

Interior Design in Hong Kong: A Practice in Transition

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Introduction

This paper arises out of a collective frustration shared by myself and many other Hong Kong interior designers faced with growing pressures in their practice. By examining the development of interior design in Hong Kong, its significance, controversies and current challenges, I will attempt to unfold the limitations and potentialities of a profession that, despite having tremendous impact in shaping our everyday environment, too often is marginalized. In addressing these issues, my intention is to seek a deeper understanding of the nature of interior design in Hong Kong, and further much-needed inquiry into the profession and its practices.

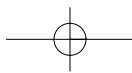
Speak to any interior designer in Hong Kong, and you are likely to hear that the practice has had its day. Confronted by intense competition and weak demand under a prolonged economic downturn, many interior designers have become pessimistic about their future in the once dynamic economy. The common view is that the weak economy is the root cause of all the problems. Interior design in Hong Kong historically has relied heavily on monetary growth and market positioning for its popularity.¹ But many interior designers feel that this view is too simplistic and masks more troubling issues.

Designers have been struggling, not only to secure projects, but increasingly with the very process of designing. Common complaints include clients forcing unreasonable changes on their work, and ambitious contractors taking over their role. Of course, there also are the familiar Hong Kong problems of too little time, too tight a budget, and the constant demand for the new and the fanciful. The outcomes often are criticized for lacking originality and sophistication, being kitsch, or even downright tacky.²

This may seem like a gloomy scenario, and to be fair, there is a handful of talented designers whose work has won them praise at home and abroad. Yet problems are widespread. Behind the familiar faces of star designers are many that struggle with the daily stresses of over hectic deadlines, exhaustion of ideas, unending compromises, overwork and under pay. All this seems inherent in the life of the average Hong Kong interior designer, who also is fighting to gain respect for a profession that often is seen as less

1 This perspective on the state of the Hong Kong interior design industry is partially based on a series of interviews with interior designers in Hong Kong in early 2002. They included designers working in the three major interior design sectors: hospitality, residential, and corporate interiors, as well as members representing the Hong Kong Interior Designers Association (HKIDA).

2 This view might seem too harsh, but it has been widespread. See, for example, Liam Fitzpatrick, "Why Hong Kong Is so Ugly?" in *Eastern Express* (February 18–19, 1995).



legitimate and secondary to the more established disciplines of architecture and engineering.

When asked to reflect on these difficulties, most designers tend to blame Hong Kong as being too commercial, and its population as being insufficiently “educated” to appreciate interior design’s potential for adding value at a various levels. Many envy designers in other countries who are perceived as having more time and space to create quality work and gain more recognition. Given the pragmatics of the highly market-driven context of Hong Kong, there seems very little hope in elevating interior design to a higher level. The causes of the problems are seen to be deeply ingrained and too complicated to be addressed systematically.

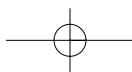
While it is easy to attribute problems to an external cause, nevertheless there is a discrepancy between interior design practice and its assumed “value” in Hong Kong. While almost all interior designers I interviewed voiced a desire to improve the quality of life, when pushed for detail, they were unwilling or unable to articulate this in practical terms. Despite growing pressures, there has been little debate on any level on the nature and changing priorities of interior design, nor are there initiatives to investigate its role in relation to other industries, and how and why society has changed its expectation of what interior design can provide. Interior designers in Hong Kong continue to perpetuate ideals that are at odds with the demands of clients, many of whom are unable to appreciate the designers’ potential.

Interior Design: A Practice of Disengagement?

