

TRIENNIAL

Australian Australian design

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Rita Minga, Trent Jansen, Johnny Nargoodah, Gene Tighe, Elsie Dickens, Eva Nargoodah, Duane Shaw and Illium Nargoodah, *Jangarra armchair*, 2017



For as long as I can recall, making Australian design has been a preoccupation of most associated with the Australian design industry. Designers trained and based in Australia speak regularly and passionately about Australian design, discussing how and why design made in Australia can represent inherently Australian things. Yet some firmly believe that contemporary Australian design, produced within the context of the design industry, fails to embody and articulate qualities of Australia as an ancient place and set of enduring Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, and that it is still trapped within a historical trajectory – the direct result of colonisation and European hegemony.

As an Australian designer, my training and education has been dominated by a Eurocentric world view. Being aware of the place and context in which I find myself, over several years I have sought to undertake design projects and generate new work enabled through collaboration and dialogue with Indigenous knowledge holders and artists. Through this experience I have gained insights and made observations, some of which are shared here. As such I present one view on the topic of Indigenous/non-Indigenous design collaboration. Reflecting on this experience enables others to draw from it; however, it is not a methodology, or a blueprint for what must be something that people devise together, each time the opportunity presents itself.

Indigenous Australian cultures offer all Australians who aspire to know them the solid foundation of a continuing ancient order enduring in this place for over 60,000 years. Perhaps, through a sharing of knowledge on Indigenous cultures, better dialogues can be established, making it possible for new opportunities to emerge, where non-Indigenous designers can seek to collaborate with Indigenous custodians to consider and interpret a shared understanding of the continent on which we live, and the society to which we belong. Through this dialogue, non-Indigenous Australians may better intuit their place, locating themselves, in the here and now, as a contemporary part of an enduring and robust Australian culture.

In this context it is worth asking: If we trace the lineage of postcolonial Australian design, were the artefacts made on this continent shaped by Australian values, or were they (and are they still) simply foreign objects made by colonist hands on Australian soil? In our 229 years of postcolonial, and roughly 116 years of post-national, occupation, if we have not yet found an Australian sentiment to shape the artefacts that we design and make, might we be looking in the wrong directions for our inspiration?

In the period post colonisation (after 1788), but before the advent of the Australian nation state (1901), it is difficult to see any possibility for Australian-ness in Australian design. According to Kevin Fahy and Andrew Simpson (1998), mainstream trends in Australian furniture design in the early years of the British colony of New South Wales were entirely dictated by English fashion.¹ Illustrations of the latest English furniture would reach the colony quickly in the catalogues and pattern books of large British furniture houses, and in many cases furniture pieces were imported for the purpose of being copied by cabinet-makers.





Trent Jansen, *Briggs Family Tea Service*, 2011

In some cases, the designers and makers responsible for recreating these artefacts would make small innovations, but in many instances the 'design' of these artefacts was more closely aligned with the standard *Oxford English Dictionary* definition – 'the generation of a plan or drawing produced to show the look and function' – original or not. Graham Cornall (1990) argues that furniture produced by craftspeople working in New South Wales according to British sensibilities exhibited limited local influences, and that the pieces were instead proud statements of the unwavering British-ness of the owner.²

It stands to reason that these early artefacts would exhibit few explicitly Australian influences. The nation of Australia did not yet exist and those colonists who cleared and settled the land in those early decades would have assigned their allegiance to the nation/ empire of their birth. Imagine for a moment yourself as one of these colonists, uprooting your life in what you understood then as the centre of the enlightened world, to forcibly or otherwise eke out an existence in what you mistook to be an uncivilised antipode. With

which of these places would you associate a sense of belonging? To which would you devote your allegiance? Those who came to Australia in the early decades of colonisation did not see themselves as Australian; they were outsiders – British, Irish, Scotch, Welsh – and their artefacts were designed and made according to the styles and conventions of the day and were symbolic of this cultural identity.

