

OCTOBER 2013 ISSUE

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Mark Landini is founder and Creative Director of Sydney-based Landini Associates, a leading design house. The company does projects around the world, producing practical – as well as aesthetically pleasing – work for clients in customer facing businesses such as retail, the hospitality industry and related fields such as property development and service industries.



Landini Associates



Written by John Boley

Right up front, Mark Landini states categorically that he is a commercial artist, meaning that commercial imperatives precede art in importance.

This is not an architect's practice. "We work in brand, and in corporate identity, but most people know us as designers," he explains. These are people in the know, too – some of the biggest and best known names in retailing including Selfridge's (the unique London department store for which

the company is about to redesign the famed Food Hall), Loblaws (Canada's dominant supermarket force), Amore Pacific's (upmarket boutiques in Seoul) and Jones the Grocer (internationally) as well as domestic stalwarts such as Coles and Westpac and global brands including Volvo and Hilton.

Mark hails from the UK and holds impeccable credentials – Conran Design Group, where he was Creative Director, and Fitch. He joined the latter when it had fifteen staff and left when it was at 600 and the only publicly listed design agency in the world. Arriving in Australia as Europe was hit by ►►



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► recession, his intention was to start a business with a partner. First, he visited a bottle shop for some wine and took an instant dislike to the ambience, writing a letter of complaint to the company’s Managing Director.

A week later, the company – a major chain – engaged him

to redesign the whole set of shops and the first to be refitted was Mark’s ‘local’; the extremely successful design he came up with remains the basis for the stores some twenty years later. “It was an incredible piece of luck,” says Mark, of the design firm’s origins.

Today, it helps that the clients tend to know each other – for example, Selfridge’s is owned by a major shareholder in Loblaws. Generally, it’s word of mouth, rather than letters of complaint, that get Mark and his team the business. “In many



cases people come to us because they have seen the work we have done for someone else, somewhere else in the world, and liked it," Mark says.

It was simply unknown at the beginning for a design company to touch every part of the business. "Normally, it would be the advertising company that does the graphics, or the merchandising or whatever, but we did everything." In Australia it remains unusual to offer the full palette of design expertise in a single agency, although, says Mark, it is the norm in Europe. "It's not really in their blood – their DNA. But since leaving college, I had never worked for a company that did not integrate every design skill. For me it is just the way designers work, but in Australia I have yet to find anyone with such a comprehensive range as ours."

Nevertheless, he finds it easier to work in Australia than on his trips back to the UK, where there is more of a corporate game and brinkmanship and you have to watch what you say and to whom. "In Australia they take you at face value – as they do in Canada, which I tend to regard as a 'cold-climate Australia' – culturally they are just so similar."

Being a commercial artist means that Mark and his team of twenty designers need to continually prioritise the practical

aspects of the projects they work on – the structural and budgetary aspects, not just the pretty looks. As proof of the effectiveness of the work, he cites one recent revamp of a food retail chain where the makeover increased turnover through the shops from \$1 million per week to \$1.4 million. "That's why people pay us. Don't forget I also used to be a retailer – when I worked at Conran, which was owned by the group that had Habitat and Mothercare and other chains." He was Creative Director of the design group which had responsibility for designing the stores themselves as well as the product that went into the shops, the catalogues that were sent to consumers to entice them into the shops, the advertising and even the buildings themselves. In that context the all-in approach is immediately understandable. "You quickly learn not to do things that are superficial and frivolous."

Landini Associates does a lot of work for Hilton, much of it directly for building owners (most of the hotel group's properties are locally managed). "So very often our fees are being paid by the developer, and they push us very strongly," Mark explains. "We have a reputation for being able to punch above our weight when it comes to cost and they love us for it. We manage to do things on really tight budgets – sometimes perhaps a quarter of what their competitors are spending on ►►

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► a like-for-like basis.” Once – just once, says Mark with a tinge of regret – has a client complained that he was not spending enough money on a project. That was a client in France who had just come from LVMH and purchased Lanvin and required a money-is-no-object approach.

In general, you may be assured that the company favours function above form: it needs to work first, and then look good. “I am a modernist, not a post-modernist. We are all in search of something that is as simple as possible but which will last. First, it has to work.” In this context, Mark and his team are able to frequently overturn the conventional wisdom of the store refit every three to five years; many of Landini’s refits and designs (Coles supermarkets, for example) that are still in place are well beyond a decade – some nearing two decades – old, with only minor tweaks to keep them fresh.

“Landini’s makeover increased turnover through the client’s shops from \$1 million per week to \$1.4 million.”

It is vital to start with a design that is hard-wearing and long-lasting, not fragile and trendy. Style should be classic. “If you do it sensibly, and do something that is not of the moment, then it should last. Good design lasts forever. I sit on chairs that were designed fifty years ago that don’t need redesigning.” It’s about getting it right first time. Sometimes the client can be its own worst enemy, redrafting strategy constantly and forking out for a new identity to go with it (Mark cites the financial sector as particularly bad in this respect).

Despite their relative lack of familiarity with the ‘all-in’ approach to design, Australian companies are better placed than clients elsewhere to take advantage of the talents of Landini Associates, says Mark, not least because, “they are so much more open-minded, more responsive to new things than people from a lot of countries that are more steeped in history. It is much easier to do modern work here than in Europe, for example.”

Hands-on in this business is critical. “I made a decision when I moved to Australia to not ‘run’ a design company but to actually ‘work’ in it,” Mark shares. “I work on every single project.” In fact, that’s one reason the company has not grown more than it has. “If it were more than twenty people I would find that hard. This is a good size to be. I have been doing this for quite a long time but I still have the passion for it.” The team comprises only experienced people. “We don’t have kids cutting their teeth on projects.”

He suggests most people of his age and in such a position



would be aspiring to run empires. “They are probably not using their experience on a project by project basis, which I do. We can work a lot quicker than our competitors as a result.” And it is simply in the nature of the business that there is always room for another project. ■