

Real global connectivity, three words at a time

 By Leigh Andrews

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Technology designer Chris Sheldrick lit up the afternoon session on the first day of Design Indaba 2017 with his talk on tech startup What3words and used small words with big numbers to explain how it is quite literally changing the world for the better.



Sheldrick

In his soothing British accent, Sheldrick shared the hard-hitting fact that without an address, you technically live outside the law and might as well not exist. That's because you can't be a fully engaged citizen as an address is required for more than just post – you also need one to register to vote, get a passport, open a bank account, or even to buy something online. This is an issue of huge socio-economic importance with as many as 4 billion people currently living without an address – **4 billion**. That's 75% of the world. Sheldrick says even in the quarter of the globe that does have a reliable address, "Packages still go missing, couriers get lost and local businesses can't be found". Sheldrick realised something needs to be done to make addressing better, as "GPS coordinates are good for machines but not people". Enter What3words.

Pinpointing location, fast-tracking service

With What3words, Sheldrick is addressing this issue in a mind-blowingly simple way, just one location and three words at a time. At its essence, a specific sequence of three simple words is assigned to any location in the world, using a global grid of three-by-three metre squares – **57 trillion** of them. This makes each three word address unique, more accurate than a postal address and certainly more memorable than a long string of random-seeming GPS coordinates.

For example:

“ With what3words, everywhere now has a simple address. [#DesignIndaba](#) [#CapeTown](#) [pic.twitter.com/o0TbuVapHE](#)—
what3words (@what3words) [March 1, 2017](#) ”

But it also solves a deeper socio-economic problem than this, especially as collaboration between Gateway Health Institute and What3words is currently in the works to improve the lives of South Africans as the system optimises business, drives social and economic development, and ultimately save lives. Obviously the app is free to use:

In addition to the app and website, the technology behind What3words is integrated into over 100 partner apps and services around the world and available in over 10 languages. Little wonder then that this seemingly simple idea has won the highest accolades the world over: A Grand Prix for Innovation at the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity, a D&AD Black Pencil, the title of the UK's most innovative company by PwC and, on the day of Sheldrick's Design Indaba talk, What3words was awarded 'Best Use of Mobile for Travel, Leisure & Hospitality' at the GLOMO Awards.

That's what I call truly inspired design. Follow [What3words](#) and [Sheldrick](#) on Twitter, get your own three-word address sign, tomorrow from 09:30am at Design Indaba (that's '[habitats.precious.remixes](#)' in three words if you're curious), and visit our [Design Indaba special section](#) for all the latest coverage!

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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