



Interdesign 2005 and communication design: a contextualisation

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During April 2005 visual communication designers took part in an International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (Icsid) Interdesign that addressed the topic of sustainable rural transport in the North West Province, South Africa. This article contextualises the activities of the visual communication design team during this two-week workshop. The question posed is whether the inclusion of this team contributed to Interdesign 2005, and the nature and possible value of this contribution are discussed.

South Africa celebrated its first decade of democracy in 2004. The ten-year period commenced in 1994 when the African National Congress (ANC), under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, became the democratically elected ruling party. This new democratic South Africa created expectations regarding a better life for all South Africans, including improved access to social services such as medical care and education, as well as jobs.

Although South Africa has one of the best-developed transport infrastructures in Africa, 60 per cent of rural households have no, or difficult, access to public transport. Two million learners walk to school, often walking more than two hours per day. Fifty per cent of the South African population is rural and 72 per cent of this rural population are poor, with little access to social services. Areas in South Africa that lack developed transport systems clearly overlap with the poverty-stricken areas in South Africa. Government intervention is required to improve rural transport systems (see

National Department of Transport 2003). Rural transport modes comprise bus and minibus services, motorised vehicles (such as bakkies), and various forms of non-motorised transport such as walking (including sometimes carrying goods on the head), riding donkeys and horses, wheelbarrows, handcarts, animal-drawn vehicles, bicycles, bicycle trailers and tricycles.

In 2002, the North West Province started to explore transport solutions suitable for local use, including commissioning the building of donkey carts. The North West is one of nine South African provinces, and has a poverty rate of 57 per cent, with more than two thirds of the population living in rural areas. The North West Provincial Government, Department of Transport, found that no standards or regulations existed that could be used to issue a tender document. The SABS Design Institute, a division of the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), became involved and this subsequently led to a decision to host an Interdesign.

An Interdesign is an International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (Icsid) forum in which mid-career designers from various countries and cultures work together for a two-week period, exploring international design issues of developmental importance and nature. Thirty-five Interdesigns have been held since the first one took place in 1971 in Russia. Interdesigns are always hosted by Icsid member countries. The first Interdesign hosted in South Africa was in 1998 where the topic of water was explored. Interdesign 2005 with the theme 'Sustainable Rural Transport – Technology for Developing Countries' was subsequently hosted in the North West Province from 3 to 16 April 2005.

Three broad strategic goals and objectives were set for Interdesign 2005. These were to:

- Develop feasible concepts with real potential for development and manufacturing within the local context and environment;
- Align the project with the objectives of the New Partner-

ship for Africa's Development (NEPAD); viz. poverty eradication, sustainable growth and development, beneficial integration of Africa into the global economy, and the empowerment of women;

- Involve Icsid and the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (Icograda) members in multidisciplinary outcomes in an environment where illiteracy and multilingualism are factors (SABS Design Institute 2005a).

Interdesign 2005 participants came from South Africa, Nigeria, Botswana, UK, and Europe, Mexico, New Zealand, Turkey, Israel, Canada, USA and India; Germany was well-represented by a team of 13 Master's degree students from the Academy of Visual Arts and Design in Stuttgart. Design groups were divided into four focus areas. Three focus groups consisting of industrial designers were then tasked with investigating animal drawn carts, bicycles/tricycles and alternative transport solutions. Communication design was the fourth focus area, and consisted of ten communication designers and two social scientists, the latter from the specialist areas of indigenous knowledge and development communications respectively.

The communication design team included the only designers at Interdesign 2005 with local language and knowledge skills. Other participants in Interdesign 2005 were the National Department of Transport (DOT), the North West Provincial Government, representatives from the Bojanala community, the National Product Development Centre (NPDC), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Industrial Design Schools of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CAPUT), and experts from various interest

groups such as The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NSPCA).

The two-week Interdesign workshop took place in Rustenburg, the capital of the North West Province. Three rural villages from the North West (Pitsudesulejang, Mathopestad and Syferbult) were pre-selected because of their diversity, including a deep rural, semi-rural and informal settlement respectively. During Week One, two days were set aside for exploratory field trips. The rest of Week One was spent developing concepts that were presented in a preliminary presentation. Week Two was spent revisiting villages and defining concepts for a final presentation. A selection of ideas presented at this final presentation was made for further development and testing by DOT, project organisers and participants from the community. Interdesign 2005 was concluded at a feedback session in Pretoria, September 2005, where some of these developed solutions were presented.

