

Craft Ink series

Talent is not enough

Respected Australian design historian Michael Bogle offers a broad analysis that traces 40 years of vibrant activity and education, highlights three exceptional designers, and suggests a strong future for design in this country.

In 2004, design is one of the broadest categories of human activity: it can be a profession, an avocation, a review committee, a moral obligation or a directive from the Premiers office. Twenty-first-century design has the ability to offend large groups of people. Chris Connells *Pepe chair* of 1993 appears on postage stamps; an Australian dress designed from American Express cards is shown around the world; and Australian furniture features on MTV.

To celebrate 40 years of Australian design, this brief essay spools through design in all its tenses: past, present and future, and highlights some optimistic trends for the future.

Education in the present tense

Designers are better resourced than at any other time in the past four decades. This statement may read like an Education Ministers press release, but the number of universities providing design programs have trebled since the 1960s; the Design Institute of Australia (the national organisation for professional designers) services members in 16 disciplines,¹ and there are over ten design magazines published in Australia and New Zealand on the Taylor Square newsagency shelves this month.²

In the most recent figures, five per cent of all full-time university students were enrolled in degree-granting art, design and performing arts programs.³ Forty years ago, art and design were commonly taught in technical colleges and the extinct Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs). In the 1980s, an ambitious Commonwealth agenda of forced amalgamations and the creation of new universities transformed the system. Design schools typically merged into universities.

Education in the past tense

Design training in mid twentieth-century Australia was confined to technical college programs commonly allied with formal apprenticeships coordinated by trade unions. A designer-in-training in the graphic arts, for example, could study design at technical college while working under indentures with a lithography company.⁴

A mid twentieth-century designer might read an article about design in their professional journals, but they would not find an Australian design magazine on the newsagency shelves. While a designer could belong to a trade union, there was no organisation for the design profession until 1948⁵. By the 1950s, however, the unique profession of Designer had fully emerged.

Design in the past tense

Clement Meadmore (b. 1929)

Clement Meadmore began his career in this mid-century milieu. While his international fame rests on his sculpture, his Australian reputation was originally based on his work in furniture and lighting. Meadmore began his study at 'The Tech or Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT) in 1946. In 1948, 'The Tech became the first school in Australia to offer a formal industrial design course ('Industrial design had become a commonly-encountered term a decade earlier). Meadmore began taking courses and by 1949, he was advertising his services as an industrial designer.⁶

Meadmore had designed his first success by 1952 – a black steel dining chair corded with synthetic fibre – under the banner of Meadmore Originals, 86 Collins Street, Melbourne. From the mid-1950s, until a move to Sydney in 1960, Meadmore put into production nine innovative works for the domestic market: a standard lamp; a three-legged table lamp; corded nesting stools; a three-legged moulded plywood chair; upholstered parfait chairs and table; a wire chair (manufactured by Michael Hirst); a black lino-top table (manufactured by Michael Hirst); and the DC 601A wire chair (manufactured by Michael Hirst).

After moving to Sydney, Meadmore taught sculpture at the National Art School, and took on a role as photo editor for the first editions of *Vogue Australia*. After three years in Sydney, Meadmore moved to New York and was claimed by contemporary sculpture. He maintained his interest in furniture design in the United States and, in 1974, he published *The Modern Chair*, an illustrated survey of contemporary furniture from the Thonet Brothers to Mario Bellini.⁷

How to read Meadmore's success? He had talent and possessed the ability to read the marketplace and produce the work that his era wanted. He also received important support from retailers. But during his active design career, he was a gallery director, a teacher, a sculptor and a photo editor for a fashion magazine. This meandering career path is not uncommon among designers, then or now.

Design in the present tense

Andrew Last (b. 1963)

Like Clement Meadmore, Andrew Last is an RMIT-trained designer. Andrew has positioned himself as a teacher, a designer and a maker. As a student at RMIT, he says he profited from the late-1980s schism between the art school tradition (skills) and the more recent university-based design training (theory). He works exclusively as a designer in metals, creating jewellery, containers and lighting.

Last has not been drawn to designing for production. 'Some of my work, he says, 'has come perilously close to production possibilities, but ultimately no... Andrew notes that he does 'some of [his] work ... in editions, as some work lends itself to production, other work takes some time and this requires steady employment.' That is, teaching.

He has chosen teaching over designing-for-production. He currently lectures at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand. Teaching design also allows him access to studio time. 'I've never had a studio of my own, he said recently, 'I ask for some respect for the studio from the students, as it's my place too. The manner in which I teach relates to what I'm doing in my own work. We [the students and I] are often working in parallel with my interests.

