



TRANSCRIPT

2018 Melbourne Insights

PANEL DISCUSSION: DESIGN MELBOURNE

Speaker Key:

JG Jane Gazzo (host)

JN Justin Northrop, Founder, Technē Architecture + Interior Design

MF Miriam Fanning, Founder, Mim Design

MB Martin Brown, Design Director, Local Peoples

SP Justin Northrop, the founder of Technē. Thanks Justin. Miriam Fanning from Mim Design, the founder of Mim Design, and the Design Director from Local Peoples, Martin Brown.

Thanks so much for your time. We're taking a completely different tip here. Justin and Miriam, you guys are in design, you've been nominated for countless awards and won countless awards for your designs in cafés, bars, hotels, etc. And Martin, with your focus on human-centric design, your creative agency is really leading the way.

I guess the thing I want to start with is has design for visual appeal exceeded design for practicality?

MF Do you want me to go first?

JG Go.

MF I sometimes think it has. I think design, as a society some people don't understand what goes into creating a space and I think with social media tools such as Instagram and such, people just get a snapshot of a venue or what a place is.

But I guess that is a great thing because it sends a message but it actually doesn't give a true sense of emotion about what a space is from a design point of view and all the ingredients that actually need to go into that space to make it successful.

Because it's not always about the design; it's about the collaboration of the client, the builders, the designers, the services engineers, everybody, so there is such a big array of a team that needs to come together to create that.

In saying that I think... A photo for me says a thousand words but being in a space is so much better.

JG So is Instagram a help or a hindrance then?

MF I think it's both to be honest. I'm a big believer in Instagramming meaning more than just an image. I think Instagram is a fantastic tool to actually communicate with someone.

I think the accounts that are just images, sometimes they are just images but I like the ones that actually tell a story and actually give somebody a snippet into what that person is creating or how they've created it or why they're cooking it or why they've played that song.

And I think for me I like to get a little bit more out of Instagram in terms of hearing a story and to actually go on a bit more of an emotive ride as to... for example this amazing venue [Hotel Esplanade].

Like you, when it opened last week I was searching through all of the Instagram feeds and also looking at the painter and looking up all of the most amazing fittings that Techne have put in. And it actually gave me more of a story rather than just one image.

So I think if you use it as a tool to educate yourself about design and about great things and the story, I think it is really, really a fantastic tool.

I think if it's just venues about creating an Instagram snippet where somebody goes there and gets a photo and the rest of it is just dulled down design, I don't think that that's helpful from a design point of view because I think good design is actually creating something that has meaning and has time and space.

And I know that we were talking about this a little bit earlier so I would be interested to hear your thoughts.

JN I agree wholeheartedly. I think in balance that the use of Instagram and Pinterest have been beneficial because they've increased design legibility, design fluency amongst the broader community and it's pushed a lot of people into hospitality venues and other social outlets for design.

The risk in it is that there's a shallowness with approaching a design via a series of design precedents. And we commonly start a design process talking to a client that's given us a Pinterest board and it's a warning sign in way when someone says, so I want one of them and one of them and I'll have that bar, and I really like this couch.

That undersells the process and it loses a sense of place if you're borrowing interior or architectural snippets from New York or wherever else. You're missing the opportunity to really explore the potential of the place you're designing in.

So there's a warning that comes from over-reliance on those things.

SP Well let's bring it back to Melbourne. As creators and designers in a Melbourne space, I mean what was it, three, four, five years ago industrial was the really big feel or design of the day. Where are we going in design? What is characteristically Melbourne at this point?

MB I think just to take design back from being around the object or the artefact, I think really the way that we tend to approach design is looking at the end user first and looking at...

That's why we call it human-centric design; it's looking at what does the end user want to accomplish and how can we go about providing that? And in that sense I've worked in London, in Tokyo and now back in Melbourne and I think there's just universality about the way that people behave.

And really design should be about helping to uncover what are those latent needs that people have and finding ways to help them, whether that's designing a product, a service, a space, it could be a digital service; I think the outcome is agnostic.

I think the really key thing is for designers and people who are charged with the responsibility of making the world that we live in, to really understand who we're creating for, who are the ultimate end users?

And I think that this space [Hotel Esplanade] is a fantastic example of really trying to balance that need for progressing Melbourne and what is the new St Kilda whilst maintaining the incredibly rich heritage that's here. And I think that's a really important part of design is to just acknowledge the context in all forms, regardless of what the application needs to be.

So when we start to talk about the aesthetics of Instagram, you can get very caught up in aesthetics and end up with a lot of mixed metaphors.

But I think when you really focus on what it is that people are trying to get out of a space, what would people actually want to do with it and how is it going to satisfy them emotionally, then I think you can end up with some really interesting, unique solutions that are naturally derived from the context that you find yourself in.

MF I think it's really interesting you asked about the industrial look and such. Going to the Eat Drink Awards, I think it was last week or the week before, there were so many fantastic entries that were shortlisted and finalists.