Leaping forward to another significant period in Australia's design history: our contribution to the most significant postcolonial shift in design philosophy – modernism. In the mid twentieth century, a new international approach to design reached Australia, ushered in by a small group of Australian designers. According to Kirsty Grant (2014), furnishings designed by Grant Featherston, Douglas Snelling and Clement Meadmore (among others) during the mid twentieth century are some of the most highly recognisable pieces ever produced by Australian designers.³ However, these were interpretations of a series of ideals that originated in other nations, and part of a growing internationalism: Featherston's practice



Marcel Wanders, *Knotted chair*, 1995, National Gallery of Victoria

was largely influenced by the modernist principles of László Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius, designers hailing from the Bauhaus school in Germany, who endeavoured to organise the cultural, social and emotional structures that govern human behaviour and facilitate a society of 'civilised' human beings. Meadmore listed American and Italian mid twentieth-century furniture as his main stylistic influences, and Snelling stated that furniture was 'purely equipment for easier living – for seating, eating, storing', a quote that, according to Kirsty Grant, is an allusion to Swiss modernist Le Corbusier's portrayal of a house as a 'machine for living'.⁴ This reference suggests that the philosophical underpinning of Snelling's work did not find its origins in Australia, but rather, that the design ideals that shaped Snelling's furniture originated with Le Corbusier.

This is another chapter in our history, in which designers practising in Australia have done so according to foreign design philosophies. Just as early colonial designers and makers felt the need to align themselves with a bona fide British or Continental

approach rather than generating their own, Australian modernists gathered in the wake of a new pre-validated global movement.

Modernism was and is a global approach to design, demanding that the function of an object dictate its form. Modernism observes that since objects, for the most part, are designed to function with or for humans, they are shaped by their functionality, utilitarianism and ergonomics. Thus the functional similarities between humans, whether agrarian, nomadic or urbanised, across cultural divides, have meant that a commonality has emerged, to which most human artefacts adhere across diverse typologies.

Modernist designs are shaped by this functional commonality, rather than being shaped by the unique characteristics that distinguish one location or group of people from another – culture, ritual, language, history and so forth. Instead, ubiquitous objects are produced that are largely divorced from place, and happily sit in any environment without interacting with the idiosyncrasies of individuals, or the environments in which they 'live'.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the design world has been in the grip of a modernist renaissance, whereby fiscal responsibility has resulted in safe, derivative design, as elementary ideas are easier to sell to a broad audience. For the most part, the once experimental design companies (mostly European) and practitioners have moved towards the centre, in order to survive these financially challenging times. However, simultaneously, innovation and evolution in design have suffered.

This international trend has, once again, been adopted by designers working in Australia, resulting in commercially driven modernist objects with a centrist global sensibility. These objects could hail from anywhere, as once more we fall in behind the ubiquity of modernism and foreign hegemony.

As a designer I am personally bored to death with this approach, but more to the point, if it is our desire to generate Australian artefacts, as propounded by so many within the design industry, history has proven that this cannot be achieved through a continued alignment with ubiquitous, international design approaches.

Vexingly, a new(ish) international approach to design may provide a mode of operation and expression that could embody the uniqueness of Australian places and cultures, despite its non-Australian origins. This approach goes by differing names – postmodern/ conceptual/anthropological design – and before you switch off at the mention of conceptual design, consider the versatility of this approach, and its ability to embody anything for anyone. Yes, conceptual design is an international movement, but thinking through the practitioners who have used this approach to generate context and culturally specific artefacts over the past thirty years, perhaps this is the international movement that could be best embraced by Australian designers to embody the local.

The famed Droog designers used this approach to embody a uniquely Dutch sensibility in designed objects during the 1990s, and the prolific Campana Brothers continue to use this approach to capture Brazilian identity in their artefacts, or as is the case with their contribution to the NGV Triennial, *Victoria Amazonica*, 2017, a collaboration with Yarrenyty Arltere Artists and Elliot Rich, capture the shared cultural significance of 'waterways' in both Brazilian and Arrernte / Western Arrernte culture.

