

## DESIGN EXHIBITIONS WITHOUT DESIGN PROMOTION

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New York's Immigration officers are noted for their deadpan wit. Once they quizzed me about my research. "Hong Kong... *design?*" the officer repeated in disbelief, "Isn't that a contradiction in terms?"

That encounter was twenty-five years ago. Today, the world is dazzled by the parade of design from Asia. From Delhi to Manila to Beijing a carnival of Asian "design week" festivals now attract a cosmopolitan audience. Exhibitions of Asian design are staged overseas from London to Sydney to Los Angeles. Troupes of new, international design museums are springing up across the region from Ahmedabad to Tokyo, Singapore to Seoul. And alongside the promotion of contemporary design practice, scholarly events from São Paulo to Toronto to London are now publicising Asia's rich histories of design.

Where did the idea of "Asian design" come from? During the 1980s I played a tentative part in its development through teaching, collecting and curating. And now that I have reached an age when personal anecdote blurs with history, my first question is how the idea of "Asian design" has changed in recent decades? My difficulty in conceptualising "Asian design" twenty or thirty years ago also prompts a critical question: did the concept present any useful meaning then – and does it now? Originally, the phrase "Asian design" raised a rebellious challenge to the canon of Western design. But as festivals, exhibitions and museums of design in Asia now take to the international stage, my final curatorial question is whether this once contentious idea has been absorbed within global design promotion?

First, to my own history. In the spring of 1981 I came to teach design in Hong Kong, a city I knew only through 'Empire Made' imports of Christmas decorations, plastic toys and electronics that had been such a feature of my childhood in Britain. Naively, I was interested in collecting and researching this history.

I was soon slapped down. The staunchly colonial Design School

here rejected my proposal to study the history of design in Hong Kong or Asia. Every year, their rationale was the same: there simply *was* no history of design to speak of, either in Hong Kong or its Asian neighbours –and even if there were, it could have no value. Back home, the Royal College of Art also rebuffed my inquiries because, as they put it, “Asia is not our area of interest”. Today much has changed. There is now a burgeoning scholarship of design in Asia, indeed of global and world design; the Royal College of Art is now a leading, if not encyclopaedic centre of Asian design history; and the strap-line philosophy of the Design School here in Hong Kong is to be: “at the forefront of applying Asian innovation to global opportunities (by) harnessing the legacy and dynamism of Asian cultures...”<sup>1</sup>

Why did this change come about? In Hong Kong the change came shortly after the Joint Declaration of 1984 as the city began its countdown to Handover. The 1980s had already witnessed the spectacular rise of Asia’s “Newly Industrialised Economies” and there was speculation about “Asian Values” underpinning the hyper-growth. There were also lively debates about theories of “globalization” and, by way of counterpoint, resurgent interest in design as “cultural identity”.<sup>2</sup> In addition, scattered accounts of design in Asia were appearing which claimed long national histories. As late as 1969, the exhibition of “Modern Design in Japan” could admit that there had been no design in the country before the American Occupation. By 1984 however the exhibition “Japan Design” included not only the Taisho and Meiji eras in its historical sweep of design, but also (recalling Fenollosa’s “Asiatic Design”) much of Edo as well.<sup>3</sup> And these factors helped me persuade the School of Design in Hong Kong to switch its history syllabus from western to Asian design.

### **Asian Design Curriculum**

In 1985 our new “Asia Design” curriculum was a mixed bag of specialist lectures, national histories, development studies and postcolonial theory. Resources were uneven. I recall one student essay opening with the memorable line: “The true light of civilisation was first brought to Burma by Christian missionaries; then the heroic Burmese people kicked out the running dogs of imperialism ...”

Nevertheless, with all its limitations, the curriculum raised pertinent questions about reductive or essentialist ideas of “Asia”. We

offered a critical account of European “Orientalism” as well as the “Orientalism” of Japanese “Pan-Asianism” and the “Greater Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere”. We were critical of “Asian Values” a decade before the embarrassment of the Asian financial crisis. And we were skeptical of the resurgent nationalism lurking behind ideas of an approaching “Asian Century”. For example, while lectures might explore the appeal of cultural identity in design as an antidote to colonisation or globalisation, essay questions might challenge students to discuss the negative consequences of excessive cultural identity.

