Distinct design for life

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By Tonya Turner

Queensland designers are doing their own thing, and the world is taking notice, writes Tonya Turner.

What characterises Queensland style? According to some of the state’s leading designers, it is relaxed and colourful but, most of all, at ease with itself.

“Brisbane is about embracing the environment we live in rather than being self-conscious about who we are competing with,” designer Brian Steendyk says.

As designers around the state celebrated the launch of the Queensland Design Strategy 2020 last week, aimed at strengthening the state’s $600 million a year design sector, the question of what denotes Queensland style came to the fore.

What qualities do our designers share and what makes them different to their southern counterparts?

“I think there’s a buoyancy and an optimism about the work that we do, and part of that is associated with being in the sunny state, I think it imbues itself in our psyche and that, in turn, imbues itself in the work we achieve,” Steendyk says.

Landscape architect John Mongard agrees.

“I think there is a different sensibility. I think we’re less encumbered by history o the past,” he says.

Designing landscapes for everything from large-scale projects such as Kelvin Grove Urban Village to residential properties, Mongard says Queensland has a distinct style.

“What makes our cultural places different to those of Sydney and Melbourne, I think, is they’re less serious, a bit more fun, a bit less self-conscious. I think Sydney and Melbourne landscapes are sometimes a bit posey,” he says.

Our sub-tropical climate also plays a big part.

“We love to go to the beach and coastal places. We have this sub-tropical lifestyle that really comes out in our preferences for landscapes and the laces that we want to be,” he says.

“What’s really important these days is what you might call authenticity.

People, if they’re flying from the other side of the world and coming to Queensland, don’t want to see a landscape they might see in any other country.

“We’ve got a unique landscape, unique animals and unique weather, so they’re the things we ought to focus on.”

As climate change continues to progress, however, Mongard says we will see a shift in present and future design trends.

“One or two degrees of temperature change over the next 50 years will move the sub-tropical landscape out of the Brisbane to Townsville. We’ll have different plants, things will get hotter and drier and we’ll get less tropical. We’re planting landscapes now for the next 100 years, trying to anticipate these movements, and the clever designers are thinking about his move towards a different climate,” he says.

The Queensland Design Strategy aims to harness the brainpower and skills of such clever designers to encourage business and public sector innovation, enhance creativity, strengthen the economy and increase design awareness in the community.
As a first step, the State Government will appoint a Queensland Design Council comprising leaders from the design, business and research sectors. The council will, in turn, inform a new Interdepartmental Design Forum of government agencies. The strategy also includes implementation of the $3 million Designing Queensland program over four years until 2012, including the inaugural Asia-Pacific Design Triennial being presented in 2010.

Steendyk works across architecture, landscape, product and interior design.

His cero chair won the 2003 Australian Design Award and was unveiled to the European market during the Milan Design Week last year. It is now being made and distributed by Italian company Serralunga.

“We’ve got some of the best designers in the country in Queensland and that hardly gets any recognition,” Steendyk says.

“I think Sydney is more about shiny bright things, stainless steel and the sun beating in. Melbourne is more internalised – its grey, overcast European sky affects your psyche.

“I think Queensland style is far more relaxed, specifically more than Sydney. I think it’s relaxing in a manner that allows us to embrace those notions of our great climate, and those nuances then permeate into the architecture and furniture and products we design.”

He compares using a stainless steel curtained wall to a self-rusting steel wall that “ages gracefully over time”.

“It has elements to it that reduce the amount of reflective light, that embrace the idea and notion of growing old and the idea of weathering. One of the other nuances of Brisbane is that historically the majority of houses were timber houses, so we’ve all grown up with that idea of things weathering and being beaten by the elements. We need to look after them to bring them back to life, so I think we’re not afraid of things not being glitzy or slick, we’re more concerned that they are robust,” he says.

To contemporary jewellery designer Ari Athans, who moved to Brisbane 13 years ago from Sydney, Queensland style is all about colour.

“It sounds like a cliché but we do embrace colour here. There’s no doubt about it,” she says.

“We’re not afraid to wear colour, we’re not afraid to buy colour, we’re not afraid to put colour into our homes. It’s simply because of the quality of light we have here – it’s bright it’s strong,” she says.

Celebrating our unique style

- Brian Steendyk’s cero chair won the 2003 Australian Design Award and is now being made and distributed by Italian company Serralunga after showing at Milan Design Week last year.
- Internationally renowned fashion designers Easton Pearson have shown in Paris since 1998.
- The State Library of Queensland by Donovan Hill and Peddle Thorp won the 2007 National Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture.
- The Cherrel Hirst Creative Learning Centre at Brisbane Girls Grammar School by m3architecture won the 2008 National Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture.
- Marc Harrison’s Husque bowls, created from macadamia nut husks, are sold at New York’s Museum of Modern Art.
- Rob Gedde’s underwater pogo stick, the Subjumpa, won Best New Product at the 2008 International Pool and Spa Expo in America.