

PRODUCT DESIGN IN HONG KONG AND THE CHINA INFLUENCE

Yanta LAM *Professor of Design, MPhil, HDD, FCSD, BEDA, FHKDA*

School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong SAR, PRC.
sdyanta@polyu.edu.hk

ABSTRACT

Industrial Design in Hong Kong was originally introduced to support the development of local industries, and as such, Industrial Designers were nurtured to practice in a supporting role. In the late 70s and 80s, Industrial Design became a profession in its own right, playing an important role in the economic development of Hong Kong. The open policy of PRC in 1979 changed the characteristics of HK industries and allowed Product Design to become more diversified. HK Designers therefore adopted different modes of practice to face the challenges and opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Product Design, Hong Kong, PRC

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, the author initiated a research study to look into the then Product Design situation in Hong Kong¹. The research aimed at understanding the existing general model of local Product Design practice, and if a new model of practice would be required. The study also investigated the existing local resources of professionals, capacity - their strengths and weaknesses - the opportunities and threats that might exist. It also made strategic proposals of improvement for building a better service to the manufacturing sector of Hong Kong and China. The objectives were therefore:

- To investigate contemporary Product Design practice in Hong Kong.
- To relate contemporary applications of design theory, process and methodology specific to the Hong Kong situation.
- To review the governmental, industrial and societal support essential to nourish local product design practice.
- To evaluate the potential of Hong Kong Design as a tool for the economic development in Hong Kong and the region.
- To inform local Product Design education.

THE METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The methodology began with a close examination of secondary materials addressing to local Product Designs and designers. Through local Design bodies (HK Designers Association, Industrial Designers Society of HK), and the HK Heritage Museum's "Hong Kong Design Donation Campaign"², source of valuable information necessary for setting up the sample element (respondents) was established.

It was followed by an analysis of the Product Design practice process commonly adopted in Hong Kong. This analysis of design process was conducted through semi-structured

¹ Research conducted by the author with the title: "Revealing Local Product Design Capacity - A Qualitative Study of the Attitudes and Design Approaches of Product Designers in Hong Kong", funded by the Research Grants Council of the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong (Research Project "PolyU 5237/02H - BQ629"), 2002.

² It is a large scale exercise for collecting good local designs with the help of Design experts from different fields. The event ran from 1996 to 1999, and a wide range of nicely designed products by local designers had reflected the existence of product design capacity in the territory. It helped to develop an archive system of local Design in Hong Kong.

interviews with the designers, by direct observation on their method of practice, design philosophies, and their problem-solving methodologies. Analyzed data were then categorized and compared so as to understand the situation of HK Product Design practice, with the aim to advance the practice specific to Hong Kong.

The sample size for a general survey was 100. For detailed analysis, the sample group was reduced to 50 for easy control of the data collection process. This was primarily a face-to-face or telephone interview (semi-structured, for design philosophy, problem approach and views in practice). There were 20 selected individuals/teams based on criteria for observational study (for work process and model of practice). A 6-month exhibition³ was held from December 2006 to June 2007 as one of the procedures for dissemination of information. The preparation process of the exhibition itself also formed a tool to probe further materials. The exhibition serves as a platform for exchanging views among design professionals.

The chief objective of this study was to solicit beliefs and views in Product Design practice in Hong Kong from a specific population (Product Design participants). The investigation method therefore fell well into such category of evaluative and creative development research. As this method was to observe and listen to design participants in order to obtain the understanding and appreciation of their attitudes, behavior and the approach in design problem, it was suggested that it might eventually lead to the creation of strategies for reinforcing or modifying their theories and related approaches.