Part of this malaise can be traced to the negative connotations of interior design as mere decoration. Forms of interior design are ubiquitous in Western and Westernized countries, but its omnipresence often is overlooked, even within design discourse itself. Despite the ever-growing demand for design in homes, offices, shops, and restaurants, and the fascination with interior furnishings and glossy stylebooks, interior design remains a field in isolation.³

Why is it so difficult to affirm the value of an activity so closely intertwined with our everyday lives? There are at least two underlying reasons. The first is that, unlike architecture, interior design rarely is seen to encompass a social dimension or public purpose. The interior tends to be confined to the private and the enclosed, and is literally not expected to relate to what lies outside. This disengagement from the larger context has more or less left interior design as a self-contained practice that only addresses the interests of clients. The second is that any emphasis on the visual and the decorative makes it more difficult to justify benefits to the users. Compared with the design of products, furniture, transportation, and buildings, interior design is much less specific in defining its role. Most project statements tend to be vague (perhaps with the exception of large-scale projects which contain more technical

3 Until recently, there had been little academic writing devoted to the field of interior design (despite the existence of a multitude of how-to-do-it interior design texts and manuals). This phenomenon is parallel to the overriding emphasis on the technique of generating interior drawings, as opposed to theoretical inquiries, in most interior design schools.



descriptions), often repeatedly restating a general goal to “improve the functions and aesthetics of space.” Also, the majority of “successful” interiors featured in books and magazines are appraised mostly for their visual appeal and choice of “styles,” which are, of course, largely subjective. As Julia Lasky noted in a recent issue of *Interiors*, the lack of empirical studies and critical reviews of interiors makes it even harder for the professionals to justify the activity as valuable and relevant.⁴ As a result, interior design can be relegated as “trivial” and “nonessential” and as making little lasting contribution to the larger culture. This disturbing phenomena, while to some extent common to interior design practice everywhere, takes on particular significance in the Hong Kong context which, as we will see, serves to deepen its disengagement and ultimately to push the practice towards a crisis.

Designing Hong Kong

Despite a long history of manufacturing arts and crafts products, design in Hong Kong (and indeed the surrounding regions of China) often is assumed not to have existed until the postwar boom years. Some misleading written histories, colonial education, and postwar trade policies have only recognized and promoted modern design from the West.⁵ Design, whatever the area of professional activity, generally is understood solely as a Western import, one which represents idealistic images of modernity, progress, fashions and good taste that fires the aspirations of a population that continues to expect to gain upward mobility through the rapid accumulation of wealth.⁶

Under this dominant mindset, interior design largely has been viewed as an add-on service, or a form of packaging that serves to improve image, elevate status, and boost sales. As a result, Western-inspired designs, which carry strong symbolic meanings, often are superimposed arbitrarily on given spaces (as well as on furniture, products, fashion, and many building facades). Styles from a great variety of locales and periods are seen as a multiple-choice vocabulary available for application. This phenomenon is reflected in the many show apartments, where a range of different design themes are simultaneously displayed in equal-sized apartments to represent a range of life-style choices.⁷ (Figure 1) The perception of design as a quick means to dress things up, and the emphasis on surface appearance, have resulted in the appearance of many quasi-Western style designs all over the city. (Figure 2)

Adding to the complication is a general perception that interior design, like Hong Kong itself, is transient.⁸ There exists a constant impetus to renew, refurbish, and renovate, largely shaped by the economic and land policy⁹ that renders Hong Kong’s built environment impermanent. Continual demolition has come to be a way of life, and rarely is the design of an interior, especially in the commercial sector, expected to last more than few years before the

4 See Julia Lasky, “Gaining Critical Mass,” *Interiors* (June 2001): 30.

5 Matthew Turner, “Early Modern Design in Hong Kong,” *Design History: An Anthology* Dennis P. Doordan, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 201–2.

6 For more on this phenomenon see Helen Hau-Ling Cheng, “Consuming a Dream: Homes in Advertisements and Imagination in Contemporary Hong Kong” in *Consuming Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001).

7 Ibid.

8 See Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong Press, 1997).

9 See Cecilia Chu and Kylie Ubergang, *Saving Hong Kong’s Cultural Heritage*, a policy research paper written for the Civic Exchange, www.civic-exchange.org (Hong Kong: 2002).

