



## comment

# Against all odds

*The brave and persistent searching of one's imagination for the key to a design solution can be a lonely and heartbreakingly frustrating process*

**opposite**  
an interactive exhibition designed by Simons,  
curated by Paul Fox, Postmaster Gallery,  
Melbourne

Design is fragile, and truly brilliant design – like brilliance in other areas of human endeavour – is rare. The chance of reaching a brilliant design solution is limited by the complexities and fragility of the exercise. Not only does the designer need to comprehend the brief, understand the properties of a range of materials and manufacturing techniques, he or she must also be able to work within cost and time constraints. While grappling with these practical considerations, designers face the bigger challenge of exploring possible solutions, exhorting themselves to reach for the elusive spark of inspiration that will make the result outstanding.

A design is fragile, even once arrived at, since it must travel a hazardous road to be finally realised and left to see out its intended life span. The design concept must firstly be accepted by the client and then it needs escorting through the realisation process where even the most detailed specifications leave room for interpretation. Once the design is realised, it can still be under threat – from physical alteration, its setting may be altered, or it may be relocated – and compromised.

At the Victorian Arts Centre, the John Truscott designed interiors have been compromised by a thousand small changes without regard for the integrity of the overall design. In Canberra at the National Museum, there is intense public debate around the merits of the 'Garden of Dreams' courtyard. In stage and exhibition design I have witnessed a number of examples of deliberate neglect or a lack of understanding of the design and how to present or maintain it which highlight how fragile design is. No doubt there are many examples of the same problems in other design disciplines.

With the competition to design Canberra, early last century and a few decades later with the competition to design the Sydney Opera House, the judging panels had the courage and vision to select brilliant design concepts as the winners. Regrettably, neither project was followed through to its full potential, (although the Opera House is going some way to redress that now). In both cases the designers were not given the support they needed. It is a poor message to the community, if designers are treated with disrespect, or worse still contempt; it is the path to mediocrity. Women designers, a pool of considerable design talent, suffer from a lack of respect and support, in particular.

A society that admires enquiry and imagination and praises and rewards creative endeavour including good design is rewarded by a thriving design community. Flowing on from such a community are a multitude of benefits arising from a high quality of application in all the design disciplines.

To achieve this increase in design vision, strategies need to be in place additional to the nurturing and training of designers. Clients need to understand what a designer can offer, the two parties need to be introduced, suitable matches between clients and designer arrived at and the brief must be expertly prepared. Those involved in the realisation of the design need to be trained to work with the designer while the integrity of the completed design requires protection from compromise. Ideally, these processes would be supplemented by a forum enabling extended discussion between designer and client.

Design students need some teachers who are practitioners. Through the media and relevant exhibitions we need to challenge the view that a designer's main role is merely to give a product a competitive advantage through its outward appearance or to make something look fashionable.

Design can contribute a great deal to a community in social, economic and artistic areas. It does not follow, however, that all design is good. Yes, it is of immense benefit that government, designers and industry work together but the strategy for encouraging this and ensuring the best results should be rooted in an understanding of what design is and what ingredients allow it to be of the highest standard.

Perhaps the creative effort involved in building an even more vital design community involves the provision of an arena for design in which experimentation can take place and sometimes even fail. The thriving pool of comediennes based in Victoria owes a lot to John Pinder who, through his venues at the "Flying Trapeze Cafe" and later at "The Last Laugh", deliberately set out to provide a venue in which comediennes could experiment and 'fail'.

Tastes vary but a community with respect for and understanding of quality design will value creative thinking and support experimentation and a variety of ideas. From such a structure will flow design expertise that we can export and use to enhance our quality of life and the environment. Above all, any strategy must be guided by design practitioners and based on the assumption that brilliant design is rare and fragile.

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**Rosemary Simons**