture and tradition... is rooted in one place - out of which is crafted the dugout.... the vehicle for communication, education and change - but there is a tension between the global and the local.

Although globalisation is a universal phenomenon, it is an asymmetrical and unbalanced process to the extent that so few of the technological tools and resources that underpin it are available in the developing countries.

Recognising the contribution made by the arts to development, the international debate regarding the attainment of economic empowerment is now clearly focused upon the role played by the arts and design in particular. The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) 'Our Creative Diversity' published in 1995, stressed the importance of fostering skills that could be turned to income-generating purposes, creative skills that can be a catalyst for sustainable development.

However, sustainable development cannot only be about commodity production..... it must also embrace the conditions in which people live. Conditions that define and create

communities and embody all the tensions that we live with in the world today. Development may be assessed according to whether it benefits the minority or the majority of the country.

New alliances need to be forged; partnerships that encourage participants to work in a coordinated, inter-sectoral, integrated way that takes into account the complexity of reality. Partnerships and cultural exchange, locally and globally, that encourages and promotes access to a range of technological skills, will afford artists the opportunity to master and adapt new processes to their own needs.

In considering the present provision and perceptions of the role that design education can play, the opportunity and undoubted challenge exists for the development of programmes that link learning to the realities to be faced. Design is not the product - it is the concept, the ability to look at a familiar situation in a new way, to transform ideas into tangibles which meet both need and want. An understanding and application of design thinking not only contributes to economic development, it has an important role to play in addressing social and educational concerns.....

The HIV/Aids + Rural Crafts project - initiated by Kate Wells in KwaZulu Natal, has promoted the role of the design process as a means to educate and transfer vital information, debunking the myths which surround the HIV/Aids virus within rural communities. Working with groups of bead workers and mbengi makers, the programme not only improved their design skills... enhancing opportunities for income generation... but through the involvement of Health workers, representatives from the Living with Aids Foundation and drama performances, raised their awareness of practical issues relating to health care and the environment, de-mystifying the threat of the Aids virus. The beadworkers are regarded as role models in their rural communities and are in a good position to disseminate this crucial information back to their families and communities.

Information is power. It is the accessibility of information that creates the learning environment essential for innovation. In a world dominated by the 'knowledge economy', information technology has become a strategic resource. Increasingly mobile populations, combined with the lack of controllable frontiers for the transfer of capital and knowledge, is profoundly changing the way we live and work with one another.

But innovation and development is not solely dependent upon the acquisition of new technology - the capacity to accept and generate new ideas, new approaches to situations, new models and ways of working is the cornerstone of creative practice. The challenge therefore is in realising that power lies not only in technical expertise, but also in capturing the local capacity for creative problem solving, ingenuity and invention

In 1996, the Norwegian Government invited UNESCO to link this challenge much more closely to development. The 'Artists' in Development' Creativity Workshop programme emerged out of this dialogue between UNESCO and the Norwegian Government (NORAD). The rationale behind the programme seeks to promote the symbiotic relationship between creative, technical and socioeconomic development of both the individual and the wider community.

Based on the principle of exchange and collaboration, South-South as well as North-South, the programme seeks to provide the opportunity for young designers to interact within a series of practical design workshops in Africa, Asia and Latin-America.

*' In promoting North-South relationships, the programme stresses that the South is not just on the receiving end: what people there may lack in hardware, skills and structures, they can amply compensate for by the richness of inherited traditions and their capacity to assimilate local and international influences.'*

(draft proposal to NORAD. c.1997)

I was invited to lead the planning, coordination and delivery of the first workshop, held in Africa in April 99 and focused on the disciplines of textile and graphic design. In devising the programme, careful consideration was given to the level of technology and local availability of equipment and materials. The capability of the host institution to maintain and support the continued usage of equipment and technology that was to be acquired for the workshop was paramount.

My first task was to identify the most appropriate host country and host institution and put together a multicultural team of trainers. The selection of the host institution posed no difficulties. The Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts within Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda - the oldest art school in East Africa - was an obvious and fitting choice. I was not disappointed. Without the extraordinary level of support and sheer energy sustained by the staff within Makerere, the programme could not of operated, nor would the outcomes achieved have been so positive.

The trainers (from Zimbabwe, Columbia, South Africa and Bangladesh) were chosen not only for their expertise as designers but also for their understanding of the circumstances facing developing countries. It was essential that the team of trainers perceived their relationship with the local staff as a collaboration between equals - each actively seeking to enable the participants to analyse their own situation and in the process expanding their own knowledge.

The participants, drawn from twelve African countries, reflected a variety of design practices and differing levels and forms of education, ranging from commercial designers employed in the industrial sector, self-employed designers and craftspeople alongside university lecturers. The selection process prioritised their ability and commitment to disseminating the information and experience gained at the workshop back in their home country.

