

Making Things Right: New Zealand industrial design pioneer Peter Haythornthwaite, the quest for beauty and putting the user first.

A PROFILE COMMENTARY BY MICHAEL BARRETT

In 2018, interviewing Peter Haythornthwaite for a small contribution to the book, 'Design Generation'¹ (by Michael Smythe; published in support of an Objectspace exhibition of the industrial designer's work), the designer ventured on to the subject of beauty and its importance to his design process. It seems fitting to start here with that idea, because while beauty's role in design is little discussed today, Haythornthwaite saw how objects of beauty make everyday use a delight.

The idea of beauty and what constitutes good design are entwined. Today, in contemporary design parlance, ‘beauty’, or more accurately, ‘beautiful’, is the adjective most reached for to describe effortless ease of use. Across previous decades, it has been suggested that beauty has become a dirty word in design¹; others have suggested that beauty’s decline is linked to the evolution of rational process and problem solving, or “design thinking”². While there are many definitions about what design thinking is, most riff on this line from the IDEO playbook: a “human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer’s toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success”³. A scant evocation of beauty if ever there was one.

Perhaps it is because beauty, subjective and qualitative in the eye of the beholder⁴, is not a prudent commercial promise to make to clients. However, for Peter Haythornthwaite, one of this country’s original design thinkers, beauty through honesty of expression and resolution, was something to strive for and a career-long commitment.

We see his intention expressed in the supporting texts of an earlier Objectspace exhibition, ‘Quotidian’ (2010), in which he described the classic design of the Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter as: “complex and well developed...not indulgent, but exceptional”. The quality that made it so, he explains, “was not a product of styling imagination but rather of form determined by purposefulness – and that’s where its beauty originates.”

That relationship between purpose and beauty provides some insight into the ways Haythornthwaite balances aesthetics, mechanical principles, accessibility, precise resolution and material invention and economy alongside considerations of sustainability, history and craft.

One significant work, LOMAK (Light Operated Mouse And Keyboard, Figure 2), held in the permanent collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, was an assistive keyboard for disabled computer users. It “focused on causing the users to feel advantaged, rather than disadvantaged”, he says. The device plugs into a computer’s USB port, is clipped to an adjustable stand placed vertically underneath the computer screen, and is operated by a small laser pointer mounted on a hat or headband.

Interviewed by the New Zealand Herald in 2018, he said: “We were really helping people in need. We helped develop a product that made people feel normal, not disadvantaged and not that nasty word ‘handicapped’. They felt normal.”⁵ Despite that, LOMAK was challenging to make a commercial success, with no long-term investors able to be found.

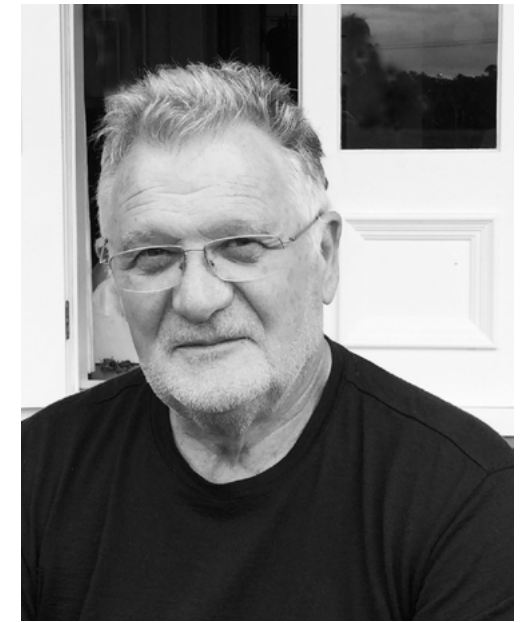


FIGURE 1. Peter Haythornthwaite.