THE GENERAL INTERPRETATION OF DESIGN

Hong Kong, similar to all other parts of PRC, has not gone through the art movements which took place in the Western World in the past hundred years. Our understanding of “Design”, has been once restricted to “art and craft”. Since the 60s, and for a long time, the concept of “Modern Design” to many of us has remained very much on the “Bauhaus principles”, in which technologies and mass production techniques were the easily understood elements of Design. While the definition of Design today is getting complex in the West⁴, Chinese designers have, not long ago, started to appreciate the “Art and Science” relationship and its importance in the origin of Design.

³ The exhibition was held in the HK Heritage Museum starting in November 2006 for 6 months.

⁴ From aesthetics, form and function to the complexity of user issues beyond human factors, to the technological, cultural and societal influences, and to the environmental concerns: In the West, from the Industrial Revolution onward, through many “Art movements”, to the “Bauhaus” period and at the present time, the definition of Design has developed and evolved.

Many Chinese Design participants today consider “Design” deriving from “Art” that embraces the aspect of humanity (*Plate 01*). On the other hand, “Technology” is a derivative of “Science”. Both “Design” and “Technology” would take into account user and usability. Where “Design” and “Technology” meet, product/system would come about. The meeting point may flow towards either side of the “magnet”, depending on the nature of product/system (e.g. life-style product towards the “Art” side, while medical equipment towards the “Science” end). The interpretation suggests a new relationship of “Design & Technology”, which automatically embeds the human issues and considerations in Design and re-adjust the position of technocracy (*Plate 02*). Designers will act as catalyst to make things happen.



Plate 01: Art & Science.

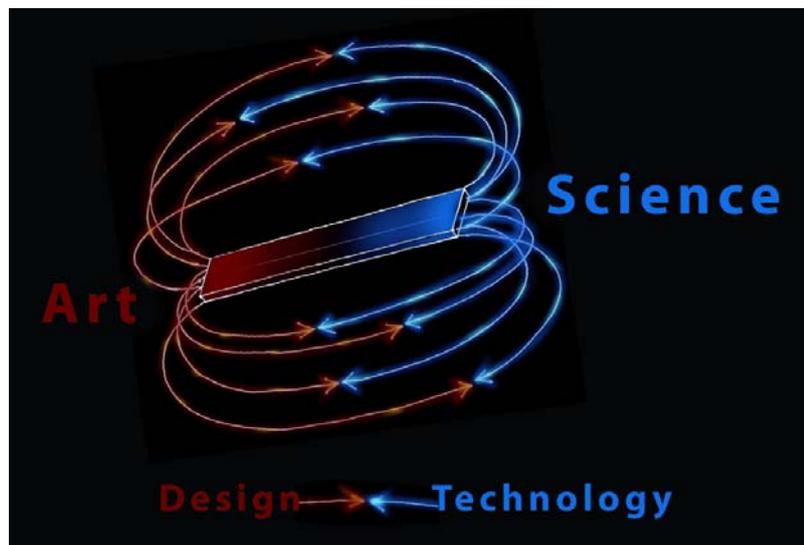


Plate 02 - The model of “Design +Technology” magnetism.

THE HONG KONG PRODUCT DESIGN PRACTICE – THE CURRENT SITUATION

Industrial (Product) Design in Hong Kong was originally introduced to support the development of local industries, and as such, Product Designers were nurtured to practice in a supporting role since 1960s. After years of hard work and experience sharing, and because of the economical changes in Hong Kong in the late 70s and 80s, Industrial Design has become a profession in its own right, playing an important role in the economic development of Hong Kong. There were not many companies/manufacturers in Hong Kong which would employ designers during the period. The situation was especially true with the SMEs⁵. Enterprises with

⁵ Small/Medium-sized enterprises.