The role of the visual communication design group

Because this was the first Interdesign that included communication designers, the role they played was not as defined as that of the industrial designers. The organisers of Interdesign 2005 and design group leaders developed preliminary design briefs for the four design groups prior to Interdesign 2005. Communication designers were challenged with an open brief, with the main purpose of the group to act as a 'link with local communities and schools in order to establish communication design strategies and

methodologies'. The brief further included 'interaction with the other design groups to identify crucial transport related information that should be communicated' (SABS Design Institute 2005a).

This article contextualises the activities of the visual communication design team during Interdesign 2005. Two broad areas of participation by the communication design team are selected for discussion; firstly, the contribution during the research phase in the form of research workshops conducted at schools; and secondly, the development of integrated communication and process frameworks. The article concludes with reflection and feedback. It is, however, not possible to assess any long term contribution or benefit since the group's activities ended with Interdesign 2005, and many of the developments were still underway at the time of writing. However, lessons learnt at this significant collaboration need to be reported and understood in order to assist with possible planning, not only for future Interdesigns, but for other design projects of a developmental nature. Although South Africa has made enormous progress in the last ten years, many urgent problems still need solutions. Devising solutions to problems remains high on the South African agenda, and is in line with the objectives of NEPAD.

Research participation – workshops at schools

The first area of participation selected for discussion in this article is the research workshops which the visual communication designers conducted at schools. 'Research for



Figure 1: This group worked together and produced similar drawings



Figure 2: Fundi Zibi, final year student from University of Pretoria listening to learners during the workshop

design' is, according to Press and Cooper (2003:102-103), a process of searching in three areas: a search for understanding, a search for ideas, and a search for solutions.

The first two days of Interdesign 2005 were set aside for exploration in the field in a search for understanding. The members of the communication design group visited schools in Mathopestad and Pitsudesulejang and held research workshops with learners from Grades ten to twelve. These research workshops had a two-fold aim: the first was to use visual language and visualisation as methods of information gathering and possible idea generation, and the second was to expose school children to the possibilities of the design discipline. The school visits were particularly important as the needs of children are often overlooked, and access to education is one of the most important issues on the rural transport agenda.

The format of the workshops was interactive, with Grades ten to twelve learners, designers, teachers and even the headmaster taking part. The design problem was explained. Learners were asked how they would attempt to solve their own transport problems and were given the freedom (and drawing materials) to draw their transport solutions (Figures 1, 2). When the purpose of the drawings was explained, most learners quickly understood that the intention was generating ideas and opinions and that there could be no right or wrong drawings. Designers moved around freely and asked for clarification and explanation. The drawings broke the cultural and language barriers.

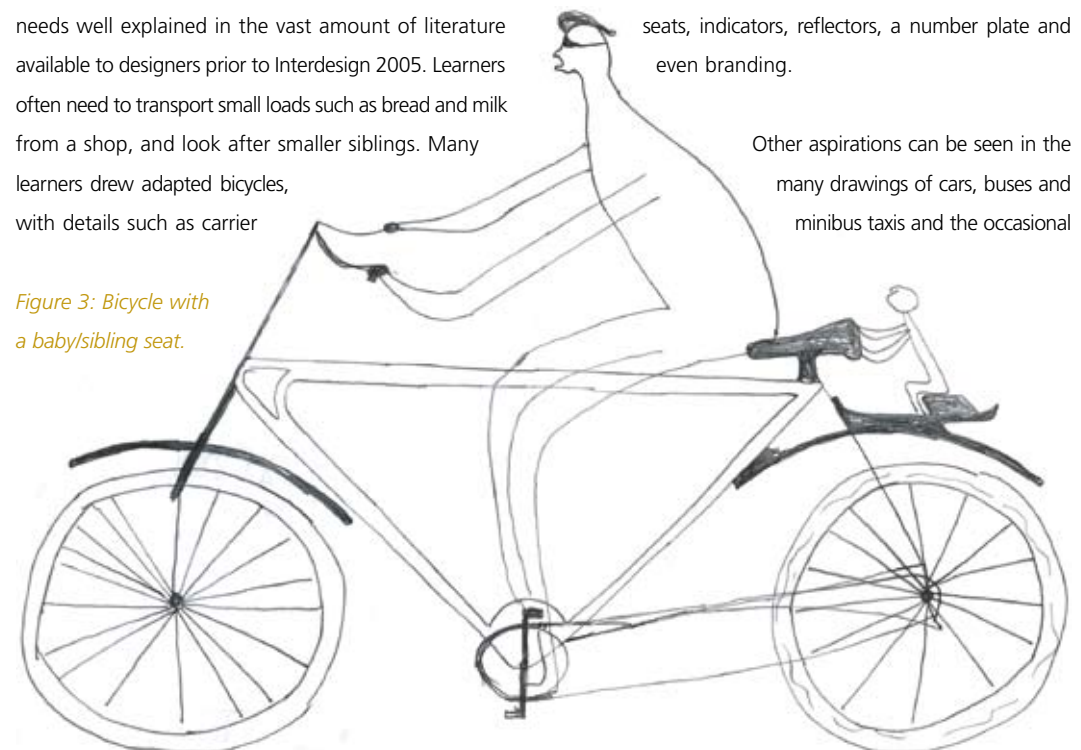
Three hundred and ten drawings were produced during these short workshops. The drawings were divided into the

