A Case for Caribbean Design Principles

ESTWICK Debbie-Ann
Barbados Investment & Development Corporation
destwick@bidc.org

This conceptual paper, under the topic track “Culturally-situated practice as design confidence”, seeks to propose principles for good Caribbean design and establish a case for design in local cultural policy in West Indian islands; showcasing how a healthy relationship between design and local culture can contribute to creative and culturally proud solutions that can potentially offer economic and social benefits. Five fundamental principles to guide good Caribbean design are proposed, inspired by Caribbean culture and society. This paper applies these principles to show how culturally-situated design and designers can contribute to environmental and economic improvements; cultural continuity - making/keeping cultural traditions relevant and accessible; and visual/language preservation - culturally situated design for identity and communication. This study draws on insight, case studies and research to present the potential value of establishing fundamental Caribbean principles of good design and integrating design and culture in order to reap social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits.

design; principles; culture; caribbean

1 Introduction
In this conceptual paper, the author aims to establish a case for design inclusion in cultural policy in West Indian islands; propose principles for good Caribbean design; and showcase how a healthy relationship between design, designers and local culture can contribute to creative and culturally-proud solutions that can potentially offer economic, environmental and social benefits. Drawing on case studies, analysis and research, the value of understanding and fostering Caribbean design is presented. A case is made that supporting culturally-situated design/designers could provide environmental and economic benefits; contribute to cultural continuity, making/keeping cultural traditions relevant and accessible; and contribute to visual/language preservation.

2 Methodology
A qualitative methodology based on observational, experiential and participative primary research, along with secondary research, was selected to better understand “good Caribbean design” and identify and propose principles to better support culturally-situated design development.
In order to propose principles that could better inform and support design and cultural policy development and applied design practice, considerations were made that influenced the methodology: these included exploring

- The role design plays in existing local cultural policy documents
- Factors influencing the qualification of “good” for Caribbean design
- Principles that could support, qualify and enhance “good Caribbean design”
- How these principles compare with widely accepted principles of “good” design
- Cases analysing and exemplifying the proposed principles from culturally-situated designers

This study presents an analysis of policy documents, relating to design, from Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago along with historical references for a deeper understanding of the local context. Literature was reviewed to explore, analyse and challenge design principles and policy approaches for qualifying and encouraging the practice of “good design” in the Caribbean. Two case studies were developed, focused on design in practice, exemplifying the lived experience of Caribbean designers of multiple national backgrounds, namely Trinidadian, Barbadian and Guyanese.

2.1 Data Collection & Analysis

Over 400 hours of observational, experiential and participative research and unstructured interviews occurred over almost two years of data collection for the case studies. This occurred through studio and workshop visits; discussions; attendance and participation in practical sessions, taught classes and a competition; design, making and experimentation; along with other forms of online observation and engagement.

Secondary research, specifically government documents, articles, books, papers and journal publications, was reviewed and analysed, providing context for proposing principles of good Caribbean design.

Proposed principles were discussed with some Caribbean designers and case-study participants and were refined and shared at the University of the West Indies’ “Th?nk Symposium” on April 27, 2017. These discussions and opportunities to test responses to the proposed principles were helpful in refining and proving the validity and relevance of the principles to Caribbean design.

3 The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Context

English-speaking Caribbean islands, often referred to as the West Indies, have shared political and social history. According to Professor Rosanne Adderly “...considering British Caribbean colonies collectively as the "West Indies" had its greatest political importance in the 1950s with the movement to create a federation of those colonies that could ultimately become an independent nation...” (Balderston, Gonzalez & López, 2000, p. 1584). More recently, many West Indian islands and territories, including Guyana, now form the Caribbean Community. According to the CARICOM website,

“The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) is a grouping of twenty countries: fifteen Member States and five Associate Members. It is home to approximately sixteen million citizens, 60% of whom are under the age of 30, and from the main ethnic groups of Indigenous Peoples, Africans, Indians, Europeans, Chinese and Portuguese. The Community is multi-lingual; with English as the major language complemented by French and Dutch and variations of these, as well as African and Indian expressions.” (Secretariat, 2017)