Haythornthwaite’s product output has been nothing if not diverse. There have been hundreds of projects, including the Crown Lynn Country Kitchen range, environmental way finding signs for Auckland Zoo, and the Gone fishin’ fly cabinet – a self-initiated “frolic” (and the joint winner of the Craft Design prize at the 1992 Best Design Awards). He has designed hair brushes for Wella, the freestanding Studio wood-burning stove, still selling well, a modular barbecue range for Beefeater, large outdoor sun umbrellas, the Raven Mop-a-Matic, and the packaging for the Valvemaster additives that helped New Zealand’s fleet transition from leaded to unleaded petrol.

Compare the technological sophistication of LOMAK with that of the “Spife” – the plastic knife-slash-spoon that might still be found around in your kitchen drawer. (Figure 3) It was developed for Zespri to make kiwifruit taste testable. It became the ideal school lunchbox tool for eating kiwifruit, yoghurt and more. While Haythornthwaite at one stage expressed concern about their disposability, it turns out that they have been remarkably long-lived and well-loved, which demonstrates what is possible when design integrity and commitment to end-users are drivers.



FIGURE 2. LOMAK (Light Operated Mouse and Keyboard). Designed by Peter Haythornthwaite and held in the New York Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection.

“As a consultant, you may think you only have one client but you don’t, you have many,” Haythornthwaite said in our 2018 interview. “There’s a paying client but there are many people you need to listen to and converse with, observe and understand. Your client, ultimately, is the person using the product. When we designed the Spife for Zespri, we cut boxes and boxes of kiwifruit, scooped and ate and scooped and ate them so that we could understand how you could best do that and yet manufacture something for three cents. I talked to mums, I talked to my sons, ladies with little kids, four-year olds, school kids. You’ve got to be open minded; you’ve got to be willing to listen rather than go with a pre-conceived conclusion. This is a process to discover the trigger that will guide design.”

STARTING OUT

Without steering (too much) into predestination, a life in design for Haythornthwaite seemed preordained.

Design ran in the family. Bill, his father, studied at Elam School of Fine Art & Design. By 1948 he had the confidence to establish an advertising and later public relations agency. In time, his mother, Ann, “a woman with refined good taste”, would open a drapery store. Between both, one imagines he had exposure to both the creative process and the need to develop and maintain client relationships. Haythornthwaite senior was an autodidact prone to personal design projects⁶, acquiring the skills necessary for projects as required (including, for example, “how to make a pattern and then sew a new fabric heading for an old Morris 8”).⁷ This likely had an effect on the naturally curious Peter.

In ‘Design Generation’, Michael Smythe notes that Bill Haythornthwaite’s work was notable at the time for being published in international design periodicals and publications, and it was such publications which would keep the young Haythornthwaite happily ensconced. He was “inspired by the uniqueness of the work as a boy, with appreciation of the work initially an ‘I like’ response”⁸.

It was not just periodicals that piqued and extended his curiosity. In 1958, Haythornthwaite senior was working to design airplane interiors for Tasman Empire Airways Limited (TEAL), the forerunner of Air New Zealand. A delegation of men from American industrial design company Henry Dreyfuss Associates, working for Lockheed Martin, visited the family home to discuss requirements.⁹ Fourteen-year-old Peter was encouraged by his father to show the group his drawings of cars. He received an affirmative response,

which helped shape his determination to work in the profession and, perhaps, one day, even to work at the pioneering design office.

Of course, for a budding designer of the time, great modernists were a source of inspiration. At Elam, in Auckland (1962-65), he would try to unpick the thought processes and solutions of the great European modernists – notably Max Bill, a Swiss polymath, instigator of the New Bauhaus, architect, furniture designer, graphic artist, poet, painter and sculptor. Haythornthwaite also enjoyed the “strongly symbolic work” of Japanese designers.

“I remember just absorbing Swiss, German and British design,” he recalls. “Taking it all in and saying well, why can’t I do that?”¹⁰ He would carry that short determination with him through his career, although perhaps later balancing it with an intention to strive to make things better.

From Elam, Haythornthwaite’s next great adventures would be in America. In his final year (1965), a design educator from the University of Illinois, Ed Zagorski, visited Elam on a Fulbright Scholarship. Haythornthwaite was inspired.