And what struck me was there is also some fantastic venues that are actually authentic and timeless and they never will date because they have that authenticity, such as Pellegrinis and Di Stasio and Cookie.

We have got some of the most amazing venues, especially this one [Hotel Esplanade], that have stood the test of time and that are authentic. And I'd hate to say that there is a fashion or a trend. I actually think that the best venues are the ones that are all about what the product is or what the venue is itself along with what that business is to Melbourne.

Because the best people that I find from a design point of view to work with, and I'm sure you're [Justin Northrop] the same, particularly with this project [Hotel Esplanade], actually are really, really authentic in what they want to deliver and they've got a very strong message that it's not about a trend. This is my passion and this is my love and this is how I want it to be perceived.

So I'm finding with our design submissions that we get in, it's not necessarily about an industrial look or a modern look; it's actually going back to the reason for design and the authenticity, which I think for Melbourne that sets us up perfectly to have businesses that have got longevity as well.

And I find that really interesting because I love to know more about why I'm designing, what I'm designing, and I know that you [Justin Northrop] probably went through this journey with this whole amazing venue [Hotel Esplanade] as well.

JN I was just going to say Pellegrinis is such a fabulous example because it's essentially not designed. It's an organic space that was probably built by the owners when it was first put together and the character and the ambience of that transcends the artifice of decoration really.

JG What challenges did you face when you were looking at something like the Espy [Hotel Esplanade]? You have to retain that authenticity that Miriam talks about but you also want to make it a usable space and embrace its history but move it forward into current day.

JN It was initially very challenging. We've worked on no other project where there were so many people deeply invested in the heritage of this place. The amount of people that said, just don't fuck it up, was amazing. And that's... It was funny but it was also a bit scary for this mild-mannered profession.

So we felt the weight of that I guess but that made me think more about what the meaning of the heritage of this place is, and it's much more than just this Victorian building with that art deco extension. It's the occupation of this building over more than 100 years.

It was originally a grand Victorian hotel, Victoria's grandest hotel, built in the 1870s. And that was a place that well-heeled Melburnians would spend weekends by the beach and then it was a ballroom and then it was a jazz venue, and much later still it was a disco. Then it was a live music venue for predominantly Aussie rock.

And there was a huge public outcry in the late 90s when a developer tried to rip it down for apartments.

JG That's right, yes. I remember it well.

JN 10,000 people came out and protested that and... So, so many people are invested in this place and they're invested for their memories and their associations with it rather than just bricks and mortar.

MF But I also think that's happening a lot more in Melbourne as well. If you look at how old Cookie is for example which won an Honours Award, that won't be changed. And it's nice because you've created something that is going to stand the test of time because you've taken it back to have meaning.

And I think in Melbourne we've got so many fantastic venues and from a design point of view we've got to actually honour them rather than taking them down and building trends or... Because trends to me is a word that is just here short-term; authentic is here for the long haul.

And I do find that we're going through that a lot in our industry at the moment. We were just talking about that earlier.

JG Well, one thing that a lot of cities are grappling with, world cities, is the apartment-isation. I say that because everywhere is getting knocked down for apartments, just changing the complete landscape of a city and infrastructure and everything else. What do you think about that?

MB Yes, I think that change is inevitable and especially somewhere like Melbourne where it's going to be growing significant over the coming decades. I think change can either happen in a well-managed way or it can happen badly.

And I think we're at a really interesting time because we've got an opportunity to create the Melbourne that we want to live in in the future and I think we've got the opportunity to design places and design services where communities can really prosper.

We talk about Pellegrinis and how do we actually create the conditions for the next Pellegrinis because you can't just invent an institution like that.

But what you can do is set the preconditions so that institutions can form and that it can start to develop and communities can weave themselves together given the right setting.

I think that is some of the work that we're trying to do is to try and work with like-minded developers to really start to create medium density living that is community focused.

And having spent time in Europe, this is really possible but it's a new thing over here and I think that some of that has to do with designing the physical space in a way that allows people to congregate and have these serendipitous encounters with each other without being too public or too private, having a mix of spaces.

But then there's also a role for services and allowing people to actually come together, make decisions together and govern themselves in a way that is conducive to forming trusting, stable communities.

I think that's the challenge ahead of us because we are going to be living closer together; we are going to be having to deal with each other a lot more. It's not going to be a quarter acre block

with a fence. We're actually going to have to really think about how we create communities wherever we live and wherever we come together.

I think it's a really, really exciting opportunity for Melbourne to do that and really show the world that this is what a 21st Century metropolis can be.

JG Architecture aside, I know Melbourne is home to the Keep Cup founders who are now, they did the Keep Cup, the coffee cup and now they've gone onto the Beat Box which is this beautiful glass bowl which won a design award recently, this new lunchbox with an aluminium lid for example.

Are there other things in design here particularly in Melbourne or Victoria that you're excited about or that you use, say, in the design concepts of the buildings that you work in for example?

