DEAR SIR: YOUR NEWSPAPER

The story of the redesign of the Cape Argus as told

Mind pictures are useful when it comes to planning a newspaper relaunch. particularly if it involves a big publication with a large staff. A clear mental image must be established right at the outset so that everyone's myriad activities can be geared toward a comprehensible and coherent outcome. If the journalists don't understand what the editor is doing and why, it is highly likely that the readers won't either.

I used a few mind pictures in extensive consultative sessions with staff of the Cape Argus as we prepared this year for the most comprehensive relaunch in the grand old title's history. The images encompassed the entire strategy but had direct implications for the redesign component, which is the focus of what follows.

First, I said to my colleagues, imagine a newspaper which has been coming to work for more than a century in a suit. Now picture it arriving each morning at Newspaper House in a pair of Levis. Then think of a newspaper as having a volume on an amplifier, with points from zero to 10. Consider The Sunday Independent as, say, a three, the Cape Times as a five, and the new *Cape Argus* as a seven. Bright and loudish, but not distort-

ing through the speakers.

These images were a means of getting us all on the same wavelength, understanding that the very personality of the paper was going to change – and certainly feel younger – from its content to its tone to its look.

It had taken about three months in the second quarter of this ye for us to develop an overarching strategy for the September relaunch of the *Cape Argus*. The task was quite unlike that of my previous project, *The Sunday Inde-*pendent, not least in that we started with a blank canvas in the case of the Indie: we invented the paper from content to design to staff structure, from scratch, and then tweaked as we went along, constantly assessing which of the innovations had worked and which hadn't.

The Argus, as it was known when I arrived in Cape Town, could hardly have been more different: 139 years old, for starters, set in its ways, published seven days a week (on-day Monday to Friday, overnight for Saturday and Sunday), mass market as opposed to niched, serving a staggeringly diverse audience, a great institution of the Cape but feeling fusty and stale, performing sluggishly and in need of the reinvigoration that is periodically required as time overtakes even the most successful formulae



ECISION-MAKERS JET IN

Cape Town lays on warm welcome for IOC team



16

Clinton wants woman as **US Secretary of State**

'Abducted' Jacqui seeking a divorce

Sudden wind puts paddlers in too deep



This personality change was not proposed willy nilly or on a whim, but as part of an integrated strategy to get the Cape Argus into rude health, ready for the next century. We concluded that major invasive surgery was needed, necessitating a recovery period fol-lowed by – we earnestly hoped –

I don't have the space here to walk with you through that strate-gy in its entirety, but it is important to note that a redesign is a nec-

ssary, but not a sufficient, condition for a relaunch. The fact that simply repackaging the same old goods is an approach doomed to failure is so obvious that it need not be laboured: the design is merely the store front and the aisles it's what's on the shelves that will ultimately decide success or disaster. So our first and most intensive deliberations were about content.

I always leave the design to last in the relaunch process. It must emerge from that process rather Daring to be different: the arrival of the International Olympic Committee in December was bound to set the creative juices flowing in the light of the strong editorial stance the Cape Argus has taken in favour of Cape Town's bid to host the Games in 2004. In addition to the masthead's daily Olympic Bid Clock, counting down the days to the naming of the successful bidder, the paper's slogan changed for the day, the editor wrote a personal message welcoming the IOC team, Weatherman Pete was given extra space for his description of climatic conditions the evaluators could expect and artist Colin Daniel was let loose on four columns of space. Mario Garcia's 'honey' feature ('Hey, honey, did you see that story in the Argus about .') survived at the foot of the page in

than be imposed at the beginning Once you know what you want (and, sadly, very few South African ournalists appear to regard design literacy as an essential component of their professional armouries), it can be done very quickly, and if the rule is applied that simplicity must always defeat over-elaboration then with the help of skilled col-leagues and technology, it's actual-ly easy. In our case it probably took less than 10 percent of the relaunch programme

one of its many configurations.

The trick, though, is logic and discipline. The design must be assembled like a Meccano set, each part fitting naturally into others, with deviations from established rules never inserted by accident but only for carefully considered

The innumerable permutations offered by the new technology bite both ways: in the hands of people who do not have a grasp of the fundaments of a design, it can lead to the "Mac madness" which afflicts so many of our newspapers and produces typographical atrocities.

