

INGRID STEVENS

CRAFTS THAT LAST: SUSTAINABLE CRAFT PROJECTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

This paper focuses on sustainable craft projects or enterprises in South Africa and analyses the actions and activities that account for their sustainability and success. 'Enterprise' is indeed a suitable word for such organisations as it means, to quote The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976:345), 'an undertaking, a bold or difficult one showing courage and imaginativeness', and these are indeed qualities that I have come to associate with such projects.

South Africa, as an environment for enterprise, is a complex and difficult social and economic one. It is unnecessary to reiterate the historical events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the country underwent a dramatic transformation to become fully democratic. Suffice to state that the radical changes of 1994 form part of particular socio-economic and demographic circumstances that I will delineate briefly. The population of South Africa, 50 million in 2011, according to Stats SA's last estimate (2011), is growing rapidly, due to a high birth rate and possibly immigration from the rest of Africa. One feature is the rapid urbanisation of this population, which is now above 57% (Kane-Berman 2002:128). This urbanisation, as it was in Britain's Industrial Revolution, is accompanied by considerable social ills such as a shortage of housing, the development of slums, inadequate or non-existent water and electricity supply, and the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera, compounded by the spread of HIV-Aids. One indicator of these problems is a declining life expectancy, which dropped from fifty-one years in 2001 to forty-nine in 2011 (Indexmundi 2011). Poverty is rife, particularly in the rural areas, and the economy is sluggish, with such economic growth as there has been in the last few years being largely 'jobless growth', to quote Seria and Wessels (2006:1). Unemployment, depending on whose figures one uses, stands between 27 and 40 % of the adult population, and poverty levels around 30-40% (Seria & Wessels 2006:1). In addition, South Africa presently has an exceptionally high Gini Co-efficient of 57.8%, indicating one of the most unequal income distributions in the world. A society previously based on racial inequality is now becoming one based on class distinctions.

Economically, a shrinking formal sector exists alongside a 'mushrooming informal sector', according to van den Berg (2004:22). It is estimated that 40% of GDP arises from the informal sector and the growth of small, medium and micro businesses. Crafts are an important part of this development, and it is estimated that some 13% of South Africa's working population is employed in crafts or related trades (Kane-Berman 2002:202). However, South Africa does not have much tradition of crafts, as, to quote du Preez (2004:106), 'our fragmented history denied us the opportunity to create a unique visual language'. Crafts made by colonialists were often inferior copies of European products, while indigenous crafts, varying in style, amount and quality, were disrupted by apartheid. And, although the government and various funding organisations have put much money and effort into craft development, and initiated hundreds of craft-based projects, many more projects fail than succeed. Doyle (2007:9) describes their products, and I quote, 'images spring to mind of curios, carved masks, wildlife derivatives, touristy junk, products that nobody really wants. [Such crafts] take one back to the world of flea markets and scented candles, curtain tiebacks and homemade jams... Most South African craft suffers from an absence of design and poor material use'. This is a tragic waste as such funding efforts, directed at what Yunus (2006:14) describes as 'social businesses', exist not primarily to maximise profit but to 'make a difference in the world', so failure is deeply disappointing for all participants as well as the funders. Thus those projects that are successful must be a valuable source of inspiration and a model for others.

As an aside, I define successful projects as those with some longevity (for example 5-10 years or more in the projects I will discuss); sustainable finances, so that the project sustains itself and does not need further outside funding or additional financing (except for the purposes of expansion); the production of 'noteworthy' products, meaning that these should be in some way individual or unique, having a distinct appearance; there should be some evidence of innovation, in the sense that the products develop and change, because contemporary markets change rapidly; the project should have received recognition, either national or international, for example, awards, participation in major exhibitions, critical responses, etcetera. Finally, there are issues of labour in a successful enterprise, for example there should be a degree of job creation, the pay should be at least or above minimum wages (about £100 per month); there should not be high employee turn-over and there should be job security and job satisfaction. Of the relatively small number of successful crafts enterprises in South Africa, I will discuss four.¹