Design teams, would often allow their capable designers to participate in running the business. Dr Mark Oakley⁶ noted in his research in the early 80s, that many manufacturers in Hong Kong did not have individual or group concerned primarily with design. However, he was impressed by the success of a HK local company⁷ that made and marketed its products overseas under its own brands. He acknowledged that the strategy for achieving such a success “demanded the creation of a design group”. On a careful study of the working and reporting procedures of the company’s Product Design and Development team, Oakley opined that “...in many aspects, the organization of the design activities in this company could serve as an excellent model for many Western firms.” (Oakley 1984). There were a few other similar examples. Oakley’s comments made 2 points. Firstly, there was positive design capacity available in HK. Secondly, there was little awareness of the need of Design in industries. The situation was indirectly caused by the “open-door reform policy” of PRC announced in 1979.

The policy encouraged Hong Kong and Mainland China to exchange and interact. In the same year, a group of Hong Kong Design educationalists and participants made a visit⁸ to the Pearl River Delta of PRC. The visit marked a key development of modern Design education in South China, which has since then switched from pure art basis to that of methodological approach, with the emphasis on human values of Design.

The Policy had benefited HK industries at the same time in the following aspects:

- HK industries became bigger and stronger in their production capacity.
- The production costs went down and products became competitive in market due to more favorable investment environments and the availability of less expensive labor resources.
- Product categories diversified from consumer products to systems and equipment.

At the time when HK industries made good use of the inexpensive labor in the PRC, less emphasis was put into Design. The arena of Design became small and it was not enough even to nourish young design talents. Many experienced designers chose to leave the industry and were self-employed, with clients mostly from overseas. To the HK Design professionals, it

⁶ Dr Mark Oakley, the Research Fellow in a research conducted for the University of Aston (Management Centre), Birmingham of UK. It was funded by the Council of National Academic Awards (CNAA), and the UK Department of Trade and Industry (1982/83). The study investigated selected manufacturers and corporations in Europe, America and S.E. Asia (Japan and Hong Kong) on how Design was related to management and company policy.

⁷ Meyer Manufacturing Company Ltd., Hong Kong – a cookware manufacturer for export.

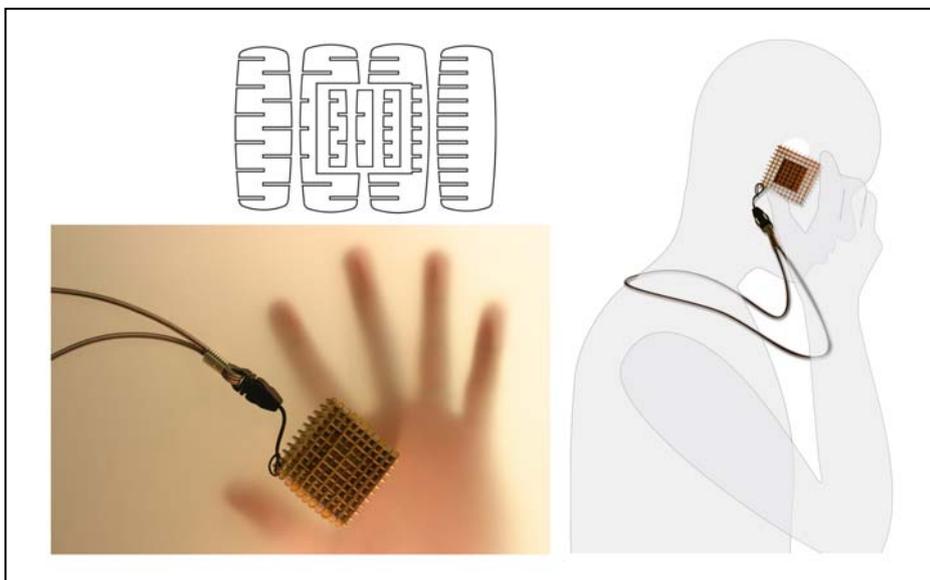
⁸ In 1979, Wucious Wong of Swire School of Design (HK Polytechnic) led a delegation team of HK Design participants to Guangzhou Academy of Art, PRC for a one-week seminar, in which the concept of Modern Design and education were introduced.

was a threat, as well as an opportunity. In fact, some experienced designers started their own entrepreneurship in Design-Make-Sell business and were rewarded with success.

