

A local design vernacular

Review by Brian Garman

When I first saw that this book was out, I looked across at my bookshelf, and wondered if I didn't already have too many design books. If I was going to get this one, it needed to be something different.

If you look through the contents page, it does seem a little "same old, same old" but there is something which makes this book quite distinct: it is entirely South African. Every featured designer, case study, interview and beautifully displayed example is local, is lekker – and by doing this, it clearly demonstrates a "local design vernacular distinct from the design languages of Europe and the United States". But what's more, it shows that South African graphic designers can hold their own in an international design arena.

Graphic Design, written (and designed and illustrated) by Michael MacGarry is the first of the new Skill Set series of books on South African design which aims to respond to a need for material that features local design, but that also "celebrates the work of the many talented creatives" who work in this country.

The book is essentially divided into three sections. The first is an essay by Garth Walker on the South African context. The essay is illustrated by examples of the often transient "street design" Walker has collected in his travels around the country, and which he uses to inform much of his own work.

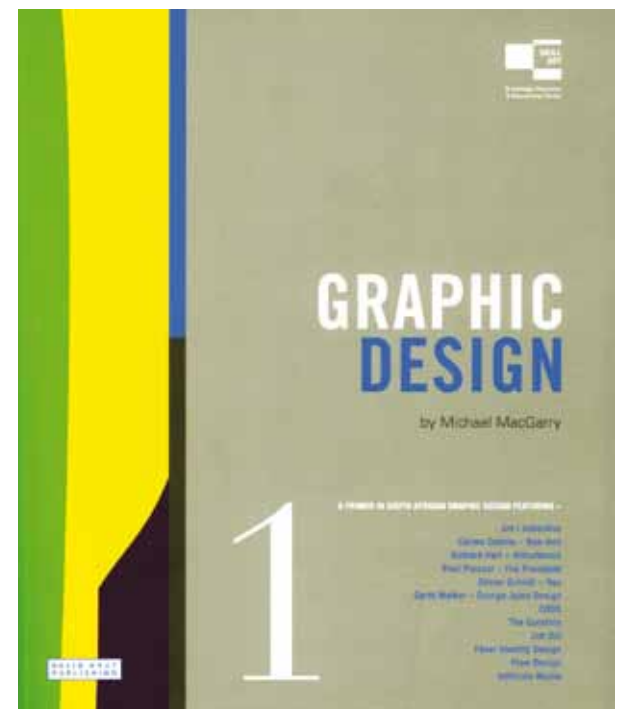
The second section of the book gives an overview of the principles and concepts of good design. MacGarry doesn't stray far from the beaten track of the universal fundamentals that you need to apply to achieve good design, but what is refreshing is the illustration of this somewhat generic information with local images. In this section, he makes use of the work of designers like Peet Pienaar, Scott Robertson, Garth

Walker, Jason Bronkhorst, Richard Hart, Oliver Schildt, am i collective, Carina Comrie, Joh Del and others. He also uses examples from across the spectrum of print design – exhibition, editorial, corporate identity, posters, packaging and illustration.

In the third and perhaps most interesting section of the book MacGarry interviews a number of local designers. The interviews – although set out as Q&A – are more of a series of discussions than a standard set of questions that he poses to his interviewees. They talk a lot about their own work, what makes them tick, things that influence them, choices they've made, the local design industry, etc. And like all good iconoclasts, none of them is slavishly complimentary of the local design industry. Peet Pienaar, creative director of The President is quite critical of the fact that local design is not very effective in exercising social influence or affecting political or social change. Ruan Vermeulen from the am i collective expresses his frustration at the treatment of young designers in the larger advertising agencies, "where they end up scanning stuff for three months" and "do not learn anything".

What's also interesting about MacGarry's choice of subjects to interview is the variety of mediums and techniques which are investigated. Vermeulen and Mark van Niekerk from am i collective make a lot of use of hands-on illustration work, while Richard Hart, creative director of disturbance sees their work as photography-orientated design. Carina

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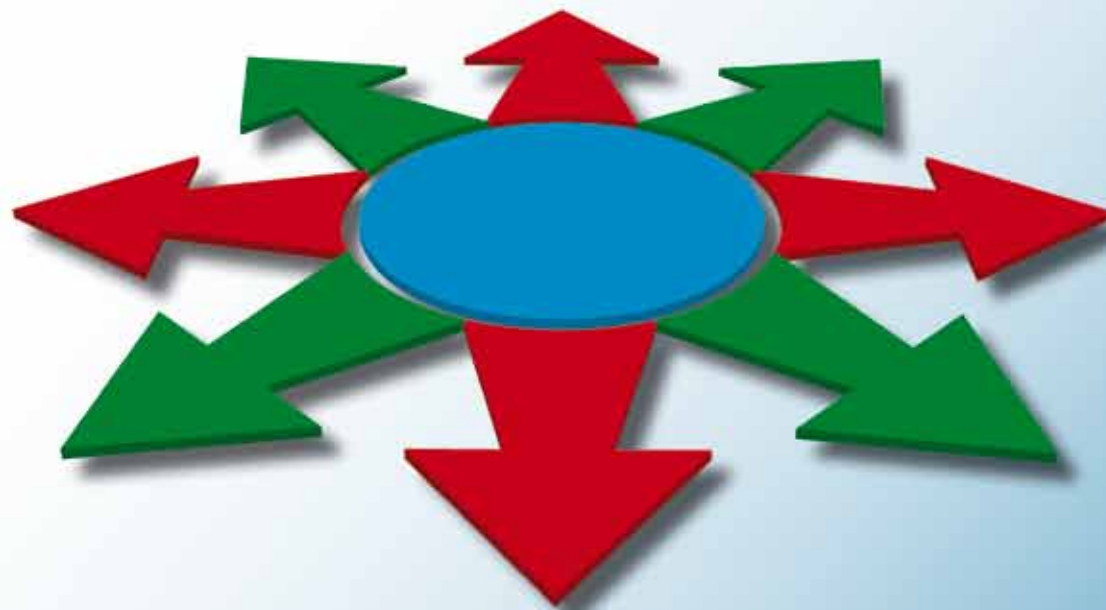


Comrie from Bon-Bon works a lot with exhibition (and its related material) and book design. What these interviews illustrate is the extraordinary breadth and depth in the South African design industry. At the same time though, they acknowledge that locally the design industry is quite fragmented.

Graphic Design is a beautiful book which will add value to the bookshelves of design students through to seasoned, practising designers. Unlike many design books which are simply vehicles for pretty images, this book has something to read as well as look at.

Oh – by the way, if I were honest with myself, I guess that I would have to confess that you can never have too many design books.

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