Whilst the primary aim of the workshop was to enhance 'hands-on' practice, exposing the participants to additional techniques and technology, equal attention was given to developing their ability to plan strategically, communicate clearly and argue persuasively, both verbally and visually - emphasizing the need to be equally as inventive and resourceful in the management of their businesses.

For many of the participants, this was their first opportunity to visit another African country. Travel within Africa is rarely straightforward - poor infrastructure and lack of funding inhibits regional interaction. It is far easier to gain sponsorship to travel out of Africa to the capitals of the North. The workshop was an all too rare event, enabling these 'on the ground' African designers and craftspeople to come together within their own continent.

One of the major benefits of the workshop was that of cultural, personal and artistic interchange - sharing and exchanging information, learning about each others circumstances, acknowledging their diversity whilst affirming common concerns, validating ideas, identifying and resolving problems - facilitating and encouraging a variety of approaches to addressing the realities and demands of competing locally and internationally.

Capitalising on the diverse talents and experiences within the group, participants were encouraged to share their expertise and give demonstrations of the techniques that they employed. Patrick and Delphin, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, gave an inspirational talk on designing for 'chitenge' cloths. The commemorative cloth that they produced is a celebration of all that the workshop sought to achieve. It is to be hoped that the fruits of the participants' experience will be harvested in their respective countries.

This first workshop was conceived not as an isolated event but as part of a longer term strategy of strengthening the quality of design education in Africa - promoting ongoing research and evaluation through the formation of a regional and international network of partnerships - emphasising that learning and knowledge is not exclusively held.

In the past decade globalisation and aid fatigue have only heightened the centrality of building viable partnerships. Although there is no 'one-way' to build effective partnerships, however it is done they must be underpinned by clear, shared understandings of each partners expectations and recognise the importance of 'ownership' and the principal of reciprocity.

**How can this trust be developed?** Who are the partners? Can they be institutions or is it down to individuals? It is no coincidence that, in today's world where increasing importance is given to autonomy and accountability, adaptability and flexibility is more often displayed by individuals than by larger organisations. But individuals are not self contained units and there is an evident need to form alliances, sharing information and expertise to develop educational models that will be of assistance in facing up to the challenge of transformation as we engage with this new century.

Although the dilemmas facing education development in the South differ from those encountered in the Northern industrialised economies. Internationally inspired agendas often have a dominance influence; promoting educational policy modeled on what may be appropriate and fashionable in the North. All too frequently innovations have failed because they are not well attuned to the needs, values and cultures of the local context.

Genuine North – South partnerships must challenge accustomed ways and redefine concepts of 'development' and 'strategic research needs'...for the results must be visible and palpable for the local community. Research capacity building, it is claimed, will facilitate more symmetrical North-South partnerships. Thus, building research partnerships and strengthening research capacity may be regarded as mutually reinforcing activities. Participatory approaches, emphasising the importance of involving all types of practitioners and stakeholders in research conceptualisation and design, incorporating the agendas, priorities and interpretations of insiders, will address the question of relevance. The production of knowledge must be construed as a collective, socio-cultural process that takes place as much outside the ivory towers of academia as it does within them. What influences designers in differing environments – how are they conditioned by their local environment?

Effective partnerships must place a 'premium on knowledge of local circumstances - the diversity of needs, community structures, culture and traditions must be acknowledged. Since practice is local, much of the knowledge needed to plan and guide it is contextually specific, intuitive and intrinsic to the settings of daily practice. A perverse effect of ignoring local knowledge is that too many projects tend to focus on 'solutions' to poorly identified problems.

For truly participatory and successful partnerships each of the partners must have:

**a commitment to learning as much as to teaching** .... for they have to be open to being deeply changed themselves

**patience as real learning and meaningful changes are slow.** They need to allow time for different individuals to respond in their own ways, at their own pace.

**the capacity to recognise their own weaknesses.....** having the courage to examine doubts and invite criticism. They need humility

**sufficient sensitivity to listen intensively** and recognise the fears, problems, hopes and creative potential in even the least promising people they meet.

**the courage to try out new things** .... to be inventive, to share information, expertise and knowledge and encourage others to be creative.

**the perseverance to work very hard for many years.**

**Development is not about projects.....** for these are at best tools.

**Development does not start with goods .....** the finest product in the world is of little value to the person who neither needs nor can afford it.

**Development starts with people and their education, organisation and their tenacity against all the odds.....**it is about growth, trust, promoting self- confidence and collective understanding so that people can build a future for themselves.

At the end of the day, the nature and quality of relationships will depend upon how individuals get along and work together. ....**but partnership is controversial...** .... are we simply perpetuating North-South relationships in another guise.....?

All too frequently my thoughts return to this quote from Peder Gowenius ‘

*” It is difficult to find a good balance ..... on the one side experience, knowledge etc. and on the other side dreams..... it is far too often that experience, knowledge and awareness kills our dreams and hope.”*

..... **and the canoe is still letting in water.**

**Book References**

'Our Creative Diversity' : Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development  
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