Figure 1

Hong Kong showflat at "The Waterfront,"
Wing Tai Asia Development, West Kowloon,
Hong Kong, 2000.



Figure 2

Quasi-Western design in Hong Kong.
Shopping mall signage, Heng Fa Chuen, Hong
Kong, May 2002. Photo: Cecilia Chu.



building is demolished and refurbished all over again.¹⁰ Even in the residential sector, the most speculative property market in the world encourages the population to change homes fairly regularly.¹¹ Interior design, therefore, like seasonal fashion, is regarded as a casual exercise in which a style or theme is introduced, used up and then shed like a skin to be replaced with a new and unrecognizable version of itself.

For a population with a strong group psychology, this tendency to pick up a trend and then discard it altogether only further reinforces the view that interior design is cosmetic, transferable and disposable. (The associated negative ecological impact and potential erosion of cultural roots cannot be discussed here, but should be noted). Interior design seems helplessly trapped in the realm of the trivial and in a state of self-perpetuation.

10 The Hilton Hotel in the Central district was a notable example of a building that was completely and expensively refurbished in the late 1990s, only to be torn down shortly after its completion when the site was sold and redeveloped as a high-rise office building.

11 See Helen Hau-Ling Cheng, "Consuming a Dream: Homes in Advertisements and Imagination in Contemporary Hong Kong," in *Consuming Hong Kong*,



Figure 3

Homogeneity in Hong Kong's design variation of the same style. Bamboo furniture—vernacular tradition meets contemporary style, Hong Kong, June 2002. Photo: Cecilia Chu.

The "Design" of Design Knowledge

As suggested earlier, one of the causes of this predicament relates to historical developments and an education system that has rejected local sources of originality and eradicated knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture that are able to provide potentially valuable sources and contexts for contemporary design.¹² Tony Fry has pointed out that the reciprocal relationship between how design is produced and consumed, learned and thought, inevitably will determine our perception of design.¹³ In other words, our designed environment "designs" our thinking of design, ways to design, and beliefs in the values it carries. If we follow this suggestion, we can see how the highly disengaged, designed context of Hong Kong has continued to reinforce the view that design: must be imported from the West; market-driven; and a tool for consumption. These beliefs shape and effectively lower any expectations of design practice as an isolated, neutral, and purely commercial activity set apart from intellectual inquiry.

In his research on early design in Hong Kong, Matthew Turner reveals the high levels of indigenous design capability of Hong Kong designers, now largely forgotten.¹⁴ Until the 1960s, when Hong Kong became the contemporary workshop of the world, design maintained strong links to China's long and rich aesthetic traditions. Designers in various fields, many of them trained in craft-based apprenticeships, were able to integrate and adapt traditional elements with those from other localities with a high degree of sophistication. This ability was reflected in a vast array of products and furnishings in which Western forms and motifs were synthesized with vernacular ones, resulting in unique adapted forms that always maintain subtle variations relating to their specific contexts and uses. (Figure 3)

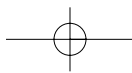
Unfortunately, the roots of this indigenous adaptive design capability were severed with the closing of China under communist leadership, and with Hong Kong's subsequent politically and economically motivated shift to favor Western design in the late 1960s.¹⁵ The achievements of early Hong Kong designers were quickly lost to a younger generation that had no opportunity to assimilate its own culturally situated tradition. In almost all areas

12 Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," 210.

13 See Tony Fry, "The Placement, Displacement, and Replacement of Design" in *Form/Work* (Sydney: University of Technology) 1: 1 (October 1997).

14 See Matthew Turner, *Made In Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong, 1900–1960* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1988).

15 Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," 211.



of design and art, Western concepts became the dominant learning model, and established the universal principles for all designers.