“His enthusiasm was contagious. He suggested that I apply to do a Masters at his school, the University of Illinois. Unbeknown to him I did apply. So when we serendipitously bumped each other on Waikiki Beach he said, ‘what heck are you doing here?’ I said, I’m going to your school – didn’t you know? He didn’t.”

After three years in Illinois, Haythornthwaite worked in California. Then Niels Diffrient, an exceptional and already very well respected human factors designer hired him for a position at Henry Dreyfuss Associates (HDA) in New York City. At the time, HDA was one of America’s great mid-century industrial design studios, and Henry Dreyfuss was friends with the heads of some very large, innovative companies, including Polaroid’s Dr Edwin Land, inventor of the instant photograph, and Bill Hewitt, chairman of John Deere.

Haythornthwaite’s employment at Dreyfuss – hired as a senior industrial designer – happily coincided with the wagging tail of America’s post World War Two economic good fortune.

“New York felt like the centre of the universe”. He said. “It was a nucleus of culture, learning, the arts, American history and more; and Carol [his wife] and I imbibed this.”

“There was a seriousness for me about work because this was a serious business for the companies you were helping. But there also had to be a strong element of fun. I would never have been involved in design if I couldn’t have played. At Dreyfuss there was a lot of laughter in the office. And each lunch time we would go out to visit design exhibits, by Ray

and Charles Eames for instance, or wander through the Henri Bendel emporium, have a hotdog from a cart on 5th and 59th, or to just mix with the diverse throng of people.”¹¹

It was a time when you might feel the future was still being reinvented. Material innovations were inspiring new consumer products and, in 1955, Henry Dreyfuss had published ‘Designing for People’ – “an invaluable designers resource” – which used humanscale models of ‘Joe’ and ‘Josephine’ as avatars to map and measure human movement; or, in the words of Greek philosopher Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things”.¹²

‘Designing for People’ was full of pithy advice for a young designer. “Design is a silent salesman...contributing not just increased efficiency...but also assurance and confidence.” Dreyfuss also argued the importance of building trust with engineers and business managers, and saw industrial design as “a great equaliser”. His description of people-centric design is illuminating in the context of Haythornthwaite’s career. Dreyfuss, once quizzed by a journalist on how he would start to solve an industrial design problem, said: “We begin with men and women and we end with them. We consider the potential user – habits, physical dimensions, and psychological impulses. We also measure their purse, which is what I meant by ending with them, for we must conceive not only a satisfactory design, but also one that incorporates that indefinable appeal to assure purchase.”¹³ Henry went on to research and write the fundamental designers’ handbook, ‘The Measure of Man’.

Niels Diffrient and two other staff members, would later expand on Dreyfuss’s human factors research and information in ‘Humanscale 123’, which Haythornthwaite describes as “handsomely designed, comprising interactive quarto sized panels that provided new human measurement information”. It would become the go-to publication for designers, architects and ergonomists.

At Dreyfuss, Haythornthwaite was putting “humanscale” design into practice, creating objects, interactions, and environments for leading companies. The work was varied. One project was the design of a grader cab for John Deere. “Because it wasn’t electronic, the grader needed to accommodate two drivers, one to operate the blade while the other drove. The design resolution was based on the company’s deep knowledge of human factors. It was not about styling, but purposefulness. Henry Dreyfuss actually changed the future of John Deere. Instead of accepting his role to design tractors and so forth he questioned the way things were being done. He asked, ‘How can we make machinery easier to use, more comfortable, safer for the operators?’”



FIGURE 3. The 'Spife', the knife/spoon developed by Haythornthwaite for Zespri.



FIGURE 4. 'Artifakts' desktop stationery, the Flipfile.



FIGURE 5. The tape dispenser in the 'Artifakts' range.

There was also work for Bell Telephone Company – whose phones were all designed in the Dreyfuss office. Aesthetically unpretentious but ergonomically well considered – “beautiful by function” – they expanded the choice of black or beige, into a new world of colour – Bell’s many customers required an appropriate vehicle to help them to make a choice. The solution was a retail store, which Haythornthwaite describes as ‘proto-Apple’, in some ways.