The academics appointed to teach the curriculum, such as the redoubtable Rajeshwari Ghose, were primarily specialists in Asian cultural or political history, and they shaped a programme in which design was not fetishized but instead used as a tool to probe aspects of Asian modernity. At the same time the curriculum privileged new subjects for study such as popular culture, objects of protest or humble, everyday items. A concern with the overlooked, everyday world was already a characteristic of Hong Kong art and some designers would later take such themes to an international audience while others would transform them into research and archive development of international standing.

### **Made in Hong Kong: A History of Export Design**

By 1987 my collections and research found a professional partner in the Hong Kong’s Museum of History. The Chief Curator’s view was that the moment was propitious - a time of “slack water” between London and Beijing that left the museum free from external guidance. Accordingly, our 1988 exhibition, “Made in Hong Kong: A History of Export Design 1900-1960” was shaped by and, in small measure encouraged a rising tide of local Hong Kong identity, providing imagery for the “re-orientalised” nostalgic design that followed.

However the exhibition’s standpoint on design was awkwardly equivocal. Its final section was bleak, tracing as it did the decline of local originality and the rise of imitation as a consequence of American influence. Yet even the originality of Chinese design celebrated in the show was presented as one of *adaptive hybridity* - a reflexive blend of qualities drawing together the city’s intricate web of Chinese, Asian and British Empire trade routes. By contrast, local designers’ success in achieving convergence with western design was

portrayed as mimicry. Not only was our curatorial interpretation free from political deference, it was also free from deference to design.

## **Design and Development in Asia**

Our experiments in teaching and curating the design history of Asia faced mounting difficulties with the essentialist phrase, “Asian design”. In 1988 we organised a conference exploring several such troublesome questions. Under the title “Design and Development in South and Southeast Asia”, and with the support of Hong Kong University’s Centre of Asian Studies, the event brought together a wide range of practitioners as well as theorists of design from Asia. The extensively anthologised introductory text by Raj Ghose sharply questions ‘whether there is an “Asian” design history at all?’ since the region is fundamentally disparate and culturally heterogenous, the blanket term “Asia” did not appear to present any useful meaning. Loose generalisations about “East” and “West” do not stand up to critical scrutiny, but the Introduction went further. Dismissing what it calls ‘a few case studies of adaptations from First world design’, it argues that modern design in Asia may be understood primarily through the interplay between national modernisation policies and the politics of international trade.<sup>4</sup>

## **Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity**

Taking forward issues from “Design and Development in South and Southeast Asia” some five years later, I co-curated an exhibition with Oscar Ho called “Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity”. Once more we explored wider issues of modernity, though here turned inward to interpret everyday experience during a decade of social turmoil and rapid change. As the subtitle suggests, the exhibition was less about how designers design *things* than about how people use design to shape identities through *lifestyle*. The word may sound superficial, but for Hong Kong “lifestyle” is a key phrase in the Joint Declaration.

One strand of “Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity” concerned purposeful agency: how the colonial administration and local elite represented images of modernity carefully tailored to omit political representation. A more complex story traced the self-fashioning of modernity in the popular imagination, tracing the experience of

consumption, lifestyle and the meanings projected onto new products, fashion and advertising. The objects on display were significant for the small role each played in the self-shaping a whole social imaginary. By this point we had lost interest in the word “identity” as a label for local design, and had moved beyond design connoisseurship.

## Registered Designs

Continuing this research on everyday design we later worked on a sizeable archive and collection for Hong Kong’s Heritage Museum. A primary source for Hong Kong, as for other parts of Asia, was found in the history of registered designs. Compared to the canonical mainstream represented in textbooks, here was an illustrated, fully documented history of design of truly oceanic proportions: a key resource for a world history of design.

Almost two centuries of designs from Asia are registered under local or overseas jurisdictions. For example, India’s records begin in 1868, the Federated Malay States from 1900 and Japan’s designs from 1910. Intriguingly, even in Colonial Malaya or Imperial Manchukuo, the great majority of designs registered are from local manufacturers rather than imperial re-registrations.

