

Craft Ink series

The lucky country – beyond default Settling the cultural nomad

As innovative design–thinkers and recent arrivals from Europe, **Simon Horauf**, **Martin Kornberger** and **Johannes Weissenbaeck** take a playful look at the nature of cultural exchange and influence in Australia now. Lomo photography by **Paula Birch**.

European civilisation can be understood in one of its founding myths: The Roman Empire, the cradle of European society, was established when Romulus drew a line around a piece of land in order to differentiate the inside of his civilised city (later to be known as Rome) from the Barbarian outside. From then on, civilisation equalled boundaries and territorial aspirations. In fact, Romulus was so deadly serious about his new border that he killed his twin brother, Remus, who ignored the imaginary fence. This new idea of a shiny new culture built within a robust border, organised and measured by administrative and cultural systems, made the previously common *modus vivendi* of nomadism look almost shabby. Ever since then, European civilisation has used boundaries to create identity on the inside, through the alienation of what was outside. It became truly obsessed with categorising and measuring people and places – the many failing colonial ventures being but some of many examples.

So, Western progress might actually have a few flaws, too. In the past decade or so, new sources of inspiration have resulted in some interesting additions to the traditionally protective approach of territorial Western culture. The concept of nomadism has found its way into our lives. Those ancient fences seem to have corroded, and borders between countries as well as cultures seem to have become somewhat blurry. Nomads follow ideas, not ideologies; they believe in movement, not settlement; and they prefer connection between things rather than domination over them. In the traditional sense, nomadism was a response to a harsh climate or sensitive ecosystem that did not support the constant presence of a human community. Similar to travelling birds or the great American buffalo, nomads constantly search for greener pastures, a milder climate or better access to water.

Growing mobility and the rise of what has lately been labelled ‘the creative class’ (thanks, Richard Florida) contributed to the advent of a new cultural nomad moving freely between creative economies. In a formula, the cultural nomad is a product of the global exchange and the local influence of ideas. They mingle and mate in cities all around the globe that are open, tolerant, and where work is balanced with a healthy dose of lifestyle. Sydney, and more generally, Australia is one of these places.

Luckily, the other day, the author of these lines could observe three of those nomadic creatures in a Glebe coffee shop, which provided him with the opportunity to study the cultural nomads in greater detail. The three foreign men in their late twenties and early thirties were sitting around a table and were engaged in a heated discussion. Besides their foreign accents, the second most obvious feature that identified them as cultural nomads was their naive, almost cultish belief in words and definitions and in exchanging the like in order to reach some common ground.

What follows is an almost authentic transcription of their conversations, which are doubtlessly related back to some more fundamental concerns about Australia’s position as a country with some decent pastures for the new nomads.

JW [Johannes Weissenbaeck]: Honestly, I can't imagine going back home. After having lived in London for a few years, it would be so hard to go back to a place like that. Here I wake up and think, 'wow, it's such a great place to live'. Where else can I go for a surf in the morning, work in an exciting job during the day, have lunch in the sun and run into some intriguing characters like you guys in the evening?

SH [Simon Horauf]: That's true, it's that mixture that makes this place so unique, isn't it?

MK [Martin Kornberger]: Yeah, maybe, but, look, I am not into surfing and all that sunny, beachy stuff and sometimes I worry whether my brain gets enough stimulation to keep the creative engine going. I mean it's so hedonistic and every option, every choice is about lifestyle. Sydney is a melting pot for a lot of things that used to be separated – you can get a kangaroo curry, Thai-fried carramundi and green-tea-flavoured iced latte within a ten-minute walking radius.

SH: Aaah! This is exactly because you don't surf! Things seem to go more with the flow here! All this is just evolution and the green-tea latte is some barista's experiment, who is trying to do something new. He probably had this idea after a good surf!

MK: Okay, that's all interesting, but I often wonder where the real connection between these things is? This stir-and-mix formula works for ready-made pancakes, but maybe not for a whole culture.

