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## Straight talk

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# STRAIGHT TALK

Over the last five months, some of Hong Kong's most accomplished designers have been engaged in a dialogue with the HKDI community and the public. DANIEL JEFFREYS and DAISY ZHONG asked a selection of the participants what the city needs to increase its standing as a global centre for design.

The *Design Dialogue: Hong Kong Culture 2013* series began on January 24th with a scintillating double bill. First Henry Steiner explained the intricacies of designing some of Hong Kong's iconic bank notes. And then Tina Liu drew deeply on her extraordinary experience to analyse the challenges of image design.

The series was organised by the HKDI's Professional Education and Engagement Centre (PEEC) at HKDI, led by Grace Kao. The goal of the ten seminars was to provide a unique window on the work and preoccupations of Hong Kong's designers, while giving the local community a chance to interact with the city's homegrown masters. All of the seminars that have taken place so far (the series concludes with two more sessions on May 31

and June 14 featuring Gary Chang and William Tang respectively) can still be revisited at the HKDI's website, where they provide a deep repository of design wisdom.

But with so many innovative designers engaged in the *Design Dialogue* project there was bound to be questions about what the Hong Kong creative community needs to be even more successful. And the design masters were not short of answers. On the day the dialogues began, seven of them gathered at HKDI to debate the future of the creative industries in Hong Kong, and many of the participants had grave concerns, with the role of Mainland China being a key issue.

"When I came here today my cabdriver told me he used to be a stuntman, but he had to change his job because so much of the film industry's work has moved north," said Liu. "The China market has more funds and resources."

Liu was concerned that the film industry's drift toward Beijing and Shanghai might be replicated on other parts of the creative spectrum.

"For design, the shrinking Hong Kong market might lead to decline, and design will follow the film industry to the north," she said. "But the market in the north is enormous and the opportunities also. I have faith in Hong Kong people and I believe that we have a role to play in the rise of China."



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TINA LIU, LEE CHI WING, KOYO WILLIAM. (FROM LEFT) LEE CHI WING, KOYO WILLIAM AND TINA LIU





《WORKING IN HONG KONG IS A BLESSING BECAUSE IT'S STIMULATING, MULTICULTURAL AND ANARCHISTIC.》

Liu also sees opportunities in the evolution of China, as its wealth class becomes more refined.

"The consumer culture in China involves an irrational worship of money and seeing money as taste and I hope that will change in the near future, I will be thrilled to see that happen and Hong Kong can benefit, but local designers have to be prepared for the much bigger scale in China – just because you can do a great job preparing one dish does not mean you can handle a banquet."

Graphic designer Michael Miller Yu, also identified issues in Hong Kong's relationship with China but he thought the city's government was a bigger issue, "The government are not giving enough opportunities to the design community," he said. Douglas Young, the founder of G.O.D, echoed his position. He issued a challenge to the government to use more young designers.

"The government is always telling us not to rely on it, but for some projects we need help," he said. "Take things like bus shelters that could easily be handled by design graduates, but these projects are not given to young graduates, they are lumped together and given to big companies and done in a really mediocre way."

Young cited the 17th century European Renaissance, when artists and designers had a rich well of support to draw from as an example that Hong Kong should follow.

"I think great work is not just the result of the artist or the designer, the patron is also very important," he said. "I don't think there are enough great patrons in Hong Kong. A possible patron would be the government, but they lack taste and have insufficient ability to take risks. I don't think Hong Kong lacks talent, I think it lacks patrons. We don't have enough of them."

Young said that his experiences in China had been better than those he had in Hong Kong, because he found the clients there to be open-minded.

"Design doesn't pay in Hong Kong," he said. "The most profitable companies in Hong Kong are not the most creative. In fact the more creative you are, the more money you are going to lose."

Steiner, who is known as the father of Hong Kong design, sympathised with Young's radical stance but was more optimistic about the future, in part because of the city's world-famous energy.

"Working in Hong Kong is a blessing because it's stimulating, multicultural and anarchistic and there is a lot of attitude, which encourages creativity," said Steiner. "The next generation of Hong Kong designers are more outspoken and have a strong sense of what Hong Kong is and can be. I think they will create positive changes."

For Steiner, it's not government or patrons who create great designers. Both can be helpful to the design

OPPOSITE FROM  
TOP LEFT: DOUGLAS  
YOUNG; HENRY  
STEINER AND  
MICHAEL MILLER  
YU; THE OPENING  
SESSION OF DESIGN  
DIALOGUE - HONG  
KONG CULTURE  
2013; ALAN CHAN  
AND ROCCO YIM



process, but in the end it's about the individual's commitment.

"I want to warn people that they should not enter into design because they think it's going to be life changing," he said. "They should do so because they want to design, it's got to be in their DNA."

Artist, designer and brand consultant Alan Chan sees education as a key component to the future of Hong Kong's design community.

"In the field of product design Japan is the leader," he said. "I can see no Asian countries that can go beyond Japan's achievements in the next few decades. This is because aesthetic education in Japan starts from the beginning of a child's life. Hong Kong's education system prevents the sense of art from growing. The painting lessons are not useful, because they are superficial. I don't think Hong Kong can nurture the kind of graphic designers who can rival Japan's."

Chan praised one aspect of Hong Kong's design approach, and he shared this view with Yu. Both saw Hong Kong's design aesthetic as a unique mix of East and West with cosmopolitan and refined elements.

"I think the greatest bargaining power that Hong Kong designers have is their cosmopolitan mindset," said Chan.

For fashion designer and HKDI graduate Koyo William, Hong Kong designers also benefit from dealing with obstacles that are specific to this city.

《 I THINK THE GREATEST BARGAINING POWER THAT HONG KONG DESIGNERS HAVE IS THEIR COSMOPOLITAN MIND SET. 》

"I think design is unlimited and I find inspirations everywhere," he said. "But in Hong Kong we are constantly dealing with limitations, especially with space. We have to be ingenious to put so many things inside 100 or 200 square feet. Hong Kong designers can develop great expertise in designing for small spaces."

Industrial designer Lee Chi Wing took a complimentary view to Koyo, seeing Hong Kong as a place that rewards new ideas and diversification.

"Design is simple and human," he said. "It should enhance the possibilities and experience of daily life."

That was a view Lee shared with all the other six designers who joined this discussion. Although all seven saw obstacles, they could also see great opportunities.

"You don't need many people to start a revolution," said Young. "You only need several geniuses to spark something that becomes self-sustaining, and I think Hong Kong is ripe for that. Hong Kong has made its money and gone through its building process and its time to establish a design culture that puts the city on the world map. And it's really up to the next generation to steer us into that era."

Which is a last word that represents the best possible challenge to the city's young designers – be geniuses and change the world. Now that would be something worth talking about. ☺



DESIGNER FROM LEFT: MICHAEL MILLER, YU HENRY, STEINER AND DOUGLAS YOUNG; MICHAEL MILLER, YU, ALAN CHAN, ROCCO YIM AND HENRY STEINER; THE OPENING CEREMONY OF DESIGN DIALOGUE - HONG KONG CULTURE 2013; HENRY STEINER