CARICOM countries have many similarities that influence culture, being largely shaped by European colonization, the enslavement of Africans and the servitude of indentured labourers. In many islands, before, after or in addition to black slaves/former slaves, there were Indian indentured labourers or European indentured servants (Tinker, 1974; Byrne, Martin, Moody, & Vaughan, 1986). Descendants of slaves, servants, labourers and poor immigrants have largely shaped and influenced
culture in the Caribbean. Commonalities such as these make for a people whose historical roots are tied to societal “have nots” and “outcasts” and could suggest that, ideally, Caribbean design should value inclusivity and accessibility, as the exclusion of colonialism is not a treasured memory. Some Governments actively work to dismantle the lasting effects of colonialism. Directly preceding its list of policy goals, the National Cultural Policy for Barbados (2010) states that

“In order to bring about the total subjugation of the enslaved Africans, the colonial powers set about to destroy their culture, their way of life. But the most damaging and enduring strategy was employed after the official abolition of the slave trade. Adeptly using their European educational and religious institutions, the values, norms, beliefs, and family structure of the newly emancipated people were systematically discredited and discarded. This resulted in Barbadians of African descent regarding their culture and their heritage with a sense of shame and embarrassment. This is a situation from which we are in the process of recovering even today.” (Ministry of Community Development and Culture, 2010, p.14).

South of Barbados lies the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, a diverse society with many religious and ethnic influences that are reflected in the values, world views, attitudes, cuisine, dress and behavioural patterns of its people (National Cultural Policy Draft 3, 2008). This diversity is undoubtedly integral to the culture of the Republic. The Republic’s National Cultural Policy refers to the varied characteristics of its many communities and determines that the national cultural identity will include aspects of each. It goes on to differentiate between the national identity and the individual’s cultural identity, which “will be based on his/her familiarity with the cultural characteristics of the community of which he/she is a part as well as in relation to the surrounding community/communities.” (National Cultural Policy Draft 3, 2008, p.20). This duality of cultural identities could provide opportunities and challenges for sharing and inclusion in aspects of national culture that are absent from the individual’s cultural identity.

Design policy for Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados is difficult to find. Instead, while design may not be mentioned specifically, it may be alluded to under policies for “Cultural and Artistic Promotion” in Trinidad and Tobago’s National Cultural Policy which states that “Incentives and encouragement should be given to local advertising companies in the use of local content and practitioners in the creation and production of their ads…” (National Cultural Policy Draft 3, 2008). Advertising agencies are where many graphic designers find employment in many islands. A review of the Barbados National Cultural Foundation website and an online review of information on the Barbados Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth did not reveal specific mention of design policies. Rather, it may be assumed that design is included in “creative expression” or development of “a creative economy” (“Government of Barbados: Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth”, 2017).

In both Trinidad and Barbados, design is most closely addressed under cultural policies. While Trinidad is the primary point of reference, as former British colonies, other Caribbean islands like Barbados, Jamaica or Guyana that share common history with Trinidad, may find some information on culture and design, as presented here, to be somewhat relevant.

4 What is Good Design?

4.1 Good Design and an International Perspective

Aesthetics, beauty and how things look are almost inevitable when discussing design. Mads Nygaard Folkmann notes, “...working with aesthetics is often regarded as a core competence in design... the pervasive attention paid to aesthetics can be annoying to designers, as it implies that they work solely with artistic matters of surface, appearance, and styling as opposed to, for example, functionality.” (Folkmann, 2010, p.40). Appeal is important, however, an over-emphasis of “looks” to qualify design as “design” and as “good” could be problematic. Folkmann adds, “...an appropriation
of design by the aesthetics of art, implying a view of design as art, may hamper an understanding of the unique complexity of almost every design object or solution…” (Folkmann, 2010, p.41).

A similar caution regarding the misunderstanding and misappropriation of design is given in the India Report when the Eameses, speaking of selecting teaching candidates, firmly issue a warning to “…be extremely careful [of] …anyone who would look upon the work in the institute as his “chance to be creative” …beware of the professional or specialist who when confronted with a problem having to do with design – seems suddenly to abandon the disciplines of his own profession and put on his art hat – this can happen to those who are otherwise most rational – doctors, engineers, politicians, philosophers.” (Eames & Eames, 1958, p.13)

The Report serves as a suitable reference because India, like the Caribbean, does not share the tradition of aesthetic theory in European philosophy, and its people and influences can be found throughout the Caribbean. At the time of the report, India wanted to develop a design training programme that could help “the small industries… [and] resist the rapid deterioration of consumer goods…” (Eames & Eames, 1958, p.6). Balaram summarises the perspective of design in the Report: “Viewing design as an activity that improves the quality of life… the Eameses recommended a sober investigation into those values and qualities that Indians consider important to a good life…” (Balaram, 2005, p.14). This investigation was to include “a restudy of the problems of environment and shelter; to look upon the detailed problems of services and objects as though they were being attacked for the first time; to restate solutions to these problems in theory and in actual prototype; to explore the evolving symbols of India.” (Eames & Eames, 1958, p.6).