The first is Kaross embroidery which is situated on a citrus farm in the rural province of Limpopo, one of the poorest areas of South Africa. The project has been in existence since 1987, when Irma van Rooyen, a trained fine artist, moved to the farm with her husband. The local Shangaan women, who lived in nearby villages, had little tradition of embroidery, although there was some tendency to embroider tray cloths and the like with European-styled flowers. They were largely uneducated and illiterate. Initially, in order to help them earn some money, van Rooyen offered them cloths and thread, and suggested they embroider pictures of their lives. They were unable to do so, lacking any design or drawing skills, so van Rooyen made drawings of their homes and villages and the environment including animals, both domestic and wild, which they embroidered. As sales started, and news spread, more and more women joined, and by now there are over one thousand one hundred embroiders, working either from the farm barn or, more often, from their homes. Subsequently, van Rooyen has trained three local men, Solomon Mohate, Calvin Mahluale and Thomas Khubayi, to do the designing, and they by now are fluent, inventive and confident designers. They draw the complex narrative and patterned designs, and the women then embroider them in coloured thread, mostly on black cloths. Kaross sells through a chain of craft shops, receives major commissions, exhibits widely and has opened its own shop in Johannesburg. The work is marketed as high quality, collectable craft and is sold as the product of a collective.

Much can be said about such an enterprise, but I will focus on the products, their design and the labour systems in the organisation. Kaross produces both small and very large pieces. The smaller cushion covers and cloths, the bread-and-butter pieces according to van Rooyen, usually have a central motif of an animal or figure, surrounded by geometric patterns. The surface of each is dense with a variety of stitches in brilliant colours. The large cloths are more complex, and may be narrative, recounting local life and events. These van Rooyen calls the 'story-telling' cloths. Finally, others, the 'interior' cloths, have complex and beautiful designs of intertwined foliage, birds and animals in rich, all-over patterns. This complexity has become the recognisable Kaross style. Although cloths may be similar, there is little repetition and none is identical to another, with much variation in patterns, themes and colour combinations. These highly decorative pieces would generally be used as purely ornamental hangings, although some might have a utilitarian purpose as well.

Van Rooyen describes the Kaross style as 'South African', and this convincingly describes her initial Eurocentric approach with the inputs of the Shangaan designers and the aesthetic sensibilities of the embroiderers. The design could be argued to be a postmodern hybrid, or part of a developing contemporary South African vernacular style.



Kaross, unknown artist, 2007, story-telling cloth (subject: a wedding), backing cloth and thread, approx. 1000 x 1000 cm. (Photograph Susan Sellschop).

The actual design process involves conceptualisation, drawing, and making. Van Rooyen herself, although she now does little designing, develops ideas with the three designers and maintains a strong mentoring role, ensuring that designs develop and do not become static. She also constantly provides the designers with new visual resource material. Then Mohate, Khubayi and Mahluale draw the designs as white outlines onto black cloths. The designers produce many drawings very quickly, sufficient to supply the thousand plus embroiders with work. So the products are in general highly planned, and it is in this planning stage that innovations develop. The embroiders themselves however, although given the drawn cloths and combinations of coloured threads, have a degree of creativity in that they apply the colours and add all the details of patterns and textures as they wish, and the work is therefore not mechanical. They all have a high degree of skill and the works are exceptionally well crafted.

Embroidery itself does not require expensive materials or technologies, but is very time-consuming and labour intensive, so is an ideal craft for a 'social business'. Van Rooyen's ideal, since Kaross's inception, has been to create jobs and generate income for numbers of rural poor. The degree of job creation achieved has been such that the surrounding villages have been markedly uplifted, and entire families, including men who embroider, are now part of the project. One village alone, Rishaba, earns about R70, 000 (just under £7,000) some weeks. This provides a significant income, which varies depending on the amount and quality of work produced by each individual embroiderer. All the workers interviewed expressed considerable pride in their work and their ability to improve the quality of life of their families. Kaross has furthermore established a new tradition of embroidery in the area, and is constantly expanding, for as demand grows for this high quality product, productivity is increased by taking new people into the project.

