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NEW ZEALAND BY DESIGN

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Software designer Mitchell Kapor said design is “where you stand with a foot in two worlds - the world of technology and the world of people and human purposes - and you try to bring the two together.”

Substitute ‘technology’ for whatever field of design one is considering, and this is not a bad working definition of design. It is the place where deliberate creative effort meets practical ‘human purpose’.

But it also works the other way. Collective ‘human purpose’ affects design just as much as design impacts human purposes. In short: culture fuels design.

When a culture or a country is fortunate or clever enough to develop a ‘design ethos’ - a cohesive and recognizable aesthetic or experiential thread to its design offerings - this tends to be a consistent response to a shared sense of human purpose and values.

Italian design is all sophistication and flair with a deep appreciation for craftsmanship and a rich sense of culture and history. This is so because this is what the Italian people have traditionally valued culturally.

German design reflects the Germanic appreciation for order, robustness and organisation. Functionality with weight. A brooding seriousness with an emphasis on superior performance. This fits naturally with prevailing German culture and values. These aspects of life are important to the German people, and their design efforts reflect this.

It’s all generalisation and stereotyping of course, and many Germans and Italians may be slightly (or not so slightly) offended by the distillation of their culture down to such blunt statements, but most of us would draw conclusions about these cultures that are consistent with their design signature.

Scandinavian design? Austere, natural, minimalistic. Japanese design? Quirky, off-beat, whimsical. American design? Lavish, indulgent, brash.

When a country achieves a national design ethos there is a natural link to its cultural values and identity. Weaknesses and strengths come through. That which is valued is communicated along with that which is not.

You can’t fake it or even greatly manipulate it, because when you try something confused and inauthentic results. When you look to the design successes of other cultures, forged by hundreds (if not thousands) of years of life and struggle, triumph and oppression, natural beauty and national tragedy, and you try and emulate the collective depth of experience with something superficial, it tends to look just that. Superficial.

So what about us? What about New Zealand? What is our design ethos?

Well, lord knows we’ve borrowed ideas. We’ve looked to just about every trendy success in the world and sought to emulate. When a country identifies an opportunity to apply its cultural distinctives to the creation of products, services, processes or experiences - and it succeeds - politicians exhort us to do likewise. Not the principle of understanding our cultural strengths and applying these to create a consistent design ethos, but rather the elements of the design ethos that said country embraces.

At varying levels we've had a half-hearted go at copying the design ethos of most of the big players but it doesn't stick because it's not really us. We're not Italian. We're not German. We're kiwis. For better or for worse.

And if we want to capitalise on our own cultural strengths and create from them a consistent design signature that appeals to the world, we must first wander courageously into that most frightening of intellectual endeavours: understanding our own culture.

There's no avoiding the fact that this is a controversial subject on which New Zealanders are far from united. Like many in the 'colonies' we tend to have a poor appreciation of our own cultural values because we live in the midst of them and, historically, they have been poorly articulated, constrained both by our reluctance to boast about our strengths and by our ongoing struggle with biculturalism.

The latter struggle, heavily influenced by the national fear of being labelled racist, has given rise to a natural virtue of lauding Maori cultural emblems (authentically or otherwise). We New Zealanders of European origin, travelling internationally and called upon to define ourselves culturally, often fall back on Maori culture even if it has had little impact on our lives. It is within reach because it is more easily defined. We perform a haka in London, give a hongi in Paris and sing Pokarekare Ana in Rome.

When Maori New Zealanders express themselves using Maori cultural forms such as the koru, this is typically an authentic expression borne of a sense of connectedness with the past and cultural pride.

When Pākehā use Maori culture as the exclusive language for communicating their own cultural values, one cannot help but wonder if an opportunity is being lost and only part of the story is being told. It's safe and relatively easy, but it lacks the kind of depth and insight that compels and attracts the world.

Beyond more obvious forms of Maori cultural expression, European New Zealand culture - heavily influenced by our British forebears and our Maori friends and neighbours - has developed its own quiet cultural values.

An astute contributor to Wikipedia has noted "Things which distinguish Pākehā culture from British culture include higher levels of egalitarianism, anti-intellectualism, and the idea that most people can do most things if they put their minds to it."

A British website advertising New Zealand as a destination for European travellers distinguishes us by saying "wealth and social status are not important to Kiwis. They take pride in individual achievements and believe that opportunities are available to all. As a 'welfare state' unemployment benefits, housing and access to health are all available free of charge to those who can't afford it."

Others certainly recognise who we are, even if we cannot so readily do so.

