

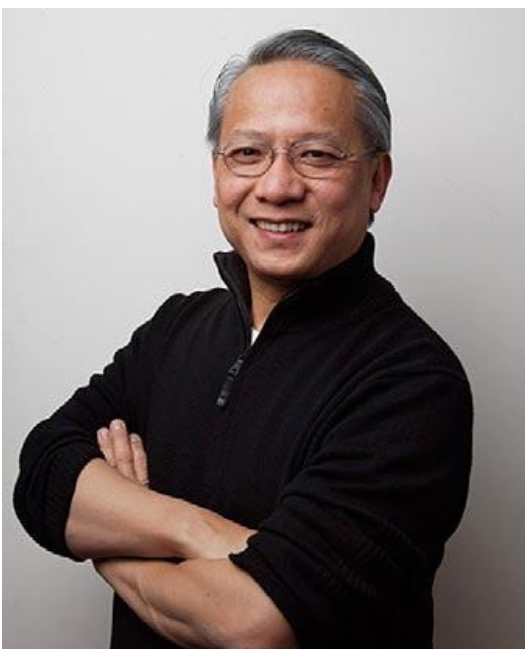
Eric Chan: Everyday Meaningful Use

by Peter Carey

In any design project, many questions need to get asked before results can be achieved. The types of questions designers and their clients ask each other are constantly in flux: How is the usability of an object, from a free standing building to a piece of furniture, determined over the course of its life? What is more important, the integration of sustainable practices before a product is made or after it has reached the end of its usable life?

Eric Chan has been asking tough questions such as these, for a long time. His company, **ECCO Design**, has found a middle path between planning for the future and dealing with the past. ECCO was formed in 1989 with the mission of bringing a meta-culture – transformative culture – philosophy to the highest level of manufacturing and consulting through product identity and development.

Known in the contract interiors



ERIC CHAN

industry for his compelling product designs for **Herman Miller** and **Geiger**, Mr. Chan's practice also addresses issues ranging from transportation improvement to humanizing technology. To answer one of the questions posed above, Mr. Chan argues that the best way for something to be sustainable is to be used.

"The systems we all use now are very inefficient," said Mr. Chan. "If you don't like something, you throw it out; disposability for the sake of human convenience is outmoded thinking. Some things never change; we just see mutations. Seating, for example, has not changed since the Stone Age. The typical seat height has remained eighteen inches off the floor." The question is, "What does eighteen inches above the floor mean to human behavior now?"

"If we are only concerned with the physical world in front of us," said Mr. Chan, "it will be diminished. If design doesn't connect with culture, you lose out on a higher order. Using is more important than owning. Think about all the things we use each day that we don't own – from public transportation to content on television or the internet. How much of it do we need physically in front of us in order to benefit?"

Eric Chan is making a case, not for a reduction in manufacturing or infrastructure, but for an increase in design intelligence. "It doesn't matter how cheap, fast or big a product is," he said. "All that means nothing without content." In Mr. Chan's view, that content usually boils down to something that is, at its essence, primarily cultural.

Cultural DNA

"Whether we like it or not, human beings can mutate and migrate, but

we cannot change our nature," said Mr. Chan. "If one accepts that Americans are hard-wired consumers first and foremost, then the issue isn't how to get people to change their habits in order to become more sustainable, but how designers can change systems to fit the consumer model while still achieving sustainable practices."

Technology is the great delivering agent for content designed to fit individual needs. "If I want to connect with someone, anyone, half a world away," said Mr. Chan, "I can do it instantly using current technology. It has become very affordable to do this now. We don't need a lot to survive and be happy. I'm not sure more technology is the right answer, but the right technology can help us find new answers."

Born in China and raised in Hong Kong, Eric Chan has a distinct way of bridging East and West. He isn't concerned with designing an ever-increasing number of products, but with finding the products that fit the way we live and work today. By carving a path between what is right for the culture and what is possible to manufacture, the design process becomes evolutionary, almost self-sustaining, not just more stuff for the sake of its newness. He is also one of the most optimistic designers. "Our imagination is our greatest asset, and it is an unlimited resource," said Mr. Chan.

Meaning through Material

"As a designer, I try to select materials very carefully," said Mr. Chan. "I consider the source of each material and how we can form it regionally. Most materials are used far away from where they are formed. A designer finds meaning, as well as form, through the materials they select.

people

officeinsight

Design has to have the combination of meaning through material.”