From an Indian bullock-cart to Wu An Chang’s ‘male genital strengthening device’, the problem is that few such items possess the glamour, status and personality that can be attached to contemporary work. They are not cool. They are not iconic. So having assembled thousands of items for the Heritage Museum almost all remain in storage. The Museum’s archive has been discontinued and is now little used. This was not through curatorial indifference but because contemporary “creative culture” is more attractive to the Museum’s main audience, and finds official support in the promotion of creative industries.

## Design Promotion

New museums of design across Asia are likely to focus on the kind of contemporary design that appeals to government bodies, sponsors and public alike. Yet just as the region’s design promotion festivals and

expos benefit greatly from official support, such enthusiasm can also circumscribe museums' collection policies, exhibition programming and interpretative strategies. For example, scholars of Asian culture have used the fluid boundaries between art, craft and design in the region to question normative European views of design as an essentially industrial practice, and even to rethink notions of originality. However, what is claimed to be the largest design museum in Asia, Singapore's Red-Dot, conforms to strictly European definitions of design. Again, rather like a design expo Red-Dot's aim is to: "serve as a communication platform (between) the public, consumers and industry."<sup>5</sup>

Even if the idea of "Asian design" originated with cultural historians' adoption of the phrase for promotional display can now overshadow scholarship. For example, the 2010 "Asia Now" exhibit in Los Angeles absorbs scholarship in its subtitle: "Exploring Design Culture". What defines "Asian design"? According to the *Designboom* curator, 'it is sometimes more impacted by beliefs and religion than western design.' So for the "Asia Now" exhibition we were looking for truly unique work that is not too influenced by western styles.' Still, as *Designboom* continues, 'with former Droog co-founder Gijs Bakker at the creative helm, Taiwanese design collective Yii (易) is sure to steal the show at the upcoming Los Angeles exhibit.' Indeed, Yii was later nominated by London's Design Museum for the Brit Insurance Award Design of the Year.<sup>6</sup>

Museum collection, exhibition and interpretation can be skewed towards design that conforms to an international style, though with a suitably "Asian" twist. A parade of such products is a stereotype more suited to an expo than a museum - an issue discussed by the Asian Museum Network Conference last month in Hong Kong. Even so, it can still demand agile curatorial inventiveness to combine fresh aesthetic, historical or political insight into design alongside promotional expectations. To take another Singaporean example, the National Museum's recent design exhibition "Weapons of Mass Desire" pitched a provocative view of the 'military-industrial complex' that threatened to stray into troubling questions about design. But before anything like that happened, the exhibit returned to the progressive narrative of design as improving the quality of life in Singapore.<sup>7</sup>

It is of course a curator's role to manage promotion while

guarding against advertising and propaganda. Exhibitions of design bring this role into sharp focus, if only because corporate promotion is usually inescapable. There is little awkwardness about this. While some claim that commercial sponsorship commodifies art the same can hardly be said about exhibitions of design, for the artefacts on display are already commodities. It follows that museum exhibitions of design are often upfront about promoting national economic policy. The V&A's recent show "British Design:1948-2012" unashamedly announced its purpose to be that of promoting the "nation as a world leader in creativity".<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, and to provoke discussion, it may help to clarify the meaning of the phrase "design promotion". For it sounds banal to say that exhibitions of design tend to promote design. Surely *all* exhibitions should promote public interest in their subject? However, design promotion is a distinct practice, with its own policy and rhetoric.<sup>9</sup>

Since the mid-20th Century policies for "design promotion" have been advocated by the governments of most industrialised nations, implemented through trade and industry bodies, education, events, expos and, in particular, museum exhibitions. The tradition was established a century earlier as industrial competition between Britain and France triggered a series of colossal design expositions – one legacy of which was the V&A Museum and its design collections. And since the nineties, when the scholar Gui Bonsiepe proposed what he called a 'discourse' of design promotion to advance what used to be called the 'Third world', similar policies has been embraced by almost all developing nations.<sup>10</sup>

'Discourse' is an apt term for design promotion, for its characteristic style is monologue. The discourse typically follows three steps. First, a series of selective quotations are assembled idealising design as a universal: as the expression of human innovation; as vital for all forms of business; as fundamental to our quality of life; as key to solving global economic, social and environmental problems. Second, it is claimed that many people still do not understand the true value of design, mistaking it for mere decoration. Third comes the warning: other competitor nations are

already exploiting an understanding of design, and in this way will soon capture market advantage. Anyone who disagrees must be among those unfortunates who *still* do not understand the true value of design.

