

# The empathic design narrative

 By [Louise Marsland](#)

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The evolution of Design Indaba from how design can reengineer a better world, to focussing on the human narrative and design as responsive and empathic, was the key theme at this year's festival.

As with any brilliant [Design Indaba](#) line-up, there are those heart-stopping moments, sometimes life-changing, and those authentic individuals who make you believe in unicorns and the ability of good people to do enough to drive real social change.

These were some of the moments that trended:

## 1. The world has enough chairs

Industrial designer [Benjamin Hubert](#) urged designers to look for worthy projects to give back some of their time spent on commercial projects, to really make a difference in the world, as the world had enough chairs and chair designers. He worked out that he spent 20% of his studio's time on pitches and projects that didn't happen and decided to donate that time. "As industrial designers we have a responsibility to solve problems and make things happier and healthier. We already solved the problem of sitting. Why design another chair?" He founded [Layer Design](#) to be more charitable and accountable.

### [VIDEO] [The evolution of immersive storytelling](#)

## 2. Use storytelling to create disruption

[Alex McDowell](#), of 5D Global Studio, a 'world-building design studio', works at the intersection of design, storytelling and technology through his work for Hollywood movie studios; and in imagining new social constructs for social projects. Storytelling is at the core of what he does. Working on the iconic movie, '*Minority Report*' starring Tom Cruise for Steven Spielberg, McDowell was able to imagine a future world with many narratives.

The post-cinematic era of mixed reality tools will fundamentally change the narrative space, says McDowell. New technology allows people to be put inside stories in the hope that they will effect change, for example, in a virtual project with an oceanographer, they want to embed people in a virtual reality ocean to experience noise pollution, see trash falling and move back and forward in time to see the effect on coral reefs and sea life. He explains: "We can use storytelling to create the disruption we need.... To powerfully change the world. Poverty (for example) is a social construct, a design flaw. We can undo it."



### 3. Be the real you

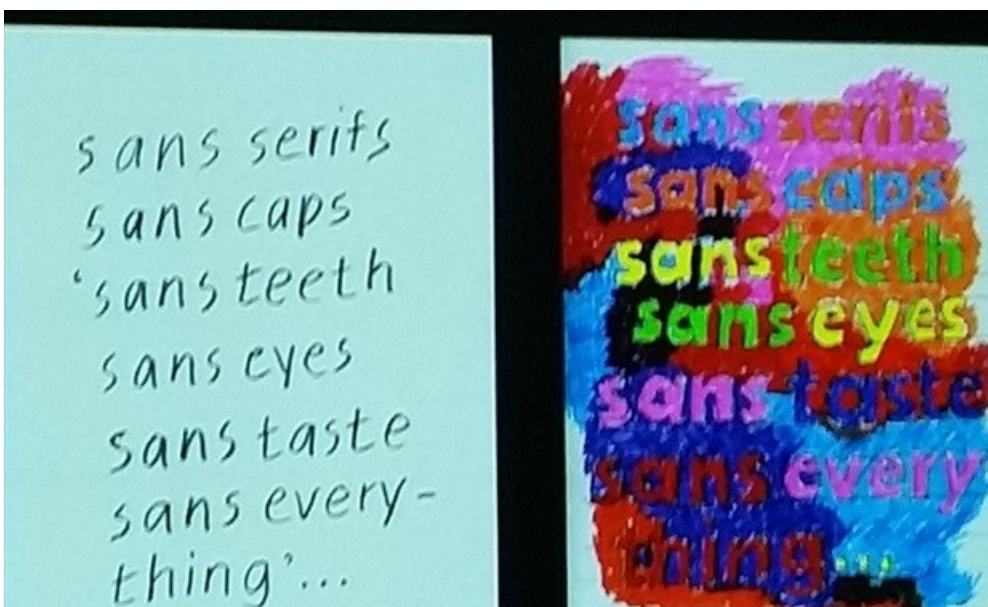
Authenticity is not just a buzzword, it is actually about the values you and your client have and the relationships you chose to have in business and with the ultimate user or customer. The time for assumptions and rules are past.

This is the message that [Nick Finney and Alan Dye](#) from NB Studio hoped to get across with a short play they wrote for Design Indaba on client/agency relationships and the pitching process. They like to break the rules.

When working for a UK charity that supports the elderly, they called for the redesign of a road sign warning of elderly people crossing the road, held an exhibition and then sold them on eBay to raise funds for the charity.

### 4. Design with empathy

[Pia Nyakairu](#), an industrial designer from Uganda, showed how she sensitively uses design to enable people to collaborate, interconnecting technology with culture and tradition. She designed an exercise wand to enable physiotherapy patients in remote areas to do their exercises, communicating remotely with physios via Bluetooth and sensors to record and track patient movements. She also developed a bracelet for deaf people to feel music. Her passion is to connect people in a completely different way, using technology as enabler and collaborator.



