

My first impression on stepping into the ...xyz HQ was the conspicuous lack of gum-chewing, iPod wearing, Converse clad X & Y generation design types. I didn't spot one Apple Mac and there was no evidence of the sleek and sexy Ober-designs ...xyz have become known for in design circles. But then I notice Roelf Mulder quietly copying down notes off a whiteboard – scribbles that look like higher grade maths to me – yet judging by the manner in which he is furiously making short work of it all, it makes perfect sense to him. And that's when it hits me – Roelf and his partners Richard Perez and Byron Qually are design pragmatists first, glory-seekers second. In a world where product designers are elevated to cult status (well, in Europe and the States anyway), these three are having none (OK, maybe they'd like a little) of it. Anti the 'performance' aspect of design, the boys at ...xyz are serious when it comes to designing products that fulfil a function, though making them look good makes them happy too.

Back in the day when Roelf had just finished his studies in industrial design, there was practically nowhere in South Africa for him to work in the product design field. So he did the next best thing – he started his own company. After landing the contract to design the Freeplay Wind-Up Radio in SA, he set about introducing the world to the company's own brand of good looking functional design. From its early days as <sup>a</sup> reinvented 'toy' to a sexy see-through must-have, Roelf was right there behind it.



1994 saw him meet up with 32-year-old Byron Qually, now the design director of the company, which they eventually formed in 2000. Work both here and abroad had left Qually with a burning desire to prove that groundbreaking design could be produced at the southern tip of Africa, and he and the third ...xyz musketeer 35-year-old Richard Perez brought a formidable sense of energy and expertise to the triumvirate. Between the three of them, they have an alphabet of qualifications and the mutual admiration that they have for each other's different qualities is readily apparent.

So what is it these guys do? In layman's terms their main premise is to make the everyday object extraordinary in its simplicity and functionality. "We're not interested in being bigger than our products – we want to create items with staying power," explains Qually. Ever thought of the people behind the petrol pump stands at your local garage? ...xyz are the team behind the Shell forecourt petrol stands which are the result of hours of discussion and to-ing and fro-ing with the teams who fill cars – finding out their exact demands from their work environment. The result is a streamlined exercise in functionality that has made local industry sit up and take notice. Unlike many other similar international concerns that tend to focus on one arena, ...xyz describe themselves as 'general specialists' – nothing is too big or too small for them to tackle – from design-tastic braai tongs with a built in light to state-of-the-art cellphones (that won one of the many SAGS Design Institute awards), highly advanced medical equipment and even three-second condom applicators (now part of the New York Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection). They've done it and will do it all.

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...xyz distinguish themselves by having a rather admirable devotion to nurturing design – each is involved in tertiary institution projects and mentoring, and they are equally impassioned about their Design for Development projects – working to simplify everyday challenges in the South African arena. "South Africa is a nation of good ideas and we are passionate about creating design awareness and helping to grow the designers of the future," says Roelf. Designing beautiful things that can be used on a daily basis is high on the list of every industrial designer's wishlist, but seeing it through to fruition is often a little seen reality and where ...xyz have succeeded is that they are prolific in so many different spheres. "We look to design products that can make a difference in the South African context," says Roelf. Whether it's a foolproof condom applicator, state-of-the-art vehicle tracking devices, devices to simplify infant eye testing or working on rural transport systems, they are constantly pushing their boundaries in a quest to simplify the end users' existence right here at home.

Much has been said about the threat of Asian manufacturing undercutting local industry and fighting this is one of ...xyz's most important challenges. Explaining to clients that a product is only 100% South African if it is also manufactured here is an uphill battle and they are valiant warriors in having their initial designs seen through to manufacture stage on these shores. "International clients comment all the time about the quality of the workmanship of our products – if more designers pushed our local manufacturing industry, they could help grow it," says Qually. With these kinds of firebrands driving design in SA, it may simply be a matter of time before a new global design revolution may emanate from these shores.

