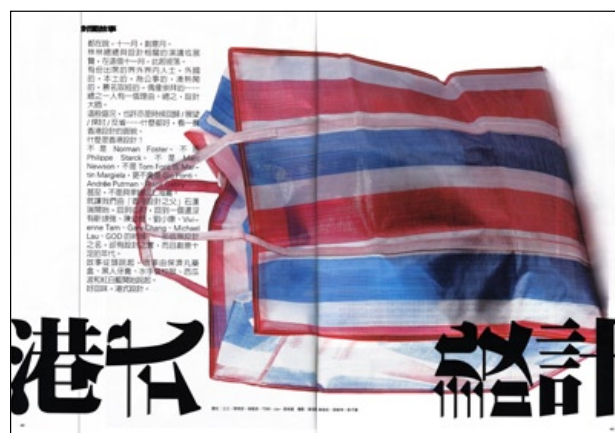


English version of a
Ming Pao Weekly article
19 November 2005



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Cover Story
Design Hong Kong Style
By Jessica Wong

Hong Kong in November, a month when creativity takes center stage. The city is suddenly abuzz with activities related to design - lectures, exhibitions, workshops, seminars - attended by practitioners and enthusiasts alike.

The occasion seems to warrant a closer look at the state of the art in Hong Kong. Well, to begin with, who defines it? Not Norman Foster, not Philippe Starck, not Marc Newson, not Tom Ford, and not Martin Margiela. And definitely not Gio Ponti, Andrée Putman, or Frank Gehry. Not even I.M.Pei or Shanghai Tang.

We have to start with Henry Steiner, the “Father of Hong Kong Design”; back to a time before Kan Tai-keung, Alan Chan, Freeman Lau, Vivienne Tam, Gary Chang, Michael Lau, and Goods of Desire (GOD); a time of freshness and creativity, before the practice self-consciously began to refer to itself as “design.” So our trip down memory lane should include traditional merchandise such as Po Chai Pills, Darkie toothpaste, sailor-styled school uniforms, plastic soccer balls with watermelon designs, and the now iconic red-white-blue.

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Henry Steiner and Hong Kong in the swinging 60s

“If I’m the ‘Father of Hong Kong Design,’” said Henry Steiner, “then these could be my children’s designs, but I think neither are legitimate.”

I was talking to Steiner one morning in his large, comfortable office on the topic of design in Hong Kong. As he leafed through the recent issue of a magazine produced by local designers, he proceeded to point out various shortcomings including illegible typography. I couldn’t help but detect a certain sense of disappointment. “Many people have the misconception that design is gimmick or decoration. If I were to grade this, I’d give it an F.”

Remembering the Hong Kong Hilton

You might wonder: how did someone born in Vienna and raised in New York get here in 1961 to become the father of Hong Kong design? After all, if as a foreigner you remain here for over four decades, it’s either because you have no choice, or you must love it too much to leave. For Steiner, whose reputation was established throughout the Asia Pacific by the 1980s, it is without doubt the latter. The enthusiasm he exudes when he talks about Hong Kong is especially telling. He knows it better than many Hongkongers, and probably cherishes it even more.

Steiner has evolved along with Hong Kong. He first worked as design director for *The Asia Magazine*, which was circulated throughout the continent. Soon after, he landed his first freelance assignment, a branding system for the new Hongkong Hilton. His mark, embodying a mix of Chinese and European iconography, became widely recognized. The logo

lasted as long as the hotel which was torn down in 1996. That was perhaps a first glimpse of what was later to become Steiner’s signature cross-cultural style. “We did lay down a new set of standards for creativity,” said Steiner, which is no overstatement considering the fact that at the time graphic design had yet to establish itself as a profession in America, much less in Asia, a new part of the new economy. In 1964 he started his own business.

Just the essentials

Steiner was quick to point out that in actual fact, the foundation of graphic design had long been laid down by the Bauhaus in prewar Germany. He himself is an adherent to their mantra: form follows function. In his book *Cross-Cultural Design*, Steiner remarks that a designer is not unlike an engineer. Paul Rand, his mentor at Yale, would say if you couldn’t write a description of your idea for a visual design on one side of an index card, then you didn’t have a design. According to Rand, design was also about contrast: between old and new, big and small, light and dark. Without contrast, design goes flat. Each stroke that Steiner makes has a reason and a function.