4.2 Good Design and the Caribbean Perspective

A similar approach to fostering design, as distinctly different from art and aestheticization, may be critical to optimizing the function of design in Caribbean spaces, where design is often overlooked or treated as art in policies. What constitutes as “good design” may differ across Caribbean ethnicities, though there are some commonalities. Common historical factors like slavery, indentureship and the lack of resources associated with such a socio-economic status may have influenced a Caribbean “make do” approach to design. It appears that new items were created from what was available or affordable, even if not ideal, resulting in innovations that have informed culturally relevant products, services and practice. This is evidenced in the use of banana leaves as receptacles/wraps in the making of Trinbagonian pastels, Antiguan ducana and Barbadian conkies; monkey pots/jars and jukkin/jookin boards in Barbados, Jamaica and other islands; bent-bamboo structures during Divali celebrations in Trinidad; hand-painted hardboard or wall signage in Jamaica and Trinidad and branded rum shops in Barbados (see Figures 1-4).

Figure 2 – Bent bamboo at Divali Source: https://caribbean.briFshcouncil.org/programmes/society/divali-trinidadtobago

Figure 3 - Jukkin Board (left) Source: Author; Monkey Pot (centre) Source: Author; Branded rum shop (right) Source: https://www.barbados.org/barbados-rum-shops.htm
This practice of design suggests that Caribbean people are capable of addressing problems and generating solutions that can “appraise and solve the problems of our coming times with... tremendous service, dignity and love...” (Eames & Eames, 1958, p. 14), the words the Eameses used in reference to the Indian Lota vessel. Similar to the approach that India took, an intentional and concerted effort to foster good Caribbean design can be valuable to national development and addressing problems.

### 4.3 Good Design and the Popular Perspective

Studies show that people (64%) trust search engines, like Google, as “the most credible source for news and information” (Beaubien, 2015, p.15); that subjects trust Google as an authoritative search engine and can be highly influenced by results presented first (Pan et al., 2007), showing bias for these, and viewing them as more relevant, even if they are not (Keane, O’Brien & Smyth, 2008).

Google search results could indicate what is popular, influential or even accepted as fact by most. A Google search for “good design” presents Dieter Rams’ Principles of Good Design within the first page of results while “Principles of Good Design” brings an entire page of similar results. Some popular blogs/articles/websites/features on design appear to hold Rams Principles as the standard for qualifying good design (Rosenfield, 2012; Weyenberg, 2016; Labarre, 2018), with one site noting that, “These principles specifically relate to his expertise in product design, but can be relied on as the foundation for modern, effective design in any discipline.” (Croft, n.d.). Conversations have revealed that some Caribbean designers have also adopted a philosophy and practice based on Rams’ Principles of Good Design.

These observations raise some questions: Are Rams’ Principles for Good Design to be accepted as universal? Can design solutions be regarded as “good” if they do not meet those Principles? Is the adoption of the Principles exclusionary to Caribbean design? Based on research from The Helsinki Design Lab, Irwin notes that, “Design: As a Third Culture sits between the two poles of science and the humanities and is at the heart of questions related to feasibility, viability and desirability.” (Irwin, 2015). Given the pervading sense of shame and embarrassment around culture and heritage, (Ministry of Community Development and Culture, 2010), can proposed Caribbean design principles encourage culture-proud, feasible, viable and desirable solutions?

### 4.4 Ram’s Principles and Caribbean Design

Rams’ Principles for Good Design, captured in Figure 5, are not all relevant to the needs, values and expressions of the diverse people and cultures of Trinidad and some other Caribbean islands. For example, Rams proposed that good design is “unobtrusive”, “long-lasting” “aesthetic” and “as little design as possible”. “Unobtrusive” is described as being “neutral and restrained” ("Good design |
However, this principle seems at odds with the bright, assertive, even gaudy, colours of many Caribbean flags, clothing and signage.