Design was not well acknowledged even in the 90s. It was until the rising of the PRC industrialists, the need of Design and innovation was finally appreciated to compete with the Mainland China counterparts. This was observed and agreed by the MIT research team⁹ in 1997 who suggested "...the capacity to create new products and processes in Hong Kong must be strengthened. More of Hong Kong's firms should follow the example set by a few leaders and devote new efforts to building independent capabilities for product and technology innovation." (Berger, et. al. 1997).

In 2003, we learnt from a survey¹⁰ conducted by the Federation of Hong Kong Industries that ..."78% of 481 companies with operations in Guangdong Province have plans to undertake R&D activities in the future...the R&D activities they planned to engage in were ... designing and developing new products or new functions for existing products... 45% of the companies planned to recruit more R&D staff." (FHKI 2003). Again, the statement indicated that only a small percentage of companies would employ the service of designers, yet there was the appreciation of what and how Design may help in business.

The local Design education and practice have since the 90s implemented various policies for



the changes. Among the many measures taken, the method of reinforcing understanding of users has been taken as an important tool in Design process. It probes user's relevant cultures, the living habits and

behaviors, and how such information could relate to Design. To ensure success of the method, HK Product Designers acquired knowledge in a myriad of disciplines. A good HK Product

⁹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. The institution was invited to run a research on how HK industries could develop. The project was located at the Industrial Performance Centre (IPC) of MIT, 1996-1997.

¹⁰ A survey on the HK manufacturing/servicing industries operating in Pearl River Delta (PRD) where Hong Kong is situated. It was conducted by the Federation of HK Industries (FHKI) in 2003.

Designer explores design problems from different perspectives. Outstanding designs draw from not only designer's life experience, personal feeling, understanding, appreciation and care of end users, and also from objective/scientific study and analysis as a methodological approach to start a Design. This is not only a concern of ideology but also a reflection of design logic in our part of the world. HK Designers therefore practise to devise unique methodologies to explore in Design in significant topics. For instance, we have designers working on more eco-sustainable products. Among them, some tried the method of allowing end-users to execute consumer choices at the stages of product development, manufacturing and delivery. User input and consumer choice are therefore not merely at the moment of purchase and use. The key objective here is to encourage minimizing wastage at all levels of the product life-cycle, thereby contributing to a more eco-friendly living environment. *(Plate 03: This design explores to contribute to eco-sustainability by involving user at the very beginning of the design and development stage. It is highly customizable and can be "co-created" with end-users by means of simple software through cyber space. Casing material: recycled sheet plastic. Make method: Laser-cut and slot/snap-fit to assemble. Courtesy: Benny Leong, 2004)*

The PRC open policy has also changed the characteristics of HK industries and encouraged Product Design to become more diversified: from consumer products in the past to the present situation of allowing innovation and equipment systems that satisfy different levels of needs. In recent years, some overseas design firms started their business in Hong Kong and work their ways into Mainland China. Some local manufacturers at the same time are developing and a few have become internationalized, with strong in-house design teams to develop new products.

MODES OF LOCAL PRODUCT DESIGN PRACTICE AND TREND

Today, we noted that local Product Designers are basically working in 5 modes of practice:

Mode 1 - Designer serves as an in-house staff in manufacturing industry or trade firms.

Mode 2 - Designer working in/running consultancy firm.

Mode 3 - Designer engaging in a full design-make-sell process for his/her own creations.

Mode 4 - Designer designing and making while the overseas partner selling.

Mode 5 - Designer as free-lancer.

In an attempt to compare the 5 modes of practice, the qualitative data were explored to be converted into quantifiable information. Eight factors that attributed to benefit the respondents (short/long term well-beings, job satisfaction) were also identified. They are shown as follows:

Factor 1 = Own Time Control (F1): Contributes to the well-being of the designer.

