# Pretoria Stories

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this is an experimental recollection of a visual exploring journey. The travelled path was one of a surprisingly individual, complex collage of cultures, textures and contrasts.

Some of the most taxing challenges faced by graphic and communication design in South Africa over the last few years have essentially been concerned with three issues. Firstly, the increasing dominance of the digital domain with concomitant new tools, new dimensions, new media and new alliances has demanded novel skills and insights from designers. Secondly, a growing awareness of the importance of evolving a South African graphic idiom, whether for competitive differentiation or as the exploration of African identity, has commanded the imagination and attention of local designers. Finally, an acknowledgement and progressive understanding of the expanding and diversified role of design has encouraged designers here and abroad to claim a more clearly defined and pro-active position and voice for themselves in the practising and cultural arenas. This perspective suggests that unique discipline skills and insights ought to be exploited in areas traditionally not considered to be part of the design domain. The systematic integration into design thinking and processes of aspects related to the above issues continues to exercise a profound impact on the ways in which design is currently practised and taught.

In design education, a fundamental reconfiguration of design curricula has included the confrontation of additional factors. Closely aligned to digital developments, are the consideration and review of the role and value of traditional autographic skills and media like drawing and printmaking in teaching programmes. This consideration has included a need to overcome the resistance of students who are seduced by a slick and fast-paced technology and who often fail to appreciate the power and usefulness of activities like drawing and sketching. In addition, the tendency to find inspiration in a vast array of easily available historical and current examples of design frequently leads student designers to slavishly copy and imitate existing design solutions – both local and international ones. This attitude results in an insular mentality and a reluctance to move beyond the design school walls to expand a limited personal experience through observation and the discovery of a larger vision not conditioned by habitual surroundings, sources and modes of behaviour.

This article reviews selected design examples, and describes and comments on a recent project undertaken by student designers at the University of Pretoria. Entitled *Pretoria Stories*, the project attempted to encompass, in an holistic manner, some aspects inherent in the above challenges.[1]
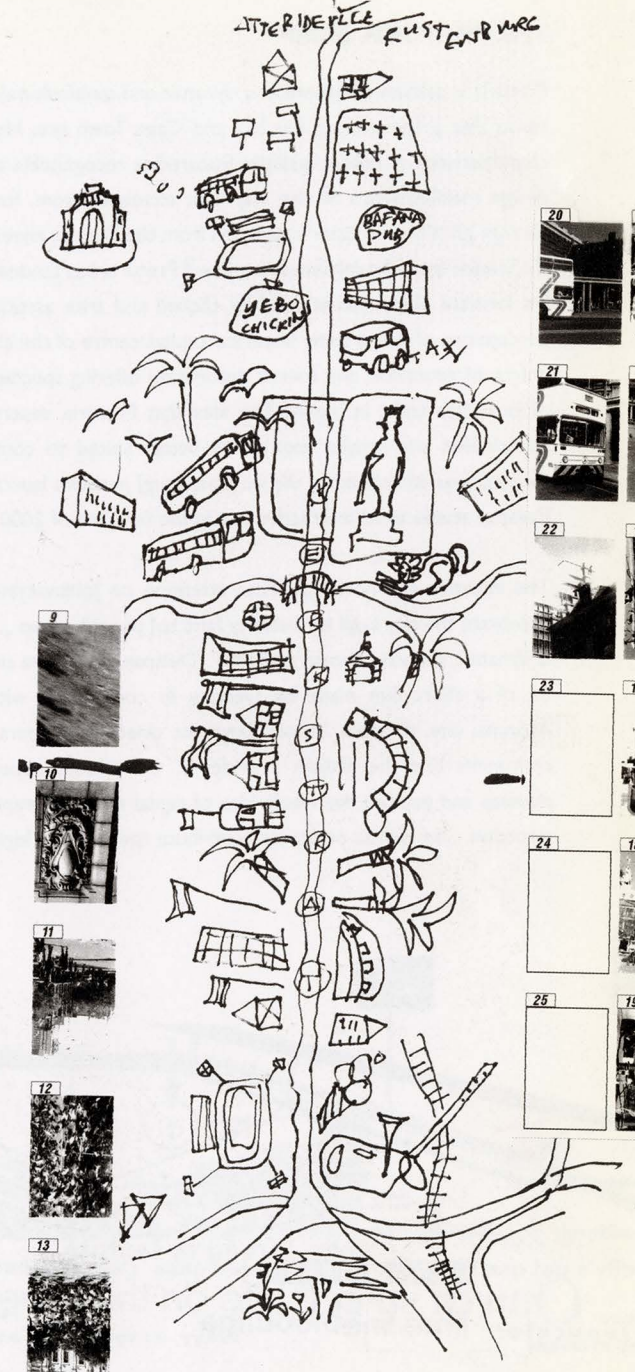
## THE PRETORIA BRIEF