When asked for an example of great design, he answers, “chopsticks.” The response is not a routinely scripted sound bite; he genuinely appreciates their pure functionalism, shorn of decoration. He quotes Saint-Exupery: “You know you’ve achieved perfection not when you have nothing more to add, but when you have nothing left to take away.” Anything extra is only ornament; the *taichi* mandala, for example, is visually perfect, he says. Less gratifying for him is the current environment. “In a way, Hong Kong is lost. Vulgar, gimmicky kitsch is everywhere you look.” When asked where he would rather live he responds, “I would want it to be Hong Kong in the 60s - but with air conditioning.”

Eye candy

Do not fault him for nostalgia. The Hong Kong of his reminiscence sounds so attractive that even someone who has never experienced it, such as I, would love a piece of it. “Back then, everything was very down-to-earth. Restaurants were like extensions of your own kitchen. Rickshaws prowled the streets of Tsimshatsui and Central; they were practical, comfortable and non polluting. Everything was more direct, flexible and functional; people had hope and a

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sense of potential. Everybody wanted to better themselves.” Does that mean people don’t have hope and potential anymore? “Since the 90s when the economy was at its zenith, what I’ve seen in design has mostly been very superficial. People began to have more money than taste or sense. And parts of our heritage like the harbor and peak started to be forgotten. Now we’re filling in the one and hiding the other.” Steiner believes we are chasing foreign mirages (Hello Kitties and Mickey Mice) forgetting our own attractive traditions.

Steiner stopped teaching design several years ago. He found his students unwilling to take risks or to expose themselves to critiques of their work. The straw that broke the camel’s back was when a student stood up to ask, earnestly, “What is the best color?” They wanted venerable rules to guide them without trying out anything experimental themselves he says, blaming this attitude on their Confucian training. Steiner answered that color question by saying, “There is no ideal color; it all depends on the project, the message, the audience and the medium.”

When the disappointed student who had taken the courageous step of asking the question - egged on by his neighbor - sat down, Steiner could see from the body language that he felt the reply to be evasive and that this valuable information was being withheld! Steiner feels too few students are failed even when they show no ability. “Like a door prize, everyone gets a diploma. Today, the number of Hong Kong designers is at an historical high and desperate competition has driven down professional fees. I’m lucky that my clients come to me for consultation to solve their business problems. They know I don’t do eye candy.”

Asked for an example of his methodology, he points to the total redesign of the Hong Kong Jockey Club’s identity which Steiner completed just before 1997. Although it was a radical overhaul involving visual unification of activities, color standards which had not been used before, a new and wide-ranging signage system, a fresh typographic program and a thoroughly redrawn emblem. Yet the Club’s brand equity was respected with the result that when this sweeping change was launched ... nobody noticed. “I was very gratified. The basic personality of the organization had been maintained and people felt reassured. The more thought through a design is, the longer it will last - and we all value longevity.” ■

Box

Vienna-New York-Hong Kong

Born in Austria, Henry Steiner moved to New York age five. He studied design at Yale University. In 1961 he came to Hong Kong. Since then, his clients have come from all sectors: Taikoo Sugar, HSBC, The Hong Kong Jockey Club, the Hongkong Hilton, Lane Crawford (*not shown*), just to name a few. His designs are known well beyond Hong Kong, and have won him many awards over the years. Steiner is a founder of the Hong Kong Designers Association.

His style is often described as cross-cultural. To be sure, marrying the cultural traditions of East and West, is a notable feature of Steiner’s visual style. But Steiner’s understanding of indigenous Chinese culture is profound. For example, the banknote designs he has produced over the years for the Standard Chartered Bank (*right*) feature five animals of Chinese mythology: fish, tortoise, qilin (unicorn), phoenix and dragon. They in turn were informed by the philosophy of the Chinese elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. The corresponding designs on the reverse show historical vistas of Hong Kong from 1850 to 2003, featuring his beloved harbor and peak. Each detail has stemmed from the knowledge and feeling for his city.

Caption 1

In 1997, as Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule, Steiner published *Foolish Things*, a small anthology of what he considered the epitome of Hong Kong designs, guaranteed to bring a smile to every Hongkonger’s face: the plastic toy which makes sledge hammer noises (*photo*), the perforated benches of the Star Ferry, traditional pawn-shop signs, the red-white-blue canopies on construction sites, White Flower Oil packaging.

Caption 2

In the 1980s, attracted by the handsome authority of its Chinese calligraphy, Steiner picked up this hefty wooden sign from a traditional rice store. It was dumped by the owner in favor of a plastic light box supplied free by Kent brand cigarettes. To Steiner, this is nothing short of a metaphor for Hong Kong’s negligent attitude to its own culture.