The bold flavours of many ethnically based dishes tell the story of a people who cannot be characterised by the neutrality or restraint that is characteristic of many European societies that may value design that is “unobtrusive”. Some may consider the colours, larger-than-life presence and grandiose costume design of Moko Jumbies and Blue Devils at Carnival to be obtrusive (see Figure 6).

The temporary bamboo bending structures seen in Felicity, Trinidad at Divali are not “long-lasting” or timeless, though they are fit for their purpose. Similarly, the rich, intricately detailed colours and patterns in the design of deyas and clothing during Divali, are not necessarily “as little design as possible” as the beadwork, sequins and embroidery are non-essential and the colours, volume and layers of fabric don’t exude “simplicity”. These intricate details and decorative elements do not suggest “less is more” but “more is more desirable” (see Figure 6).

Rams proposed that good design is “aesthetic”. This can pose a challenge to Caribbean design if understood in relation to aesthetic theory in European philosophy (Folkmann, 2010), being “a class of judgments that also includes judgments of daintiness, dumpiness, delicacy and elegance” (Zangwill, 2014), and, as is more common, a concentration on “the study of the various forms of art and of the spiritual content peculiar to each” (Munro & Scruton, n.d.).

Given the socio-economic history of the Caribbean, with a people largely descended from slaves, servants, labourers and poor immigrants, transported to a New World without an aristocratic class of their own or a philosophical study of art and beauty throughout Caribbean history, and a perception of beauty heavily influenced by lower-income classes, a true Caribbean “aesthetic” may be impossible.

Judging by Rams’ widely accepted principles, unless a European aesthetic is adopted (good design is aesthetic), cultural expression is subdued or erased (good design is unobtrusive and long-lasting) and European values embraced (good design is as little design as possible), a Caribbean designer may conclude that his/her design solutions can never be good, even if they are feasible, viable, and desirable. There is a need to attempt to identify principles of good Caribbean design in order to recognise, value and encourage its practice and reap the benefits of an innate, collective understanding and pursuit of good design. This could be beneficial for Caribbean design and development, just as the understanding and adoption of Rams’ principles have been invaluable to European and even global design practice.
10

PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD DESIGN
AS PROPOSED BY DIETER RAMS

1. GOOD DESIGN IS INNOVATIVE
The possibilities for innovation are not, by any means, exhausted. Technological development is always offering new opportunities for innovative design. But innovative design always develops in tandem with innovative technology, and can never be an end in itself.

2. GOOD DESIGN MAKES A PRODUCT USEFUL
A product is bought to be used. It has to satisfy certain criteria, not only functional, but also psychological and aesthetic. Good design emphasizes the usefulness of a product whilst disregarding anything that could possibly detract from it.

3. GOOD DESIGN IS AESTHETIC
The aesthetic quality of a product is integral to its usefulness because products we use every day affect our person and our well-being. But only well-executed objects can be beautiful.

4. GOOD DESIGN MAKES A PRODUCT UNDERSTANDABLE
It clarifies the product’s structure. Better still, it can make the product talk. At best, it is self-explanatory.

5. GOOD DESIGN IS UNOBTRUSIVE
Products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should therefore be both neutral and restrained, to leave room for the user’s self-expression.

6. GOOD DESIGN IS HONEST
It does not make a product more innovative, powerful or valuable than it really is. It does not attempt to manipulate the consumer with promises that cannot be kept.

7. GOOD DESIGN IS LONG-LASTING
It avoids being fashionable and therefore never appears antiquated. Unlike fashionable design, it lasts many years – even in today’s throwaway society.

8. GOOD DESIGN IS THOROUGH DOWN TO THE LAST DETAIL
Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance. Care and accuracy in the design process show respect towards the user.

9. GOOD DESIGN IS ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY
Design makes an important contribution to the preservation of the environment. It conserves resources and minimizes physical and visual pollution throughout the lifecycle of the product.

10. GOOD DESIGN IS AS LITTLE DESIGN AS POSSIBLE
Less, but better – because it concentrates on the essential aspects, and the products are not burdened with non-essentials. Back to purity, back to simplicity.