Pretoria is seldom projected as a dynamic and multicultural city in the sense that Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town are. Nor have its characteristics or unique qualities featured as recognisable sources for design manifestations in the way that examples from, for instance, Orange Juice Design draw inspiration from the Durban environment or Tin Temple from the Johannesburg one.[2] Pretoria has tended to remain 'an invisible place' conditioned by clichéd and trite associations and perceptions of it as a static historical capital, centre of the civil service, mecca of education, and tourist destination offering spectacular vistas of jacaranda trees in bloom. The idea that Pretoria deserved closer observation and graphic expression better suited to contemporary realities, was stimulated by the we [lovejoburg] initiative launched by the Delapse studio as an interactive site in the first half of 2000.

The initiative attempted to focus attention on Johannesburg and to 'celebrate the city in all its diversity [and to] pay tribute to ... a city that is dynamic, growing, human and alive' (Delapse 2000). The site consisted of a short film made by Delapse in conjunction with Dewald Aukema, one of South Africa's foremost cinematographers. Aukema comments that the project provided '... the perfect opportunity to develop and explore the whole idea of digital cinematographic deconstruction ... as well as positively contribute towards the legitimisation,

and by implication the popularisation, of South African urban landscapes. As it turned out it also furthered the notion of the aesthetic merging of digital production and postproduction processes' (Delapse 2000).

Participants were invited to submit creative proposals that were included as part of the site. The we [lovejoburg] interpretation was never intended to be a definitive documentation of the city. It serves rather as an introduction and an impression of '... streets and people and spaces and buildings and textures and light and darkness' (Delapse 2000). It provided an opportunity to brand Johannesburg as a great city and to position it as a prime information centre in Africa as well as suggest its capabilities in dealing with media convergence.

The Delapse initiative offered a model for the exploration of a city environment, media and identity/branding that easily served as an inspi-

ration for the definition of a project adapted to suit pedagogic needs. In a similar through less ambitious vein, the student design project Pretoria Stories sought to encourage the exploration of environment, media and identity. The primary aim of the project was to present a personal interpretation of Pretoria, its people, places and activities. This interpretation was to establish a narrative and a unique vision of the city that revealed aspects of its inimitable and contemporary character. Secondary aims were the experimental merging of autographic and digital media and the adaptation and translation of personal expression into functional communication.

The project was divided into four sections:
1 Sketchbook of notes, photographs and drawings
2 Print series in silkscreen, monoprint and a medium of individual choice
3 Digital series comprising static or a sequence of moving images
4 Final digital product for a client.

Section one, the sketchbook, provided the foundation and source material for the project as a whole. It comprised personal research, commentary, observation and visual documentation of people, places and activities over the period of one week. Students were required to look, analyse and record in order to acquire ideas and constituents that would enable them a build and present a unique vision of
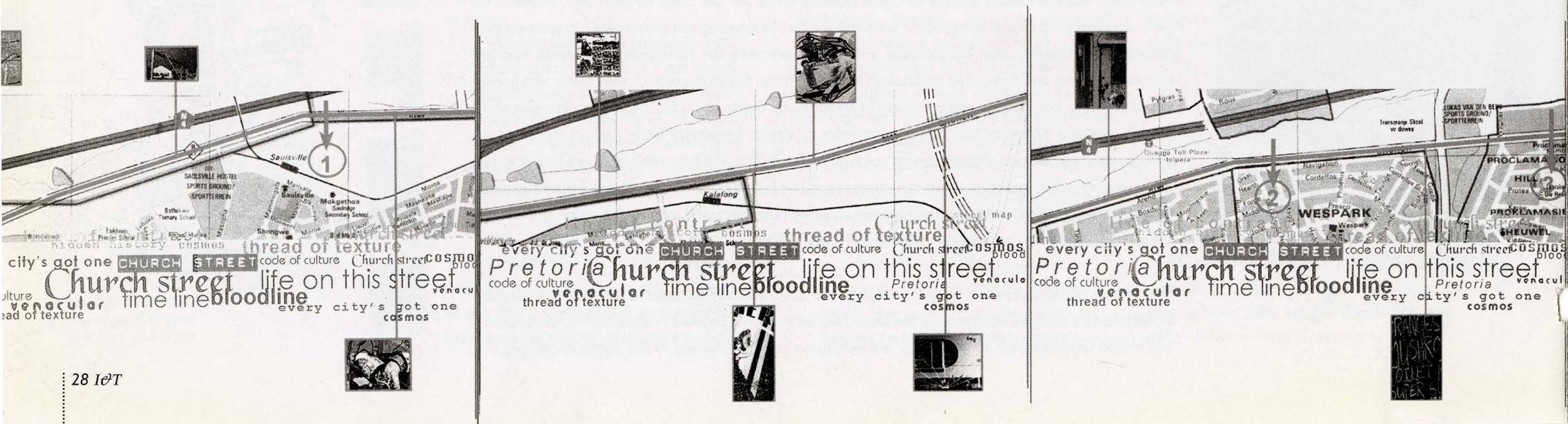
Pretoria. This section was formulated to develop a heightened awareness in student designers through the confrontation with their own environment. It sought to emphasise not only the excitement inherent in discovery, but also the power of acquiring skills and experiences that are useful when conceptualising, visualising and articulating a design.

Sections two and three each comprised a minimum of six images that presented a personal interpretation of the project theme, drawing on the research and visual documentation completed in the previous section. Each section required a sequence of images of acceptable depth and substance that identified and captured essential characteristics of theme, circumstance and location. Prescribed media could be used singularly or merged in any chosen manner, although the maintenance of an autographic quality was recommended. The exploration of media and aesthetic possiblities directly supported educational objectives. These were to stretch the imaginative and interpretative abilities of student designers and to assist them in the development of a graphic idiom that reflects in spirit, style and content that which is uniquely South African.

Finally, as section four of the project, the students were required to develop a presentation for Standard Bank Customer Strategy. Their audience for this presentation comprised customer strategists, advertising managers and researchers. Entitled *Life in the Capital City*, the objective of the presentation was to allow the audience to gain an insight into everyday life in Pretoria and develop an understanding of living in the city in ways that were potentially useful to people who operate in the commercial environment.

This section of the project was tailored to contribute to on-going research for Standard Bank's marketing strategy. Based on the concept of a better understanding of lifestyles, the Bank's customer research and strategy focus on life stories and allow the idea of story to be extended and reinterpreted. The manner in which people use money to realise and articulate their personal stories, was of particular interest to Standard Bank. 'People use money to construct their own life stories. They use their money to bring their identities to life. If we could give every person in our country one R1 coin, very few would spend it in exactly the same fashion – we all have unique lives and apply our money in unique ways. As a bank our business is to enable people to use their money better to create the lives they'd like to live' (Erasmus 2000).

The format requested by the client was a conversation style oral-visual presentation – a digital impression of Pretoria accompanied by an open forum discussion. Student designers were thus placed in the position of being visual and verbal storytellers on a number of levels. They were observers who were required to present some measure of objective and useful information or commentary about Pretoria and the values and lifestyles of its inhabitants. They were also subjects who were asked to convey a personal account of living in and experiencing Pretoria and to reflect on their own practices and methods as designers. The client indicated that they not only wished to review the design interpretations placed before them, but were interested in '... the human dynamic that sits behind the creative work. The human dynamic between observer, subject and society' (Erasmus 2000). An elaboration of the creative design process through the articulation of how and why personal impressions and expressions were formulated and then translated into functional communication, were an integral part of the client's requirements.
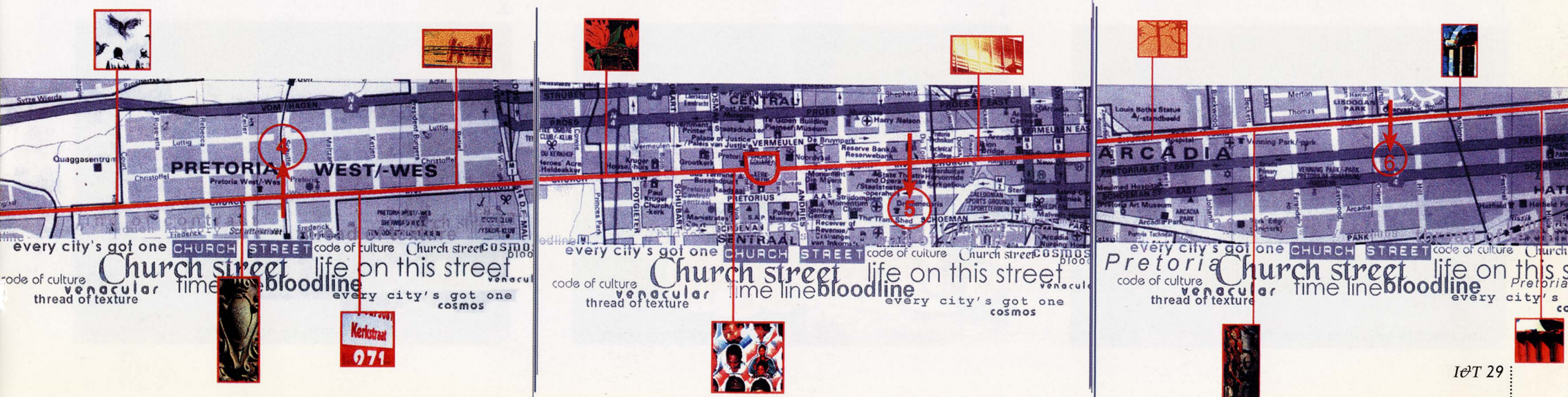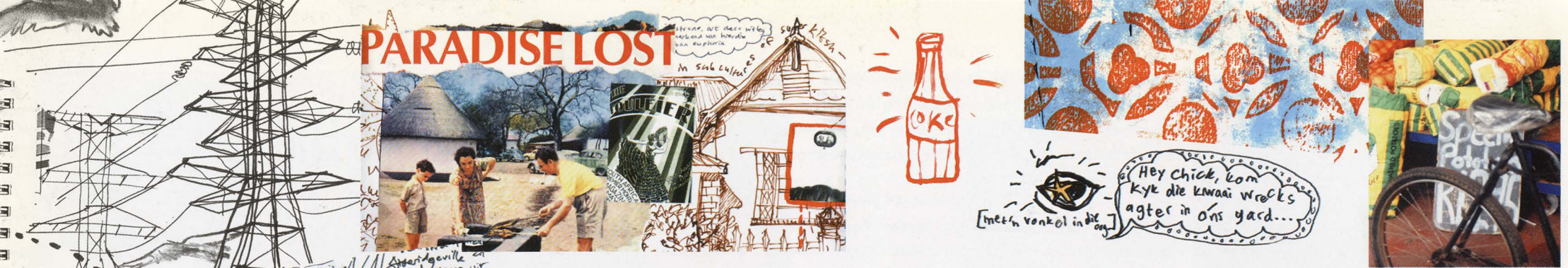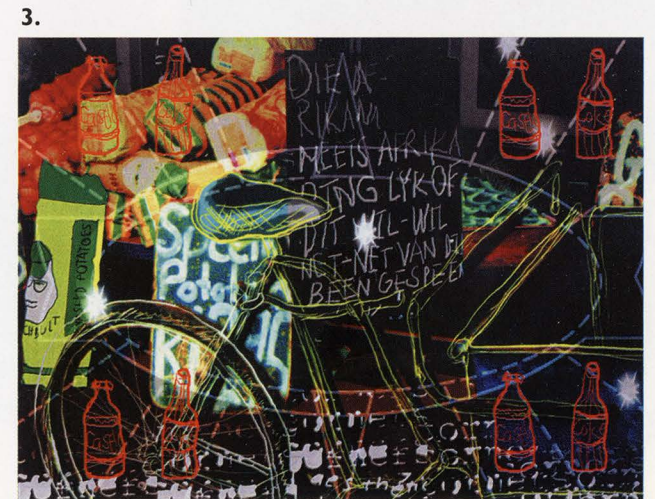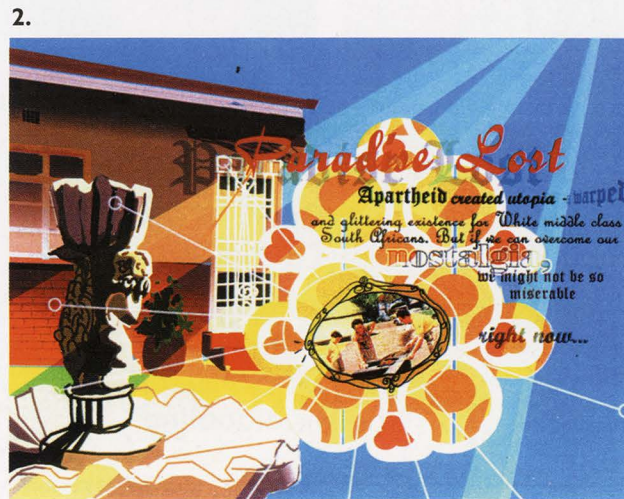
## CHURCH STREET BLOODLINE

Annemart Muller's sketchbook (images on pages 27 - 31) deconstructs the conventional idea of a conservative city and presents a rich kleidoscopic journal across Pretoria from west to east along Church Street. Claimed to one of the longest streets in Southern Africa, Church Street enjoys great symbolic prominence in the life of Pretoria. When the city was originally laid out, it was centred around Church Square, with Church Street leading through it from east to west. Church Square, dominated by a statue of Paul Kruger and the colonial facades of the surrounding architecture, held a dual position in the psyche of apartheid South Africa. To many white Afrikaners it was a signifier of liberation, while to black South Africans it became redolent of oppressive forces. A decade ago, a conventional and historical view would hold up many of the landmarks along Church Street as quintessential signposts of the city, and indeed of a national ideology. Church Street to the west of the Square would have been routinely characterised by administrative buildings, Paul Kruger's house, Heros' Acre in West Park cemetery and the Iscor steelworks. To the east of Church Square, identified beacons would have included the city's commercial hub, Strydom Square, the State Theatre and the bridge across the Apies River adorned with carved lions presented to Paul Kruger by the mining magnet Barney Barnato. Following Church Street eastward, the Union Buildings, the ministerial residential area of Brynterion and the jacaranda lined suburban streets of Arcadia and Hatfield would have been considered essential features of the city.

Based on the premise of Church Street as a bloodline that enables the decoding and unraveling of a seemingly conservative city, the photographs, comments, and drawings in Muller's sketchbook reveal

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"Hallo my Sista"

a complex amalgam of continuity and change, merging and diverging cultures, and a multiplicity of forms and textures. The journal starts in the semi-rural landscape bordering the township of Atteridgeville and winds its way through the gritty industrial sections and working class residential areas of the western suburbs with their sometimes harsh and unpretentious beauty. It continues into the heart of a changing city contained in the vibrant micro-cosmos of the five or six blocks leading off Church Square, and moves through the post-modern architectural appropriations of the eastern suburbs, where political correctness reigns, to end at the gate to the National Botanical Gardens.

Along the way, the plurality of voices and people in these neighbor-hoods become visible. Value systems, lifestyles, social conditions and forms of economic activities are made apparent and contrasted in a multitude of ways. Individual characters are invited to tell their stories. Groups convey their status and affiliations through the use of unique modes of personal address, and the revelation of aesthetic sensibilities, living and working environments. Language and forms of communication are captured in the juxtaposition of advertising boards, retail signwriting and handwritten offerings and listings. Chance encounters with objects invoke a contemplation of their changed significance. History is re-visited by means of the architecture along Church Street, but also through the memory of events

associated with certain locations, for instance, ANC bombings of certain buildings and the random shootings on Strydom Square by a white extremist. Throughout the sketchbook, time and context are interpreted and dealt with alternatively in tones of irony, speculation, questioning, empathy, nostalgia, and affection.

The postcard series (images 1-6) presents Muller's six final views of Pretoria based on the visual research and documentation compiled in the sketchbook. Each postcard provides an integrated and condensed version of the city that combines a selected geographic location along Church Street, social comment and aesthetics to convey the quality of place and people.

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## MUSEUM CITY

In contrast to Muller's overriding theme of continuity and change, Jonathan McKay's digital presentation of Pretoria in response to the Standard Bank directive, reflects a city resistant to change and reluctant to re-invent itself (images 7-18). McKay portrays a city resolved to stall the passage of time and he finds a useful analogy for his presentation in Pretoria's reputation as a city of museums. He subverts this idea and builds his impression of Pretoria around the concept of a museum city.

Like a museum, the city neatly classifies, organises and separates its inhabitants who are isolated in residential areas and enclosed in static, inwardly focused social pockets. Here they are expected to act according to the type to which they belong. This mentality encourages little interaction between different ethnic, social and economic groups and prevents residents acquiring an understanding of each other. The city appears intent on preserving and guarding extinct species in what is supposed to be a cosmopolitan or, at the very least, a politically correct era in a new South Africa.
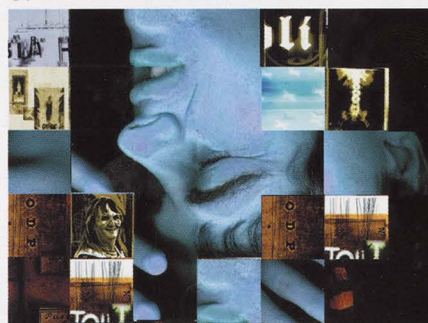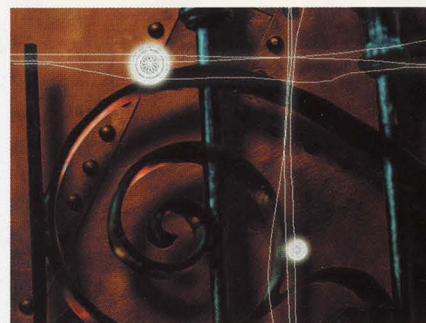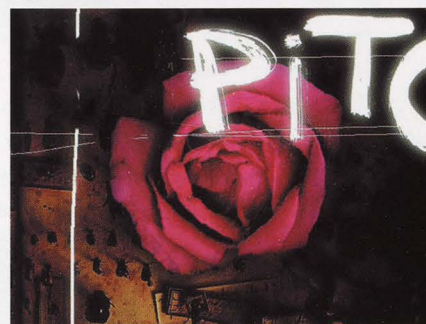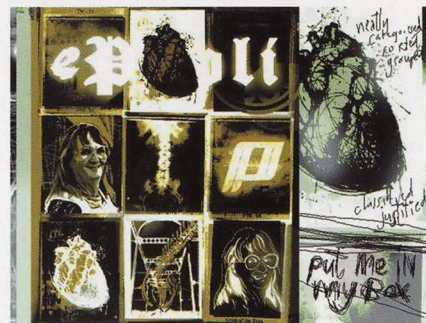


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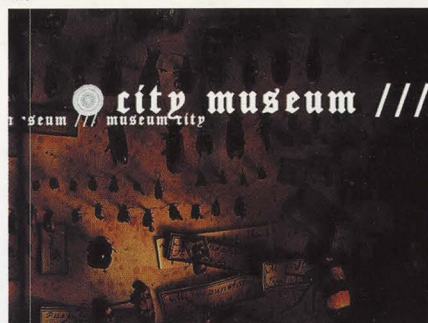


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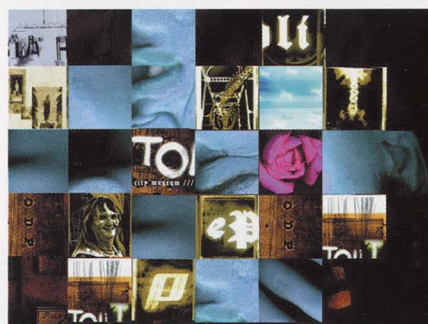


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## FINAL COMMENTS

The project brief afforded student designers opportunities for observation and documentation; personal exploration, interpretation and expression; conceptualisation and branding of Pretoria; and the merging of digital and autographic media. The impetus for the formulation of the brief was initially fueled by attitudes to drawing, the inappropriate and indiscriminate use of source material and students' lack of knowledge of their own city. These variables were easily placed within the broader context of considerations that pertinently shape current professional and educational discourses and strategies.