Factor 2 = Quick Response to Market (F2): Contributes to the business/job of the designer.

Factor 3 = Sense of Achievement (F3): Contributes to the well-being of the designer.

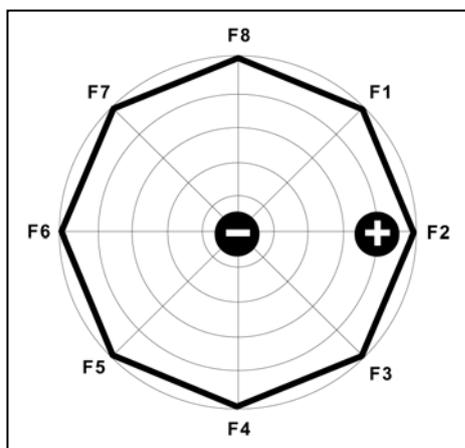
Factor 4 = Monetary Reward (F4): Contributes to the well-being of the designer.

Factor 5 = Motivation & Encouragement (F5): Contributes to Factor 3.

Factor 6 = Cross-disciplinary Learning (F6): Contributes to the longer term success.

Factor 7 = Knowledge Advancement (F7): Contributes to the longer term success.

Factor 8 = Increased Flexibility in Diversification (F8): Contributes to the longer term success.



$F6+F7+F8$ = Depth of Response to Market & Diversified/New Opportunities.

All factors are preferably to be at a balanced state as this chart indicates (Plate 04). All factors are encouraged to move from the center towards the circumference.

Plate 04: Ideal Mode of Local Product Design Practice.

Here are the features and comments to the 5 modes of practice (Plate 05):

Mode 1 – Stronger in cross-departmental/cross-disciplinary learning, therefore quicker information flow and knowledge up-date. Less personal satisfaction, less emphasis on individuality.

Mode 2 – High degree of autonomy. Quick response to market. Small team normally has narrow client-base which restricts long-term development.

Mode 3 – High degree of autonomy, positive earning and personal satisfaction. Products created and developed normally do not involve much technology and are less complicated in tooling.

Mode 4 – High degree of autonomy, positive earning and personal satisfaction. Products created and developed normally do not involve much technology and are less complicated in tooling.

Mode 5 – High degree of autonomy, unstable income.

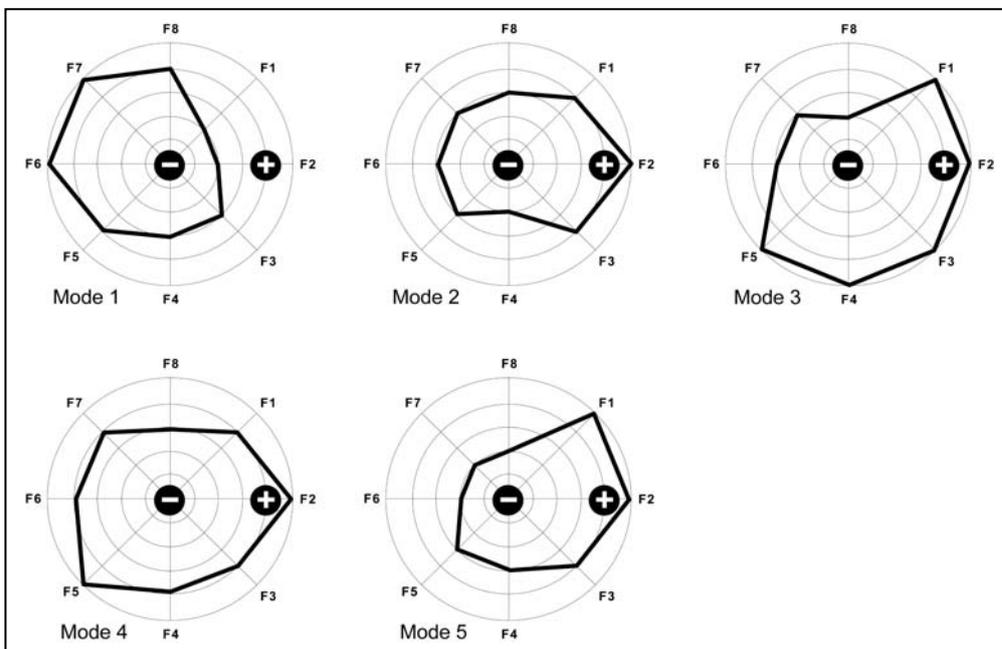
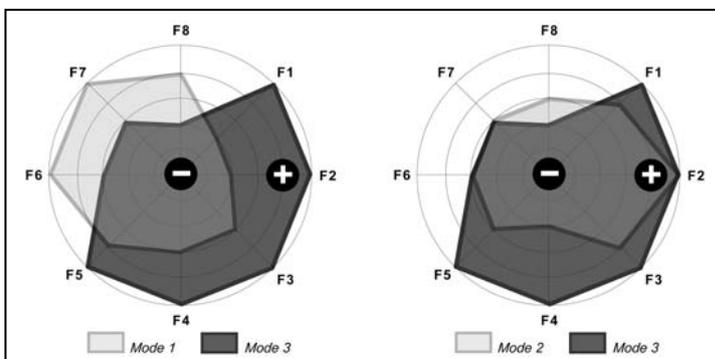