Figure 5 - Rams’ Principles of Good Design. Photo source: Author. Content source: https://www.vitsoe.com/us/about/good-design
4.5 Caribbean Design and Policy

Design’s core focus, often applied through varying design disciplines, is addressing problems and providing human-centred solutions. This may be done, for example, through the design of structures and spaces (e.g., in architecture, urban and interior design); goods and products (e.g., in fashion, industrial and product design); and services and experiences (e.g., in graphic, user interface and experience design). Design strategy and thinking can harness the methodology of designers, often in ways that are holistic, practical, human-centred, creative and visually driven to address social, environmental and other problems. Naiman notes, “A design mind-set is not problem-focused, it’s solution focused and action oriented towards creating a preferred future.” (Naiman, 2017). Press and Cooper propose that “If one considers designers as those people with the skills to innovate, to solve problems, to bring creativity to a situation, with an element of visualisation ability, and with the ability to deliver a product, then wherever there is a need to do this, designers can turn their hand to it.” (Press & Cooper, 2003, p.195). This does not suggest a superior position for design but emphasises the need for understanding design’s value, scope and potential to reap greater benefits in the Caribbean. Nigel Cross speaks about the close relationship between design, science and art, establishing each as different yet essential to human intelligence (Cross, 2010). Considering design as distinct from the arts and identifying principles of good design for Caribbean culture could inform policy development and prove valuable.

4.6 Design and Art

Design is often overlooked in Trinbagonian and Barbadian cultural policy or, perhaps, assumed to be addressed within the Arts. This is problematic. Confusing art and design can be crippling to design and its optimum functioning in Caribbean societies. Industrial designer and educator, Sir Misha Black noted, “At their extremities of maximum achievement art and design are different activities sharing only creativity and some techniques in common.” Black noted the criticism of an art student regarding the art in London galleries as “a luxury of the bourgeois elite…” and added, in reference to conceptual and performance artists, that “Support for it comes not from the masses which it attempts to reach but from the bourgeoisie which it purports to despise.” (Black & Blake, 1983, p.216).

When Caribbean design is confused with art, the result can be a design industry that is inaccessible to the masses; disconnected from providing feasible and viable solutions to local problems; and heavily dependent on the local upper-class, diaspora in the developed world or an ideal, wealthy foreigner. The effect of this can be a dependence on imports; limited innovative responses to local needs; exclusion of the local retail market; a lack of affordable, utilitarian solutions; a trinket-based design industry; a high cost of investment to train persons to design for a market with standards and
expectations with which they are not familiar; and the economic repercussions of a design industry that lacks diversification. Design should be recognised and treated distinctly from the arts in the development of policy in order to capitalise on innovative opportunities for growth. Given these possible effects and the socio-economic history of many Caribbean islands, design that is accessible to locals, solution-seeking, necessary and appealing should be especially valued by people and policy-makers.

4.7 Design and Craft

Confusing craft with design can be similarly problematic. A “Craftsman” is “1. a person who practices or is highly skilled in a craft; artisan. 2. an artist.” (craftsman. (n.d.), 2017). “Handicraft” is “1. manual skill. 2. an art, craft, or trade in which the skilled use of one’s hands is required...” (handicraft (n.d.), 2017). This suggests that craft may focus on the mastery of techniques and methods of making, often resulting in beautiful artefacts, objects, materials or goods. Good craftsmanship speaks to perfection while good design speaks to purpose. Regarding perfection and purpose, Black notes, “Perfection without purpose can be as negative as purpose without perfection, but if we lose the will to make as perfectly as we can all is certainly lost and nothing gained.” (Black & Blake, 1983, p.216).

Excellent craftsmanship dictates that an object be made well; craftsmen may dedicate long hours to their work resulting in objects of great intrinsic value which, like art, can come with a dependence on the local upper class, diaspora in developed countries or wealthy foreigner. Many of the issues that may be encountered when art is confused with design may also be encountered when craft is confused with design in policy development and practice.

All craftsmen are not designers and all designers are not craftsmen. It can be observed in both Trinidad and Barbados that while some craftsmen have mastered skill, they are not designers and may struggle to innovate or create items that are desirable to an international market or wide cross-section of local people.

