

Empathy and empowerment hand-in-hand at Design Indaba 25

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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The word on everybody's lips at this year's Design Indaba would have to be "Sheltersuit" - the weather-proof jacket that transforms into a sleeping bag for the homeless or those in need of shelter, designed by 20-something-year-old Dutch fashion designer, Bas Timmer, who has taken the concept of utility clothing to a whole new level.



Manu Prakash. Image source: Design Indaba new sletter.

This kind of impactful thinking and doing is the *raison d'être* for Design Indaba's 25-year existence and why, as we have repeatedly proclaimed via this platform, Design Indaba is not solely for designers, but for anyone with a vested interest in improving life on our planet, which would pretty much include all of us.

Extra feel-good news is that a small Sheltersuit factory has been set up on South African shores with individuals and corporates such as Woolworths coming on board to purchase suits for local distribution at a cost of R600 each. You can too at [Sheltersuit.org](https://sheltersuit.org).

Empathy design

What the above and other initiatives presented at the indaba really demonstrate, is a new kind of empathetic thinking.

Channelling radical empathy was the theme of Finland-born, London-based designer Enni-Kukka Tuomala, who identifies that many key societal issues such as racism, sexism, xenophobia and political polarisation are caused by this very empathetic deficit, i.e. being unwilling or unable to see from the point of view of another, and she could be right.



DI2020: How Enni-Kukka Tuomala plans to start the empathy revolution with a balloon

Angie White 2 Mar 2020



The concept of empathy goes hand-in-hand with the realisation that 1% trying to design for 99% is impossible without empathy and inclusion.

Empowerment

To have someone of the calibre of Manu Prakash, associate professor of bioengineering at Stanford University on the Design Indaba stage, who manifests radical inclusivity thinking for good, is a deep privilege.

Under the heading Frugal Science, Prakash goes in research of economical scientific solutions to global problems. He is famous for inventing a \$1 foldable, paper microscope that you assemble yourself and wants every child to own one.

Not exactly a household item, access to microscopes is too rare to gather enough data to solve many health problems. This means very low access to microbial data from areas of the world often affected by disease. The origami microscope called Foldscope offers such an elegant solution it brings tears to one's eyes.

“ A \$1 origami microscope? Interesting... <http://t.co/je2QT5zSzZ> pic.twitter.com/cr4GCAIaHi— Bill Gates (@BillGates) [March 22, 2014](#) ”

Demonstrated from the Design Indaba stage and at a workshop which saw around 100 design delegates giving up cocktail hour to fold paper microscopes on a Friday evening, Foldscope has a quadruple whammy effect, putting microscopy in the hands of a billion kids to date, empowering them to participate in real-world science and data crowd-sourcing, whilst potentially solving not only health or environmental issues, but also addressing the lack of access to or interest in science education at scale.

Linking low high tech to further inspires a new generation, as the paper and lens Foldscope may be attached to a cell phone to allow exciting imaging and sharing of findings. Join the Foldscope community online by clicking [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#).

“ An unforgettable fewdays in South Africa. At [@designindaba](#) - sharing Foldscope with creative artists, designers, educators and humanists. It was supposed to be an hour long workshop - but we lasted 3 hours. The creative drive was full throttle. Photo credits Joex Pillemer. pic.twitter.com/vzG6M1v8y9— PrakashLab (@PrakashLab) [March 1, 2020](#) ”

Abuzz

Mosquitos, Prakash informs us, kill more people than wars. Of thousands of mozzie species, about 40 carry deadly diseases. The lyrical insight that every mosquito species has its own “ringtone” will soon allow any mobile phone user to record mosquito song to be converted to data mapping of where the culprits might be located! The app is coming soon. Click [here](#) for more information.

Another example of Frugal Science at play is Paperfuge, which computes the button-and-string, the oldest and simplest toy in the world and apparently one of the fastest human-powered objects, offering 3,000-4,000rpm and 30,000 units of G-

force, to separate blood and other pathological samples, sufficient to allow healthcare workers to isolate the anaemia caused by malaria parasites in areas without otherwise access to electrically powered medical centrifuges.