This is why I favour, for several months after a relaunch, limited options on style-sheets and ruth-less design policing. Once we've got this car running smoothly, I tell the sub-editors, then we can think about mag wheels and GT stripes. Let's get it going reliably first. And it makes their jobs that much easier, because the rules become second nature - when they're bent for effect, as they must be in a lively newspaper, everyone is aware that they're being bent, and why.

Before getting into the fonts and formulae, I do need to place the design which eventually emerged in its wider context.

We were operating in a specific market, under specific (and recently altered) conditions. Our sister paper, the *Cape Times*, had until only a short while before been owned by a competing newspaper group and chasing exactly the same market as *The Argus*. Further down the road of its relaunch than us, it was now establishing itself as a morning paper with a very strong finance component (Business Report), catering for well-educated readers and tending

toward issue-oriented content.

We by contrast were in the confusing (to readers) and difficult (for us) position of publishing our founding edition early in the morn-ing and "topping up" later in the day. Much too much of the paper was produced the day before, and it

There was no clear distinction in readers' minds about what made the Cape Times and The Argus different from one another: except that the *Times* had the advantage of coming out first with a paper pre-pared late into the night, while we had to scrabble around in the morning for fresh content - before most potential sources had even woken up, let alone showered and

We decided to take the strategic risk of moving our deadlines later (flying in the face of international common wisdom about afternoon papers) and becoming a truly onday paper once again in terms of fresh, breaking content. This is good for journalism but risky for distribution, as the paper's shelf-

REEKS OF YOUTH

by its editor, Shaun Johnson



Wearing it well: Shaun Johnson (standing, right centre) and his team fly the flag on the eve of the September 5 relaunch

life would be dramatically reduced.
Also, it is a fact that the 1990s notion of "time famine" has made it harder and harder to convince people to take the time to read a substantial newspaper in the

But we did not have the option of going for the morning slot, so the challenge was to create a paper that was friendly, accessible and bright enough to compete with all the other activities that dominate homes in the evening – the West-

ern Cape is, incidentally, very family-oriented.

People read morning and evening papers in entirely different frames of mind and moods. One of the means we employed to achieve this was carefully altered, formulaic pagination, which I'll discuss later.

We also took the major step of reintegrating the geographically "zoned" sections into one newspaper for one Cape Town in the new South Africa

The Group Areas Act and its long-lingering aftermath had seen to it that by following the geographical route one ends up publishing by "group area", offending many and satisfying few. It seemed to me obvious that if an important or interesting event occurred in Mitchell's Plain, it should go in the same paper which is read in Constantia, and vice-versa. The Cape Argus is an institution belonging to all the people of the region it serves, and had to reflect that.

So much for the positioning of the paper: let's talk about the

design, and another mind picture. I think of newspaper design like a piece of clothing. The primary question is whether it fits, and is well-made. After that it's a matter of fashion and personal taste. Does the design work? Is it a toolbox from which you can quickly, consistently and neatly assemble several newspapers each day? Those are the questions to be answered positively before you go ahead.

You can rest assured that if those criteria are satisfied, and the result is clean and readable, people will get used to the particular fonts and other elements you have selected. Every single aspect of the design must pass this test: does it make things easy for the reader? Thereafter it's a matter of whether you prefer flares or stovepipes.

In the case of the new Cape Argus, though, I wanted to do something more than just produce a paper which worked for the reader – we could have done that in 15 minutes with an old faithful like Times New Roman

Times New Roman.

I had the growing feeling that South African (and, for that matter, British) newspapers were beginning to clone one another in their design fundamentals. Several titles published in our country at the moment are so alike in "feel" that one has to turn back to the masthead to see what one's reading. (Indeed the fashionable "small caps" masthead is itself part of the cloning process.)

So we wanted to create a paper that would leave no reader in any doubt that it was the *Cape Argus* in their hands, and this informed our decisions on fonts, the grid, and our colour palette.

I was determined that the Cape Argus should look like no other newspaper ever seen in South Africa, or indeed the world. I believe passionately in the power of journalistic innovation, accepting that by definition not every aspect of innovation can be successful, and we were insistent that when the new Cape Argus came out, it would be an absolute original. We are all busy building a new country in South Africa, and we

I had the growing feeling that South African newspapers were beginning to clone one another

must work at building new newspapers as well.

Clearly such profound change was going to come as a shock to people who had become used to the look of the old *Argus*, but I bet anyone who would listen that the new look would be accepted within weeks and it was

weeks, and it was.
Even the Gill Sans Bold Extra
Condensed masthead, incorporating the Olympic Bid logo because
of the importance of the issue for
this metropolitan daily, was quickly embraced. We journalists often
agonise over things that the reader

Boxing clever: the TV listings are a time-consuming chore but very reader-friendly

won't give a second thought to as long as they're functional – but I'll come back to the matter of the critical reception of the relaunch later.

Here then is the small story of the transmogrification of *The Argus* into the *Cape Argus*. (Part of the reason for the title change, by the way, was that I wanted to celebrate valued traditional elements at the same time as dramatically modernising the paper. The first edition of 1857 had come out as *The Cape Argus*, with the regional moniker being dropped only about 20 years ago. We aimed to be a great metropolitan paper with no pretensions about being read nationally, so we were quite happy to identify ourselves with our region once

I had collaborated with United States design consultant Mario Garcia prior to the launch of The Sunday Independent in June 1995. Garcia, for all the parochial and xenophobic nonsense that has been spoken about him, has done great things to haul our industry out of its 1970s torpor and into the real world of newspaper publishing and competition at the end of the century.

He was brought to South Africa by former Star editor-in-chief Richard Steyn, and Steyn deserves credit for his vision and recognition that we did indeed have a lot to learn from a world which had been closed off for decades.

Garcia and I had in fact designed the basics of *The Sunday Independent* in a two-hour brainstorming session in Johannesburg

in early 1995. He does not come to a newspaper with a pre-ordained design in his head. If he has a likeminded editor he will sit, listen, and doodle while the editor describes the look in words.

describes the look in words.

In Cape Town this time around we sat in my rented flat in Oranjezicht deep into the night and he hardly said a word, except to ask for clarification here and there. In the next hectic week the design came together beautifully, as innovative as can be and certainly different from any other paper in the country.

I gave him some basics and some specifics. The basics included brightness and a turned-up volume that stopped well short of fully-fledged tabloid treatment. I wanted strong headlining and strong straps which could also be read at a glance, rather than operating as glorified blurbs.

We were blessed with a good photographic team and wanted to showcase their work. Because we wanted people to be able to take the paper home and share it out among family members, we needed a two-section main body along with the tabloid Tonight supplement and the broadsheet Classified section.

Within the main body I wanted absolute sectional consistency, so that readers knew precisely where to find what they liked in the paper, every day. All that would vary would be the overall size, depending of course on fluctuating advertising support.

Continued on next page



A star is born: Weatherman Pete, alias assistant news editor Peter Goosen, is occasionally mobbed by small children in the street after becoming an overnight sensation with his detailed and chatty five-day forecast

From previous page

Specifically, I made these requests among others. A sans serif headline font which could be used in caps for a splash lead, in upper and lower for the rest. Because the backbone of advertising support in the Cape Argus is what I would call garish retail, I asked if we could develop a formu-la whereby all headlines were in bold, with only the point size shift-ing in order to indicate to the reader our judgments about the importance of stories. (Instinct tells me that the endless variety of font weights has been overused at the expense of simplicity and clarity and that it's time to go back to basics, but the need was acute in the Cape Argus because the editor ial space has to fight for visibility against very dominant and bright advertising.)

I asked for Nimrod as the body type because most people seem to find it easy to read—you're reading it now—and suggested an innovation/experiment whereby the intros are in the same type and size (Nimrod 9 on 10) as the body copy, but are in bold and ragged right with hyphenation off. I think they have turned out to be very readable and neat.

I asked for a colour palette which related to our continent and our city, and moved away from the boring standards. I stressed the need for an absolute minimum of complicated gimmicks, so that our pressurised subs could commit their energies to accuracy and creativity rather than deciphering – and confusing – elaborate stylesheets.

After our lengthy session Garcia went off to his hotel room with his Powerbook and in the morning we began, together with our systems wizard Dave Chambers, to erect the scaffolding.

erect the scaffolding.

Main headlines in Helvetica
Neue Bold Condensed, inside
heads Helvetica Bold Neue. Strapheads in Walbaum, an elegant and
strong italic. (Neither of the fonts
had been used before in South
Africa, as it happened.) Body copy
in Nimrod; a restricted range of
pull quotes on a colour wash, easy
to place and difficult to muck up.

Basic structure modular with no doglegs, erring towards horizontality rather than verticality, but breaking each page for balance. A six-column grid with options for bastard measures dependent on specific pictures. No fussy drop caps or purely decorative elements: everything simple, everything subjected to the "is this for the reader or for us?" test.

The examples on these pages will give you a much better idea of the whole than a string of jargon from me, but I think it is worth pointing to some of the particular innovations which, when seen

together, begin to build the "difference" we sought

ence" we sought.

I stole my own idea from The Sunday Independent (in design one should not be ashamed about pilfering if other publications have done something effectively and it suits your needs) and got rid of the irritating barcode by swinging it up into the left hand corner of the masthead space.

I couldn't, as with the Indie, get

Everything simple, everything subjected to the 'is this for the reader or for us?' test

what I call a landscape ad across the bottom of page one, so we had to work around the traditional rectangular solus.

We tried running the day and date vertically next to the barcode ("in cyberspace", said one of our subs), but had to move the date and seal back to more traditional spots. We left the price in cyberspace, so to speak, and no one seems to mind.

We put our new slogan "Cape Town's Biggest, Oldest, Favourite Newspaper" discreetly beneath the colourful masthead. We built in a promo slot with the masthead – a version of the skybox – for plugging Tonight and other features, and gave a lot of attention to a daily "Inside Today" plug on page one, featuring our new personality forecaster, "Weatherman Pete". (Know your market: the weather is a very serious issue for everyone in Cape Town, cutting across all cleavages of class, race, gender and the rest.) I had the feeling that upfront puffs were often not taken for what they are – prime page one space, deserving of the best thinking, writing and design the title has to offer.

The paper then began to shape up like this. Main body section one with breaking news for the upfront pages, changing gear subtly into more feature-oriented news pages with longer copy and bolder illustration, leading into the traditional slots of leader page and oped. Ours are called Cape Argus Issues (for oped) and Cape Argus Attitudes (for leader).

Issues carries a daily, localised humour column called Tavern of the Seas, and a rotating column written by our in-house specialists, from crime to the environment. It also carries "The Big Story", one lengthy issue-based feature of the day which I believe is more effective than a random array of lifters and own-generated pieces. My theory is that you will know at a glance each day if the subject inter-

ests you: if it does not, you'll move on without inconvenience. The Big Story is adorned by a daily painted portrait by our excellent artist Colin Daniel. The page also carries obituaries of local personalities on a regular basis

aregular basis.

"Attitudes", our version of the traditional leader page, carries a large Zapiro cartoon, a small leader (we're trying to cut the waf-fle), James Clarke's humour column and a very lively letters section which we've called Cape Points. That ends section one.

Section two – Argus 2 – starts with Life, the easy-reading quirky department of the paper. There's a personality profile and portrait each day ("In Town Today") chronicling the fascinating characters of the region and those who are (increasingly) passing through. We ask each one what they think of Cape Town, and run their answers bite-sized.

Life includes a Things To Do In Cape Town section, a shipping column (this is still a port city), and a

rotating range of feature material.

The jewel in its crown is Weatherman Pete Goosen's page, complete with a suburb-by-suburb forecast of Cape Town's notoriously diverse climate, which we humbly believe is the best newspaper weather guide in the world. It was clear to me in the relaunch process that so-called "service journalism", for so long the unglamorous

end of our business, is growing exponentially in importance, and if you put excellent people on the job your readers will love you for it. Life is followed by our business

Life is followed by our business section, which concentrates heavily on Cape business, given that Business Report does a comprehensive national and international job in the mornings. We want business readers to feel they must buy both the Cape Times and the Cape Argus for full daily coverage.

Business leads into Racing and our strong Sport section, which also seeks to give unparalleled local coverage as well as featuring celebrity columnists like Paul Adams and Duncan Crowie.

Then there's the Tonight entertainment section with a range of controversial columnists and a uniquely formatted (and editorially time-consuming) television guide – again an investment in exceptional service journalism

exceptional service journalism.

The same basic design principles are carried through to the weekend papers, although the headline fonts and pagination differ because we wanted the papers to be clearly from the same family, but not twins.

butnottwins.

A great advantage of the simplicity of the design "system" is that subs don't ever have to switch body copy, byline styles and the like. The colour palette I mentioned is unique, too. We have invented our own colours, drawn from the sights of our own city: Sea (blue), Sand (brown), Sun (yellow), Earth (red), Rock (grey), and Grass (green). Like I said, you know when you're reading the Cape Argus that you're not reading something else.

In closing let me deal with the—

In closing let me deal with the how can I put it politely — mixed reception to the new look from competitors and rivals and others not overly fond of us. Quantum leap relaunches are very seldom hailed at first — just ask *The Guardian* in London what was said about their radical change of clothes in the 1980s.

clothes in the 1980s.
The local Mail & Guardian contrived to sleuth out the only advertising agencies critical of the new look, while I sat with a pile of congratulatory faxes on my desk from the others. I've come to expect that

from a paper which for all its other qualities is legendarily mean-spirited when people other than themselves seek to contribute to a mewspaper succeed

much-needed improvement in the overall quality of our journalism. The M & G's (tellingly) unnamed "design experts" suggested the Cape Argus would flop. They had, however, said the same about The Sunday Independent.

And then there's my friend Richard McNeill, formerly of the Sunday Times, who appeared to burst several blood vessels when he saw the new paper—so much so that he instituted a lengthy and vituperative correspondence on the issue in Business Day. I enjoyed it hugely, thinking that it must surely be the first time that the design of a Cape Town newspa-





Paired up: oped and leader appear on the penultimate pages of the first section. The Gothic masthead on the leader maintains the newspaper's links with its 140-year past

per has become the subject of heated dinner party conversations in suburban Johannesburg.

The fact is, though, that McNeill got it wrong because he appears unable to adjust to the dynamics of dramatically changing circumstances and demands in a dramatically changing country. What worked in Fleet Street in the '60s is well and good ... for Fleet Street in the '60s. This is South Africa in the age of nascent, fragile, skittish, unformed democracy – and burgeoning electronic media.

I was sorry McNeill got so carried away in his attack, because it forced me to answer when I was asked why I

asked why I thought he was quite so furious. The fact is that he had himself applied earlier, unsuccessfully, for the job of design consultant on the

Cape Argus relaunch. So perhaps Garcia's appointment had something to do with the subsequent apoplexy?

He also allowed his rage to blind him in terms of professional analysis: a calmer look would have showed him that far from being gimmicky, the Cape Argus design is probably the most simple, disciplined and user-friendly in the country – ask the people who know, the subs. Anyway, perhaps Richard will have cooled down enough in a year or so to look again

enough in a year or so to look again at the Cape Argus, unjaundiced.

I've said it before and will say it again: design on its own is not, and can never be, enough to make a





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"Cape Town is a fantastic city, with great beouty and many contracts.
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"A big plus is the accessibility to so many fourism opportunities. I mean, where elter can you fly to a game tam, see the flig Fier, then come back the next day to see the 100 m

"This a great place to have the Olympics, and I frenk you have a very good chance of getting the Games in 2004.
"I personally would mally like to see

that happen, and I think it will.

"The main thing is that so much good can come of this – employment, a series of price, a huge tourism boost.

"This is something that is not

People paper: the Argus 2 front page carries an interview, says what the personality thinks of Cape Town and puffs sport

newspaper succeed. I also believe in a form of perpetual revolution, that the tweaking and improvement of a living title will never be

complete.

But we believe at the Cape
Argus that the amount of inventiveness, care and concentration
which has gone into the packaging
of the paper will bear ripe fruit for
us in time, as readers come to

accept that the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts.

We have a long way to go yet and I believe that content and all other elements will improve immeasurably in the coming year, as we get better at driving the vehicle we have assembled.

It is a little-recognised fact, but newspaper relaunches are always subject to the delayed reaction phenomenon: if innovations have caught on, it will be recognised some months down the line. But we have made an exciting start, and our paper is being talked about again; it is alive and growing.

One reader's delightful early response to the new paper was this: Dear Sir, Your newspaper reeks of youth. I think he meant it unkindly, but I don't see it that way at all.