As the cliché goes, we don't really understand how different New Zealand culture is until we reside outside it, and those that have report their understanding of our laid-back lifestyle, our affinity with the outdoors, our adventurous spirit and our desire for a casual, comfortable lifestyle.

Then of course there is the historically celebrated and now commonly derided 'number 8 wire mentality'. Our pioneering spirit, isolation and lack of resources gave rise to an approach to opportunity or need that was simple, functional and 'un-aesthetic'. This has tended to be the touch-point for New Zealand design; the thing we could say defined our design: inelegant, but pretty bloody useful.

More recently this has caused frustration for our economists who bemoan -

understandably - the failure of New Zealand businesses to fully capitalise on and commercialise innovation. The 'number 8 wire' mentality is no longer enough, commentators have exclaimed, we must do more with our ideas.

Another cultural phenomenon that frustrates those seeking to build New Zealand's economic future is 'satisficing'. This term is used to describe the average New Zealand business owner's restrained pursuit of success. New Zealanders in business, apparently, seek enough success to fund a comfortable lifestyle - boat, bach, holidays - but not enough to spurn real economic growth for the country.

In short, we are a country of laid back, easygoing sorts who love our natural environment and deeply value our lifestyle; time with our family and enjoyment of life. We don't want to work 80 hours a week, and have tended to resist work impinging too greatly on our personal lives (although our cultural aspiration of home ownership is denting this value).

But what we must realise is that it is this very lifestyle that is compelling to the rest of the world.

We are less wealth-oriented than the Australians and the Americans. Wealth creation is - for better or worse - less important to us. We want plenty of time to enjoy what surrounds us - family and nature - and we are prepared to sacrifice cash to enjoy it.

We are inquisitive, travelling the world desirous of genuine cultural experience. We tend to fit in and be welcomed in other cultures. Our feeble, but noble, efforts at learning the local languages are appreciated. Our willingness to try the local foods is warmly noted.

Americans aren't like this on the whole. Nor are the British, French or Italians.

We are different. We are adventurous. We are relaxed. We operate a slower pace. We are interested. We don't crave wealth above all else.

Good for us: now let's turn all this into a design ethos (which could actually spur on that economic growth we're a bit casual about).

What if we could focus export product design offerings around these cultural phenomena? What if we could capture these cultural traits consistently in experiences that visitors would be drawn to for life? What if every New Zealand offering on the world stage upheld a design signature so characteristic that it served as an advertisement for every other New Zealand product?

When Lamborghini releases a new supercar it now only reinforces what Lamborghini stands for, but what all Italian design stands for. It reinforces the overall design ethos and draws attention towards anything that comes from Italy.

We have an equivalent opportunity because who we are is just as distinctive. It's beyond the haka and koru and cultural shows and reflects a deeply valued lifestyle that is attractive to the worn and world-weary (and wealthy) that reside in contrasting cultures.

The design challenge is both refining this ethos, translating it into disparate products, services and experiences, and continually reinforcing the overall New Zealand Brand.

New Zealand youth adorn themselves with heavily American - and particularly Los Angelean - influenced clothing and accessories because they identify with and desire some connection with the lifestyle these represent. We have the opportunity to similarly embody our own lifestyle through products and services.

Icebreaker have done it. AJ Hackett's done it. Air New Zealand sometimes looks like it's having a crack at it.

But if it's going to stick it needs to be well understood and consistently applied. It requires leadership and coordination and patience. It requires support and adoption by both our big and potentially big exporters, our service providers (like Air New Zealand) and our experience providers.

It requires an ongoing public exploration and understanding of culture that rises above political correctness and honestly assesses who we are; the good and the bad.

But it doesn't require government.

We must not sit around and wait for some government programme to organise our bright business minds around the exploitation of our cultural values. It would cost a fortune and fail miserably because it would be dumbed down, forced and bureaucratic.

Instead it is up to each New Zealand business to start the process individually. Armed with an understanding of good design principles, any company can begin to delve into those aspects of our collective culture that appeal to outsiders and create value by embodying them.

As each successive company enjoys success with this approach, so others will - hopefully - follow. Pioneers will blaze the trail and the world will respond. Smart companies will embrace our broader cultural values and lifestyle and bottle it for the world. International consumers will see what we have to offer and will - if we get it right - be attracted to what we stand for and what we value.

The more we do it, the stronger the design ethos will become and the easier it will be to maintain and market. Purchasing a New Zealand product or enjoying a New Zealand experience will really mean something, and will attract a premium on the world stage. And every deliberate decision to follow this design ethos will reinforce our overall national brand and make it easier for emerging exporters to make their mark.

From this platform we could build a powerful national competitive advantage and achieve strong, sustainable economic growth.

Now that'd be choice, eh.