Yet the rediscovery of Hong Kong's design history drew attention to a local tradition based around a contextual awareness that facilitates a subtle yet complex form of adaptation. The depth of this collective understanding of, and sensitivity to the relations between things, persons, and contexts, contrasts sharply with the design method employed in current interior design practice in which themes mainly are based on images in books and magazines. "Knowledge" of design, in this sense, equals knowing how to repackage visual elements. This also explains why sometimes a design theme can be literally reused in different projects by transferring it from one place to another (or from one presentation board to another). This reductive way of thinking-designing not only delimits the complexity embedded in the act of designing, but also relegates it to a technical skill to be learned in a highly linear manner.

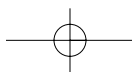
A Skill-Based Mentality

In the present context of Hong Kong, the learning of design is strongly enhanced by the underlying desire to master a skill quickly in what was historically a fast-expanding economy, one where pragmatism always has been hailed as the key to success. Knowing the "right" way to achieve results often is seen as more important than exploring theories, which are regarded as impractical and too abstract to grasp. This attitude was further conditioned by the decades preceding the Asian financial crisis, when Hong Kong experienced a prolonged boom with rising prosperity, and when the mastery of basic drawing techniques and good marketing skills were enough to ensure success. Despite recent efforts and ideas being promoted in higher education to encourage conceptual thinking and the inclusion of more liberal arts subjects in design schools, a skill-based attitude towards design learning still is overwhelmingly dominant. As a result, interior design continues to be treated as a vocational subject by the majority involved in day-to-day practice.

However, this current model of learning, practicing, and thinking increasingly is being challenged due to a number of interconnected factors. The problem not only is the result of an economic downturn, but arises from a system that is unable to cope with the faster pace of change.

Designing vs. Copying

As discussed earlier, design in Hong Kong generally has been understood as a form of packaging (and repackaging) that serves to improve image. Each project is expected to distinguish itself from what already exists. The quest for the unique and the new, coupled with modern Western notions of progress, nevertheless is in conflict with the local design method of applying existing stylistic elements



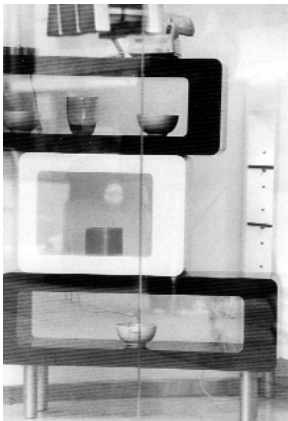
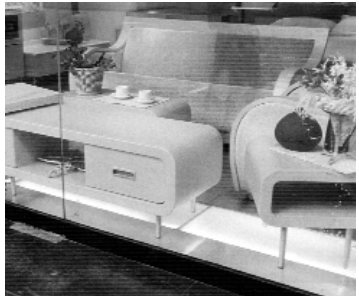
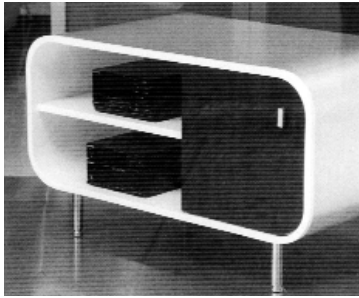


Figure 4
Examples of early adaptive design in Hong Kong. "Modern" furniture store display, Kowloon, Hong Kong, June, 2002. Photos: Cecilia Chu.

out of context. The inevitable result is superficial modifications of the point of reference and, instead of distinctiveness, there often is a strong tendency towards homogeneity, and variations of the same style. (Figure 4) This phenomenon is apparent in almost every field of design in which designers struggle daily to create something new and different demanded by a market filled with more and more design.

The issue of copying also must be mentioned as a reality which, over the years, has given a negative reputation to Hong Kong's creative industries. Why are designs constantly being copied? The most obvious answer, of course, is that it is a convenient way to produce something eye-catching and also "tried and tested" with little effort. The simple rule is to produce it quickly before someone else does. But while copying can be criticized as being unethical and lacking originality, what sometimes is overlooked is the fact that traditional Chinese learning is based on emulation.