Similarly, while some designers have the ability to conceptualise and model desirable items, they may lack the skill to make well or quickly with traditional resources that the craftsman has mastered. While all craftmanship should not necessarily be replaced with technology and imports, it may be naive to ignore these. Design can take advantage of technology, programmes and machinery in creating and mass-producing affordable, useful, desirable solutions that are culturally relevant. Black notes that, “If a designer is not competent to resolve the technical as well as the social and formal aspects of a problem he is purely a stylist concerned only with the superficial appearance of products the manufacture of which is beyond his comprehension.” (Black & Blake, 1983, p.237). This does not suggest that the Caribbean designer is to be replaced by the engineer or technical operator. Far from! Robert Boguslaw cautions that

“Perhaps the fundamental danger in any system design is the possible loss of desirable aspects of “humanness.” To avoid this danger, it is necessary to find means for insuring that the systems themselves somehow retain these qualities. If the design specifications are deliberately shorn of everything but a callous rationality, we feel uncomfortable without being able to specify why.” (Boguslaw, 1965, p. 159).

There is room for policies to be developed that encourage the application and practice of good design by encouraging the inclusion of designers in the manufacture of Caribbean goods and products.

Caribbean goods, by necessity, should be environmentally conscious and responsible. The 2017 hurricane season that battered numerous islands is “one of the worst on record” (Harrington & Gould, 2017). With rising concerns about climate change and the fate of many small islands, policies that support the design of products, solutions and processes that mitigate global warming, adapt to climate change or otherwise benefit/avoid harming the environment may be essential. Considering
design in craftsmanship, manufacturing and business strategy can address challenges regarding sustainability, modern appeal/desirability and relevance.

5 Proposed Caribbean Principles of Good Design

This paper proposes five fundamental principles to help qualify and support good Caribbean design. Eurocentric design principles are not always relevant for Caribbean people and culture with its melting pot of ethnicities, influences, historical context and needs of people. What is feasible, viable, desirable and good design in the Caribbean may be different from what is widely recognised as good design. An analysis of Megatrends that are currently shaping the world (The Upside of Disruption: Megatrends Shaping 2016 and Beyond, 2016) suggests that human-centred, independent designers who embrace technology and seek the good of people and planet have a significant role to play in building a better world. A growth-focused ideology should therefore facilitate the success of individuals and projects that do just this. A set of recognised principles for good Caribbean design can help inform policy thereby facilitating the growth and success of valuable initiatives and projects.

The proposed principles for good Caribbean design, outlined in Figure 7, are based on a Caribbean perspective and cultural context.

These are -

1. Accessible - Attainable for the average income earner and/or easily accessible to local and/or diaspora markets
2. Urgent - Solution-seeking or attempting to address problems, needs or make improvements that can benefit people or planet
3. Sustainable - Profitable, safe, feasible and environmentally conscious, minimising environmental, physical and visual pollution, harm or waste
4. Appealing – A considered interpretation of local values with meaning expressed and ideas reflected or communicated through design application or in function as various senses are engaged (partially based upon “Evaluating Aesthetics in Design: A Phenomenological Approach” (Folkmann, 2010).
5. Relevant - Significant to the traditions and values of Caribbean heritage while considering continued relevance in a rapidly changing, globally connected world.

Figure 7 - Proposed Principles for Good Caribbean Design

6  Design and Culture: A Synergistic Relationship
The following case studies exemplify the proposed principles at work in local, culture-focused projects, by designers, that have led to design solutions that provided social, economic, environmental or technological benefits.

6.1  Fete Signs & De Sign Books
De Sign Books, a project and product of Collaborative Laboratory,\(^1\) initiated by Barbadian-born designer Debbie Estwick, creates notebooks from out-dated fete/party signs to celebrate local culture, up-cycle waste and showcase possibilities for innovation through design collaborations.

6.1.1  Opportunities & Challenges
Sign-painting and informal promotions contribute significantly to Trinidad’s cultural and physical landscape. Bruce Cayonne is a Guyanese-born local designer and sign producer who practices the typography-based craft of hand-painted promotional signs despite the prevalence of printed banners. His colourful, cost-effective hardboard signs can be spotted along highways and main roads using local lingo and promoting fetes (parties), musical artistes, food establishments and other businesses (see Figures 8, 9). His signs may be a design solution in response to the need for affordable and effective public communications.

The colourful signs capture a distinctly Caribbean language and visual style and represent a class of sign-painters that, according to Cayonne, has been declining over the years. However, there is an inherent challenge in the sign painting and informal promotions system when it comes to removing signs that are past their date. Event-planners, sign painters, promoters and sign installers all play different roles but no one currently has the role of sign removal. This can result in visual clutter and physical debris along public roads.