Plate 05:
Five Modes of
Practice in HK.

Plate 06: Comparing mode 3 to modes 1 and 2.



In general, mode 1 has the advantage of “breadth and depth” in product/market and knowledge advancement, but less personal satisfaction. Modes 2 to 5 allow better personal initiative and motivation because of the more positive sense of achievement.

These modes of practice however, are less advantageous in knowledge advancement and in long-term future development. The point can be made clear in comparison charts in Plate 06:

Modes 1 and 3 go to the opposite ends; modes 2 and 3 share something in common, with the latter emphasizing the short term advantages.

THE IMPLICATIONS

The most satisfactory pattern seems to be modes 3&4, which allows full control for designer over his/her own design, provides greater job satisfaction, and eventually fulfils sense of achievement. Though these modes demand greater all-round ability of a designer, and often with their own investment (time, effort and money), they seem more preferable by individual designer.

This trend however, poses a problem. For in the longer term, the knowledge advancement will be restricted owing to the work pattern. SMEs at the same time are getting less help from the capable local professionals, who are educated and trained to render service to the former. These modes of practice, on the other hand reflect indirectly the little awareness and demand of Design which needs to be addressed.

CONCLUSIONS

Albeit a small team of design force, Product Designers in Hong Kong are maturing and performing. The magnitude and speed of this trend depend very much on their personal appreciation of design matters, the relevant environment and design supports¹¹ available locally and from the region. Designers have to reinforce their own philosophy and methodology. Advancement of knowledge is essential. The opportunity for self-development has to be taken seriously. This could be done through team effort and cross-disciplinary approach in design. Promotion among SMEs will help to reverse the negative Design awareness, and it is partially the responsibility of the profession.

The reunification of Hong Kong and the PRC provides better opportunities to local designers in various ways. These include the availability of relevant human resources in the Mainland China, the possible technological support from Chinese universities and the huge potential China market. As the PRC has entered the World Trade Organization, local designers are encouraged to play an important role in this part of our world.

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¹¹ There was action taken by the industry, local Design bodies and government to help. For instance, the Federation of HK Industries (FHKI) set up the HK Design Council in the 70s to promote Design. In 2002, the HK Design Centre (HKDC) was established for the same purpose. The HK Science and Technology Corporation (HKSTP) worked together with HKDC in the last two years and founded the "InnoCentre", to provide design professionals with physical space to facilitate their development (2006). The two major institutions for Design education (The HK Polytechnic University and Institute of Vocational Education) were much developed and expanded in recent years.

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