MF I'm a very big believer in utilising local craftsmen where you can on jobs, on projects, and also custom design where you actually get to work with the maker.

I went on a trip a couple of years ago when I went through Scandinavia and went to some of the most amazing furniture factories and what struck me was that the same families were still building the furniture.

I often get worried in Australia that we will actually lose our trades and our skilled craftspeople in making furniture and lighting, all of those sorts of things.

And I think buying Australian and designing Australian and also utilising and specifying the correct design furniture, not copy furniture, is really important for us as Australian society to actually really make sure that we can keep using those craftspeople and designing beautiful things with them as well.

I don't think they're necessarily mass-market things like the Keep Cup. They might be more specialised but I don't think that that's a bad thing. I love the fact that the Mary Featherston range has been re-emerged with Grazia & Co and I think that's a really good direction of how we should perceive design and Australian design and utilise it as much as we can.

JN I think that comes back in a circle to the role that Instagram can play in Melbourne in that those producers have the opportunity to have their wares out in the public much more easily than they did in the past.

MF Adam Goodrum.

JN Yes, exactly right. You don't need bricks and mortar presence to have a successful design business. And I think that this interest in locally crafted really meshes in with the way... particularly hospitality design but lots of related fields meshes in now with heritage buildings.

This interest in where things come from and how they're put together on a local scale is leading to a much more sensitive view of how we work within heritage buildings and what we're getting out of it I think is a more idiosyncratic result.

It's not a matter of saying a nice Victorian shell is a generic thing and painting it white and putting some stuff in it. Designers are really engaging with the patina and the feel of the building which is so valuable for ambience and character.

JG I'd like to ask if there are any questions from the audience regarding design. Yes?

MB Yes, sure, so Local Peoples came out of Assemble. So Assemble is a joint venture partnership looking at essentially small footprint development.

And really the thinking there was around how do we actually encourage small footprint living, which is essentially living in smaller spaces, environmentally sustainable developments. And I think partly one of the ideas that sprung out of that was really that we need to create the demand for this.

As I said, this is not new thinking in other parts of the world but it is in Australia. So, Assemble Papers was formed to start to make this way of thinking much more well-known in Australia or certainly in Melbourne and that has really taken off.

And I think we're really starting to get a strong community of people and there are quite a few like-minded developers who are really trying to galvanise this new way of thinking about living and new way of thinking about apartment buildings.

So, Assemble is one, Nightingale are doing some really interesting stuff, Milieu... and as I said, focusing around community. So that starts... typically what human-centred design does is try to take... when you've got very big complex problems, the tendency is to get into silos and everybody focuses on their little thing.

And really what we try to do through the human-centred design process is try to really stitch those things together and think about design as a holistic servant to the end user.

So when it comes to developments it's not thinking about, okay, there's a sales process and then there's a design process and then everyone walks away.

I think what Assemble have tried to do, especially through the development in Roseneath Street was very early on start to build a community, start to, through things like Assemble Papers, get people involved, really prototype the space, so get people down, activate the space, start to draw a like-minded crowd of people around this potential new lifestyle, this thing that people are going to invest in very heavily and... heavily emotionally and financially over their lifetime, and really start to build a community early on. And then involve them in the design decisions.

So instead of design being something in the domain of experts only, really opening up the design process and helping... well helping to take in the input of the people who are going to be directly affected by that design, and doing that as much as possible throughout the development process.

And then working through workshops and, before people have even moved in, getting the community together, getting people to know each other, dividing them into interest groups so that they can start to form communities around the things that they're interested in, and being a facilitator of that.

So, taking a much more active role in that than is what is typically part of the development process.

JG Thanks so much. We're going to... Oh yes, one more question.

AM [Inaudible].

JN I think something that's happened in Melbourne over quite a long period of time is we've become very good here at fine grain work.

So the city grid supports a good laneway structure that... and we bang on about our lanes a lot but the laneway structure is small odd allotments of hidden things, and designers have been busy for a long time making those spaces work and thinking about the interface at the front and the character and the ambience of it.

And over time that has filtered out across broader Melbourne, so we're very comfortable in small spaces and eclectic spaces. And it's to the point where we're approached to think about fine grain work within much broader developments.

So yes, there's a big challenge in getting community centres and commercial hubs to work out suburban developments but developers are working on making those places more liveable through employing people that think at that scale rather than at the big scale of a box store or shopping centre.

MF And I think a good example of that is Brickworks out in Nunawading which is a development where they're basically focused on having it being a green development with its whole nursery garden, its whole vegetable garden, an array of shops.

It's really, really been very well thought-through and very much talking about the fine grain that Justin has mentioned. So there are a lot of developments that are coming through at the moment that is really picking up on exactly what you're saying and making sure that we're not just focusing on one area.

JG We're going to have to leave it there but we are going to take a ten minute break, so if you have any questions, further questions for Justin, Miriam or Martin, please go see them out here in the beautiful Gershwin Room bar.