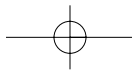
By becoming familiar with the forms, styles, and techniques from the past, students could assimilate their essence and be able to transform it into something of their own. The objective was not the production of a distinctive work, but rather a continual process of relating and integrating things and techniques from the past with the present, in order to evolve into something different without necessarily breaking away from tradition.

But this creative adaptive ability, reflected in many early Hong Kong designs, has largely been lost in current practice oriented towards uniqueness and the consumption of the new. Western modernity has placed the subjective pressures of "originality" and "uniqueness" on the work of Hong Kong designers. But for Hong Kong designers, it is not simply copying or a lack of originality which makes much contemporary design appear superficial, but rather a lack of a culturally-embedded sensibility. Turner dates this "creative inferiority" to the 1960s, when Hong Kong increasingly turned away from its own traditions to modern Western design.¹⁶ Many turned to copying Western styles in an attempt to combat the problem of competition, but they lacked the understanding of and engagement with their sources. It is a practice that has continued to mark Hong Kong design to this day.

The Blessing and Threat of Technology

Without the cultural grounding of indigenous practice, the problem of copying has become even more intensive in recent years as fast-advancing computer technology has enabled those with no previous design training to generate drafting and drawings (formerly a skill that interior designers were proud of). Trades related to interior design such as builders and furnishing suppliers now can produce professional-looking images based on existing designs. With the help of a draftsman, an acceptable design project can be prepared,

16 Matthew Turner, *Made In Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong 1900-1960*.



often faster than by employing a well-trained designer. This trend has been exacerbated by the emergence of new computer-enabled outsourcing companies that focus on specific tasks. Many are based in mainland China, and can offer extremely competitive services from presentation renderings to full packages of construction documents.¹⁷ By employing staff with some background in art and design, they also can offer design input and help clients to quickly visualize simple ideas by copying from existing images.

This shift also means that some of the interior designer's responsibilities are being subsumed. As a consequence, interior design is further being relegated to a minor role in the building process. At worst, it is represented by a mere set of documents, which are readily available for purchase. The rise of technology, seen as a blessing by many trades, becomes a threat to interior designers when it is used as a shortcut that inevitably will lower professional standards.

Ironically, another difficulty is the rising interest in interior design among the Hong Kong public. The wider availability of information on the Internet, in bookshops, and furnishing showrooms is providing clients with an educated eye in styles and trends in interior design, or at least the perception of one. Thus, many people are becoming more confident in exercising their own design decision-making. Builders and suppliers are more than willing to help realize small-scale projects, without the involvement of an interior designer. And even large-scale commercial projects often relegate the interior designer to a coordinating role that demands constant compromises with other parties who continue to gain negotiating power in the design process. Inevitably, the design process has become fragmented, and to address this has had to undergo a number of structural changes that ultimately will work to alter its nature and future.

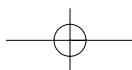
Fragmentation of Design Practice

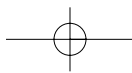
The first change which has occurred is the downsizing of interior design firms. With their scope of work diminishing, they have to keep an economy of scale in order to survive. Indeed, the majority of the interior design firms have laid off a significant percentage of their staff within the last two years.¹⁸ But while "lean and mean" seems to be an obvious strategy for survival under a difficult economic climate, it cannot counteract the fierce and growing competition coming from other fields.

A second change is the blurring of roles of those involved in the design process. Many designers who have lost full-time positions are beginning to work in other design-related fields, mostly as ad hoc freelancers. With the availability of these floating design resources, more and more contracting firms, retailers, property developers, and even real estate agencies in Hong Kong are beginning to set up their own, so-called design consultancies, offering

17 Many outsourcing companies of this kind can be found in Shenzhen, the neighboring city to Hong Kong. The proximity of their location, as well as the increasingly computerized nature of the work, makes their services convenient and competitive.

