

Product Design in Hong Kong (HK) and the Influence of China (PRC)

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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. After years of hard work and gained experience, and subsequently owing to the economic changes in Hong Kong in the late 1970s and 1980s, industrial design has become a profession in its own right, and now plays an important role in the economic development of Hong Kong.

China's Open Policy of the 1980s changed the characteristics of Hong Kong industries and allowed product design to become more diversified—from solely consumer products in the past to the present wide range of products that cross the entire spectrum of consumer demand.

In recent years, some overseas design firms established their businesses in Hong Kong and worked their way into Mainland China. Local manufacturers at the same time are developing and many have become internationalized, with strong cross-disciplinary in-house design teams to develop new and innovative products.

Hong Kong designers are therefore facing challenges and opportunities coming from the Mainland, and from overseas. On this assumption, the Hong Kong's design education and practices are preparing for these challenges. Among the many considerations, the method of reinforcing understanding of users in the PRC is taken as a new 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, cross-cultural experts of design and nondesign disciplines would have to work together to bridge many gaps of knowledge.

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 for improving service to the manufacturing sector of Hong Kong and China. The objectives were

- 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, such as the Hong Kong Designers Association and the Industrial Designers Society of Hong Kong, as well as the Hong Kong Heritage Museum's Hong Kong

¹ Lam, Y. (2002) Revealing local product design capacity—A qualitative study of the attitudes and design approaches of product designers in Hong Kong. Research project PolyU 5237/02H—BQ629. Hong Kong: Research Grants Council of the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong.

Design Donation Campaign,² numerous sources of valuable information needed for setting up the sample element (respondents) were established.

It was followed by the analysis of the product design practice process commonly adopted in Hong Kong. This analysis of design process was conducted through semistructured interviews with the designers, by direct observation on their method of practice, design philosophies, and their problem-solving methodologies. Analyzed data was then categorized and compared so as to understand the situation of Hong Kong product design practice, with the intent of advancing the practice.

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 process (semistructured, 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 is being held 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 views in product design practice in Hong Kong from a specific population (product design participants). The investigation method therefore fell well into the category of creative development research. As this method was to observe and listen to design participants in order to obtain an understanding and appreciation of their attitudes, behaviors, and their approach to design problems, it was suggested that in return it might lead to the creation of strategies for reinforcing or modifying their theories and related approaches.

The General Interpretation of Design

Hong Kong, like the rest parts of PRC, has not gone through the art movements that took place in the West during the past 100 years. Our understanding of design was once restricted to art and craft. Since the 1960s, and for a long time thereafter, the concept of modern design to many of us has centered 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 only recently started to appreciate the art and science relationship and its importance in the origin of design.

Many Chinese design participants today consider design deriving from art that embraces the aspect of humanity (Figure 1). On the other hand, technology is a derivative of science. Both design and technology consider about 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., lifestyle products are geared towards the art side, while medical equipment towards the science spectrum). The interpretation suggests a new relationship of design and technology, which automatically embeds the human issues and considerations in design and readjust the position of technocracy (Figure 2). Designers will act as catalyst to make things happen.

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 developed an archive system of local design in Hong Kong.

³ The exhibition was held in the Hong Kong 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.

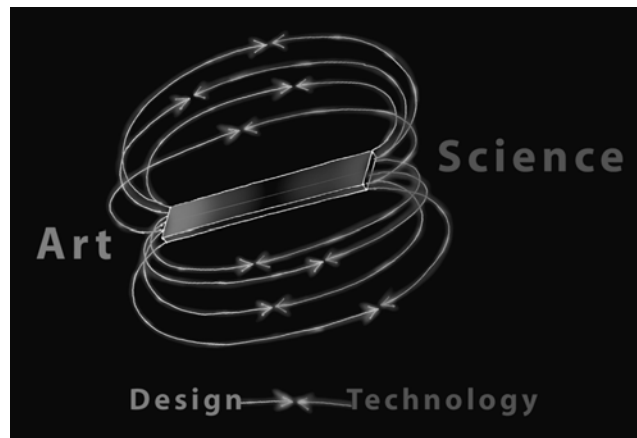


Figure 1. Art and Science. Figure 2. The model of design and technology magnetism.