“To present the different phones we employed a standard display system from Denmark called Abstracta which enabled people to hold, consider and select the phone of their choice. It was a revolution, phones previously were rented, now for the first-time people had a choice of what they might like to have. And they could take the phone home and plug it into a pre-wired home.”

A PERSONAL MISSION

Haythornthwaite would eventually return home from his rich and varied life in a global design nexus. The obvious question is why? Initially, he had no such intention at all, deferring invitations from his former teacher at Elam, Jolyon Saunders, to take a design lecturer position at the school in Auckland.

“I wrote back and said no. Then my parents came by and said, ‘Are you sure about this? They’re going to pay your way home and they’ll pay your way back if you don’t like it.’ In the end, I thought well, maybe I will. I thought we’d stay for a year or so and then go back to America.”

As things turned out, Haythornthwaite loved teaching. He describes it as a time when some highly capable and eager students went to Elam. It also helped that in the 1970s lecturers were encouraged to practise as well as teach, which meant Haythornthwaite could extend his new-found pedagogical tendencies to New Zealand’s commercial sector. In New York he had been at the zenith of design, had “seen so much and experienced so much”, that he returned a zealot for human-centred design, excited and optimistic about New Zealand’s nascent potential.

“I just came back and I was so excited. I thought, we’ve just got to stop thinking about just making money but about what can we take to the world? There’s so much opportunity here. I always set out to educate clients. I had a responsibility to educate them – not because I was necessarily smart but because I had knowledge to share. I believe a lot of clients have come to understand design through my perspective because I was an evangelist when I came back to New Zealand.”

At first, he juggled teaching with private practice, exploiting university holidays – around four months of the year – and working nights and weekends. He undertook consultancy work for organisations like Temperzone and the New Zealand Post Office, and set about applying his contemporary design approach to companies that previously had seemed to not think much about how, or even what, they presented to the public. To do this, he identified companies and people he wanted to work with and went after them. Once he’d got them on board, he would assess their health, philosophy, values, vision and purpose and see whether it “all knitted together in a consistent manner”.

“Good design positively influences every aspect of a company,” he says. “And bad design does the opposite. Good design is a way of thinking and doing that can transform the way a company behaves, competes, and wins. But this requires it to be integrated into culture, that is, company purpose, values, and vision. It must be championed. Otherwise design is relegated to being an enhancement of commercial convenience.”

A mid-1970s example of this theory in action is the human-factors review he conducted of New Zealand Post’s working environment – a response to the increasing number of women joining the workforce as tellers. The result was a more ergonomic setting, “lower counter heights and the removal of equipment that led to broken fingernails and snagged stockings”.¹⁴

However, the world of commerce is also a world of compromise. Haythornthwaite says, “Even with the best of the work that I have undertaken, there is always a degree of dissatisfaction. There is always a better solution or way.”

That sense that solutions could be better drove him to start companies that would enable him to design and manufacture products to a standard that clients may not see as valid and valued. Such was the case with Artifakts (desktop stationery products), Studio Stoves (wood-burning stoves),



FIGURE 6. The 'OohAh' woodburning stove. Peter Haythornthwaite has designed two other stoves, the Stack Vista and the Studio.

Ipsa Facto (self-start projects), and Gesundheit (marketing design events). “There was a ‘joy’ of being in control of a solution’s destiny – it’s an amazing learning experience.”

MAKING THINGS RIGHT

In the chronology of design, Haythornthwaite is a late Modernist and there are many references from the period that help explain his approach. Ralph Caplan, editor of the American industrial design magazine ‘I.D.’ in the 1960s described good design as “making things right”, an apt description for Haythornthwaite’s approach. The early modernists, “not only created desirable things – they also used them to promote the idea of societal advancement,” wrote the industrial designer Tucker Viemeister for ‘Design Observer’. Not a passive designer, Haythornthwaite made opportunities, looked for areas where he could improve companies or introduce products into the market, delighted in problems, and saw how design could lead progress. That good design could lead to good business and good business could help achieve wider societal benefits is something he understood well.

