Harnessing design for prosperity

Creativity can solve problems in many service sectors, says a visiting expert

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For British design expert George Cox, in Sydney last week, good design is 'understanding how people think and behave'

THE thing about designers is that they always want to tell you how to live your life. In the best possible way, of course.

Buy a designer product for the home — a kitchen appliance or a chair — and you buy into the designer's ideology: futuristic, trendy, eco-friendly, or simply an exquisite marriage of form and function. It's a benign form of lifestyle control.

This is the essential difference between works of art and designer products. A painting, symphony or sculpture may be programmatic, even didactic, but it cannot impose a lifestyle on you. The shape of a kettle, however, will have a big say in how you make a cup of tea.

These thoughts surfaced while walking around *The Red Square*, one of the best exhibitions of the year (it recently closed at the Art Gallery of NSW, and is now at the National Gallery of Victoria until March 4.).

The exhibition covers those 14 culturally potent years of the Weimar Republic in Germany, the brief respite between World War I and the rise of Nazism. This was the era of the sardonic theatre of Brecht and Weill, the expressionist filmmaking of Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, and the design Utopia that was the Bauhaus.

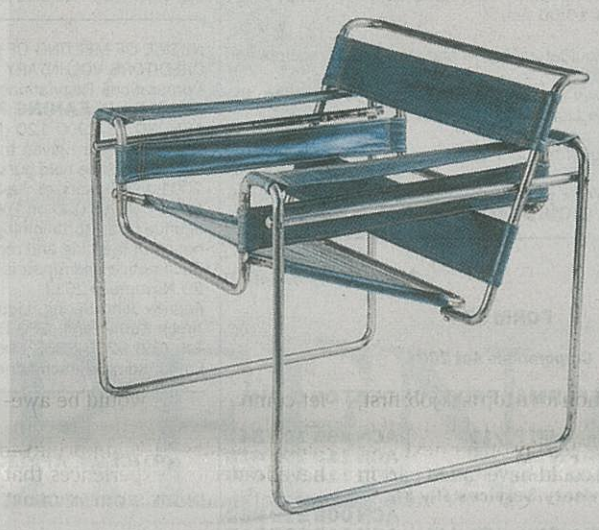
The exhibition includes disturbing images by Otto Dix of Germany's walking wounded and portraits by such artists as Christian Schad, George Grosz and Dix: faces that hold the viewer in a frank, disconcerting gaze.

A large part is devoted to domestic objects, furniture and art from the Bauhaus, the design school founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar in 1919, and the origin of the modern design industry. (The location in Weimar was a coincidence, and the Bauhaus later moved to Dessau and Berlin before the Nazis disbanded it.)

On display are the iconic club chair designed by Marcel Breuer, with its streamlined tubular steel, the bright orange dining-room suite by Erich Dieckmann, and a conical, red-glazed tea set by by Margarete Marks.

The objects add a vital dimension to the exhibition but also stand apart from the other artworks. First, unlike works of art that are unique, many of the Bauhaus products are intended for commercial manufacture. Indeed, Breuer broke with Gropius and the Bauhaus over his right to profit from his designs.

Second, while the Bauhaus embraced experimental theatre, music, photography and artists such as Kandinsky, it was in the design products that its idealism found physical form: decorative, functional, modernist and democratic in their ability for mass manufacture. To sink into Breuer's chair, or to take tea with Margarete, is to participate in their vision of the world. Thoughts of the Bauhaus return in conversation with George Cox, former chairman of Britain's Design Council, who was here to give a series of talks for the NSW, Queensland and Victoria governments. Cox is not one of those hip design types: no black suit, no Le Corbusier specs. His navy jacket is more befitting a former businessman and company director, although he did sport a natty pair of Paul Smith cufflinks.



THOMAS DIX

Marcel Breuer's club chair, 1925

RAY STRANGE

Robert Foster-designed water jugs at Fink Design, Queanbeyan

For Cox, however, design is less about aesthetics than about good thinking: policy and strategy, beautifully executed.

In 2005 he was invited by Britain's then chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, to produce a review on creativity in business. How could British design — not just the "cool Britannia" of fashion and media, but also pointy-end science and engineering — be exploited for greater all-round prosperity? Several of his recommendations were implemented by the former Labour government, and Cox is now invited to speak on the subject around the world.

"You get very much fewer bad products now; product design is pretty good," Cox says. "But I could give endless diatribes about good and bad service ... You see things that would cause you apoplexy, and things which are just good design."

Cox's message is that problems in the health sector, transport and other services can be better solved with design-like thinking: the meeting of specialist knowledge and designers' creativity. Further, he says, government investment in good products and solutions — through procurement policies, for example — can set design-led thinking buzzing through the public and private sectors.

Arts Minister Simon Crean may take notice of Cox's formulations as he prepares to draft the National Cultural Policy. As outlined in the discussion paper released in August, the policy will attempt to draw together seemingly every aspect of Australian creativity, including the heritage performing arts, screen production, fashion and design. This is in addition to a National Design Policy that was promised at last year's federal election. The NCP discussion paper referred to a "scoping" study due last September, and the deadline has since been extended.

Several design groups have their irons in the fire. The Australian Design Alliance — the organisation that brought Cox to Australia — was founded a year ago as an advocacy body for the design sector. Executive director Lisa Cahill argues that design needs a separate policy, because its commercial aspects set it apart from the subsidised arts covered by the NCP.

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Meanwhile, the Australian Institute of Architects says the central work of architects and designers has been downplayed in the NCP, and wants a separate architecture policy.

These discussions are being had while the federal government's arts funding agency, the Australia Council, has withdrawn its $250,000 annual grant to Craft Australia, the body representing 10,000 craftmakers and designers, many of them small businesses. As the Australia Council grant was Craft Australia's only income, the advocacy body will almost certainly close.

All this points to the need for a clear policy overview of what can be loosely called Australia's creative industries: a catch-all that includes everything from chamber music to broadcasting, fashion and video games.

Justin O'Connor, on the creative industries faculty at Queensland University of Technology, makes a bracing argument for collapsing the old distinctions between the traditional art forms and the creative industries.

It is wrong, he writes, to say the arts have only cultural value and the creative industries have only economic benefit when all are part of the fabric of modern life.

As previously pointed out in this column, though, not all creative industries are alike. The needs of subsidised performing arts companies, for example, are very different from the needs of start-up design companies, not least the distinction between not-for-profit and profit-making ventures. We ask a symphony orchestra to give concerts of exceptional music, not to also design, manufacture and market the instruments.

That said, it would be a missed opportunity if the NCP treated the arts, design, architecture and other creative industries as mutually exclusive, when so much cross-fertilisation can occur.

At the heart of good policy are the principles of good design. Indeed, the ADA has offered Crean and his policy wonks its services, to show them how design thinking can produce the best result.

It may be as simple — and as difficult — to achieve as Cox describes it: that good design is about "understanding how people think and behave".

Matthew Westwood's column appears on Tuesdays.