

The 'duct tape' design solution that is Airbnb

By [Ilse van den Berg](#)

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Joe Gebbia, entrepreneur and co-founder of Airbnb, was a highlight of day two at Design Indaba 2017. The company is currently worth US\$30bn dollars with 2 million listings in over 191 countries.

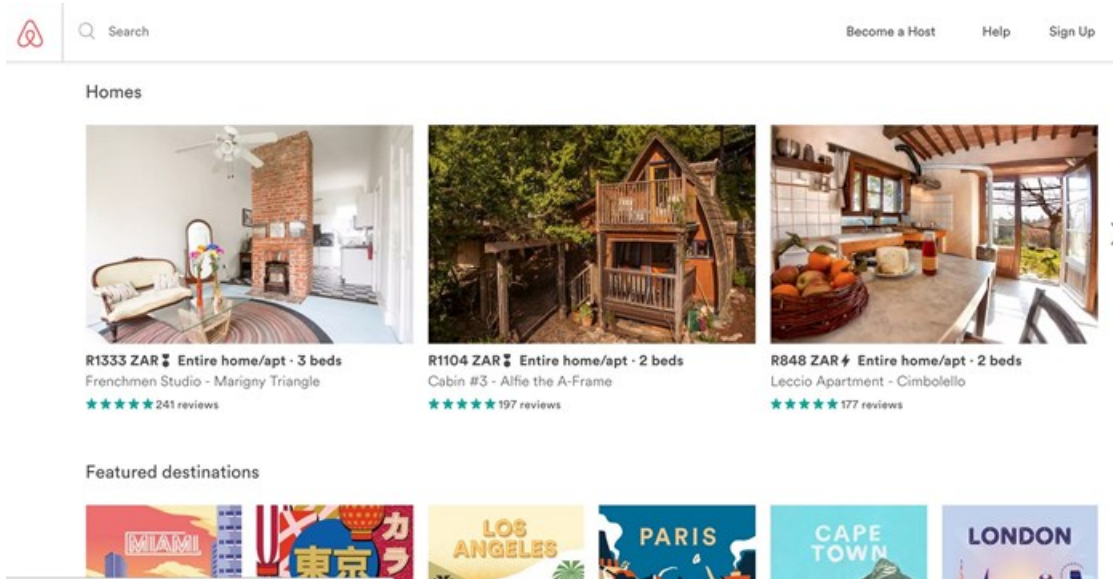
Motivated by a lecturer while studying design, Gebbia was introduced to the concept of 'duct tape' design opportunities. He recounted the story of where duct tape came from and what a simple, yet life-changing solution it is to so many problems.



Joe Gebbia

"When you spot duct tape, it clearly means that something isn't working, there is a flaw in the current design. It's like design SOS," said Gebbia.

The Airbnb story



There was, of course, a duct tape solution that led to the creation of Airbnb. As designers, they saw a break in the system: there was a design conference in town and all the hotels were fully booked. He and his roommate had some extra space

and they needed some money to pay rent. So, he decided to pull out an air mattress to accommodate designers.

Before they knew it, they made this makeshift solution - their very first air bed and breakfast website. They had people, an apartment, and the internet with which they created the “duct tape” solution that is Airbnb today.

Gebbia then started wondering how they could expand their services and mission to reach more people - even to those without a home, or those without a means to travel. They established a team within Airbnb to continually look outward and find out what the other areas of duct tape are.

The company is seeking to leverage its core competencies and constantly asking themselves questions like "what can we bring to the world?" and, "what are we well-positioned to do through our knowledge, resources and skills?"

Core strengths

Airbnb is the first and probably most immediate answer to hospitality. “It’s our signature trait to help people turn their homes into sources of income, sources of experiences and gives them a connection to the world,” says Gebbia.

Another core strength is the ability to create complete trust between strangers.

“Once we have an idea of which strengths we can leverage, we then ask the next question: Where would it be most useful? What kind of duct tape can we apply? So it’s basically a combination of what we do best in a situation where it’s needed the most,” he explained.

We Accept

There are currently more displaced people in the world than ever before. Gebbia told delegates how Airbnb has been aiding these displaced people - whether their displacement is due to natural disasters or a refugee crisis.