In his consideration of beauty he is like the celebrated American modernist designer Paul Rand, for whom beauty and utility, were, ideally, “mutually generative”, or German designer Dieter Rams, whose third tenet from ten (developed to answer his own question about what is good design) was “good design is aesthetic”.

Some years ago, writing to Rick Wells, the former managing director of Formway Furniture, Haythornthwaite expanded his thoughts on the subject. “Beauty and deftness of resolution is experienced and appreciated when the solution performs its task with eloquence and ease; without conflict or uncertainty for the end user or customer.” Beauty is commensurate with balance, “when colour, materials and content integrate with fluency” and, he adds, it “should not be mistaken for styling, and should not clash with purpose”.

“It’s the cup that nestles into your hand for a cold-morning cup of coffee. It’s the brand identity that engages and inspires by its refinement and appropriateness. It’s the car ‘control area’ that is driver-intuitive, safe, prioritised and functional – as well as handsome.”

His understanding of beauty was that it had a role to play too, not as ancillary or an unintended consequence, but as a purposeful pillar which, for commercial clients,

had a powerful quality. “Take the time to quest for beauty,” he wrote. “Beauty demands discernment, judgement, perceptiveness, and meditation, but the reward is that it will enhance your fulfillment in life.”

Of course, to understand how it will bring fulfillment, requires an empathetic point of view, understanding of the need to be met. Haythornthwaite felt a responsibility to ‘walk in the shoes’ of the user.

“I wanted to gain an understanding as to what it was like to be the user. For example, what’s it like to be a first-time visitor depending on hospital signage. Often the signage is designed to meet the needs of people who are already familiar with the hospital environment, but their logic is different to a first-time visitor, maybe under stress, seeking to expediently see a loved one.

For Haythornthwaite, the commitment to meeting the needs of people in ways that are effortless, elegant and enduring has been career defining, establishing him, as design historian Michael Smythe has written¹⁵, as the best New Zealand designer of his generation.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Smythe, *Design Generation, How Peter Haythornthwaite Shaped New Zealand’s Design-Led Enterprise* (Auckland: Rim Books, 2018).
2. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3057819/in-defense-of-beautiful-design>
3. <https://feed.geronimomartins.com/circle/circling-around-beauty/>
4. <https://designthinking.ideo.com/>
5. American graphic designers Stephen Sagmeister and Jessica Walsh undertook experiments to prove a hypothesis that, generally there is more consensus rather than divergence about what is beautiful. To cut a long story short – from a lineup of colours and geometric shapes, respondents select their aesthetic preference. The most popular colour, blue. The least popular brown. The most popular shape, the blue circle. The least popular, the rectangle. “Ironically, the brown rectangle has been the most dominant shape in architecture over the last hundred years.”
6. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/kiwi-designer-i-have-been-given-the-privilege-to-create/S5XZKYJCJX-6BYIIDBVPQMKGZA/>
7. Michael Smythe, *Design Generation, How Peter Haythornthwaite Shaped New Zealand’s Design-Led Enterprise* (Auckland: Rim Books, 2018), p19
8. Ibid.
9. Personal interview.
10. Michael Smythe, p.19.
11. Personal interview.
12. Ibid.
13. Protagoras c.481-411nBC. Quoted by Plato in *Theaetetus*. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*(2nd.Ed.). London: Oxford University Press,1968.p.402.
14. <https://www.designersreviewofbooks.com/2009/05/designing-for-people/>
15. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/kiwi-designer-i-have-been-given-the-privilege-to-create/S5XZKYJCJX-6BYIIDBVPQMKGZA/>
16. Michael Smythe, *Design Generation, How Peter Haythornthwaite Shaped New Zealand’s Design-Led Enterprise* (Auckland: Rim Books, 2018).