This is a non-prescriptive approach whose only rule is that design should embody something substantial. This something can be specific to materiality, place, narrative and context, allowing the generation of culturally or conceptually specific artefacts freed from the economic and functional rationalism of modernism. Conceptual design is a truly versatile approach that, unlike the strict and prescriptive modernist approach, is open to evolution and individual interpretation, allowing designers and their collaborators to attach their own values, ideas and attitudes, iterating the method in order to generate outcomes relevant to their priorities.

Trent Jansen, *Pankalangu Wardrobe*, 2017



If this approach was to be adopted, from which components of Australian identity could these designers draw influence? Is it even possible or relevant to identify those beliefs, ideas and values that are most commonly understood as Australian? While there are some common narratives that are considered by a large portion of the population to be Australian, are these narratives inevitably exclusionary and often problematic? David Carter (2006) says that national symbols and ceremonies are conveyed to the population by the media, educational institutions and political organisations.⁵ Given the percentage of the Australian population exposed to these entities, there is some consistency in the national rhetoric consumed by Australians. Carter lists narratives such as the Anzac tradition, bush legend and the pioneering spirit as common symbols of Australian identity transferred to the Australian community at large. However, there are two problems with these narratives when considering their potential influence on uniquely Australian design methods. Firstly, these are exclusively white Australian myths, largely ignoring the contribution of Indigenous Australians and excluding them from the national identity with which these narratives are associated. And secondly, these are young myths, lacking the robust lineage that Australian designers have sought through their alignment with British and internationalist design movements in order to legitimise their practices.

For non-Indigenous, urban Australian designers, with little everyday access to information that might form a respectful and sensitive understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, it can be difficult to know where to begin in delving into the possibility of another trajectory for Australian design informed more by Indigenous culture.

Working respectfully with Aboriginal Australians must entail more than simply asking permission to take inspiration from cultural content, or suggesting a particular creative direction as, in many cases, decades of forced agreement with white Australians has resulted in obliging responses, even when that individual would prefer to answer in the negative. Similarly, no response at all might be interpreted as offering consent, but in some Indigenous communities this is the politest way

of declining a request. It is imperative that permission is sought to take inspiration from Indigenous Australian cultural content; however, when a relationship predates a request for permission, the knowledge seeker has come to know the character of the knowledge holder. This firstly gives that knowledge holder more license to refuse a request, and secondly allows the knowledge seeker to better judge whether or not information is being given consensually.

A nuanced understanding of the protocols governing Indigenous cultures can be out of reach for many. There are methods for seeking out this knowledge, but from my experience none are easy, and all require some level of personal commitment on the part of the knowledge seeker. The most common way to access knowledge is through a diligent and rigorous approach to research, but research can only take the process so far, and for this type of work to be legitimate, drawing as it must from cultural knowledge held in trust, it must be created in a reciprocal mode of knowledge exchange facilitated by mutual interaction, with time spent between individuals across cultural divides.

More symmetrical models of engagement can result in better outcomes, avoiding appropriation and ambiguity of authorship through a deeper mode of practice based on a mutual exchange of ideas and information. Collaboration is one such example of symmetrical exchange, but what is collaboration? What are the common complications associated with collaboration more generally? And what specific challenges are associated with Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration in Australia? The term collaboration covers a broad spectrum of cooperation. At one end of this continuum is complete co-authorship – the sharing of all stages of the creative process in the development of creative outcomes – and at the other are any number of models whereby specific stages of development are shared, and others are realised individually.

In reality, complete co-authorship is rare, as this process requires either a completely synergistic relationship between cooperating practitioners, or a great deal of dialogue over extended time, or compromise. Instead, most collaboration tends to

operate more closely to the standard Oxford definition – ‘the action of working with someone to produce something’. This definition does not dictate the degree of co-authorship, and as such any project involving more than one person could be labelled collaboration. This could entail a sharing of knowledge at the beginning of a project, cooperative production at the end, or any number of alternate models where specific tasks are shared and others are not. It is not for me to specify which collaborative mode is most conducive to a sharing of knowledge. I have worked under a few collaborative models with Indigenous Australian artists and storytellers, but until now the adopted mode of each partnership was unplanned, evolving as needed towards the best outcome for the project.