Figure 8 - Bruce Cayonne Signs: Cutters (left) Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSO_dSGhBSI/ & Big People Party (right) Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSjFWiBGV/_/

\(^1\) Collaborative Laboratory (Co. Lab.) is an experiment to drive innovation through design collaborations, connecting design practice and thinking with everyday individuals, businesses and organisations through small projects and experiments.
6.1.2 Design Response

Up-cycled sign books, made with recyclable newsprint paper, become a missing link in the event promotion system by placing value on out-dated signs, securing their removal, giving old signs a second life and providing additional income-earning opportunities, all while commemorating events, celebrating and promoting local culture.

Design thinking is used in implementing a system involving and compensating the sign painter or promoters in sourcing used signs. Designed to lay flat when open for optimal usability and priced affordably in comparison to other handmade books, De Sign Books feature rugged, hand-painted, one of a kind covers that highlight the colours and energy of Caribbean living through carefully selected, abstract shapes. The brand is nuanced in both its design and naming (see Figures 10, 11).
6.1.3 Results
De Sign Books retailed at two outlets in Trinidad and one independent stockist-reseller in North America. Social media posts on Instagram and Facebook along with a web page and a bitcoin shop were developed for the project to aid in product promotion and accessibility.

De Sign Books saw the support of a local and international community around the product and growing interest around sign painter Bruce Cayonne who, through the help of Trinidadian designer, Kriston Chen, is on Instagram and accepting online orders for signs. Members of the diaspora reached out through social media, webpages and online forms to engage about the project, pursue partnerships and purchase books or signs. Books and signs now reside with people locally, regionally and internationally, in Barbados, the UK, USA and other countries.

6.1.4 Design Principles at Work
In the case of fete signs and De Sign Books, the proposed Principles of accessible, urgent, sustainable, appealing and relevant were embodied in the design solutions. The projects showed aspects of design thinking, graphic design, product design and craftsmanship. Design contributed to language preservation with the use of dialect in both signage and branding. The work of Cayonne and De Sign Books were culturally situated and celebratory of bright colours, characteristic of the Caribbean; “cheap” or “budget-friendly” sign/book materials; and hand-painted letterforms that characterise the “make do” signage solutions. The sale of De Sign Books to members of the diaspora contributed to foreign exchange. The making of De Sign Books provided environmental benefits by using old signs that could otherwise become garbage or litter. In addition, it highlighted opportunities and created solutions to help counter possible negative effects of the cultural practice of sign painting, which is sometimes prevented as it is not always environmentally friendly. By addressing the possible negative effects of a cultural practice and providing a solution, design worked to contribute to cultural continuity.
6.2 #1000Mokos & Moko Jumbie Institute of Higher Learning (MJIHL)
Afro-Caribbean stilt-walking (Moko Jumbie) adopts a new approach to co-learning, adaptability, accessibility, community, continuity and online promotion.

6.2.1 Opportunities & Challenges
In Trinidad, Moko Jumbie groups and masters teach, perform and progress the practice of the cultural art form of walking/dancing on stilts. Geographical communities around masters and teaching spaces gain the benefit of exposure to stilt dancing. Learners may use a stilt that is attached by wrapping the foot and shoe of the wearer to the stilt or by use of a custom stilt that has the learner’s shoe bolted in, thus creating inconveniences and challenges in trying or sharing stilts. Limited access to experimenting with stilts to learn outside of established schools and communities along with challenges in affordable, autonomous, easily adaptable and accessible stilts leaves a gap for designers to problem solve through a branded system of easily accessible and shareable stilts, informal gatherings, exploration, experimentation and co-learning.

6.2.2 Design Response
The design of a quick-release stilt, popularised by the Moko Jumbie Institute of Higher Learning (MJIHL), a concept of Canadian-Trinidadian architectural designer, Michael Lee Poy, provided learners with an easily shareable stilt that encouraged autonomous learning. Made of pine, plywood and aluminum, the stilts which featured steel D-loops and velcro closures, were designed for comfort and convenience. Lee Poy collaborated with Sam Mollineau of Callaloo Company to design and fabricate the quick release system (Estwick, 2017).

Need precipitated the design of the quick-release stilt. According to an article by Debbie Estwick on Designer Island, a website dedicated to design and creative culture in the Caribbean, Lee Poy said of his design impetus, “I want to make a better stilt, a light one... I want to support better costuming and a better mas” (Estwick, 2017).

