

## **2006 State of Philippine Competitiveness National Conference**

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### **“Designing in the Philippines”**

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My first language is visual. I read and speak through objects. The narrative I experience is about shape, color, size, texture as much as it is about emotion. For me, objects are like characters, with distinct personalities. Some of them curious, some of them boring. They can fascinate- or they can be purely functional. In my opinion, the most intriguing ones are a hybrid of both.

Look around you. Almost everything that you see that is man-made comes from a designer’s mind. Your shirt, the shoes on your feet, that pen nestled in your hands, the font in every book that you’ve ever read, and even the chair you are sitting on right now. Before actual fabrication, there was someone somewhere who had to figure out its dimensions, its degree of comfort.

Someone had to consider that you would be sitting on top of it, for hours on end, and imagine you to be listening to lectures. Whether conscious or otherwise, you have spent your everyday life surrounded by design. If you reflect on that, then you will begin to understand how dominant and influential the creative industries are.

I had been tasked to discuss the ART- BUSINESS-INNOVATION interplay. In my experience, this is comprised of three basic elements, each one as integral as the next. These are **DESIGN, MANUFACTURING AND MARKETING.**

#### **DESIGN**

The germ of an idea is supple. Its sinews can be stretched, reshaped, poked, perforated, colored, and coated, chiseled and contoured in one’s head. Any designer will tell you that the genesis of an idea is the easiest part of bringing a piece to life.

One of the first exercises we were given in design school was to design a chair. This seemed easy enough- except that an hour later, our Professor came back and told us: “by the way, design a chair that will last a thousand years” Everybody crumpled up their papers - and we began again.

In this day and age, the task of creating must take into account physical realities of our time.

Eero Saarinen, furniture designer, said: **Always design a thing by considering its next larger context -- a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, and an environment in a city plan.**

With the advent of condominium living, the spaces we inhabit are shrinking. On the horizon is a seamless environment. The modern habitat demands it.

In furniture design, there is a movement towards multifunctional pieces, and space savers. A cabinet file which opens up into a desk, a decorative cushion that rolls out into a futon. Reflecting our mindset, we have become a society of multi-taskers, with things of multi-purposes. There are objects like Rose Cobs' "Modular chest of drawers" which is a cross between furniture and luggage.

A piece called "Vanity Cube" which is a 29 x 24 x 24 inch block that opens into an upholstered chair, storage compartments and a mirror. Even cell phones now have email, radio, music, cameras and videos. As we walk through the street, we can carry in our back pocket a device that ensures that we stay connected to the rest of the world at any given time.

Glass, Lucite - transparent, translucent materials are on the rise- and nothing makes a space look bigger than filling it with objects that are floating. Flat screen TV renders the bulky entertainment cabinet obsolete. In Tes Pasola's James bound collection, leaves of paper are fanned out and become candlesticks, lamp based, and vases- a wonderful and witty interplay of mass and volume.

Yet even if our spaces are smaller, we want them to be meaningful and not just decorative. As the clichés of minimalism and retro-modernism fall to their knees, perhaps the phenomenon of McObjects and pre-packaged, hyper-styled life will tumble down too. We will be searching for the homespun, and the nostalgic. Look towards the proliferation of remake movies based on the heroes of our youth, or at least mine. In the Luxury sector, the demand for bespoke services is on the rise. Retail giants like Louis Vuitton offer merchandise exclusive to certain stores, thus adding premium to these objects by guaranteeing that only certain pieces find their way to either London or Paris but never both. Craft is the new indulgence.

The retail landscapes abroad are changing too - the environments with which these products are displayed has also altered. Spaces are no longer boxed up- most of them are now sweeping cosmopolitan labyrinths. In Hong Kong, the new Lane Crawford is an open, unstructured place that allows you to wander from room to room, complete with a music bar. Everything is about cocooning and lifestyle. Stores begin to mimic living rooms. In New York, there is a place called the Apartment, which is a fully furnished apartment – where everything within can be bought. People are looking for an experience - seeking out both the sense and sensorial - in the "Empire of Aesthetics".

Sir Winston Churchill declared:

We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.

What of the shape of things to come?

There are forecasting groups around the world that quantify the sociological influences that are impacting different markets. They condense this information and define emerging emotional trends. Then they break it down into consumer scenarios (this is where you would find suggestions for color, fabrics, and materials.) As I speak, they are already forecasting for 2008.

One must remember that these trend bibles are just channels of inspiration; and not foregone conclusions. These are mere intellectual tools - emotional equipment. One must funnel their own ideas and interpretations - and make up your own answers. After all, an artist may have a country of origin, but art can shatter the boundaries of geography, culture and time.

#### DESIGN and IDENTITY

An artist once said: *"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."*  
**His name was Michelangelo.**

Art for me is exorcism. It's that recurring dream, the idea that won't go away, that haunts and grabs onto you. It is that pulse that becomes the lifeblood of your pieces - that is your identity or as they say, your signature style. You can orbit around this identity, but must continue spinning forward against inertia.