He says that one of the most powerful design research questions to ask is “what’s the biggest challenge you’re facing?”

After researching and asking this question to these displaced people, they thought the area where they could have an immediate impact on was an issue in the US regarding short-term housing when a refugee family first enters the country.

They [created a platform called We Accept](#) that connects asylum seekers in need of short-term accommodation and people who have accommodation to offer. As of today, over 15,000 people have volunteered their homes for refugees on this platform.

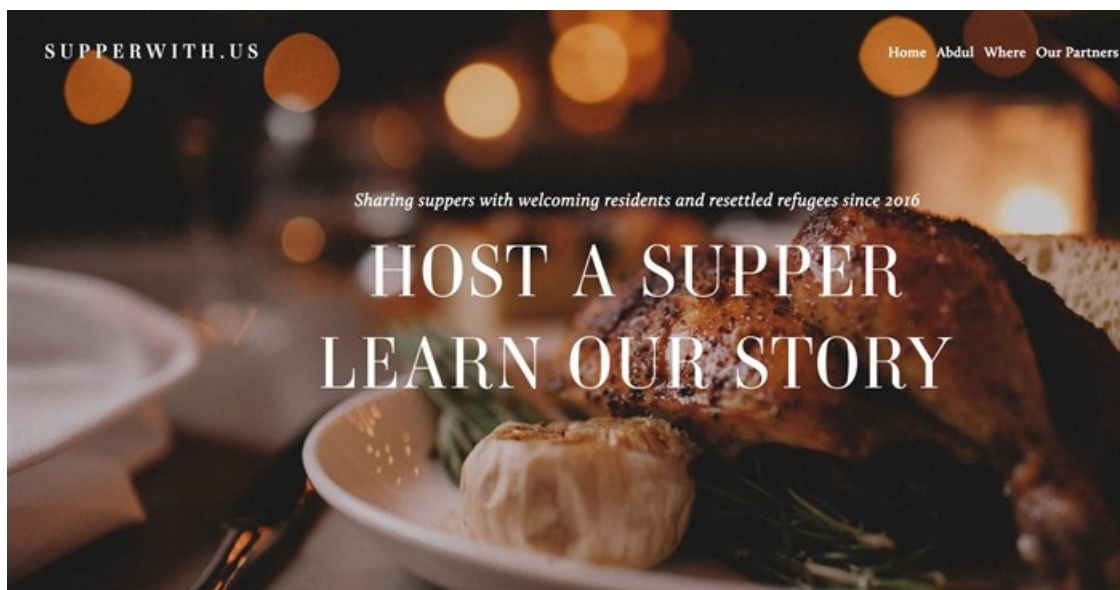
Now there’s a duct tape solution if I’ve ever seen one.



Supper with Us

Another project the team is working on is called [Supper with Us](#) which allows people to host a refugee family for dinner. It's a great opportunity for people who can't offer accommodation but still want to contribute. It's also great for those who have the space but aren't necessarily comfortable hosting, to overcome a key obstacle - the "us vs. them" mentality.

Over the course of just two months, nearly 100 suppers were organised by members of the Airbnb community.



Experience hosts

Gebbia also explained how, once a refugee has settled into a country, the next step would be to establish a source of income. Many refugees are willing and able to work, but often aren't allowed. He used [Amman as an example](#) and explained the concept of experience hosts on Airbnb.

In essence, it's a market of experiences - from food and drink to art and sport - which enables people to share their skills, passions, talents and cities with travellers. It allows travellers to see a city through the eyes of a local while creating a livelihood for a refugee. Another small duct tape idea that makes a huge difference in the lives of many.



Experiences



R1844 ZAR 3 hours · gourmet food & environment



R3352 ZAR 3 days · food critic & dining
★★★★★ 3 reviews



R3528 ZAR 3 days · pastries & culinary
★★★★★ 4 reviews



R213 ZAR 2 hours · street art & historical walk

Gebbia encouraged designers to keep their eyes open for those duct tape opportunities in everyday life and to share it with him on Twitter ([@JGebbia](#)) using the hashtag [#SpotTheTape](#).

ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out [Passing Stories](#)). She is also the editor of [Go & Travel](#), a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work [here](#) and [here](#). Contact Ilse through her website [here](#).

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