The quick release stilts, originally used to teach primary school students, facilitated the development of the #1000Mokos initiative in Trinidad (see Figure 12).

#1000Mokos began as a co-learning initiative where people from any community could try stilt-dancing in a variety of spaces, disconnected from a single community space or school at no cost, though donations were accepted. Initially spearheaded by Trinidadian graphic designers Kriston Chen and Joshua Lue Chee Kong, the group evolved into a thriving community of volunteers and supporters to facilitate stilt dancing activities and practice sessions (see Figure 13). Sessions were held at Alice Yard primarily, a contemporary art space, but locations included Audrey Jeffers House, in honour of International Women’s Day, a late Victorian house built by the first black resident in St. Clair (Noel, 2011); Las Cuevas Beach and Wildflower Park, among others. Designed social media and online promotions were used to promote new events, form an online community and document coverage of events (see Figure 14).
6.3 Results

#1000Mokos served as an equaliser for people of all ages and races, from a variety of local and international places (see Figure 15).

For many, an interest in Mokos was kindled or rekindled. Designers developed solutions to make the culture and art form accessible and generate new interest. That growing interest was seen from
unlikely sources, including locals and tourists who were previously disconnected from the existing groups and communities that continue the tradition. While the initiative depended heavily on the selfless generosity of many individuals, opportunities for revenue generation to offset expenses were capitalised on through the sale of quick-release stilts and the design and sale of #1000Mokos T-shirts along with the promotion and hosting of paid learning sessions in collaboration with pre-existing, traditional groups (see Figure 16, 17).

![Image of Mokos of all ages](https://www.instagram.com/1000mokos/)

Source: https://www.instagram.com/1000mokos/

Photographer: Kriston Chen

![Image of Mokos T-shirts](https://www.instagram.com/1000mokos/)

Designed by Richard Mark Rawlins.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/1000mokos/

Photographer: Shaun Rambaran

### 6.3.1 Design Principles at Work

In the example of #1000Mokos and MJHIL, the proposed Caribbean Design Principles of accessible, urgent, solution-seeking and relevant were embodied. The projects showed aspects of design thinking, graphic design, product design and social design. These projects both contributed to cultural continuity, along with heritage pride and social and racial integration through accessible stilt
dancing. Design made a significant impact in providing a sharable stilt that was easy for an individual to put on or take off. This precipitated the creation of #1000Mokos, a roaming community. As an inclusive community, #1000Mokos engaged with other Moko Jumbie communities, hosted events, engaged young and old of varying races and socio-economic backgrounds and created an online hub and community for Moko Jumbies, aspiring Mokos and fans.

![Figure 17 - #1000Mokos Masterclass with traditional group, Two Brothers (originating from the Keylemanjahro Group), at Big Black Box. Hand-painted signs from Bruce Cayonne brand the space with distinctive Caribbean flair. Crossing signs help Mokos across busy Port of Spain streets. Photographer: Jason Hunte. Source: https://www.instagram.com/1000mokos/](image)

7 Conclusion

Fete signs, De Sign Books, MJHIL and #1000Mokos show that design can profitably address local social and environmental challenges while promoting and celebrating culture and that design can fuel popular interest in cultural traditions, increase accessibility, foster social growth and integration and improve technological growth.

Identifying, proposing and embracing a set of principles for good Caribbean design could help improve confidence and pride in national heritage, identity and design solutions, while providing a benchmark for recognising and valuing good design. Including design in policy development could help Caribbean island nations capitalise on the specific benefits of design, as different from art, craft or engineering, and reap the rewards of promoting, fostering and funding the practice of good Caribbean design. This can lead to the following: development, sale, engagement and export of cultural products and experiences and that are inclusive, accessible and affordable for locals; perceived as appealing to locals, the diaspora and internationals; urgent and necessary for addressing problems and relevant to preserving the past, progressing traditional approaches and embracing the future.
8 References


Dieter Rams 10 Principles of “Good Design”.


About the Author:

Debbie-Ann Estwick is a Design Adviser at the Barbados Investment & Development Corporation, entrepreneur and former educator. With an MA Design & Branding Strategy (Distinction, Brunel University), and regional/international experience, Estwick works to connect design practice/strategy to business and export development.