

The importance of design education with Suné Stassen

 By Leigh Andrews

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Suné Stassen, festival director for the Open Design Festival, is heavily involved in the country's design education movement. Here, she shares how your business can pick up the baton to take the movement forward.



Suné Stassen.

In addition to her role at the Open Design Festival, Stassen, former editor of the biannual online publication *Design>Ed*, founder and creative director of Rock City Foundation and RC Events, and describes herself as follows: “A designer and entrepreneur at heart and a creative consultant, project and events manager, design education specialist, curriculum advisor and content developer by choice.”

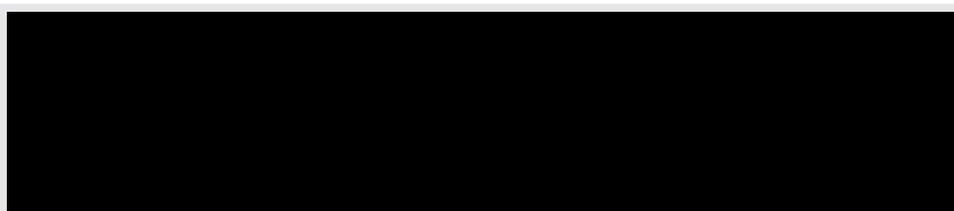
That’s quite a mouthful, as is her background – having taught design for more than 15 years and contributed to the development of the current national design curriculum in an advisory capacity, she has also published extensively, served as contributing editor of the three nationally approved design textbooks produced for the design curriculum at secondary school level following a nine-year journey to convince the National Department of Basic Education that design is in fact a credible subject and a development space to invest in our future innovators, leaders and entrepreneurs as a driver for change. She has also been project manager of the Loeries Creative Future Scholarship since its inception in 2008 and a former board member of DEFSA (Design Education Forum South Africa).

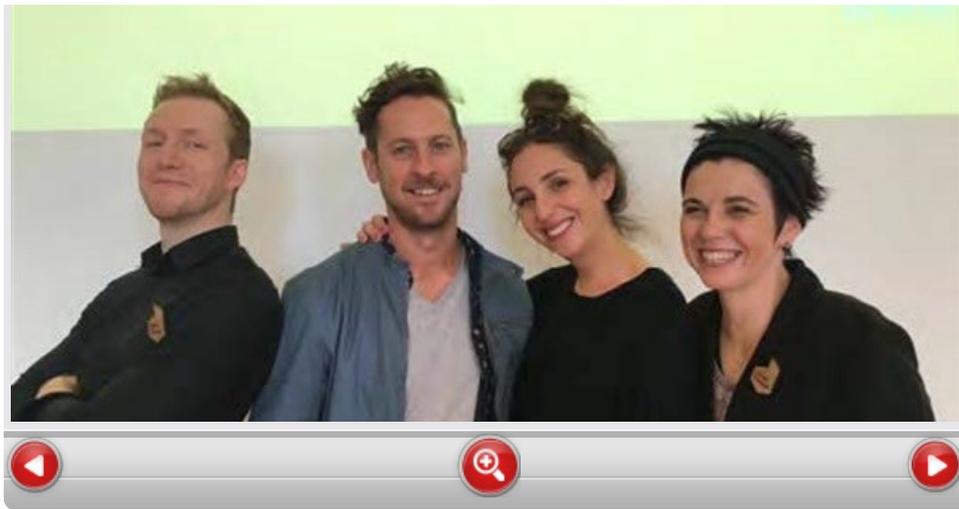
Of her design career, Stassen lists among her highlights as the fact that her personal aspiration has been solid since the beginning: to change the elitist and exclusive perception of design, from a luxury and a “nice to have” to an industry, tool and activity that is an absolute necessity to drive change and transformation especially in developing countries, and what better place to start this journey than in education?

The power of design thinking

Linked to this is the fact that many misconceptions about the values and impact of design go beyond school level. Explaining the importance of design, specifically design-thinking, and its benefits for any business in any industry, Stassen says, “For centuries, it was perceived as the driver of consumer products and luxury items: extravagant jewellery, clothes and expensive cars – a very elitist and exclusive perception. It’s easy for the laymen to relate to art as a form of self-expression. When it comes to design the understanding of it is a bit more complex and challenging because it has so many different layers to it. The big noise of exclusivity and luxury items overshadows the core value of design, which is its ability to improve the daily life standards of people. Design is also about business and understanding how to apply your creative skills with a more human-centred approach to enable you to add real value to a business, a product, an environment, a system and even in service-sectors like education, banking, tourism, transport and healthcare.”

This leads back to her point that education, community and innovation are the building blocks of a thriving society. So to be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable and productive, our society needs more innovators, problem solvers, entrepreneurs, change-makers and leaders across all sectors. Stassen believes the ability to design and innovate are the unifying threads that will ignite the creation of more relevant and sustainable solutions to design a better world.





Previously our workforce prepared to take on a job for a lifetime, with vocational training based on a menu of capabilities required to do a job. Today, our future workforce needs more than technical abilities: it needs a bank of core life skills that can be drawn on to meet the demands of a new, more fluid, entrepreneurial career path.

Elaborating on what businesses can thus do to enhance their employees' design education, Stassen says the starting point is for businesses to understand that the landscape has changed dramatically. The status quo from a decade ago won't cut it anymore and investment in their people is crucial to navigate the complexity of current and future spaces.

Creating change makers across the board

So business needs to tap into various options available to them so that a little of the magic taken from the designer's toolkit can be shared with their employees. This will not only enhance their individual skillsets but also empower them to be of greater value to the business at hand. "It's like advancing to designing your own in-house holistic value chain where people are always the hero," she says.

Stassen believes if businesses are serious about driving change and transformation in their sector and also within their own business culture for the better, then they will eagerly take up the challenge to look through a design lens at their human resources and see every individual as a potential change-maker that has the ability to help them drive their various agendas. Integrating design thinking into the culture of a business presents a new landscape of opportunities to ensure the production of more relevant, marketable and people-friendly products and services.



A scene from Open Design's CreativeMornings session.

"Putting our left and right brain abilities and skills to work, Design Thinking will challenge your employees to use logic, intuition, imagination and analytical and systematic reasoning to solve complex problems with simplicity and solutions that have far more desirable outcomes," explains Stassen. It develops an optimistic mindset that's not focused on the problem, but rather on the solution and the human experience. The focus of design thinking is on serving the needs of people with authentic insight and empathy and executing this power with integrity to develop more effective and meaningful business strategies.

This is addressed by the Open Design Festival, which Stassen started back in 2013 with a small team that decided it was

time to change the design narrative. “Not in the classroom, not in a workshop, but on a big public platform.” And so, with the support of the City of Cape Town they piloted the first Open Design Cape Town Festival and five years later are growing from strength to strength and the relevance of this festival and the valuable work they do being realised more and more. Stassen calls it “an accessible and inclusive festival of ideas; connecting communities and educating people from all walks of life to become change makers.”

It takes place annually in August, so expect more insights on what to expect from the Festival then! In the meantime, you can [click here](#) to visit the Rock City Foundation blog, here to follow [@OpenDesignCT](#) and [Stassen](#) on Twitter and [here](#) for more in the Open Design Festival.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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