## 5. Never stop doing what you love

The former South African graphic designer famous for the font on British public road signs, [Margaret Calvert](#), is still influencing typography at the age of 80. She says she has never been busier and intends working until she is 100. She attributed her longevity to doing what she loves. Many of her road signs are in museums and part of design installations. In an exceedingly droll presentation, she showed her witty 'Sans Serif self-portrait', 'borrowed' from Shakespeare's play 'As you like it', she informed me later. Calvert also designed the British Rail alphabet. "There was no Helvetica then, thank goodness."

## 6. Respect what has gone before

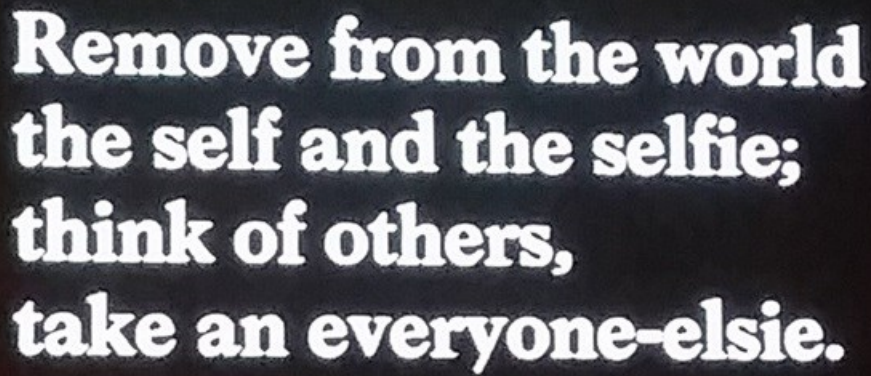
One of the most influential chefs in the world, [Elena Arzak](#), is from the famous Basque region where she is the fourth generation to work in her family's Arzak restaurant which has kept its three Michelin stars for 25 years. "We don't work to impress, we work to avoid monotony. Innovation is essential to the evolution in our restaurant. We keep looking at what is next in cuisine." They have a food lab and a nutritionist to help them innovate, but respect the craft and history of their cooking at the same time.

## 7. Use what nature gave you

[Frederico Gelli](#), the Brazilian designer behind the branding for the Rio Olympics and the Paralympics later this year, is inspired by nature in his designs for Tatil. "There is a lot of created intelligence on earth - more than 3.8 billion years of R&D. Nature's design is perfect, it is designed to be spread..." The simplicity of nature: no waste, everything with a purpose, the optimisation of energy, is what he takes forward into his designs which he hopes will create the same reaction as when we view the perfection of nature. "Understand that emotion is the most powerful bonding ingredient."

## 8. Become your customer

[NB Studio](#) Nick Finney and Alan Dye emphasised that it was important to know the customer, developing a "stretchy" brand for Ravensbourne University in the UK, that could be applied anywhere in the university as signage and branding; as well as allowing the university to adapt it to their branding needs and apply it everywhere, from stairwells to corners, etc, as "a space where amazing things happen".



**Remove from the world  
the self and the selfie;  
think of others,  
take an everyone-elsie.**

## 9. Makers of culture

Creative, wordsmith and poet, Pentagram's [Naresh Ramchandani](#), says no to commercial projects that don't support his values and urges creatives to try make the world a better place in everything that they do. He hates corporate jargon and selfies and chose eight words important to him, to tell his story (Home, Ping-pong, Plug, Change, Grace, Pathetic, Selflessness and Maybe).

"I want more than the world does. We are makers of culture. With our creativity, we have magic in our hands. We put ideas in the world and with those ideas, we can create any change we want. I would like to see a world with less prejudice, less self-centred, less myopic. Through all the work I do, I'm doing my best to bring it about. "

A challenge for everyone is to show selflessness, he says. "Don't take up so much time with self that there is no room for selflessness. We need to be more human. We need to think more of others."

## 10. Inhabit the non-space

[Thomas Poulsen](#), also known as the artist and designer, FOS, does not allow himself to be constrained by space. To define a space or a design, he looks at the non-space of a place or an object and what it would take to make it come alive. His presentation entitled 'Art is not everything, but is design something?' showed how he creates unusual spaces that rely on human interaction to realise their full potential. "Design wants to create a solution... art would like to make an option. We are moving through a set of spaces and each space is figuring the narrative."





## 11. Redefine public space

South African architect [Thomas Chapman](#), is studying how to connect our cities, divided by Apartheid, and address immediate needs through reimagining public space and altering city assets. For example, a square billboard design gives a street vendor shade; a bread wagon is made out of scrap to navigate city alleyways; and a school is designed with a multipurpose community space in the middle that serves as a hall, a function venue and sports arena.

In a country which banned public gatherings during the Apartheid years, Chapman says there are missed opportunities for public space in our new democracy. “(Apartheid) used natural infrastructure and highways to separate white areas and city centres from black townships... We have corridors of freedom, to knit the apartheid city back together: transport routes, cycle paths, pedestrian walkways...”

## ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: [www.sourceagency.co.za](http://www.sourceagency.co.za).

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