The requirements of the academic life, however, are very different from a design and manufacturing career. The 'dark arts' of a teaching career require exhibitions, exhibition jury selections, meetings, guest lectures, publications and more. With these demands, there can be little time left to pursue commercial opportunities or even commissions.

Designing and making things by hand is something that Andrew Last prefers. In his view, 'my generation of university-trained designers was at the end of the tradition of skill in working in metals. [Education] is now focused on breadth, he says, rather than virtuosity. That is, the development of exceptional skills.

Caroline Casey (b. 1964)

As a design graduate from Sydney College of the Arts, Caroline Caseys professional path wanders from her 1980s Sydney fashion label 'Caz, to New Yorks Parsons School of Design, to her current furniture and home furnishings work represented by Anibous Sydney and Melbourne showrooms. While she has been involved in workshops, Caroline has never been drawn to teaching.

When Casey returned to Sydney from the United States to set up a studio in 1994, she took her work to Ute Rose at *Anibou* in Sydney and was offered a display of her work; another exhibition followed in 1997. Now, she has an impressive range of work in production through *Anibou*.

A solo show curated by talent-spotter Judith OCallaghan at the Powerhouse Museum in 1998–1999 gave Casey considerable exposure among the design curatorium from Australias museums and galleries. OCallaghans exhibition catalogue, *Essential Structure*, contains some revealing vignettes about Caseys work⁸ 'For me, Casey says, 'it's about pursuing a strong, simple idea, isolating the functional requirements and paring back to an essential structure ... In the end its the structure that represents the essence of an idea.

It is precisely 'this 'structure of her design work that allows it to be reproduced at a commercial scale. If a client wants 130 units of her *Heliconia* lamp (1998), or 600 units of the *FLIP* newspaper stand (1998) from Anibou, that is a realisable order.

Carolines career is similar to that of many contemporary design professionals. While it is clear that she is the master of her materials, it is less certain that she feels the need to acquire the skills to produce her work. For many twenty-first-century designers, balancing the acquisition of skills and the need for developing ideas is part of their path to design autonomy.

Designers in the future tense

Whether students pursue design skills or design theory, design education is an uncontrolled market. Unlike the university admission quotas that rigorously shape the demand for medicine or law, design schools will continue to produce graduates for a market where there is a shortage of design-based jobs. Talent is not enough. The cruel laws of economics will direct the designer's fate.

The increasing pool of trained designers suffers, in part, from what the economists call 'structural unemployment – the mismatch between the skills and location of unemployed designers and unfilled vacancies for these skills. The simple lack of public and private financial investment in Australian industries that employ designers also plays a role.

But while many 21st century designers may be 'structurally unemployed, they constitute a form of 'Social Capital. To our collective benefit, they have been educated in a common design language that confers a degree of social solidarity, unusual in most professional communities.

While many designers may enter the shadow world of the 'informal economy, these graduates can discuss products in terms of design values rather than dollar values. They can visualise alternatives to poorly designed consumer products. And because they have little or no allegiances to industries or at an extreme, even to careers, designers are alarmingly free to analyse and criticise the markets offerings.

The increasing volume of graduate designers produces social and political pressure. Their presence creates community demands for improved design, for more informed buying decisions and for a domestic marketplace where well-designed objects get noticed. Designers, whether employed, under-employed or unemployed, are important social assets.

Michael Bogle is an Australian design historian. His most recent book, *Designing Australia* (Pluto Press, 2002), is an anthology of essays on Australian design from authors from the nineteenth century to the present. Michaels earlier history published in 1998, *Design in Australia 1880–1970*, is available from Thames & Hudson.

End Notes

1. See the Design Institute of Australias website at <www.dia.org.au>.
2. *Creative, Artichoke, Monument, Design Graphics, INDesign, Curve, Oxygen, IDN, Inside, AR, Architecture Australia, Object* and other smaller publications.
3. The Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) figures for full-time equivalent figures are from 1996. The *2004 Art & Design Education Guide* lists 90 institutions offering design courses in Australia.
4. George Johnsons famous novel, *My Brother Jack*, 1964, provides a glimpse of this form of training and apprenticeship.
5. See the Design Institute of Australias website, op. cit., for a thorough history.
6. Meadmore says, however, '...I was bored with the way it was run. I decided I'd learn more from books, which I did. See Geoffrey De Groen, 'Playing with Blocks. Clement Meadmore, in *Some Other Dream. The Artist, the Art World and the Expatriate*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, p. 66.
7. Clement Meadmore, *The Modern Chair*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1974, re-released by Dover Publications, New York, 1997.
8. Judith OCallaghan, *Caroline Casey: Essential Structure*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 1998.

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