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 sharing experiences, and subsequently because of the economic changes in Hong Kong in the late 1970s and 1980s, 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 that would employ designers during the period. The situation was especially true with the SMEs⁵. Enterprises with design teams, would often allow their capable designers participated in running the business. Dr. Mark Oakley⁶ noted in his research in the early 1980s, 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 Hong Kong local company⁷ that made and marketed its products in 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 two 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. Also in 1979, a group of Hong Kong design education advocates 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 Hong Kong industries at the same time in the following aspects:

- Hong Kong 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.

⁵ Small/medium-sized enterprises.

⁶ Dr. Mark Oakley, Research Fellow in a study 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 Southeast 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 (Hong Kong Polytechnic) led a delegation team of Hong Kong design participants to Guangzhou Academy of Art, PRC for a one-week seminar, in which the concept of modern design and education were introduced.

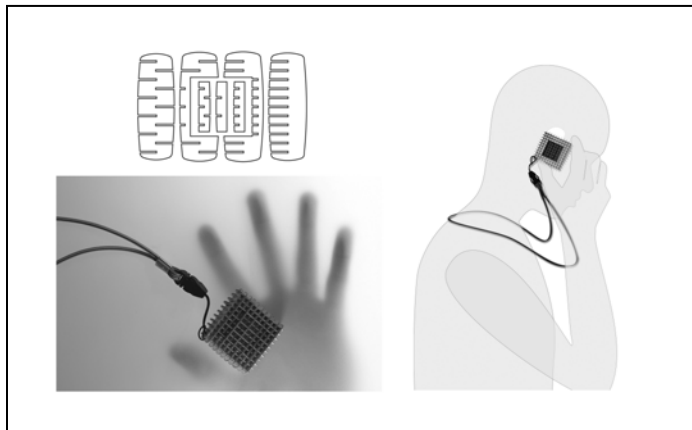
- Product categories diversified from consumer products to systems and equipment.

At the time when Hong Kong 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 designers. Many experienced designers chose to leave the industry and were self-employed, with clients mostly from overseas. To the Hong Kong design professionals, it 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 1990s. It was not until the rise of the PRC industrial base that the need for design and innovation to compete with other countries was finally appreciated. 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 learned 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 how design could advance a business.

Since the 1990s, the local design education and practice have 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, their living habits, and behaviors, and how such information could relate to design. To ensure success of the method, Hong Kong product designers acquired knowledge in myriad disciplines. A good Hong Kong product designer explores design problems from different perspectives. Outstanding designs draw from not only designer's life experience, personal feelings, understanding, appreciation of and care for end users, and also

Figure 3.

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. Hong Kong designers are working to devise unique methodologies to explore in design in significant topics. For instance, we have designers working on more ecosustainable 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 ecofriendly living environment. Figure 3 shows a design that explores ecosustainability by involving the user at the very beginning of the design and development stage. It is highly customizable and can be cocreated with end-users by means of simple software through the cyber

⁹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. The project was located at the Industrial Performance Centre (IPC) of MIT, 1996–1997.

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

space. Casing material: recycled sheet plastic. Manufacturing method: Laser-cut and slot/snap fit to assemble. (Leong, 2004)

The PRC Open Policy has also changed the characteristics of Hong Kong industries and encouraged product design to become more diversified—from only consumer products in the past to the presently designing equipment systems that satisfy many levels of consumer demand. In recent years, some overseas design firms established their business in Hong Kong and have worked their way 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 five 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 freelancer.

In an attempt to compare the five 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.

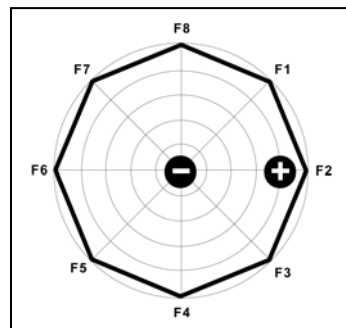
Factor 4—Monetary Reward (F4): Contributes to the well-being of the designer.

Factor 5—Motivation and 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.



$F6 + F7 + F8 = \text{Depth of Response to Market and Diversified/New Opportunities.}$

All factors are preferably to be at a balanced state as this chart indicates (Figure 4). All factors are encouraged to move from the center towards the circumference.

Figure 4.
An ideal mode of local product design practice.

Here are the features and comments to the five modes of practice (Figure 5):

Mode 1—Stronger in cross-departmental/cross-disciplinary learning, thereby facilitating information flow and gained expertise. Less personal satisfaction, less emphasis on individuality.

Mode 2—High degree of autonomy. Quick response to market. Small team normally has narrow client-base that 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.

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Mode 5—High degree of autonomy, unstable income.

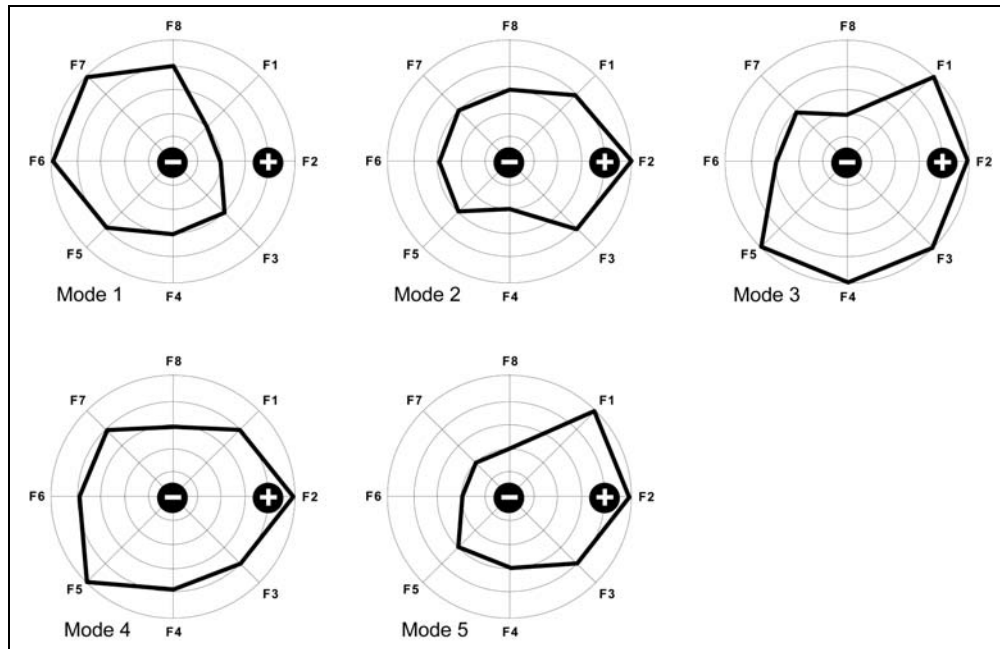
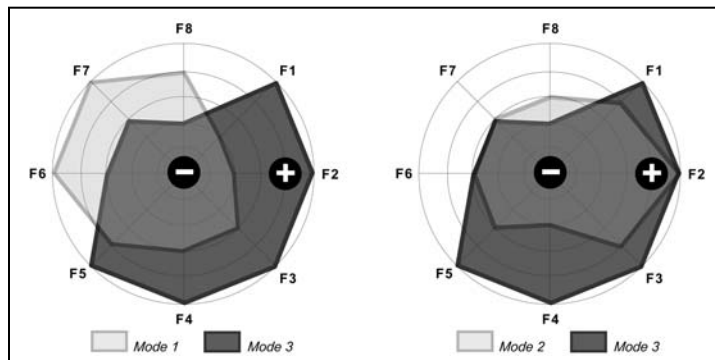


Figure 5.
Five modes of practice
in Hong Kong.

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



These modes of practice, however, are less advantageous in terms of knowledge advancement and long-term future development. The point can be made clear in the comparison shown in Figure 6. 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.

Figure 6. Comparing mode 3 to modes 1 and 2.

The Implications

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

This trend, however, poses a problem: in the longer term, the knowledge advancement will be restricted because of 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 that needs to be addressed.

Conclusions

Albeit a small but growing group, product designers in Hong Kong are maturing and performing. The magnitude and speed of this trend depend very much on the designers own personal appreciation of

design matters, the relevant environment, and design support¹¹ 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 a team effort and a cross-disciplinary approach towards 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 Hong Kong Industries (FHKI) set up the Hong Kong Design Council in the 1970s to promote design. In 2002, the Hong Kong Design Center (HKDC) was established for the same purpose. The Hong Kong Science and Technology Corporation (HKSTP) worked together with HKDC in the last two years to found the InnoCentre, to provide design professionals with physical space to facilitate their development (2006). The two major institutions for Design education (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Institute of Vocational Education) were further developed and expanded in recent years.