18 The exact magnitude of downsizing cannot be exactly determined at this time, but an industry expert estimated that close to three-quarters of Hong Kong interior design firms have laid off half of their staff in the past two years.





complete packages that include interior design as a “value-added” service. Increasingly, these once strategic partners of interior design firms are becoming their direct competitors, threatening to take over their business.

One, perhaps positive, aspect of these changes is that they allow interior design services to become more widespread and may, therefore, serve to help raise the general standards and perception of design in the long run. But, as stated above, sheer popularity alone cannot help change interior design. In order to establish a sound professional status, it must break away from its current role and redefine itself as an agent of change.

Combating the Crisis

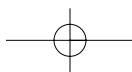
Given the seemingly overwhelming challenges on every front, how can interior designers move forward and secure their professionalism? To be sure, designers are not wholly unaware of the need to upgrade their knowledge and improve their position, but where should these efforts be directed?

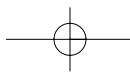
One widespread response to the difficulties in Hong Kong is direct and immediate: for designers to seek work in neighboring China, where there are enough projects in a market that still lacks sophisticated design skills. Hong Kong design firms are viewed on the mainland as a foreign service filling a gap in providing necessary expertise.¹⁹ For them, moving into the China market can develop their knowledge base and expertise. However, this is a pool of work that may dry up fast. Mainland designers, eager to catch up with the world, are feverishly improving their skills and knowledge to an extent still largely underestimated by their Hong Kong counterparts.²⁰ With China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, the capability of many Chinese industries is gaining strength. There is no doubt that, in the foreseeable future, designers from China, many of whom display a surprisingly deep understanding of cultural context in their thinking, will become significant competitors to Hong Kong designers.

A second strategy for dealing with the pressures of competition, one generally seen as a more long-term solution, is to further professionalize Hong Kong interior design practice. This would mean setting up more standards, rules, and restrictions, along with qualifying exams and codes of conduct to prevent those who are not properly trained to compete for work.²¹ Formalizing the profession in this way will, it is hoped, help to raise standards, restrict the number of practitioners, and retain a recognition enjoyed by other established disciplines.

While this “classic” strategy may reduce some immediate competitive pressures and help to raise standards, it also carries the danger of perpetuating the status quo. As Francis Duffy has commented on architectural practice,²² professionalism is primarily concerned with keeping things as they are, and tends to encourage

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- 19 See *Design by Hong Kong: Interior Design*, a report published by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council which analyzes the export potential and competitiveness of Hong Kong’s interior design services in the Chinese mainland market with respect to China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (Hong Kong, October 2001).
- 20 In fact, many designers I interviewed have expressed this concern. Also, for a description of the growing capabilities of mainland designers, see “A Passage to Fuzhou” in *Contemporary Design* (Taipei, January 2002).
- 21 The professionalization of Hong Kong’s interior design industry is one of the major targets currently being pursued by the Hong Kong Interior Designers Association.
- 22 See Francis Duffy, *Architectural Knowledge: An Idea of a Profession* (London: Routledge, 1998).





the maintenance of boundaries rather than fostering interdisciplinary exchange. The easy satisfaction gained from instituting a system of elitism can prevent reflection, and lead to oversimplification of problems, hence blocking the intellectual development of the profession as a whole.

Ultimately, although some individual designers may continue to excel, the future of interior design practice in Hong Kong lies neither with new market opportunities nor raising professional barriers, but in a redirected practice that understands design's potential role and impact, and can address the real concerns of a changing society. Interior design has to learn how to play a positive role in shaping the socio-cultural discourse, and in offering new solutions to the problems of living. Only by giving a new direction to practice can interior design begin to become truly relevant in Hong Kong.

Towards a Redirected Practice

Gui Bonsiepe has pointed out that the design professions in general have suffered from the symptom of "collective muteness,"²³ and that designers have become accustomed to distancing themselves from social and intellectual inquiry. This is all the more prevalent in Hong Kong, where interior design practice evolved out of a skill-based mentality with deep mistrust of anything theoretical. A conditioned mindset, plus the constant demand for short-term answers to design problems, have made it particularly difficult for Hong Kong designers to operate intellectually.