SH: It's a young country, I guess. Open for new combinations and trying to make sense of all these influences that exist in and around this island.

JW: Exactly! And you know, this makes for a culture that embraces new things very quickly. Just look at *Sydney Esquisse*, the design and arts festival.¹ How quickly everybody got on to this idea, and all sorts of people, too – from the directors of Macquarie Bank to a regular Joe on the streets of Surry Hills. Back in Europe, you would have to look real hard to find so much enthusiasm and willingness to make things work. And this is a great environment to be in. There is opportunity in the air.

MK: Sure, Australia is more open to new ideas and experiments in general. But this openness and 'anything goes' culture has its dark sides – it is dangerously close to ignorance and indifference. People might applaud just about anything anybody does ... There is no conflict, no confrontation, no clash and no friction between the production and consumption of design. People love fashion, glitter and glamour. But they don't like to see how things are made, and how they affect others.

JW: Yeah! 'Good on ya, mate!' [Childish laughter by all three.]

SH: You're right! But, seriously, it means that there is the potential for such a loose culture that has not yet crystallised to accept all sorts of influences and learn from what is happening all around. And in a way, I guess that's why we are here, no? You know, because there is still some play in the joints that make up the structure of such a culture. There's space and movement. Not like in Europe, where you have some great, dignified substance as a cultural base, but it's stiff as hell because it's hundreds of years old!

JW: What you are basically saying is that there is a lack of identity – if you don't know what you are standing for, you can't really disagree. This might be a symptom of a more fundamental problem – the search for an Australian identity, where people are confident enough to disagree with one another because they have something stronger in common that connects them.

SH: So you reckon it's a question of identifying exactly what Australia is?

JW: Maybe it's this situation of having so much scope that is a blessing in disguise. There is a certain void, which might make objects and people feel out of context at times. But this emptiness also represents something like a big, untouched canvas, waiting and wanting to be filled – and

that's a great potential for all those cultural nomads who arrive here looking for new combinations and new ways of doing things.

SH: So maybe it's not so much about defining identity, but about trying to connect available things and exchange ideas with each other. It's less about who you are, but how you can connect to a whole lot of different, maybe even contradicting things.

MK: Well, in this light, Australia is something of a gigantic lab where humans run experiments in real-life conditions, with themselves as the guinea pigs. There is enough space, both physically and metaphorically, that you can think outside your own box without ending up straight away in someone else's box.

SH: Maybe that's it – Australia is between east and west, between all religions, it is between old and new, between global city and local bush, between high-tech design and traditional craft. Australia is neither A nor B, it is in between one of the oldest cultures in the world, the culture of the Aboriginal people, and the latest form of Western development ...

JW: ... not to say progress.

MK: So, I guess Australia could become the great plains for the cultural nomads who are looking for that variety all at the same time. Not the red, dry land, but the green, rich pastures – metaphorically speaking, of course.

JW: So then, the question becomes in which direction will we develop – and how can we nurture more valuable connections to produce an environment of these green pastures ... ?

This conversation, which represents the typical European cocktail of slightly arrogant, high-flying ideas mixed with not so high-flying, real life observations, ended abruptly as the three young men suddenly rushed off. Presumably, they had another meeting over a green-tea latte with some other cultural nomads.

Simon Horauf, Martin Kornberger and Johannes Weissenbaeck arrived in Australia from London (2000), Vienna (2001) and London (2001) respectively. They are co-directors and founders of PLAY. PLAY Consulting is a creative think-tank, specialising in branding, marketing and cultural change for businesses and public organisations. Simon, Martin and Johannes are the current collaborative editors of *(inside) Australian Design Review*.

Endnotes

1. The first *Sydney Esquisse* design and arts festival involved over 200 designers and artists, 35 venues in Surry Hills and Redfern, with parties and events held over four days (27 – 30 November, 2003). PLAY have scheduled the next *Sydney Esquisse* to be held over ten days (18 – 27 March, 2005) for more information visit: www.sydneyesquisse.org

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