following themes: Group 1: drawings showing functional and aspirational needs; Group 2: drawings showing methods of construction and use of materials; Group 3: drawings showing socio-economic expectations; Group 4 drawings showed alternative solutions. A brief overview based on a purposive selection of drawings in each group follows.

Group 1: Drawings showing functional and aspirational needs

Functional and aspirational needs were often combined on one drawing and are therefore grouped together. Drawings and discussions with learners confirmed the following functional needs: to get to and from school clean, dry, warm and on time using a method faster than walking. These were needs well explained in the vast amount of literature available to designers prior to Interdesign 2005. Learners often need to transport small loads such as bread and milk from a shop, and look after smaller siblings. Many learners drew adapted bicycles, with details such as carrier

Figure 3: Bicycle with a baby/sibling seat.



seats for siblings, space for shopping, and bicycles with canopies or space for an umbrella. Often bicycles included more than one seat (Figures 3 – 6). Donkey carts were drawn with canopies for shelter and comfortable seats (Figure 7). A typical single axle donkey cart is used for recreation during the holidays (Figure 8).

Aspirational needs became apparent, and these are mostly of a peer pressure nature. Informal discussions with the learners revealed that donkey carts are not perceived as 'cool'. Some learners indicated that they would only go to school in a donkey cart if their friends did the same, and if the cart is closer to a car in function and appearance. Figure 9 shows a donkey cart with 'style'; upholstered seats, indicators, reflectors, a number plate and even branding.

Other aspirations can be seen in the many drawings of cars, buses and minibus taxis and the occasional

