

# Introduction

## Hazel Clark

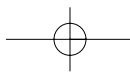
Devoting this issue to design in Hong Kong draws attention to the fact that so called “marginal” cultures must now play a part in any consideration of design in the world. Not only to redress a still prevailing Euro-American dominance of the discourse, but, also as the following pages indicate, because in these cultural “margins” reside powerful resonances of and for the mutual “other.” Thus the papers, in speaking about Hong Kong, address issues which have significance far beyond the territory, both geographically and intellectually.

Seen here from the perspective of the 1990s, Hong Kong is a global city, like others, facing the unforeseen challenges of the millennium, but also it is a city caught within its own history, experiencing the change in its sovereignty from Britain to Mainland China. During a century of British rule, it had developed from a “barren rock” to an international center of manufacturing, business, and banking. Yet beneath this veneer of commercial and economic success dwelled an anxiety—one that simultaneously enabled but potentially undermined much that had been achieved.

The years following the 1984 signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which sanctioned the “handover,” highlighted the complexity of Hong Kong. An international city and a colony with an the impending change into a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China brought urgency to the need to establish and represent its own identity. This was no simple task; a century of colonialism had produced some unusual, and paradoxical features in the cultural space of Hong Kong. Ackbar Abbas has astutely identified Hong Kong as “not so much a place as a space of transit,” a doorway for people and trade, where everything “floats”—currencies, values and human relations.<sup>1</sup> The erasure of the colonial space, by, what many saw as, an alien identity, brought, what Abbas terms, “a kind of last-minute collective search for a more definite identity.” In this task of self-identification design had a significant role to play.

Seeking identity through design was not new in Hong Kong. Efforts had been made to do so in the 1920s and 30s, but they were not sustained. The mid century development of the manufacturing sector was dependent on export and on adaptive design, fostered under the OEM (Overseas Equipment Manufacture) system. Design became regarded as a Western import, a symbol of modernity and “good taste,” which, by implication, had to be brought in from the outside. This was not without benefits. In the late 1960s, the arrival

<sup>1</sup> Ackbar Abbas *Hong Kong. Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 4–6.



of a number of designers from overseas helped to establish the design profession and design education.

Professional design was established first in visual communication, with the contribution of Henry Steiner and others.<sup>2</sup> Hong Kong's bilateral culture became represented in the "East meets West" paradigm. Alan Chan, one of the territory's most renowned graphic designers, described his winning design for the 1997 Hong Kong Designers Association annual awards:

The yellow and red "Lipton" label hangs on the end of a string over the side of a steaming teacup. A more traditional English image is hard to find, except the small white teacup which has no handle; it is a Chinese cup containing a Western incarnation of the ancient drink.<sup>3</sup>

But the "East meets West" strategy, innovative though it can be, provides only a "one-dimensional" characterization of Hong Kong design.

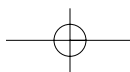
The authors of the papers in this issue were all involved in design and design education in Hong Kong in the 1990s. Some were long term residents, others shorter-term visitors, but each contributes an individual perspective, drawn from their shared experience of the colony before, during and after the handover. Then, as of course now, Hong Kong's "bigger picture" is China—and that is where our issue, begins, as it must. To establish the China context, I asked Clive Dilnot to revisit a paper he presented to an industrial design conference in Beijing in 1995.

Dilnot reminds us that we cannot see Hong Kong in isolation from the Mainland. With its international contacts and experience, Hong Kong is China's most logical "design center." As a conduit into the global economy, Hong Kong can help China achieve the three scenarios for design that Dilnot projects. But to do this, Hong Kong design practice must change. What Dilnot calls "the Hong Kong model" is one that trivializes and operationalizes the role of the designer. Cecilia Chu corroborates this view in representing the collective frustration of Hong Kong interior designers faced with growing pressures, exacerbated by the Asian economic downturn. She sees interior design as a profession that has been marginalized so much that it lacks the authority to fulfill its proper potential. Chu warns that unless professional design is more valued in Hong Kong, it will face serious competition from the Mainland.

Architects, Gutierrez + Portefaix, on the other hand, write not about the operational aspects of their profession, but about its innovative ways of addressing the paradoxes of contemporary China, the collision of communism and capitalism, within the urban density and connectivity of Hong Kong. Ezio Manzini shares their view that there are valuable lessons to be learned from observing the urban and cultural space of Hong Kong. Manzini advocates close examination of this dense urban culture to provide the key for "new forms of life" engendered by culturally hybrid ways of living,

2 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

3 Alan Chan, *South China Morning Post*, November 3, 1996.



predicated on the high density and connectivity of the population along with its cross-cultural character. Hong Kong is offered as a “laboratory of the future” where sustainable solutions may be sought as models for other, similarly complex, urban environments.

Tony Fry also looks through Hong Kong to the future. For Fry Hong Kong was a literal and metaphoric “port of entry” to Chinese culture. He sees it not simply as a binary culture, but more as a place of unified opposites, emblematic of the Chinese concept of *Yin yang*. It is its authentic inauthenticity, its unsituated situatedness, its “glocal” presence, which provides Hong Kong with its design opportunity.

Benny Leong has already taken up this opportunity in his work as a designer and as a teacher. In common with Fry, Leong responds positively to the lessons that can be drawn from a study of Chinese culture, traditions and history. But these lessons do not simply apply to its representation; they deal with more fundamental and more complex ideas. Leong exhorts a theoretically-based design method as a way of addressing the ethical issues which much modern Western design persists in avoiding.

To establish the depth of approach and understanding in professional design which Fry, Manzini and Leong each advocate will require education. And design education in Hong Kong has yet to find its focus, according to Siu King Chung. Discussing its origins in the 1960s and 70s, Siu reveals how a failure of vision and a lack of clarity in the very understanding of the potential of design was exacerbated by a decision-making process that was largely resource-driven.

It is with Siu then that we end this issue, not just with his paper, but also with the review of the book he compiled with Phoebe Wong, based on the 1999 exhibition *Designs You Don't Know What To Do With*. Lisa Norton's insightful review brings us back to the products of, what Dilnot terms, design with a small “d,” design which occurs everywhere. It is a good place to end, in reminding ourselves of the ubiquitousness of design. We have focused here on one place, but the implications and importance of what has been written is by no means culturally specific—it applies both within and beyond Hong Kong—and that is its point.

Before concluding I would like to mention the journal cover, and to thank Eddy Yu, a designer whose work I much admire, for taking the time to provide an excellent and appropriate design. Thanks are also due to each of the contributors, who have suffered variously my coaxing and cajoling, as well as, for some, an extended wait to see their work in print. Also thanks to the editors of *Design Issues* for inviting me to conceive and guest edit this issue and particular thanks to Diane Stadelmeier for her continued support and encouragement. I hope you, the reader, will find the following pages both interesting and stimulating and I would welcome any comments: [hazelclark@earthlink.net](mailto:hazelclark@earthlink.net).