

## DESIGN STORIES FROM HONG KONG

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At *Ming Pao Weekly* magazine, we call ourselves 生活空間, and cover stories on design, the city, and also lifestyle. *Ming Pao Weekly* has been in Hong Kong for more than 40 years; we'll be 45 next year. Our lifestyle magazine is mostly read by mainstream people, teachers, students, designers - our readership is quite big. We deal with many different issues, and have had quite a few design-themed cover stories. For example, we've discussed how designers work with craftsmen. We've also done what we call creative city guides, for which we've talked about Hong Kong design through recommendations from local designers. We've done historic stories, such as on parks in Central, going into archives and looking for original design sketches, documents, and also interviewing city planners, users and so on to look for the stories behind the parks. We also deal with topics that are very up-to-date, such as upcycling: how designers work with the community to turn waste materials into new designs or new systems. At the same time, we will report on Milan's design week; we've been doing it for more than seven years already, but we try to do it from a Hong Kong perspective. Before, there weren't so many designers in Hong Kong, but now you can find quite a lot of things here. Also, this year, Helsinki has been the designated World Design Capital. We went to Helsinki and tried to see how they organise a world design event. We also spoke with local designers there: what they think about their city, or what one can see when walking on the street? We try to approach other cities from an angle that might be relevant to Hong Kong.

In 2005, we did a cover story on Hong Kong. The reason was because after 1997, there were a lot of debates and questions about Hong Kong's identity, how different we are from China, and how we should see ourselves in a more global context. So we looked for stories that were not about Norman Foster, or Philippe Starck, or even Kan Tai-keung, this very important figure in Hong Kong. Instead, we went back to the 1960s, where we found a lot of industrial design icons such as the red-blue-white bag, which everyone used when going back to China. Quite a lot of Hong Kong people came from China, and when they returned to China, they carried their belongings in these bags. We were thinking about the importance of the 1960s after talking with Henry Steiner, an Austrian-born designer who was educated at Yale under Paul Rand and has

been practicing design in Hong Kong since the 1960s. Back then, there were a lot of international designers coming to help design Hong Kong – from architecture, city planning, and so on. They worked with local designers, local officials, and others to do many things. Back then, everything was about function and practicality, but beauty as well.

We try to look at design from a more everyday approach. This is Darkie toothpaste. I tried to look into the background of this brand. It was actually first manufactured in Shanghai in 1933, but later based in Hong Kong and Taiwan. At that time, a lot of packaging were done by Guangzhou artists who had specialised skills making drawings for Chinese medicines that could not easily be copied, with easily identifiable trademarks. And the artist in this case was actually the son of one of the very famous Chinese medicine packaging designers, 梁枝梅. He learned from his father this very traditional skill. His father came to Hong Kong in the 1950s, and one of the works from the second generation is Darkie toothpaste. Why does the image on the package look like a black person? Actually, it's not taken from a black person, but from the artist himself. He referenced his own portrait.

For another project, we picked uniforms. We looked at uniforms from the biggest school uniform shop in Hong Kong, which has designed uniforms for more than 300 schools. The way they design it is very interesting. They work very closely with schools. They have different templates for various types of tops, ribbons, skirts, etc. A very iconic example references Japanese uniforms. At that time, Hong Kong school uniforms looked pretty much like business suits. The owner of this shop thought it wasn't suitable for students to dress like businessmen. So he thought he could design something that was affordable, practical, and easier for girls to get on the bus to go to school. And when the weather got colder, you could put on a little sweater. This is a design for everyday life.

Another example is the two-colour plastic ball designed by the important Hong Kong manufacturer and entrepreneur Chiang Chen. He came to Hong Kong after the Chinese civil war. While he was travelling from Sichuan, he passed through Changjiang, and saw the junction of two rivers. Because of pressure from the flow of the two rivers, their water doesn't combine together. So he applied this logic to his plastic moulding machines, and tried to mix two colours of plastic. You can make cups, along with plastic balls and other products, with this special technique. He was the first to use this technique in industrial

design, but he did not patent it because it was too expensive to get the rights. This was one of the very important plastic designs in Hong Kong.

Another thing we're very concerned with is local craftsmanship. It helps keep neighbourhoods alive as these people use their traditional skills sometimes for even more than two generations in Hong Kong. We covered a project by the Community Museum, for which they teamed craftsmen and designers up to try to make new designs. One example involved the very Hong Kong local style metal box. Designers worked closely with craftsmen to make another version that you could join with a ladder to literally transform it into furniture. You can even download the design and ask a craftsman to make one for you. It does not have to be industrially manufactured. In another case, they tried to turn a wooden cart into a table.

Very often, when we work on local design issues, we will go and talk with a lot of designers and ask if they can share with us what they consider to be a Hong Kong design icon. Henry Steiner said the tram is a very important icon, and explained why. Three young web designers chose Red A plastics. Wong Yan-kwai, who works on movies and is also a writer and painter, suggested a teapot with a plastic handle. It's much easier to pour water with that design.

And it's not just purely local. We've been seeing a lot of foreign designers coming to Hong Kong, like Michael Young. He's been working with many Asian brands, and uses the Hong Kong city experience to design interesting homeware and other products.

We don't just cover product design. We also talk about public space because there have been a lot of issues relating to it, such as regulations and dos and don'ts, etc. For our first examination of public space, we worked with four local architects to consider different issues. For example, we went to the IFC garden and tried to do different kinds of things. We played there. We tried to have a picnic there, all to see how the security guards would react. There is a requirement that such open spaces are for the public, so we should be able to use those spaces. But because they're also private property, there are security issues. We also looked at the temporary structures that domestic helpers make every Sunday in public spaces, where they get together with their friends. We followed them and observed how they make these structures. And also, you may have noticed that we have many salmon pink-coloured buildings in Hong Kong. We tried to find out why.

