

Then and now, by design

 By Leigh Andrews

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The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the phrase '[Design Indaba](#)' is Ravi Naidoo, a man so enthused about using design to make the world a more beautiful, functional place that he positively buzzes with creative energy.



Ravi Naidoo

A scientist by training, Naidoo is creator of the Design Indaba conference and its founding company Interactive Africa, focused on 'stretching Africa' and responsible for such high-impact projects as the First African in Space Mission, as well as the obviously successful marketing and pitch for South Africa's bid to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

As remarkable as these other accolades are, it's Design Indaba that's drawing eyeballs, as one of the world's leading design institutions through its flagship conference and expo annually held in Cape Town. Little wonder, as an interview on Bruce Whitfield's [#Shapeshifter feature on The Money Show](#) last year revealed the University of Stellenbosch's finding that Design Indaba had added R1.7bn to the economy in the past five years.

With this year's rendition set to be bigger and better than before, we were lucky to pin Naidoo down for a few minutes. He talks fast and fluently about possibilities for a future that can't help motivate others. In the build up to next week's conference, Naidoo shares exclusive insights here on Design Indaba's remarkable 21-year growth trajectory this far and what more to expect from the three-day conference, a highlight on event calendars the world over...

1. Talk us through the difference between the very first Indaba and the 2016 version.

Naidoo: Four words: Scale, support, impact, track record. Scale: thousands of times bigger. Impact: way more, in terms of global reach and how it affects projects on the ground. In terms of support, I am particularly charmed by how corporate South Africa has woken up to the power of creativity, design and innovation in terms of sponsors, supporters and delegates that come to the Conference. The creative community needs to sharpen up or it will be scooped by its own clients, who are arriving at Design Indaba in droves.

2. Give us a brief highlights package of the best of Design Indaba over the years.

Naidoo: That's hard to say as it's been 21 years! The best ones for me are the ones where we had **impact**. The most momentous one was the one where we unveiled the [10x10 housing project](#), which pointed to what our purpose is, and why

we do what we do.

It's also been phenomenal to have been **sold out** since 2004. The first time it happened, we were so blown away, it was a seminal time to have started the [Emerging Creatives](#) programme. It's an awesome legacy that gives us immense pleasure.

Then, in terms of presentations, everything from the [Handspring Puppet Company](#)'s theatrical performance with a two-metre tall giraffe puppet on the stage, through to [Hugh Masekela](#), whose performance was so moving that a South African ex-pat from London actually resigned from his job to move back home, based on the **high-octane emotion** unleashed. Many receive standing ovations - some even before they start:

“ Standing ovation to welcome [@Missoni](#) founder, Rosita Missoni at [#DesignIndaba @designindaba](#)
[pic.twitter.com/uLDQHrPfBG](#)— Ogilvy & Mather SA (@OgilvySA) [February 26, 2015](#) ”

3. Explain why Design Indaba is described as a ‘Cirque du Soleil for your mind’.

Naidoo: Design festivals and design weeks are the new generic. With design conferences, people try to emulate us, but they think a successful conference is purely based on a laptop with a keynote presentation and a projector. There's so much more to it from that.

We've also really raised the game of late, with past Design Indabas featuring [Nicholas Hlobo](#) descending from the ceiling in a silken cocoon, [William Kentridge](#)'s presentation morphing into an opera.

Design Indaba has always been more than a Powerpoint presentation – it's an immersive, experiential event. Now that we're moving it to the Artscape, we just wanted to crank up that component, so, we've done it almost by design. One presentation is actually going to be a play, while another presentation morphs into a concert. Various aspects of the conference make it very 'un-conference', more of a theatrical spectacle.

4. Let us in on this year's big changes.

Naidoo: We've never been in a state of stasis. If anyone who attended the first event saw what it looks like now, they'd know it's constantly evolving. We're very aware of what's going on locally and internationally as our team tends to be first-hand witnesses to what's happening in the creative industries and what's happening in design in particular.

We're not a slave to a business model as these are perishable. We must constantly seek relevance, morph and change. Some of this change and plasticity is location-specific. We now have the joys of the rotating stage, orchestral pits, and all manner of theatrical goodies we wouldn't have had previously. We also really loving the creative safaris across Africa, which we've increased in the last few years. We're really wanting to make Design Indaba, over and above being a wonderful showcase of the best we can find from around the world, the most esteemed creative festival for African creatives.

I can feel the inspiration flowing already, with just under a week to go before Design Indaba 2016 conference immersion! Watch this space for more on what to expect from the Design Indaba conference speakers, as well as Naidoo's views on creativity and design on the rest of the continent and how Design Indaba's satellite projects keep that 'design love' pumping all year long.

For more on [Design Indaba](#), visit their [special section](#) on Bizcommunity, [click through](#) to their website or follow their [Twitter handle](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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