A great example of Mr. Chan's approach is the **Kiva Collection** by Herman Miller, a series of five multifunctional pieces of furniture for the workplace. (Now discontinued.) The collection includes the Kiva Soft Screen, a self-supporting privacy screen that is lightweight, translucent and flexible. Mr. Chan designed the weave of the fabric and determined the content of its fiber for maximum vertical stability so that it can stand without additional support material. It's a perfect example of his design aesthetic: simple, but not minimal, and very easily adaptable.

Another example of design that incorporates everyday meaningful use is

the **Ribbon Lamp**, a product commissioned by **Top Brilliant Technology**. The *Ribbon Lamp* is the first task lamp to feature Cold Cathode Fluorescent Lighting (CCFL) and offer both dimming and color temperature changing capabilities. The *Ribbon Lamp* premiered at the **International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF)** in 2009 and is available for sale at www.212lighting.com and at select retailers. It's a perfect for task use during the day and for ambient light in the evening. The design, which capitalizes on the product's flexibility, emits a direct light when the arm is fully extended and folds in on itself to offer soft ambient lighting. Cool to the touch and running at about half the cost of LED light sources, the *Ribbon Lamp* is available

at a modest price point to encourage broad, universal appeal.

Seamlessly switching to the contract executive space, Mr. Chan created the **Foray Chair** by **Geiger**, designed specifically for wood-based office environments. Inspired by the shape of the palm of a hand, symbolizing a nurturing shape, the *Foray's* most prominent feature is the back's sinuous, cradling aluminum oval. Bridging a gap between existing task and executive seating, *Foray* incorporates an ergonomic platform based on Herman Miller's *Harmonic Tilt* technology. With pivot points at the hip joint, knee and ankle, the *Foray* mirrors the body's natural movement by keeping the sitter in contact with the chair through all points of recline.

The three examples above are snap-



KIVA COLLECTION



KIVA SCREEN



RIBBON LAMP

shots of how Eric Chan incorporates strata of meaning into an object's use. His methodology for determining what qualities are important to design are as varied as his designs. "Human beings are programmed by desire," said Mr. Chan. "The quest for beauty and desire are universal human characteristics. The chief duty of design is to fulfill an emotional need."

Crowd-sourcing

Giving me a brief history lesson of *then versus now*, Mr. Chan said, "In the old world, you had a few dominant players. Size mattered in order to gain dominance in the marketplace. Now, the crowd matters, flexibility matters. It used to be the mass and scale of a company that determined its viability; today's model is the guy in the garage coming up with the next best thing." Embracing fragmentation and an intuitive knowledge that the American culture's business model of "try, fail, mutate," actually makes us stronger, Mr. Chan is looking to the younger generation for solutions.

"The newer generation is not afraid

to break the code," said Mr. Chan. "Long-term payback is not in the old model." Citing the ubiquitous search engine **Google**, which operated at a loss for its first four years in business, Mr. Chan said, "the profit and loss business model that we saw in the past is outmoded. The new economy model is the wisdom of the crowd."

Crowd-sourcing is a relatively new practice that uses current web technology. A problem is posed to a group of anonymous solvers in the form of an open call for solutions. The crowd acts as a virtual focus group and sorts through all solutions posted, commenting on the best and voting on their favorite. These best solutions are then owned by the entity that posed the question in the first place.

One could argue that crowd-sourcing is an good litmus test to see if a design is harmonious with the related cultural DNA, especially that of the younger generations that are more technologically savvy. "Younger generations are more altruistic with their designs," said Mr. Chan. "Look at the popularity of open-source tech-

nologies." Bridging the intangible gap between desire and sustainability requires many agents. "The vast supply of human resources available now is our cultural software," said Mr. Chan. "Once you have an idea, you send it to the crowd; the solution will be no more or less than what you need."

The Future of Sustainability in Design

Most designers today are more than a little concerned with sustainable design. One of the best tools to ensure and monitor the sustainability of any material is to keep it local. Eric Chan suggests that local manufacturing could be on the increase soon in the most unlikely place: your home. The rapid prototyping revolution is soon expected to take off the way desktop publishing took off in the 1980s.

"Soon, it will be possible for anyone to make a virtual model online," said Mr. Chan. "It could be a tool, a model of a chair, a phone, anything. Similar to current 'just in time' manufacturing practices, a person will be able to customize the model of what they want from a kit of parts and send the information to a local manufacturer, similar to a typical copy shop today." Obviously, the quality and critical dimension of performance is not there yet for rapid prototyping, but Mr. Chan believes that we will see easy access beginning in the next few years.

From the past to the future, Mr. Chan's philosophies on the interaction between design and human culture make him a fascinating study. His orchestration of logic, magic, form, function and technology provide new insight into the meaning of an object's use and what the future holds for all of us. ■

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FORAY CHAIR