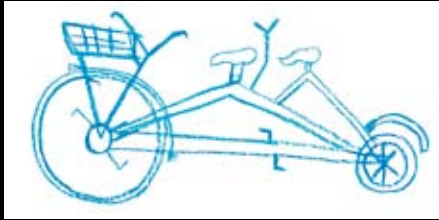


Figure 4: Two-seater bicycle with basket

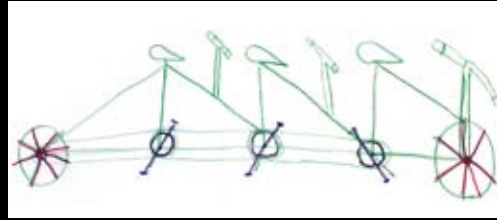


Figure 5: Space for three cyclists

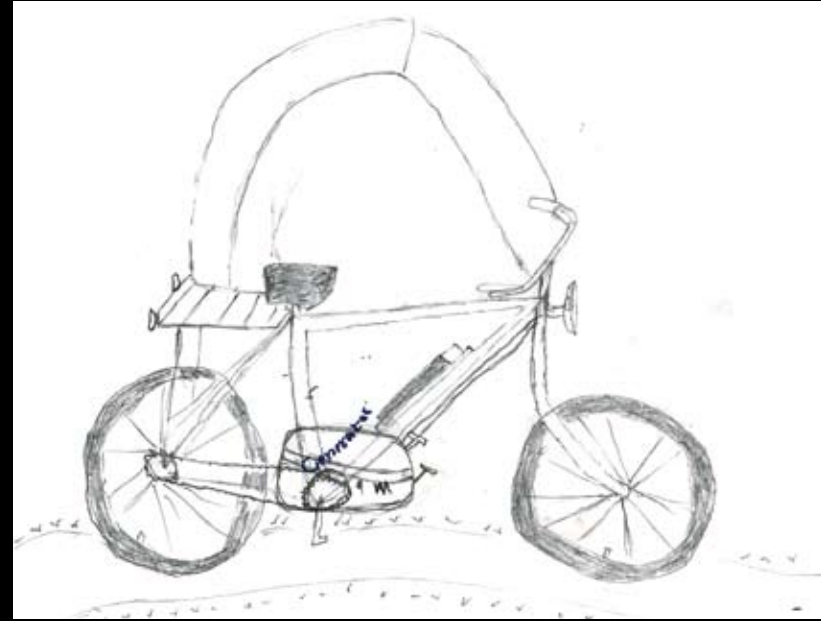


Figure 6: Bicycle with canopy, carrier and generator

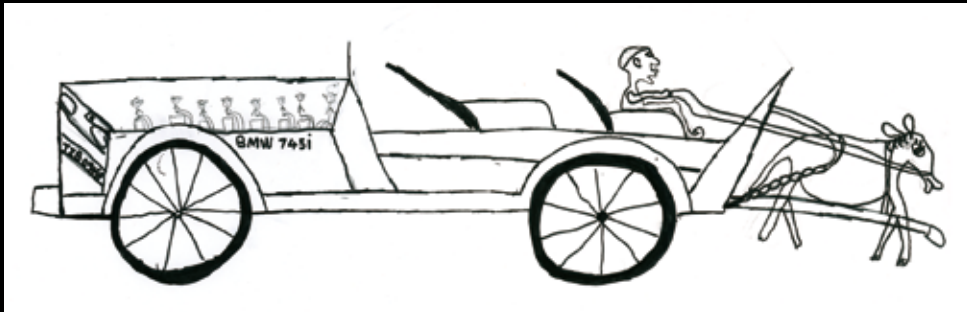


Figure 9 (Above): A 'cool' donkey cart.

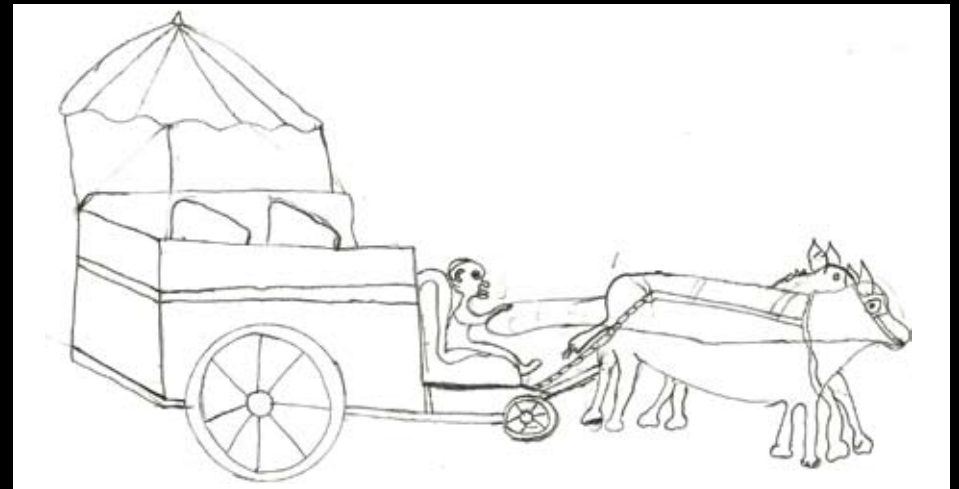


Figure 7: Donkey cart with side panels, canopy and special driver seat



Figure 8 (Left): Children having fun during the April vacation on the road to Pitsudesulejang

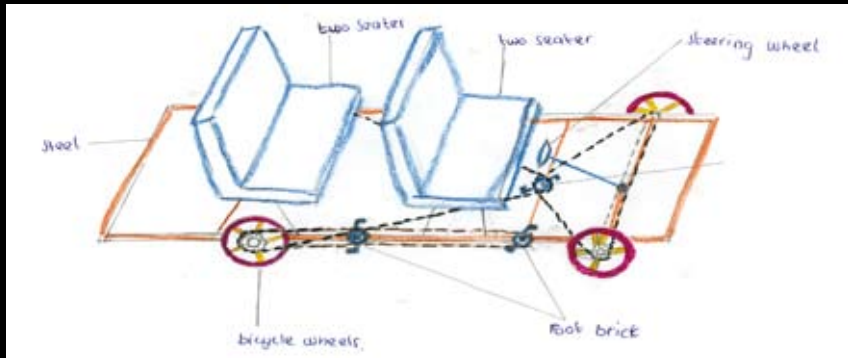


Figure 10: Chain powered 4 seater, with steering and foot brake on a steel platform

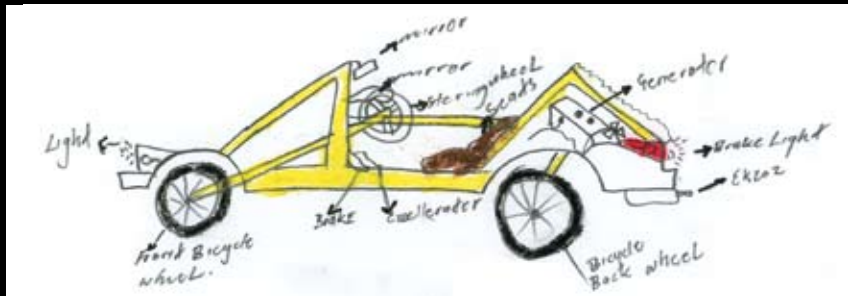


Figure 11: Generator powered go-cart

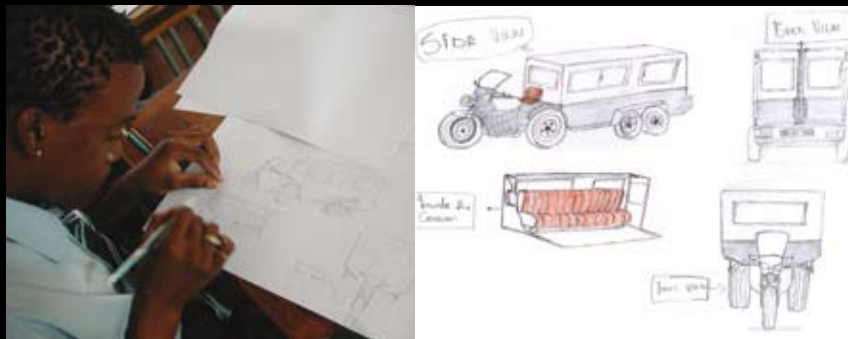


Figure 12: Various views shown in a detailed drawing

train – all familiar modes of transport. Motorcycles were the exception, but a couple of drawings depicted generators added to standard bicycles. Wheelbarrows were also included, and are clearly a well-established and valued means of transporting goods.

Group 2: Drawings showing methods of construction and use of materials

Technical understanding and ability were obvious in several drawings; these were executed as a plan or working drawing, showing materials, labelling of components, structures and different viewpoints and angles (Figures 10 – 12). Wheels were often indicated as originating from wheelbarrows or bicycles. These drawings clearly show confidence and technical awareness of what can be built with local materials available to the learners.

Group 3: Drawings showing socio-economic expectations

When asked to draw transport solutions, many learners related the question to their own environment and drew improved infrastructures, such as good quality tarred roads and public transport such as school buses (usually drawn with a good sound system!). Social services such as medical care and libraries were drawn in accessible locations (Figures 14, 15). These solutions reflect the reality of rural life and, more importantly, the expectations of the youth. One attention-grabbing drawing depicted money as the real transport problem and solution (Figure 13). Below the money is a drawing of a minibus taxi.

An observation made based on several drawings depicting infrastructure is the lack of road safety knowledge.



Figure 13: Money as a solution to transport problems



Figure 14. A school bus offers protection against both sun and rain.

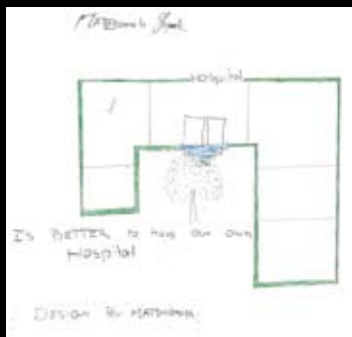


Figure 15. A solution to the difficult transportation of the sick.

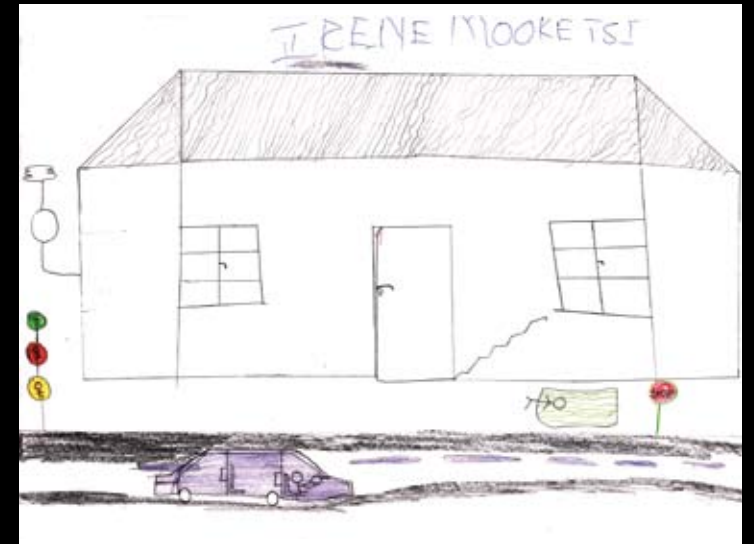


Figure 16. Incorrect traffic lights