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PLANET ‘Studio K’ lamp – making the case for an ‘urban’ design icon.

When discussing objects from Australia’s industrial past journalists writing for ‘popular’ magazines are fond of using the ‘Aussie icon’ tag. Many such reviews focus on the usual parade of ‘rural’ design objects: the stump-jump plough, Sunshine harvester, Furphy water tank and Ford Ute to make the claim that we are uniquely inventive as a nation. Far less attention, however, is paid to ‘urban’ design objects. Planet’s ‘Studio K’ lamp, to be re-released this year, is one such ‘urban’ design object and surely worthy of iconic status in Australia.

Australian ‘rural’ design icons

Objects from Australia’s early colonial era are greatly revered as the works of poor wretches sent to the end of the world and forced to fashion objects from alien materials with simple hand tools. Innovation indeed. The pioneering spirit is popularly believed to have been reborn during the 1930s when so-called ‘depression-era’ design objects were cobbled together. Furniture was constructed from old kerosene-tins, toys were made from jam tins and pieces of wire while musical instruments were crafted from whatever their makers could lay their hands on. Many historians and collectors have chosen to see the Australian national identity somehow revealed in these simple objects created ‘against the odds.’ The Australian public, too, has responded well to the pioneering qualities of ‘improvisation’ and ‘innovation’ - witness the successful television program The Inventors shown from 1970 onwards and its accompanying book.

Australian ‘urban’ design

While there is no doubt Australia’s national identity has been interwoven with its pioneering past - of bush innovation and innovative agricultural implements - Australians have felt less emotional attachment to 20th century manufactured objects designed for the home: kitchenware cast in iron, cars, sporting goods, musical instruments, white goods and furnishings. One such urban object that deserves to join the cannon of great Australian design objects is the Planet ‘Studio K’. Still in service in countless bedroom and offices and mounted to the drawing boards of all types of designers everywhere, they are increasingly being seen in their cheerful 1960s and 1970s colours in expensive collectables antique fairs and displayed to a new generation of design enthusiasts who embrace them as ‘Retro’.

Invention vs. adaptation

The notion of ‘Australian inventiveness’ is dearly held in this country. Unlike in Britain or America, settled centuries before, Australia’s frontier days are close enough that many of us believe we could indeed repair or invent anything with ‘a lump of red gum and a piece of barbed wire’, as the popular cliché has it. Yet we
are the world’s most suburban people, far removed from the land, and contrary to popular perception Australians are not uniquely innovative as a people. We did not invent the concept of the rotary clothesline nor the rotary lawn mower nor the small light truck! The world wide patent for the rotary hoist is, in fact, held by the Americans, the concept of the (unpowered) rotary lawnmower was developed by the British while the light truck had existed decades before the Geelong Ford factory decided to take a saw to an American passenger car and add a bit of a tray to put the bails of hay and pigs on. Instead, it is more correct to argue that the Hills Hoist, Victa Mower and the Ford Ute were very creative adaptations to existing international design objects.

These design objects have, however, been widely embraced by our culture to become ‘Australianised’. After over half a century, they are justly considered great Australian objects for which we all have affection.

The Planet ‘Studio K’ lamp surely falls into this category – a successful adaptation to the existing ‘parallegram spring balance arm’ lamp idea which was first defined by the British ‘Anglepoise’ in 1934. Many other designers around the world have also sought to explore this idea. It was a quest Australian Bill Iggulden was to solve successfully on three different grounds: functionally, aesthetically and commercially. The lamp’s success is revealed in that it sold virtually unchanged for 30 years and after a decade’s rest is to be re-released to face another century.

Inventor to designer

Throughout Australian design history there seems to be a preference for identifying with the term ‘inventor’ and not ‘industrial designer’. For example, in the recently published Dictionary of Famous Australians many sports people, public figures and artists are celebrated but there is no section devoted to designers. Instead, there is a section entitled ‘Inventors’ that lists many practical men: Lawrence Hargrave, Lawrence Hartnett and other makers of useful things such as sheep-dips, agricultural implements and medical technologies. Is the term ‘designer’ a little too cosmopolitan for Australians? They seem to prefer the more workmanlike term of ‘inventor’ which might be explained by the continuing Australian identification with the ‘rural’ national identity. Several titles of Australian books suggest this. Leo Port’s Australian Inventors and Ron Cull’s Inventive Australians spring to mind.

According to John Igguldon, writing an obituary for his brother Bill in the January 1971 issue of DESIGN australia, Bill initially perceived himself to be an inventor. A ‘hands on’ design approach was evidently inculcated by their father in the family company, the Bentley Mfg. Co., founded in Melbourne by W.A Iggluden in 1911. The company manufactured building tools from their own patented designs – the 1920s ‘Speedscrew’ Floor Clamps, the 1930s Fibro Cutters and the 1940s ‘I’ series task light.
John Igguldon tells the story that the young brothers joined the family company and, after doing lots of work on the production line, were soon allowed to seek out their own design jobs. One of these jobs was redesigning a window for a caravan manufacturer. John believed the knowledge Bill gained from this project, with its spring-balanced mechanism, helped with the first lighting design, the ‘Orbit’ lamp of 1939.

War work, including re-designs of weapons occupied the next five years, but it seems also to have been a time of growing self-awareness for Bill. After the war, he picked up the threads of many old design ideas, with a new awareness of himself as an industrial designer and not just an inventor. This included a new sensitivity towards the aesthetic dimensions required in a successful mass produced object. According to his brother, Bill was increasingly developing throughout this time as a poet, photographer and painter.

This growing aesthetic dimension can be seen in Bill Iggulden’s work. By 1962 the definitive version of the Planet balanced-movement lamp, the ‘Studio K’, arrived and won an Australian Design Award. Early Melbourne support was given by the Myer department store, the retail outlet with the best sales. Sales people within the department store even suggested the colours currently in vogue across a wide range of Myer stock to add further to the lamp’s appeal.

The ‘U’ series medical light was a further successful commercial extension of the balanced-movement idea and won the Award of Merit in the inaugural Prince Phillip Prize. Both lamps had physical longevity being fabricated from folded mild steel with an oven baked finish (the 2003 re-edition model will have a powder-coated paint finish) and have endured the decades well.

According to his brother John, Bill Iggulden was very conscious of helping develop an Australian design sensibility to show the world and be proud of. Notable international accolades included the display of the ‘Studio K’ at the Louvre and at New York’s MoMA making it one of a very few Australian-designed objects to be so-honoured. This short review has only considered the early history and one particular product from a company that currently undertakes a diverse array of design work. In 1974 the company moved from Melbourne to Bellingen, NSW, while in 1987 they formed Australia’s only commercial-scale glass-blowing factory. Recent large projects involving lighting have seen Planet carry out design and manufacturing work for the South Australian Parliament Buildings in Adelaide, West Australian Parliament Buildings, Perth, Old Parliament House in Canberra, leading hotels throughout southeast Asia including Raffles in Singapore, the Casinos in Melbourne and Sydney and the world’s tallest buildings, Kuala Lumpur’s Petronas Twin Towers.
I am indebted to Brett Iggulden, Director and CEO of Planet Lighting for supplying information about his father, Bill.