“ *The Paperfuge is a cheap, simple device made from paper, string, and plastic. It could also transform healthcare.*

<https://t.co/WymQhhg8le> [pic.twitter.com/NfYM03FONR](https://t.co/WymQhhg8le)— WIRED (@WIRED) January 14, 2017 ”

[Plankton Planet](#) sees another global science community including David Attenborough's research boat and a potential 10,000 to 15,000 citizen sailors mapping the ocean's microbes and micro-plastics for our Anthropocene age.

The above solutions address problems of limited scientific resources, breaking solutions down to potentially billions of amateur scientists, especially the youngest generation, that according to trend forecaster Li Edelkoort is being referred to as the Great Generation. The future of science, poses Prakesh, will not be written by academics, but his final challenge to us - how to manufacture mentors.

Representation

Another form of empathy, i.e. thinking and feeling from the point of view of others, is that of representation.

There are many blind spots in our world outlook that prefer to marginalise difference or diversity. Inclusion and representation always bear fruit, as the work of Italian illustrator Olimpia Zagnoli for *New Yorker*, *New York Times* and brands such as Prada demonstrates.

Stand out examples include her persuading fellow countrymen Barilla to change policy to allow same-gender pasta-lovers to be represented on advertising and packaging material and the iconic image of an African American women enjoying the sight of New York, in answer to a commission by MTA Arts & Design, the transportation systems serving New York City and the surrounds. As an aside, since 1985 this arts programme has installed art by over 300 artists in more than 260 stations with the specific intention of improving the journey for New Yorkers and visitors alike.



#DI2020: Ignite your inner activist - representation through illustration

Leigh Andrews 27 Feb 2020



I have been banging on about public art since 2014. South Africans still need to participate in the great debate about whether we want to see ourselves represented in our public spaces to offer enhanced experiences for our civic users or not! We'd love to hear your views.

Design for disability you design for everyone - Robert Wong

As part of his presentation Robert Wong, creative director of Google Lab, had informed us that the keyboard, email and telephone were invented for differently-abled people and the "best way to help millions of people is to help one". In 1972 subtitle captions opened the TV to deaf people for the first time. At Google the use of this TV technology was used to enable live captions on Android, proving Wong's statement that "when you design for disability you design for everyone."



#DI2020: Why technology is nothing unless it touches someone's life

Angie White 28 Feb 2020



UNSDGs - empathy on a global scale

Speaking of rights for all, it was so great to finally meet the person behind the UNSDG icons, the colourful visual language that is now understood and loved across the planet. Jakob Trollbäck in the house, showed the evolution of the 17 main icons and 169 sub icons designed to simplify the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Launched September 2019, the identity system is now the official one to represent that in “the global commitment towards a more sustainable world, no one should be left behind. That means reaching the most vulnerable and excluded first.”

Trollbäck said,

“ *Information is not communication, understand the other person, if you don't understand you don't care, if you don't care you don't act, all action is emotional.* ”

Which I guess is about as good as a definition of empathy gets!

It is empathy again that inspires business graduate Mazbahul Islam to apply himself to repurposing traditional tuk-tuk vehicles to be safe and sturdy ambulances on the long rural roads of his native Bangladesh. It is his calling to serve underprivileged, his call to action to everyone seems doable: “Seven billion gaps every day - until we create a world, not only content but complete.” Perhaps like Prakash's crowd-sourced scientists, if we each take on one small conscious act per day the results will be magnified exponentially.

Policies, rights and ethics

Design can change policies, ethics, rights and access. Engaging in empathetic thinking by business, organisations, individuals and educators benefits everyone. Empathy is what user interface design gets to be when it grows up. The work of designers such as Bas, Enni-Kukka, Manu, Olimpia, Jakob, Wong and many others at this year's Indaba inspires us to see that social justice cannot be achieved by blindspots, polarised views and wishful thinking. Radical inclusivity is just crowd-sourcing with empathy.

Happy coming of age Design Indaba. Let's activate and celebrate!

The Design Indaba took place at Cape Town's Artscape complex from 26 to 29 February.

For more:

www.designindaba.com

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