

'Special qualities' an inspiration for design pioneer



Graphics master Henry Steiner found Hong Kong offered more opportunities, so he decided to stay

Known as "the father of Hong Kong design", graphics master Henry Steiner is the creative talent behind many of the SAR's most identifiable symbols - from its banknotes to corporate brands. Born in Vienna and raised in New York, the Yale-educated designer has spent over 40 years defining the identities of names such as Citic Pacific, The Hong Kong Jockey Club, HSBC, Jardine Fleming, Lane Crawford and Standard Chartered Bank, to name a few. The founder of branding consultancy Steiner&Co, his skill for incorporating Chinese cultural symbols into Western design concepts has won international acclaim. Hong Kong's Next Magazine listed Mr Steiner as "one of the 100 most important people to influence Hong Kong's development since 1841".

"I arrived in Hong Kong in 1961 as design director of the former Asia Magazine, which had recruited me in New York. I came out expecting to stay for nine months, and by the end of two years, I saw no reason to leave. I realised Hong Kong offered me perhaps more opportunities, and then there was the adventure of being a pioneer.

The projects that attracted me were the ones that tracked Hong Kong's growth. As Hong Kong became a communications centre in Asia I was involved in several magazines and publications. With the expansion of tourism I began working on a stream of hotel identities starting with the Hong Kong Hilton. My most recent hotel work is for the Shangri-La group.

There was also the development of retail and shopping centres, the real estate boom and, of course, banking and financial services, all of which generated identity work.

Even the 1997 handover provided opportunities. A series of banknotes I first designed for Standard Chartered Bank in 1979 was reissued with its British heraldry replaced by the post-colonial bauhinia flower.

Steiner&Co also virtually reinvented the Jockey Club brand in 1996, dropping 'Royal' and putting the Chinese name first, providing a typographic signage grid, corporate colours and enclosing its familiar symbol in an attractive oval. The perfect accolade for our sweeping new system was that nobody noticed.

For the various identities I originated, people would often ask: how do you get your ideas? I say it's just a case of being sensitive to your client's needs and to the competitive environment.

The best brands don't get old, they get better - just look at Lane Crawford, designed in 1965. If they are not trendy-sensitive and nothing happens to the company, a brand can stay around forever. The Hilton brand would still be with us if the building hadn't been demolished.

After the handover, Hong Kong found itself with a new flag and lots of new concepts on how to sell ourselves. So we now have a plethora of images, with perhaps too many well-meaning ideas, too many messages. We need to salute one 'flag' and concentrate on a unique selling point.

What that should be, I can't say offhand. I don't get ideas until I have a deadline and then the metre starts running. But what must first be defined is Hong Kong's distinct personality.

There are many things in Hong Kong that we take for granted. For instance, it is one of the safest cities in the world. Vandalism is virtually nonexistent and there is practically no graffiti.

We have great communications, transportation, banking and rule of law. In all my experience here I've never had a problem with corruption, and I can't think of any other place in Asia where you can say this.

We're going through a testing time at the moment; the mood is downbeat. But Hong Kong people still have the ability to get through this as in the past - by stepping back to analyse just what makes this place special."