

FORGO FAST CULTURE FOR CREATIVITY'S SAKE

OPINION COLUMN



CARL GOUW

Ambassador of Design
Carl Gouw studied at the London School of Economics and heads real estate investment and development group Goldig, but architecture and the humanities have always stirred him. He is the founder of non-profit organisation Wan Chai Visual Archive Ltd.

Facade of the Waterhouse hotel in Shanghai, designed by Neri & Hu

Hong Kong compares its financial market to that of London and New York, but we shy away from mentioning our museums, galleries and theatres. Looking at Cafe de Coral's success, we pride ourselves on our 'fast' culture, of designing everything from architecture to food efficiently.

Our 'catching-up' mentality was developed when we were well behind the European and American economies, which boomed respectively after the industrial revolution and the Second World War. Only in the 1970s did we start to have the Hilton, Armani and Ferrari, luxuries that were once exclusive to the West. As the world's most ostentatious nouveaux riches in the 1980s and 1990s, we were like Las Vegas' high-rollers and Hollywood's celebrities. Today, the same generation encounters *déjà vu* when faced by mainland big spenders.

Our first- to third-generation capitalists begin to sense the dilemma and self-denial faced by 20th-generation European aristocracies or 10th-generation American industrialists. Should Hong Kong continue to 'catch up', or should we pause and set a different direction?

Creativity & Innovation

Artists and architects were important figures centuries ago, placing after royalty and religious

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leaders, but Hong Kong simply sees art and culture as insignificant leisure. Capitalists value analysts and knowledgeable experts more highly than designers and creative talents. Entrepreneurs forget that creativity is behind every product and service. We follow objective business plans, quantitative models, advertising and branding, despising the qualitative, subjective, philosophical, poetic and organic processes of creativity.

Dick Robertson, whose consultancy in London develops imaginative approaches to corporations, said at the recent Cultural Leadership forum at the University of Hong Kong that "most of the thinking about organisations has been based on engineering and the problem is that they are not mechanical entities. They function on the basis of human relationships, emotions and psychology – and are less connected to physics." No wonder science cannot explain nature's beauty or human complexity – creation itself is God's artistic work beyond the understanding of our minds. Creativity is, therefore, not only for art and design but everything from education and politics to humanity.

The reason behind London's success as an international city and England's as an exporter of services is that the British embrace innovation.



Cocktail bar on the Waterhouse roof

WHAT'S COOL?

Carl Gouw's recent sightings:

- The Waterhouse hotel in Shanghai by Neri & Hu (www.waterhouseshanghai.com)
- A farm in the Netherlands by 70F Architecture (www.70f.com)
- LED art by Shanghai-based art collective Liu Dao (www.island6.org)
- Metal Shutter Houses in New York by Shigeru Ban (www.metals shutterhouses.com)
- MAXXI museum in Rome by Zaha Hadid (www.fondazionemaxxi.it)

Young designer Thomas Heatherwick was commissioned to work on significant projects like the Expo pavilion and London buses. Architect Norman Foster, singer Elton John and retail-cum-restaurant entrepreneur Joseph Conran were knighted because of their creative legends.

Hong Kong & China

I often hear that mainland China is now more creative than we are – from contemporary art and boutique hotels to Hollywood-distributed movies – and I feel pity as a Hong Kong entrepreneur. Open-minded mainlanders, with a *carte blanche* since the Cultural Revolution, have the passion we once had and the guts to make mistakes. We fear mistakes, though even scientists recognise that failures lead to questions answered and new starting points during experimentation. Knowledge and skills arrogantly destroy our innocence and purity, the very essence of creativity.

When information is free and bountiful, we don't realise that 'knowing less' will give us fresher ideas and inspirations. When we are willing to say 'we don't know', things will happen. "What might be taken for a precocious genius is the genius of childhood," said Picasso. "When the child grows up, it disappears without a trace. It may happen that this boy will become a real painter some day, or even a great painter. But then he will have to begin everything again, from zero."

Our entrepreneurs were once creative, fusing Chinese and Western influences – from Tai Ping Koon to Tsui Wah restaurants. Apart from food, we were also one of the world's largest movie-producing economies in the 1980s, exporting kung fu films to hundreds of countries, until the decline in the 1990s fuelled by overproduction

and an upwardly mobile middle class that looked down on local films as tawdry. As a teenager in the 1990s, observing pink tiles being laid on office towers and public toilets, singer-idols who could not sing and TV series with 'family feud' plots filmed with the same backdrops, I smelt our pride and vanity, cocooned in satisfaction but heading towards a void of self-deceit. Whenever we are pleased with ourselves, we lose our innate ability to imagine and create. "It is perhaps when our lives are at their most problematic that we are most likely to be receptive to beautiful things," wrote Alain de Botton in *The Architecture of Happiness*. "Our downhearted moments provide architecture and art with their best openings, for it is at such times that our hunger for their ideal qualities will be at its height."



The Upper House, designed by Hong Kong's Andre Fu

Individual Talent & Style

Every entrepreneurial success story, from McDonald's and Starbucks to Apple and Facebook, is defined not by generalised theories or techniques but individual and intangible elements. MBAs are for those who want to work in organisations rather than start businesses. Virgin Group's Sir Richard Branson, a dyslexic ex-band singer, raised eyebrows by his revolution of aircrafts, railways and records. Mark Zuckerberg had the boldness and 'blind courage' to start Facebook ahead of the calculative and competitive Winklevoss brothers, who had family prestige and type-A personalities.

The \$90,000-budget award-winning local documentary *KJ – Music and Life* tells the story of musical prodigy Wong Ka-jeng who understood that music was beyond competition and skills. Shakespeare, Mozart, Picasso, Frank Lloyd Wright, Philippe Starck and successful entrepreneurs all represent the 'flea' that radically surprises the 'elephant' in his industry or field, to use the analogy of Charles Handy's book.

In the 1980s, nightclub-operator Ian Schrager and designer Starck started the boutique hotel movement in the US, which influenced Starwood to build W hotels worldwide and six-star groups including Four Seasons and Park Hyatt to focus on design and individuality. I wrote about boutique hotels in 2003: "Previously, we wanted hotels to have big logos on top of their towers and provide every extravagance. Now, we long for a homely environment set amid a subtle minimalist elegance in a building that may not even have a name above its door." Today, there are still hotels built by individual owners and large corporations, from the 19-room Waterhouse in Shanghai to the 117-room

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Upper House in Hong Kong, that are influenced by this movement.

After mass advertising brought by American-led capitalism and globalisation, sophisticated consumers now yearn for originality and character – like the traditions and heritage once exclusive to European royalties. From small boutique hotels and resorts to ‘star’ restaurants and chef’s tables, the same exclusivity is now being re-created, synonymous with luxury ‘non-chain’ establishments that have been around for hundreds of years. Acclaimed local architect Andre Fu says “creativity is about re-invention, to make references to the past and re-interpret”. Sadly, in the world-class city of Hong Kong, one could count the number of boutiques hotels on one hand.

Culture & Identity

Another Hong Kong visionary Douglas Young, through his brand GOD, demonstrates our hunger for lost identity in a climate where many equate foreign brands with quality. Although Young himself did not grow up in such a culture, he celebrates ‘grass-root localness’ humorously and ironically. Similarly, in an exclusive way, Sir David Tang brought back ‘Chineseness’ through the China Club and Shanghai Tang. In terms of aesthetics, it happened during the minimalism-influenced era when modern Chinese restaurants used Western-style tableware. Politically and socially, the former colony was preparing – or simply passively or fearfully waiting – for our handover. China, which was eager to show its rise to the world, favoured the symbolism that these places brought to people of influence.

The China Club, which opened on June 30, 1991 in the presence of top British and Chinese officials, has everything ‘Chinese’ – its ‘star’ logo, art deco interiors reminiscent of 1930s Shanghai, congee and soy bean milk, goldfish in an artist-made porcelain bowl and caged birds. The world-famous club also has a priceless collection of contemporary Chinese art, which represents Sir David’s involvement in the art scene.

Art and design are always relevant in

the cultural, social and political contexts. During the Cultural Revolution, China used art to bring ideologies to its people, with the same motifs and imageries now being used by visual artists to create valuable works. There would not be Andy Warhol’s paintings of a Coca-cola bottle and Marilyn Monroe, today worth several hundreds of millions of dollars, if the US did not have a period of industrialisation leading to consumerism and pop culture. Throughout mankind’s civilisation, art has been central to every society’s set of cultural customs and values.

I wonder why after years of Western-influenced designs, we needed GOD, China Club and Shanghai Tang to bring back ‘Chineseness.’ Interestingly, one of the world’s top luxury hotel groups, Mandarin Oriental, links its design and values to Chinese influences. Ironically, the group, which began in 1963 with its first hotel in Hong Kong, has always been in British hands.

Our problem is, as Alan Lo rightly stated in his first article for this magazine’s collaboration with the Ambassadors of Design, a “huge baggage” of “identity issues”. In a few decades, we grew from being fishermen to industrialists, then bankers and businessmen. However, when we had external influences, we looked down on ourselves and quickly threw away our Mandarin-collar jackets and put on tuxedos.

When we only want growth, we focus on scale and profitability rather than value and meaning. “If growth becomes a strategy I don’t think it is an enduring one,” said Howard Schultz, Starbucks’ CEO, famously.

Hong Kong needs more creative heroes like Sir David and Young to bring fresh, authentic ideas that are not covered by superficial marketing facades but supported with firm conceptual underpinnings, inspiring and provoking people to think about social and human issues.

The Unknown & Imaginative

Instead of worrying about Hong Kong’s future role and our competitiveness, we should stop competing and do something different. We will always be behind if we follow London or New York. If we fear Shanghai, we will forever analyse because China’s development is not based on any other country or past ideology. Changes can unfold in arbitrary, experimental and multi-faceted ways.

We should learn that creativity is about the unknown and imaginative. “The greatest picture is not yet painted, the greatest play isn’t written, the greatest poem is unsung,” said philosopher Lincoln Steffens. “There isn’t in all the world a perfect railroad, nor a good government, nor a sound law. Physics, mathematics, and especially the most advanced and exact of the sciences are being fundamentally revised . . . Psychology, economics and sociology are awaiting a Darwin, whose work in turn is awaiting an Einstein.”

Letterbox magnets – GOD’s humorous take on local culture, designed by Douglas Young