The second enterprise I will discuss is Ardmore Ceramic Art. This project, situated in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal on two farms, has existed since 1985. This is in another impoverished rural area, but it has the additional tragedy that it has the highest incidence of HIV-Aids in South Africa. Ardmore was started by another fine arts graduate, Fee Halstead-Berning. She began working with one of her husband's farm workers, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, making small, decorative, painted objects. Ntshalintshali proved to be very talented, as well as knowledgeable about local Zulu customs and practices and, with Halstead's initial training, she became a creative and well-known artist, producing both complex painted sculptures and utilitarian objects. The work sold well almost immediately, and more local people joined, making work that initially resembled Ntshalintshali's, but evolved in different ways. The project now involves over a hundred people, working either as sculptors who model the complex objects and sculptures, as potters who throw vessels on the wheel (and all of the above are men) or as painters who decorate the surfaces (and these are mostly women). So usually at least three people are involved in the production of each piece. Ardmore sells on international auctions, on prestigious exhibitions, and it now has its own gallery-museum. Its work has achieved the highest prices ever paid for South African ceramics (around £17,000-£20,000).

Ardmore products consist of vessels with simple shapes, whose surfaces are highly decorated with modelled additions and then finished with complex, brightly painted surfaces, of geometric patterns and elaborate flowers and foliage. Stacked and composite sculptures have equally richly patterned surfaces or, more rarely, are left white. Bread-and-butter pieces are also made, such as modelled candlesticks, egg cups and bowls. A large vessel might, typically, show a troop of baboons amongst flowers, playing, grooming and eating, while on the back of the vessel, some have been aroused by a leopard creeping through the foliage. The subject matter is nature-based but eclectic, and may include anything from a zebra or panther to a tiger, a toucan to a flamingo, a rose to an aloe. Halstead-Berning and her team market them, very successfully, as African or even Zulu, but they are again a postmodern hybrid.



Ardmore Ceramic Art, unknown artist, 2007, candleholders, under glazed and glazed ceramics, approx. 700 x 40 x 40 cm. (Photograph Susan Sellschop).

The design process often starts from the initial ideas of Halstead-Berning, communicated verbally or as sketches, or arises from commissions, but, almost always, the design process is generated by the project participants looking at a rich variety of visual source material from many places and cultures, and across many art and decorative types. However, the modelling and painting are so accomplished and complex that it is hard to see how they arise from what are often simple visual sources, and the works show a high degree of skill, inventiveness and creativity.

This too is a social business. Halstead-Berning's ideal is to enable people to be artists and to encourage their creativity. In this she appears to succeed, as individual styles can be detected within the general Ardmore style and a number of the participants have become well-known. She also aims to empower local people, and this is done through high earnings for the sector of up to R18, 000 per month (compared to the average R2, 000 at Kaross), regular wages whether their pieces sell or not, and a fund that supports health care, education, housing and insurances for all the workers. (Sadly, many have died and will die from Aids, such as Ntshalintshali). The Ardmore artists express pride and satisfaction in that they are artists, and some become empowered enough to leave Ardmore and continue as independent artists.

Although I am not focusing on business practices, I want to mention one aspect of Ardmore in this regard. Halstead-Berning, who is well connected socially and through the art world, states openly that she has 'used the system' in the marketing of Ardmore works, which is an activity largely generated and managed by her. From its inception, she promoted, spoke of and marketed Ardmore products as 'art' rather than 'craft'. In practice, apart from this abstract theoretical categorization, Ardmore thus sells on prestigious exhibitions, for example, at South Africa's presidential residence, on London auctions or at very up-market shops. This partly explains why the prices reached so far outstrip those for any other 'craft' objects, and even for many 'art' works, in South Africa.

The work of Ardmore is certainly unique and unlike anything made in South Africa or even internationally.

The third project I will discuss is the Mapula embroidery project in the semi-rural and remote outlying area of my own home town, Pretoria. This is a true community project: it was started by a charitable organization, the Soroptomists, in 1991 in the impoverished Winterveld area, and is based at a Catholic church centre. The Soroptomists, consisting of a number of artists and academics, decided to start an embroidery project because it is technically easy and requires little equipment or infrastructure. The Soroptomists would visit every Saturday to guide a group of unemployed women, and in fact, one of them still visits and oversees marketing, commissions, materials supply, etc. Others gave the women drawing lessons and ideas, but by now, 180 women work very independently, making embroidered cloths in their meagre homes and delivering them or fetching materials as needed. So management and marketing still occurs on a voluntary basis.