I often use the phrase "stringing moments into momentum". We are as much students of history as we are apprentice to the future. And the future is now.

Movement 8 is a group of multi-awarded furniture and product designers from the Philippines. (Their pieces are on display at the lobby). They have used their special alchemy to craft relevant, enduring pieces that truly represent the best of what progressive design is about. They are contemporary interpretations in a language that Budji Layug referred to as "Tropical and Moderne."

My own approach to design is different - my pieces don't use natural materials. I use crystals, glass beads and the like. And yet, I feel they are distinctly Filipino - the exuberance of a jeepney in a bag. Some of my necklaces are "fiesta" incarnate - I can embark on an interpretation of the idea of "Maharlika" and see where it leads me. My designs are organic, not so much in materials, but in our methods.

#### MANUFACTURING

There is a note that I once got on my college plate - "Good idea, bad execution."  
No matter how remarkable you believe someone's design is on paper, if it cannot be fabricated properly, it is worth very little. Your prodigal design will come back to you, repentant for its shortcomings. Design is dependent on manufacturing. In some cases, it is slave to it.

As much as there is an emphasis on the importance of creative people, I believe the soul of design is in manufacturing. Artisans, skilled workers, they are elemental to the industry. I cannot stress this enough. And this is one of our greatest resources- as the Filipino is dynamic and naturally curious. We take great pride in our work - and we are very emotional about our work. The worst advice, and probably the only negative advice I received, was NOT to go into manufacturing. Today, Production is my joy.

The only way I am able to bring my pieces abroad and around the world is because I have a team of problem solvers, magicians, story tellers, dream weavers that wield needle and thread.

I have a girl, Josie – once, someone sent back a bag as she wanted to have a label placed in, which, for all intents and purposes placing a label on take about two days to do. But when Josie, who had originally made it, saw it- and by this time, she had improved monumentally, she would not let go of it. She spent two weeks on it, agonizing and apologizing, and would not, could not surrender him until she could do what ever she felt was necessary to make him the best she could. It's been said that a piece of art if never finished. It is simply abandoned.

You must allow your team more than moments to shine. As I 'vet said, those moments turn into momentum - and they will amaze you everyday. Every bag has its own badge of honor with a tag that reads... “proudly Philippine made”- Josie is an example of what that truly means.

In April, My workshop, we took an excursion to the CITEM fair. I felt that it was important that they understand what is out there in the world of Philippine design, and where their own place is. I think that exposure should be democratic.

My bags take from 1- 2 months to complete. Each piece. Time is luxury - perhaps that is why they say I am in the Luxury business. People always come up to me with suggestions on how to make them faster. But I never went into this industry to be the fastest. I am not in the business of speed. I have no desire to make 1000 bags a day, by a 1000 girls whose names I won't know. I invest myself in emotional pieces, interesting pieces, things that you want to hold and explore and discover- however long it takes.

## MARKETING

All this creative indulgence would not be possible, or profitable without some form of business backbone. One thing that I was sure of when I decided to make the leap into this venture, was that I could not jump alone.

Constanin Brancusi, a sculptor, said: To see far is one thing, going there is another?

My business partners create the paths, they clear the brambles of inventory, pave the roads towards efficient systems. They are both the compass and the solid ground.

It was upon their suggestion that we registered with the Board of Investments. The BOI has been phenomenal in their guidance. I would strongly recommend that anyone thinking of going into export, work with them.

There are permits, there are restrictions- and you must try to be aware of them before you begin. IN MY CASE, Python is illegal in California. Leather from China is not allowed in some markets, non-precious jewelry metal must be nickel-free to be sold in the US.

Our buyers come in all shapes and sizes, from select boutiques to department stores, all of them equally important. The question is how we get to them, from the boondocks of Bicutan.

The quickest route we've found to Russia, New York and Norway is highway – the Internet super hi-way.

Getting on the net is easy - and everybody can do it. Getting noticed is a lot harder. If you have a good product, and it is made well, you have a bit of a head start. But here is where the tangent creative industries are important. Before anyone requested to see my samples, they worked from pictures. Visual communication is key - art needs its own strategy. My advice is, it is best to use a great photographer and website designers.

Another effective way of getting your product noticed is to join a trade fair. Either local or international. Which one you join should be determined by which market you want to capture or be exposed to. To market, to market - if you are brave. Or you can join an agency that does the rounds of the important trade fairs.

There also exist design competitions, whose winners then get sponsored to mount a show at trade fairs. The Council of Fashion Designers of America has a fashion fund, which not only grants monetary support for fledgling fashion designers, but offers mentorship regarding the running the gauntlet of a retail business.

Rafe Totengco, the New York based, very successful bag designer, did give me advise, some six years ago - and it remains as one of the best I have received: "Do what you love."

**In the end, there must be cohesive cooperation between the organisms of DESIGN, MANUFACTURING AND MARKETING. They must understand each other intimately. The conversation between the three must remain open and fluid, as they should all be telling the same story.**

**That Story, that narrative, new and fresh each instance, happens when we read beyond the lines of what already exists. And using art and innovation - we fill the spaces in between.**