Recently I was asked to collaborate with Indigenous Australian artists working at Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing, remote Western Australia. Unlike other cross-cultural collaborations in which I had previously participated, this one involved adopting a mode specified by Fremantle Arts Centre. As part of *In Cahoots: Artist-led Collaborations Across Country*, they hope for this to be a co-authorship, where the research, design and production are developed cooperatively. For the first time I was forced to carefully consider the complicating factors that govern any collaboration, as well as those that affect a non-Indigenous artist working with an Indigenous artist, and conversely those influencing an Indigenous artist working with a non-Indigenous artist. I have concluded that the challenges of all collaborations, since they are all interactions between people, are similar.

The most significant blockages I experienced relate to language. It is difficult for two individuals to communicate across language groups. If one collaborator speaks urban Australian English and the other speaks in their own language, it can be difficult to engage in the complex conversations necessary when making artefacts. Less obvious is the paradigmatic barrier between an individual with a Western art/design education, and another without.

Those who practise design within Australia’s formal design industry are generally educated in the vocabulary of that discipline. As such, when two such

designers meet to collaborate, they both understand the function of this relationship within the context and codes of their industry. However, those existing outside of a Western paradigm, with their own language and codes surrounding their own design processes, may have a different understanding of collaboration. I have experienced both of these blockages when collaborating with Indigenous Australian artists, but I have experienced similar blockages when collaborating with, for example, Indian, Italian, Dutch and Japanese artisans and manufacturers, so these complicating factors are by no means unique to the Australian context.

One solution to this particular blockage is to see ways to work outside of language. In my experience, sketching has been a very useful communicative tool in this scenario. I have experimented with sketching exchanges, whereby two practitioners converse through sketches, with the first sketching their interpretation of an idea, after which the second responds with his/her interpretation of the first sketch. This method can go back and forth until both authors recognise their own agency and influence within the final outcome. This method requires that both collaborators are competent sketchers – there will be questionable results if either has little aptitude for drawing. Another method by which language can be removed from the design process is through direct prototyping. This is the co-design of an outcome, either from prefabricated components, or through co-making with little pre-planning. Again, this method requires that both authors are proficient makers. The physical/visual nature of both methods removes the focus on language, and collaborators prioritise the act of co-authorship, rather than the discussion of how that collaboration might take place.

These are both strategies that I have adopted in collaborative projects in a variety of places where linguistic communication is difficult. Given the vast cultural differences between contemporary Indigenous communities from diverse regions of Australia, each collaboration that I have undertaken with an Indigenous Australian knowledge holder and/or artist has been considerably distinct. While living among and working with individuals with a longstanding and deep-rooted

connection to their Country, I have gained information and sentiment that illuminated portions of the ancient and continuing order governing that specific place. However, this knowledge is bestowed incrementally as relationships form and trust is built. In my experience, the reciprocity that exists between two individuals working together on a common outcome has opened lines of communication, and allowed me to better understand possible interpretations of Australian-ness embodied with Indigenous culture.

The act of working across cultures, telling stories, breaking through language barriers and understanding the way in which people from other cultures live and make design can be complicated and vexing, but there is also great beauty to be found in this in-between place, when designers and artists work respectfully towards a mutual understanding and the removal of longstanding cultural divides.

Perhaps it is time for Australian designers to look more deeply at influences close to home so as to respectfully open dialogue with Indigenous Australians as they seek to adopt inspiration from the longest-standing, most deeply rooted design practices of all: the artefact design and making practices of pre-colonial Australians.

Notes

- 1 Kevin Fahy & Andrew Simpson, *Australian Furniture: Pictorial Dictionary and History, 1788–1938*, Casuarina Press, Sydney, 1998.
- 2 Graham Cornall, *Memories: A Survey of Early Australian Furniture in the Collection of the Lord McAlpine of West Green*, Australian City Properties Ltd, Perth, 1990.
- 3 Kirsty Grant and National Gallery of Victoria, *Mid-century Modern: Australian Furniture Design*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2014.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 David Carter, *Dispossession, Dreams & Diversity: Issues in Australian Studies*, Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest, 2006.



W. H. Rocke & Co, *Bookcase*, c. 1896, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne