

Conference highs to come

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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'Accidental entrepreneur' Ravi Naidoo lets us in on why [Design Indaba](#) has turned the usual design philosophy of 'less is more' on its head: 'More is more' means this year's conference attendees will get more inspiration, more immersive experiences and more examples to reboot your creativity...

Can you feel it? There's a growing sense of excitement as one of the most anticipated industry events of the year is just around the corner: Design Indaba 2016 takes place from 17 to 19 February at the Artscape. There's reason for all the clamour, as this is by no means your average conference, cited by many in the industry as the highlight of their year.

That's because this 'un-conference' is actually an alternative platform for creatives to share their stories and spark a whole new generation of Africans to follow their dreams and come up with their own ideas to suit our unique context, particularly with aspects not covered by the constituency.



In this 'conference speaker' focused interview, Design Indaba creator Ravi Naidoo shares some of the challenges in putting such a conference together, how the truly outstanding speakers are selected, as well as what it takes to keep the conference agenda fresh and relevant each year...

1. What is the biggest challenge each year when putting together Design Indaba?

Naidoo: To up the previous year. We set such high standards for ourselves, and the crushing thing about any event is that you're only as good as the next event, not the last one. The trajectory is always leaning forward, and you're always wanting to make the next one better. So we take advantage of the few days off after the current one, then we're already planning for the next. In fact, lots of the planning even happens simultaneously – some speakers have already been booked for 2017. With the nature of how we put an event together, and the levels of production that go into the spectacle that is Design Indaba, sometimes it's not enough to just do it in a 12-month period – it needs some more time as a bun in the oven before it's ready for the full presentation at Design Indaba.

2. How do you keep the agenda fresh, engaging and relevant to current issues?

Naidoo: The agenda is defined by the creative community. All we are doing is heralding the best work we've seen in recent

times from all around the world, but we have a particular way of doing it as a massive mash-up. We look at creativity in every kind of class and stripe, we look at it across every age group, we look at it all across the world – so there's a lot of content that's untouched and cast at Design Indaba. You have to be quite numb not to be moved by the soaring intellect and ideas of the cast every year, because they represent the best of the best in the world right now.

3. What then makes a good Design Indaba speaker?

Naidoo: We do the 'Mensch test'. The primary thing is to look for a generosity of spirit. You can be a lone genius in a corner, but it is so, so important that when you get up there, you must be prepared to share and open up with confidence. So we have a very unique way of curating Design Indaba in that regard, where we meet everyone in person and give immense consideration, both in terms of budget and time, as well as energy, in literally traipsing around the planet. We almost interview and audition the speakers!

4. What does it take for a conference speaker to reappear on the schedule?

Naidoo: There are two returning Design Indaba Conference speakers of some consequence this year.

We're very embedded in what's going on around the world of design, and an aspect of Design Indaba over the years is that it has always picked talent quite early. For some, their steepest trajectory happens subsequently, so we want to call them back to check what they've done in the last decade. Jaime Hayón is an example of this. He had just started his career when he first spoke at Design Indaba but the [majority of his body of work](#) has been done in the last ten years, so we want to look in on that.

Then, in the sense of [Alfredo Brillembourg](#), when he was out here in 2012, he was so moved by the informal housing situation in Cape Town. At the time he didn't take the helicopter flight we had offered around the peninsula, but with our permission redirected the flight so that he could look at the topography of the Cape Flats, and took photographs of it, so that he was completely immersed in a study of what was going on in the housing there. On the final day there was a farewell lunch, but he instead chose to go on a field trip to Gugulethu. It really got under his skin, and he's been working on a model since then. So in some respects it's a part one and a part two. The first part was when he came here and told us about his own work in Venezuela, part two came after he visited South Africa – about being moved by what he saw here and what kind of solutions he could offer in Khayelitsha. That's why people get invited back.

5. It's not all international names though. Explain the importance of having the big local names talk about design to a South African audience.

Naidoo: We are fiercely proud South Africans, and we take particular care in making sure that the South Africans who talk at Design Indaba merit their place. We think of it as the creative Olympics, so everyone must run their qualifying times to be there. We particularly focus on the more youthful contingent of South Africans for this year and people on the rise as opposed to people who have already accomplished it.

“ Our friends [@pepemarais](#) & [@XolisaDyeshana](#) take the stage to open [#designindaba](#) [#blackandwhite](#)
[@joepublicagency](#) [pic.twitter.com/p65CLcwHlp](#)— FCB Africa (@FCBafrica) [February 25, 2015](#) ”

6. What is feedback usually like after the three-day conference? What aspects does the audience love most?

Naidoo: It varies and is really dependent on 'the cast'. We tend to have a very appreciative and very knowledgeable audience and our speakers tell us that first and foremost they are always surprised by their hunger and complete and utter appreciation for the craft and the creativity, so long may that last. In such a cynical world, it's wonderful that people can actually appreciate the endeavour and the energy, and what it takes in the creative process, and for people to lay themselves bare and share their stories in such a generous kind of way. The only way to respond to it would be with some gratitude, and some warmth. Many people are simply not natural-born performers. They tell you a very candid, honest

story, completely, with cuts and bruises, of their own unique journey. Our whole idea is that we can be inspired by that journey. Design Indaba is not a 'how-to' conference – the best thing you can do for anybody is just to share your story and to be inspired by your peers' experiences and their journeys in the creation of whatever it is from a house, through to a website, through to an ad campaign.

It really is about drawing creative inspiration from different walks of life. [Click here](#) for more on this year's DI conference speakers, visit the [Design Indaba special section](#) on Bizcommunity, and follow their [Twitter handle](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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