

Made In Australia, and other guff.

An article in today's paper has prompted me to write a small piece on bike manufacturing in Australia and my views on it. Before I delve too deeply into the topic, first a bit of background.

Australia a weird place. Geographically and from a flora and fauna perspective, Australia is amazingly interesting, and from a design culture point-of-view, it's also safe to say it's pretty interesting. Australia is the home of the Hills Hoist, Décor containers, The Holden Monaro (read: Pontiac GTO) and the Lockheed Lounge (read: That Marc Newsom guy).

If you take a quick snapshot of the global design landscape without the myopia of isolation however, we're not looking so great. Sure, there are some great designers living and working here in Australia, but many succumb to 'environmental' pressures and join the 'great brain drain', seeking jobs and/or work overseas.

So what about manufacturing? Without writing a treatise on the subject, suffice to say that post war and after the re-emergence of Japan and Taiwan as the global manufacturing 'superpowers' (and now China, Bangladesh and Indonesia et al), Australian manufacturing was in the doghouse. To summarise, we refused to compete where we could actually be competitive (and arguably still are). We repeated the dogma "Japanese made stuff is crap" just long enough for Japanese made parts to become world class and for us to invent a new mantra - "Taiwanese made stuff is crap".

Meanwhile in Australian Manufacturing-land, consolidation was taking place. Nobody wanted to innovate because there was the perception that there was no money in it (and other reasons, more on that later) so many companies just produced local versions of successful overseas products. The post war lack of resources – when there was little concept of a global market in the way we know it today – lead to a fair amount of local product and innovation, but that soon died as Pacific Rim manufacturing took off and improved in the 60's, 70's and 80's. It's a position that has only been reinforced as the value of design has fully been realised.

Okay, so where does that leave us now, and how does any of this relate to bikes. Fer-cryin'-out-loud?

If you've kept an eagle-eye on the local bike industry recently, you'll notice that although it still sucks, still, it's never been more buoyant. You've got Craftworks designing their hulking great freefall bikes, Aireal busy making their chainguides and stuff, Darrell Mac polishing his lugs like mad at Llewellyn – the list goes on.

It's not just frames and parts either, but also related industries such as helmets and clothing that are kicking along nicely too.

Things are going great, right? Well, let's take a snapshot of another colonial outpost – Canada.

Canada has a slightly bigger population than Australia at 30 million, but in all fairness, we make better cyclists than them plus we're not snowed in six months of the year. We're also big wasters of electricity to smelt bauxite too, so that means we should have lots of good Aluminium to make bikes from.

We also now have our very own version of NAFTA, so the North American market should be even more 'open' to our wonderous bike products.

It's when you start to look at Canadian bike companies that we Aussies start to get a bit embarrassed. Look at the brands Canada has come up with – Syncros, Rocky Mountain, Cove, Kona, Cervelo. I won't go on, it's too painful.

To summarise? Well, as you probably guessed at the start, we pretty much suck.

Canada has a disproportionate amount of successful bike companies. I haven't looked into the specifics of why or how, but from what I know things aren't looking that great.

Okay, so what about somewhere else like.....New Zealand? Let's see. Crap weather. Lot's of sheep. Population of a measly 4 million. That's about the population of Melbourne. What bike industry could they possibly have?

Well, we fare a bit better here, but brands like N-Zo, Keewee, Lahar and Avanti make us look a little bit like slight under achievers. It looks even worse if you take a quick overview of the general 'sports and leisure' or 'outdoors' industry. It's fair to say that doing so makes us look fairly lame at this point.

So where does that leave Thylacine?

Well, my general statement to the local cycling community at this point in time is "Who cares where something is made?"

If your aim is 'keeping jobs in Australia', why discriminate? What's the difference between a manufacturing job and say a design job or heavens forbid a marketing job? Why, if you agree manufacturing is no longer very competitive or cost effective here as I've illustrated, why would you value it over something that **is** viable such as design?

I think it's pointless having a cute parochial "I want everything on my bike to be Australian made" attitude or lamenting the fact that we don't make much stuff here anymore. What is the point? If it's a global market, what's stopping anyone

anywhere choosing the best place to manufacture something based on something other than a quaint 1950's patriotism?

As of the time I published this, most Thylacines were made in the USA, and all softgoods were made locally, but I'm looking at using imported US organic cotton t-shirts and hoodies for promotional wear. Why aren't they made here as well as designed here? Simply, the breadth of experience and quantity and quality of micro-manufacturers that have the ability to build what I want in the US so vastly outprice and outnumber the local producers that it simply makes no sense to make them here. The first 3 Thylacines were made here, but I quickly realised that it made a lot more sense from a quality as well as a business sense for me to concentrate on my strengths and farm out everything else to quality contractors that share the same commitment to quality product, service and business ethics that I do.

The harsh reality that nobody in Australia wants to hear, is that the future of Australia – and perhaps the entire Western World – is that of Ideas, services, and Intellectual property. It's not in manufacturing or interesting retrospectives of a world where each nation was living in it's own little bubble.

It's a testament to our working class origins that we lament the general demise of our manufacturing, but now that we get underway into a new millennium, I think it's time for a paradigm shift that can launch us out of our popularist conservatism and retrospection and into a new era where we embrace and nurture what really differentiates us.

Without sounding like propaganda, what Australia needs to do is concentrate on it's strengths and advantages in a global market, and forget about the past. The crest of that wave (nice cultural lead-in there) is, ladies and gentlemen, one simple word.

Ideas.

Thylacine Cycles is an idea. A concept. A package. Free from cultural baggage yet embracing what makes Australians unique, the Thylacine is a metaphor for who we are, where we are, and where we need to go. The Thylacine was driven to extinction by a handful of corrupt graziers, and it's mythology lives on today – one hundred years later.

Thylacine Cycles is also about design. The reality is that there are many, many people that can join two tubes together. There's not many that can tell you why.

At this stage I was going to launch into a boring rant about Australians' penchant for being cynics and confusing success with arrogance, but I feel a paper on 'Tall

poppy syndrome and the Australian consumer' would be ending this collection of words on a sour note.

I think anyone who has read this far probably now realises that 'how' something is made is much more important than 'where', and that Thylacine Cycles is all about the New Australia and not the Australia of old. As much as I often indulge in a bit of 'nostalgia-ising' myself, it's a big exciting world of ideas out there and that's where you'll hopefully find Thylacine Cycles.

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August 2005