

Cities that speak

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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One of the dominant themes to have emerged from [Design Indaba 2012](#), held as usual during the last week of February, at Cape Town's CTICC, might be said to be one of a new kind of assisted or enhanced intelligence - with almost every presenter demonstrating the new narrative and emotive potentials of digital interfaces to connect.

In architecture, business, health and civic planning, sophisticated data-visualisation and -mapping systems are opening new possibilities of continuity and connectivity.

Transparent and democratic city interfaces

[Urban-Think Tank](#) founder [Alfredo Brillembourg](#) had cited one of his influences as Saskia Sassen, the Dutch sociologist who proposes concepts such as "urbanising technology to allow people to better 'talk back' to cities and implement user-driven change."

This type of new urban thinking was demonstrated by Danish architect [Bjarke Ingels](#) in his proposal for [the city hall complex in Estonia](#). [Panoramic windows](#), arranged around a public square, allow citizens to see their representatives at work, plus a tower with a steeply sloping roof, the underside of which is mirrored to create a "huge democratic periscope", enables the public to see the politicians at work in the council chamber and, conversely, the council members to see views of the city and the people outside about whom they are tasked with making decisions [*especially if the public is protesting outside - managing ed*]

Speaking in smoke signals



[click to enlarge](#)

Ingels also makes the visible the technology of a waste-to-energy recycling dump in Copenhagen in the form of a chimney placed on top of the building that blows a giant smoke ring every time the plant reach 100kg of CO2 output - a city that simultaneously communicates back, delights and informs.

Addressable surfaces that communicate emotion

South African-born [Clive van Heerden](#), who works at [Philips Design lab](#), demonstrated the concept of a wafer-thin screen that could be inserted under human skin and be "addressable", meaning that dynamic tattoos, with an infinite number of display options could theoretically be possible. The tattoos concept could be applied to clothing, as well responding to biometric data, such as heart rate, gestures or emotions, opening up novel ways of digitally communicated emotion.

The potential two-way communication between people and environment was also demonstrated via the MIT Senseable City Lab [Copenhagen Wheel project](#), whereby the city interacts with the cyclist via sensors on bicycle wheels that provide micro- and macro- feedback on traffic, pollution and energy output information.

In case you hadn't realised it, the objective of any public art or should be enhanced civic expression and engagement - [Andrew Shoben](#), part of [Greyworld London](#), demonstrates the full potential of the genre - 60 million viewers around the world watched as [its atrium installation](#) at the London Stock Exchange, "[The Source](#)", became the centre piece of London's financial district, when it was unveiled by Her Majesty the Queen in 2003.

The more recent "[sun](#)" [installation](#) in London's Trafalgar Square, on 23 January 2012, was designed to add winter cheer to people who haven't experienced sun for months, while also managing to epitomise the potential of public art to influence emotion, to add magic and to unite experientially.

The famous Coca-Cola [Cratefan](#) (two giant statues built using Coke crates that were installed at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town and in Newtown in Johannesburg) by local designer [Porky Hefer](#) stimulated a similar reaction, being photographed over a thousand times a day during the 2010 FIFA World Cup and getting countless postings on social media sites around the world - emotive design reaches out, breaks boundaries, inspires new thinking.

Visual data simplifies abstract concepts

French ambience designer [Mathieu Lehanneur](#) plays with visual data in his Data Vases, whereby he prototypes vases by plotting the population data of various countries extracted from the United Nations.



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The ability of objects to communicate is well-demonstrated by his solution to dispensing kids' asthma medication. Using the irresistible principle of a tamagotchi, the inhaler "gets sick" (turns a negative color) to alert its user that he or she must take the inhaler for it to "get better".

The object miraculously succeed in playing on our human tendency toward empathy... especially for young kids who don't want to take medicine every day, but need to.

An "onion-shaped" antibiotic makes the passage of an illness visible, encouraging the completion of the course to the very end, as you peel off the layers from the largest outer layer to the last one on the inside.



[click to enlarge](#)

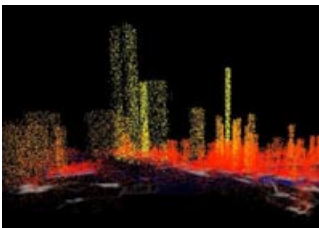
It is ideas like these can imbue even multinational pharmaceutical companies with humanity.

Making tech talk

The amazing project work done by UK outfit [Hellicar & Lewis](#), called [Reaktickles and Semantics](#), reveals software that provides digitally interactive tools for self-expression for the over/understimulated manifestations of autism in children. They have even used the drawings of the children most often described as uncommunicative and withdrawn as a form of dialogue, to inform some of the visual content of the software - a great example of a feedback loop where none has previously seemed possible.

I love the way these and other collective and often abstract thoughts of the planet are being visually communicated via techniques and software such as www.sf.biomapping.net/map.htm and [the world happiness index](#)

Here is an example which just says it all about the emotive potential of data. A visual, by [Aaron Koblin](#), of SMS messages being sent in Amsterdam on New Year's Eve!



[click to enlarge](#)

Like the buildings of Bjarke Ingels, which by their shape and position welcome you to town, blow smoke rings and establish dialogue, or the tamagotchi toy principle, software interfaces and objects that evoke emotional responses are heralding symbiotic relationship between man and environments - the feedback loop begun by [Star Wars](#) at the start of the indaba and finishing with the tools for a newly engaged and enabled 21st century citizen.

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