Mapula, Selinah Makwana, 2004, *Ten years of democracy – truth – reconciliation*, backing cloth and thread, 119 x 118 cm. (Schmahmann 2006:77).

The Winterveld women, unlike those in the previous two projects, choose their own themes, develop their own drawings and decide on colours and finish. So the works are uneven in quality and varied, however still with a stamp of the communal nature of the project. They took many years to reach any degree of proficiency and excellence, so the project took longer to offer them any real benefits.

Aesthetically, these are individual and strongly narrative depictions of local life as well as national events such as Mandela's inauguration, the 2010 Soccer World Cup or other events that affect the women such as HIV-Aids. The volunteers still supply newspaper clippings and other visual sources and many of the stories, accompanied by texts, reflect international news, while others are purely personal. For example, 'Rosinah Maepa going to London but she have no passport' or '26 December a terrible disaster of tsunami'. But any theme that the women select is fine.

Design thus occurs on an individual and informal basis, although some women, lacking the skill, pay others to draw for them. They embroider in small groups, and the works are technically simple, formally stylized and even naive, although the surfaces and narratives may become relatively complex and expressive. The work is easily distinguished from Kaross. In a sense, this is 'art' rather than decorative craft as the works explore issues, experiences and ideas about living in a particular socio-political-economic context. One might also categorize these as 'folk art' or, following Turner (1996:515), as 'grassroots art'.

The ideals that fuel Mapula are, apart from the dignity of employment and poverty alleviation, probably those of the initiators and now, of the women themselves, to tell their own stories and develop their own ideas and approaches, so creative satisfaction is high. On the down side, these women earn relatively little and more irregularly than the Kaross embroiderers, but nonetheless, this is a long-running project.

Finally, and briefly, I will discuss the community project Monkeybiz. Unlike the previous ones, this is situated in a city, in central Cape Town, and involves women making beaded objects. Again it was started by two trained fine artists, Shirley Fintz and Barbara Jackson, who encouraged their under-employed domestic workers and their families to make beaded dolls and animals, starting in 1999. The two artists initially bought all the objects and, when money ran out, began exhibiting and selling them. They formed a partnership with a very well-established South African designer, with whom they share exhibition space, marketing and management structures. This not-for-profit company now employs some 500 women, who work in their homes in the townships and squatter camps of the city. The profits are used to run soup kitchens, educational programmes and an HIV-Aids clinic.



Monkeybiz South Africa, anonymous, 2003, stacked animals, coloured beads, size varied. (Viljoen 2003:6).

Beadwork has certain advantages as a community craft, much like embroidery. It is a traditional skill amongst many African women, so no training is necessary. Beads inherently make for bright colours, rhythmic repetition and fine, geometric patterns. Furthermore, they can be marketed, both to tourists and internationally, as typically 'African', as 'authentic'. The products of Monkeybiz are presented as a South African vernacular and local form, although the actual objects are in no way traditional. So the works are simultaneously contemporary, fresh and colourful. They include dolls, single or stacked animals in a great variety of sizes, shapes and patterns, and trendy items such as fridge magnets, picture frames, narrative pictures, Christmas decorations or anything else that the project managers think might be marketable. The bead makers, however, design their own products and make them as they wish, and individual approaches are encouraged. So, there is a division between the originators of the ideas and the design of the pieces.

I have discussed these projects very briefly and much more could be said about them. But now I will offer some analysis and summing up to explain why these projects are so much more successful and sustainable than many others in the country and, again, much more could be said. Firstly, there is the quality of the products: all can be said to be exceptionally accomplished; all are original and distinguishable from other projects. Although there are varying degrees of individuality, for example at Ardmore and Mapula, the diverse products are recognisable as coming from one project, hence become familiar and cohesive. All are original and are not copied from other products, although, I might mention, these products are themselves often copied. Innovations occur, whether this arises from the designer-manager or from the crafters themselves. All are in some rather postmodern way 'South African', and fulfil Fuller's (1985:232) dictum that decorative items should share in the symbolic order of their society by combining individual creativity with shared social values.