In the present global economic meltdown such simplistic claims for universal progress through design sound a little hollow. Indeed a few critics have been driven to charge designers with being as morally unprincipled and environmentally wasteful as the corporations employing them. Yet design promotion continues to refresh itself for each new nations and generation, gaining further support from policy and investment while repeating the same idealised, attractive, progressive, didactic discourse. No wonder it is the default position for design display in trade fairs, expos – and increasingly for museums.

Of course museums are not trade fairs. But if museums of design are not to be extra publicity venues to promote the creative industries, then curators will have to draw on stronger interpretative themes that can stand against, and even contend with design promotion.

Well, I can hear that New York Immigration Officer repeating in disbelief: “Design exhibitions without ...design promotion? Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?”

Not really. It is a confusion of terms. The phrase “Asian design” is an ideal brand label for promotional expos. It is just inadequate for museums, even if our present discussion under the title “Asian design” might be taken to support its adoption by Hong Kong’s “Museum Plus”.

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<sup>1</sup> Polytechnic University School of Design ‘Our Philosophy’; [www.sd.polyu.edu.hk/web/About](http://www.sd.polyu.edu.hk/web/About)

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Levitt’, “*The Globalization of Markets*”, *Harvard Business Review* in 1983; *National Characteristics in Design*, V&A Museum “Boilerhouse” exhibition, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> “Exhibition of Modern Design in Japan”, Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art, 1969, p.2; *Nihon no Design: Dento to gentai (Japanese Design: Ancient and Modern)* Seibu Museum of Art, 1984, p.8.; E. Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of*

*East Asiatic Design*, London, 1912, discusses Qing influence on the “eclectic design of modern Chinese industries” (p.545)

<sup>4</sup> Ghose, R., (ed.) *Design and Development in South and Southeast Asia*, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1990; The introduction ‘Design, Development and Cultural Legacies in Asia’ was reproduced in *Design Issues* (Vol. 1, No. 1) MIT, 1989 and in V. Margolin (ed.), *The Idea of Design; A Design Issues Reader*, MIT, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Red Dot Design Museum Singapore [www.red-dot.sg/concept/museum/main\\_page.htm](http://www.red-dot.sg/concept/museum/main_page.htm)

<sup>6</sup> “Asia Now: Exploring Design Culture”, curated by Designboom for *Dwell on Design*, Los Angeles, 2010 [www.coolhunting.com/design/asia-now.php](http://www.coolhunting.com/design/asia-now.php)

<sup>7</sup> “Weapons of Mass Desire: Design and Consumption in the Aftermath of WWII”, National Museum of Singapore, 2008-9.

<sup>8</sup> “British Design 1948-2012: Innovation in the Modern Age”, V&A Museum, 2012 31 March - 12 August 2012. The exhibition celebrates ‘significant moments in the history of British design and how the country continues to be a world leader in creativity and design.’ [www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-british-design](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-british-design).

<sup>9</sup> Raulik-Murphy, G., and G. Cawood provide an international review of contemporary design promotion in: “National Design Systems”, *Creative industries Research*, University of Birmingham, 2009 ([www3.uwic.ac.uk/English/IIDPS/Documents/Raulik-Murphy%20Cawood%20-%20National%20Design%20Systems.pdf](http://www3.uwic.ac.uk/English/IIDPS/Documents/Raulik-Murphy%20Cawood%20-%20National%20Design%20Systems.pdf)).

<sup>10</sup> Bonsiepe, G., ‘Developing countries: awareness of design and the peripheral condition’, in C. Provano (ed.), *History of Industrial Design: 1919-1990: The Dominion of Design*, Electa, Milan, 1990; and ‘Designing the future’, *Design Issues*, Vol. 7, no. 2, 1991, pp. 17-24.