As mentioned earlier, the skill-based approach to design has proved insufficient to address the rapid changes affecting Hong Kong. What matters is not simply the material and visual form of interior design, but its potential to reference cultural practices, habits, technologies, and social forms.²⁴ If interior design does not interact with these larger contexts, and is uncritical of its impacts and consequences, the role and respect of designers will diminish further.

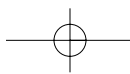
Duffy suggests that for design practice to have a future, it must develop itself as a learning profession geared towards a more welcoming, inclusive approach to neighboring and allied disciplines.²⁵ As the boundaries of traditional design practice continue to shift and dissolve, a new design culture would have to be created through the sharing of knowledge by means of an ongoing discourse involving both users and designers. The more designers can understand the impact of their practice, and the more sensitive they are to the changing needs and priorities of design, the more likely that they can respond intelligently and critically without being subsumed under the forces of the market economy.

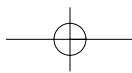
Clive Dilnot has remarked that design is not, as many would assume, about creating something new out of nothing, but about bringing change to something understood deeply.²⁶ Given that pure

23 See Gui Bonsiepe, "Some Virtues of Design" in Jan van Toorn, ed., *Design Beyond Design* (Netherlands: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions, 1997), 106.

24 See Gert Salle, "On a Dialogue of Design: On the Disappearance and Re-emergence of Design" in a catalog for the touring exhibition *Design Now. Austria* (Vienna, 2001).

25 See Francis Duffy, *Architectural Knowledge*.





invention is rare, and that new designs always arise to some extent from reconstituting what exists, then alternatives can be sought within the framework of things. To follow this line of thinking, interior designers would need to stop focusing on producing the unique and the new, and seek to discover what has been concealed. Interior design, in this sense, can be seen as a conscious act of intervention into the world, able to generate new sets of relations that are not reliant upon or subject to copying. The recognition of translation as a mode of designing potentially could offer a new path for Hong Kong interior design practice to reemerge as a “practice of engagement.”

But to grasp the skill of translation, interior designers need to develop a high degree of sensitivity to what lies outside the realm of their often enclosed world, and let themselves be influenced by the new and unfamiliar. A parallel can be found in the creative adaptive efforts of early Hong Kong designers who were able to synthesize traditions and foreign influences, and adapt with ease to new materials and technology.²⁷ The achievements of these early designers starkly contrast with the work of a new generation struggling to “innovate,” but also hint at vast resources for contemporary design. This does not mean that we should return to the past. Yet the reaffirmation of an earlier indigenous design capability, and the reexamination of the products and process, offers us a potential starting point for current practice to be redirected.

Hong Kong’s reunification with China in 1997 coincided with the beginning of a period of prolonged economic stress, which has afflicted interior design as well as so many other industries, businesses, and professions. Although designers have tried to expand their service to mainland China and raise professional standards in the hopes of overcoming competition, this alone cannot address the more fundamental difficulties undermining the viability status and centrality of the profession. If interior design hopes to step out of its current predicament, and establish itself as a “relevant” profession, designers need to establish a contemporary contextual awareness, as well as develop an intellectual capacity that enables them to question, rather than simply “solve,” problems and possibilities, and to overturn existing models when necessary. If interior designers can, through these new capabilities, move beyond a market-oriented and skill-based approach, then it may be possible in time for interior design to be seen as relevant, valuable, and indeed, essential to Hong Kong’s future.

26 Ideas developed here were borrowed from a series of lectures delivered by Clive Dilnot at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1999.

27 A good example showing these abilities is the introduction of plastics in the 1950s, which resulted in a great diversification of products. Plastics, as Turner explains, had “become the China Trade ceramics of the twentieth century, and design became an everyday expression.” Turner, “Early Modern Design in Hong Kong,” 207.