Proposals and interpretations presented by students demonstrated a nascent understanding of how ideas from immediate surroundings can be assimilated into design and used for graphic articulation. Buildings, signs, languages, vernacular expressions, pedestrians, people of all ages, races and religions going about their daily activities provided motifs, styles, symbols and meanings with which to visually identify a position in the world and convey unique messages. Designs evidenced ample examples of movement beyond predictable means in exploring and discovering sources that facilitate the devising of communicative design forms and expressions appropriate to peculiar times and circumstances. The range and originality of responses offered, underline the need to encourage student designers to confront the content and context of their own surroundings. They must be prompted to identify and to foster an on-going engagement with the multiple sources available in immediate localities and situations and to recognise the significance of context (cultural, technological, geographic and graphic) for communication.

While sound and music, the moving image, interface and interactivity, and the importance of narrative are some of the valuable aspects explored in the course of the project, the potency of sketching and drawing as primary means to design invention was reinforced. These skills better enabled student designers to focus on, and fix dimensions like physical relationships with objects, sensual interactions or emotional responses to people and events. The revitalisation offered by merging digital and autographic media, alerted students to approaches that discourage convenient compartmentalisation. At a time when one of the major challenges in South African practice is to develop unique designs, fluidity and the crossing of boundaries stimulate the re-examination of stylistic trends and entrenched ideas.

The final section of the project placed wider observations and experiences of community and culture in the commercial arena. The section allowed the design client, vying for business, an indication of how to market to audiences in their own self-images. It also placed student designers within broader attempts to foster an increasing understanding of the possibilities and potential of design and designers. This attitude and mentality strives to improve the intelligent use and understanding of design and to enlarge the influence of design within predetermined environments or situations – cultural, social and organisational.[3] Objectives encompass a drive to consider and describe some of the various roles that designers fulfil, for instance, that of technician, artist, mediator, change agent, collaborator and reflective practitioner. Albeit at an elementary level, the *Pretoria Stories* project, supports ideas of conscious, pro-active and multiple contributions by designers to strategic initiatives and organisational processes. It specifically suggests that clients could benefit from understanding and incorporating designer sensibilities and the basic visual narrative techniques of design in numerous ways. At the same time, it suggests to design educationalists the value of developing reflective individuals, able to understand the critical issues animating design and able to clarify their own positions within the diverse and expanding contexts of design.

In a more profound way, the almost anthropological nature of the project enabled students to develop a deeper understanding of the city's symbolic structure, complexities and rhythms. Arbitrary encounters with residents, objects and events, a discovery or rediscovery of traditional landmarks, the documentation of visual and tactile stimuli all allowed for the revelation of a controversial history and prevalent socio-economic conditions. The direct engagement with the city's diverse inhabitants highlighted emotional and cultural dimensions and sparked a critical inquiry into value systems and their expressions which must surely, in the long term, contribute to the development of empathetic design techniques and a better dialogue with design audiences.

## ENDNOTES

1 The University of Pretoria periodically publishes descriptions of how student projects are formulated in response to demands and needs in educational and external environments. See Sauthoff & Lange (1992) and Van Eeden (1995).

2 The refinement of local observations, experimental approaches and the crafting of a South African graphic language to meet specific communication and business objectives, mark the attitude and design strategies of a growing number of South African designers. The portfolios of design groups Tin Temple and Orange Juice Design serve as good examples. See Sauthoff (1995, 1998).

3 See Anceschi (1996); Buchanan (1998); Golsby-Smith (1996); Mitchell (1996) who present views on the diverse and expanding roles of design and designers.

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