Is it because of the paint or contract reasons? Why are so many government buildings of that colour? It's because pink is the cheapest paint in construction. Other colours are more expensive; for example, if you want to use blue or black, you have to add other minerals or pigments so it's much more expensive.

Parks are an important part of life in Hong Kong. As we know, west Kowloon is going to have a big new park, where everyone can do everything. Hong Kong parks are supposed to be for the people. But if you've visited Hong Kong parks, you'll see there are a thousand rules about what you can't do. We can't sit on the grass in the parks, for example. So we went back to the first public park. It was supposed to be a government garden. I went to the government archive and dug out the old drawings and also letters written to the Queen asking for money to build the park. They reserved the best land for the park when they were building the Victorian city. Since it's now a botanical garden, you can find a thousand kinds of vegetation there. You can find tropical trees inside this garden. There are more than 30 trees that are over 100 years old. So we went there, looked for the trees and let people know about them. We found a photo from the 1960s, back when everyone would go to this park. The design of the park's centre fountain has changed through the years, so we've also been looking at why it changes. More recently, it's been given a more modern look. It's really nice to go there.

This year we reinvented our magazine. Mr. Stanley Wong is our creative director. We try to have more design and lifestyle elements. Art Basel will be in Hong Kong starting next year, and soon Design Miami will be coming, so we talked to them during Design Basel and did an issue on Art Basel. We did another issue on creative hubs, because given the new PMQ creative hub that will open in Hong Kong, we were wondering what these types of spaces should be. We asked designers what they want for creative spaces, and went all over the city to five different places. First we went to the Innocentre, which was set up by the government to offer incubator programmes for one or two years for young design companies. We also went to the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, where artists can have space in a renovated industrial building. There's also Good Lab, a social enterprise where people share an open space. We also went to two buildings owned by individual landowners. They rent out their spaces with very, very low rents so that young creative teams can move in and flourish. High rent is a big problem in Hong Kong. Designers always have to find space for their studios or exhibitions. Another interesting example is the Easy Industrial

building in Kwun Tong. It was actually opened by a guy named Aden. He's a jewelry designer. His father is an architect. He bought the building in the 1980s. Back then, there was no lift in it. But when he came back from Australia, he took over all the floors, changed it, and looked for tenants including designers like Michael Leung of HK Farm, who does urban farming. You can find a lot of tenants in the building. They work together, they're young, and they grow organically. You can see musicians, leather makers, wood makers, and upcycling designers there. Aden gives them a really good rent.

Another project we've done is called GeoHong Kong. We worked with one of Asia's leading studios, called Design and Cultural Studies Workshop, which is led by Mr. Zhao Guangchao. They're based in Hong Kong, but have done a lot of studies on the Forbidden City, for example. We work on the magazine features, and also on the educational component by linking up with design schools around Hong Kong and finding design students to work on various projects. One of them is on Hollywood Road. Hollywood Road is very long - from Central to Sheung Wan. It's interesting because Central used to have the western police station, the government, and westerners who all lived in Central. Meanwhile, Sheung Wan was for the Chinese. You can find Tung Wah Hospital, which was founded by wealthy Chinese, on the eastern end of the road. So it's a very good mix of Chinese and western culture, and you can still find a mix of old and new, including galleries, very nice restaurants, good boutiques, and at the same time, nice old architecture, street life, craftsmen, and so on. This is a one-year project, and we're about halfway through. Some of the stories we've done include one on the Central Police Station. We looked for policemen who worked inside this very important historic building, which is now being converted into an arts centre. We also looked for architects who have been studying the style of the architecture. One of the interesting stories is that, back in the colonial era, they didn't have architects or designers. So how did they design such a big police station? It turns out they had a bible decorated with all these different kinds of designs, and they brought it to Hong Kong, found the workmen, and combined the designs together. This is how the design arose for one of our important buildings.

We also did a story on street stalls, researched by one of our interns from Hong Kong Polytechnic University's design school. She is just a first-year student. I asked her to go and find the archives, look at post stations, the government rules applied to these kinds of little green boxes. The design actually came from these rules and

officials' requirements. In the end, she interviewed street stall vendors as well, and identified three stages of design and drew them up. There's a triangular variation, which is the first generation. For the second generation, stall owners made a lot of little changes, like tables for computers, where they can also have their lunch. The latest one is a design from 2000 by an architect who thought it looked like Ikea. You can put things like bookshelves there. It doesn't work at all. But there's still some flexibility for street hawkers for doing business and spreading everything out. These are observations made by a design student. She went to these stalls every day, talked with the vendors, looked at the stalls, measured them, etc.

We did another project on newspapers, comparing their design from the 1930s and the 1960s. How did it change? How do the changes in society affect the design of newspapers? We've also looked at traditional or very small businesses along Hollywood Road. There is an almost dying craftsmanship in Hong Kong. It used to be that printers would do newspapers; now they only work with specialised, project-based printing. But they have many clients like Lane Crawford, Shanghai Tang, etc. Another shop we found has been running for three generations. They were originally tailors for suits. Now they do alterations for Lane Crawford, Joyce, and others. They alter Armani suits, and so on. They're really amazing. And we also looked at Man Mo Temple, which has been there for more than 160 years. They've kept a lot of very authentic architectural features and traditions inside the temple. It's very small, it's a tourist place, but it's one of the liveliest places on Hollywood Road. We sought out an architecture professor. He told us how we should look at Chinese architecture. We also went to see the rituals performed there in autumn, undertaken by the Tung Wah Hospital Group. These have been continuing for 50 years. They've kept all the rituals and everything intact.