The cohesion of each project, whether in the 'house style', if I may so term it, or the inter-relatedness of project participants, results from a strong centralising factor, which is the input of a leader or volunteer-mentor, who in all cases is an individual with art training, particular skills in design, marketing and mentoring, and who in all cases has remained involved with the project. This is different from many of the failed projects, where the initiators withdraw after a time, believing or hoping that the community would be able to sustain the project. This never happens, except in the rare instance where the craft is already traditionally embedded in the community. Given the shifts in South African society through its history, there are few such traditions.

Thirdly, although design and innovation happen in different ways in these projects, there is an emphasis on both, and maintenance of quality usually rests with their strong leader-mentors. They might be compared to Gramsci's (Burke 2005) 'organic intellectuals', who articulate through the language of culture, the feelings and experiences of groups in society, or to Weber's (1968) charismatic leader. Their presence seems one of the most important factors in sustaining these community projects. Many debates might arise from this factor, including issues of authority and privilege, exploitation of labour, and problems of succession which time does not allow me to discuss.

Marketing is an important aspect of any contemporary business, and no less so in these craft projects. This is managed by the leader-mentors, who are well connected and understand the ways of the art world and related markets. Interestingly, they deliberately situate the products in one of two basic categories: as collectible and 'authentic crafts', in which case prices are generally lower and volumes of objects sold higher, or as 'art', in which case fewer objects are sold at much higher prices.

Finally, it is noteworthy that similar ideals drive these projects, ideals about empowerment, development of capabilities, upliftment and sustainability. The ideals of these 'social businesses' unite and support all the various participants in these sustainable enterprises.

Endnotes

1. In each case, I visited the enterprise, spending at least a day at each production site, observing the workplace and interviewing the enterprise's leader, i.e. the owner or manager, as well as other crafts people. In the case where there was more than one such site, I visited both and, in cases where the crafts people worked from their homes, I visited a small number of them in their homes. I also visited the showrooms and selected retail outlets and galleries where the craft products were sold in order to view the finished products at their points of marketing. I investigated the Internet websites of those enterprises that had them and other textual data. This textual data was limited or non-existent, and what there was, was generally of a promotional and commercial nature. Thus there was little or no theoretical or scholarly data available.

References

Burke, B. (2005) Antonio Gramsci: schooling and education. [Online]. Available at <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gram.htm> . [Accessed 24/08/2011].

The concise Oxford dictionary, (1976), JB. Sykes (ed). 6th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Doyle, G. (2007) 'Taking craft beyond tourist tat', The Weekender, March 17-18: 9.

Du Preez, K. (2004) 'Design of the times', Elle Decoration, No 33, Spring: 106-109.

Fuller, P. (1985:232) Images of God: the consolations of lost illusions, London: Chatto & Windus.

Indexmundi.(2011) Life expectancy in South Africa. [Online}. Available at <http://www.indexmundi.com>. [Accessed 24/08/2011].

Kane-Berman, J. (Ed). (2002) South Africa survey 2001/2002, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Schmahmann, B. (2006) Mapula: embroidery and empowerment in the Winterveld, Johannesburg: David Krut.

Seria, N. and Wessels, V. (2006) 'Jobless rates rises to 26.7%', Business report, January 25: 1.

Statsonline. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za>. [Accessed 28/08/2011].

Turner, J. (ed). The dictionary of art, London: Macmillan.

Van den Berg, S. (2004) 'Income trend marked by increasingly unequal black society', Business Report, February 25: 22.

Viljoen, D. 9ed). (2003) Positively HIV: HIV and AIDS education through beadwork by Monkeybiz, Cape Town: Monkey Press.

Weber, M. (1968) On charisma and institution building, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Yunus, M. (2006) 'New type of capitalism can help eradicate poverty', Business Report, Tuesday, December 12: 14.