The BRODY bunch

Neville Brody was the graphic designer of the 'eighties. Not even ALR's logo is exempt from his influence. Here Craig McGregor assembles the Brody credo for the 'nineties.

It was more like a visit by a rock star than a graphic designer. Wherever he went during his recent visit to Australia, Neville Brody was hung around with design groupies, students, hero worshippers. His public talks, two in Sydney and two in Melbourne, were packed out. He had more media exposure than most visiting film 'personalities'.

When he talked to students only in the Design Faculty at the University of Technology, Sydney the place was crowded out with almost a thousand students, academics and designers who had bussed in from all over Sydney, NSW and Canberra. The ABC and GH magazine were there. Brody's first words on confronting that row upon row of expectant, noisy, highly excited faces (Faces?): "Oh shit! This is terrifying."

Brody, of course, has the sort of reputation which might justify all this. He is the young Turk/guru of British graphic design and today one of the most influential designers in the world; at the age of 31 he has virtually revolutionised British typography. As one English critic, Martin Colyer, writes: "When it becomes time to produce an '80s volume of Pioneers of Modern Typography it is possible that the British section will be a one-man show. Write 'B for Brody', large."

The magazine which made Brody famous is The Face, the contemporary lifestyle magazine which is still a sort of trendy bible for hip young people all over the world; he was art director and designer for five years and helped turn it into an astonishing success, so much so that it has spawned imitators in the UK, Europe, the United States and Australia. He is currently art director of Arena, a more laid-back fashion magazine, but during his visit revealed he would be leaving it shortly. Some years ago
he redesigned City Limits, the London entertainment guide; his work spreads across to posters, book jackets, record covers and various forms of packaging.

Brody, like another first-class English designer, Dave King, has a history of designing for Left magazines and movements as well. He designed the cover and letterhead for the New Socialist, the British Labour Party's then monthly magazine, using bold constructionist imagery and a brilliant red to create one of the best magazine covers I've ever seen. Says Brody:

"There was no point in trying to appeal only to the party faithfuls - NS needed to start competing on the newsstands, so the first priority was to improve the covers. I have them stripping across the top which was neither black nor white, using colour in a very direct and obvious way.

"The NS logo followed through to the contents page, and with other headings like 'Front Line' I wanted to create a corporate flow so that the reader could open it at any page and recognise it as New Socialist.

"With the layout, I created a modern feel, but used typefaces like Bodoni to give a classical balance that reflected the magazine's history of theoretical writing. A much greater emphasis was placed on the use of photographs, because I felt that the potential new readership had been largely brought up on television's fast imagery. The magazine was trying to state its relevance to modern life. The fact that it spoke out against many aspects of this did not mean that I could afford to ignore the prevailing modes of expression.

"Needless to say, the whole exercise triggered a 'designer socialist' backlash. Even though it was what I had suspected might happen, I got fed up with being tagged a leftwing designer."

Brody had such an impact on designers in the 'eighties that art directors and graphic designers everywhere began copying his style, his flash and funk layouts, his hand-drawn typefaces, his irreverent and rule-breaking approach. It became trendy to do a Brody - and during his visit there were street posters all over Sydney which were clearly Brody lookalikes. But Brody himself has moved on to what he calls a sort of "revised Modernism", in which spaces and shapes are much more restrained and almost classically balanced. In his public talks and private conversations he came across as serious, thoughtful, image-conscious, something of a play-actor, passionately committed to the graphic tradition and to extending it...and still fairly Left. Here are some of Brody's thoughts from his whirlwind Australian tour.

**Designer as Communicator**

"A designer has quite a responsible role, and there is a choice. Either you can use the tools of manipulation in order to continue that manipulation which means basically that it's money-gear ed, that is greed-gear ed...if your choice is that you went into design to buy the right car...The other choice is to actually see yourself in public service in a way. It's your responsibility to try and communicate your information as honestly as humanly possible."

**The politics of design**

"Design has to start addressing the fact that there's a world out there, there are people out there, not just clients and accounts and expensive cars. What we've seen in so many countries is that people have finally been able to be in control of their own destinies, people power becomes much more important...the revolutions that went on were beyond the control of media. This was nothing to do with advertising, it was almost nothing to do with propaganda. This
was something to do with something much more genuine as a human feeling, a human desire, and design has to start addressing that fact."

Ethics

“"You have to believe in something, you have to have the courage and conviction of this point of view, and if a client is telling you to do something you feel ethically worried about, that you think is wrong, then it’s your position as a designer to say to the client ‘No!’ or ‘Think about this in another way’. In fact you’re not so much the client’s representative speaking to the public but the public representative speaking to the client. You’re in this mid-position, you’ve got dual responsibilities, you have to look both ways. It’s no good saying ‘this job was shit’ because the client told you to do it. That is no excuse, I mean how can you live with yourself...unless you have a nice car.”

Recycling

“We’ve been getting a lot more into recycled material...Most clients seem to think that a job is only well-designed if it uses all six colours and if it’s printed on six hundred sheets of expensive Japanese paper...This is a lie...in fact a good design should be able to work on any material and the more expensive the message I think the smaller the message is.”

Rebellion

“When I was at college the punk movement came along. It gave me and a lot of fellow students some sort of reason for doing things. We could see outside the college that other people were thinking and trying different ideas and it gave us a lot of encouragement to go out and see what the tutors were telling us wasn’t necessarily the truth, and it wasn’t necessarily the best way to do things.

“We would be trying ideas at college and the tutors would come along and say ‘you can’t do that’. I mean there is no such phrase in design as ‘you can’t do that’. We decided to push along anyway and develop our own ideas because I felt that this was the only time when someone was going to pay you to be sitting for three years and mucking about and developing ideas yourself...At the end of the course the internal tutors failed me, they said I had no commercial potential. Two years ago they asked me to come back and teach, so you can never believe what your tutors tell you!”

Tradition

“The things we were taught at college were geared very much around the traditional notion of design which to me was quite lacking in any human content. It was not reflective at all of the everyday human experience but more reflective of an idealised experience...What we see around us in advertising is projected ideals.”

Ideas

“It’s really critical to explore nothing to do with presentation (when you’re a student) but to explore ideas. Presentation will come later, business will come later...”

Mike Tyson poster

“This was for a Mike Tyson fight in Tokyo and the fight lasted a lot less time than it took to design the poster.”

The Face

“This was the time when the experimenting had to be drawn to a sort of period of refinement...what had happened during the course of The Face was that each issue tried to challenge conventions, conventions of what a magazine design was supposed to do. We would try and question everything on the page..."
tion right down to its root level...looking at what was necessary as part of the language and what in fact was excess baggage if you want, what was unnecessary tradition...as far as I was concerned tradition is anything that someone says to you three times.”

Record covers

“The record company that I did one sleeve for actually worked from someone’s bedroom in South London. It was run by one guy with a motorbike which meant that you could discuss things with musicians and you were left much freer to go away and produce your own interpretation of what the music was about because it was a sort of shared feeling.

“I find more and more today that the role of the designer in a record industry is to retouch haircuts or to choose the appropriate typeface to go with the appropriate makeup. When I was working on record covers then it was possible to try and influence the way people think and now it’s more important in the record industry to influence the way people dress, which to me is a great sadness and a great loss. My biggest dream is to do a Kylie Minogue cover. Vinyl is being less and less used by the record industry, which is a good thing because I think it certainly helps the environment not to use so much vinyl. Now in America most records will be released on CD only. So this becomes another challenge; the CD package is too small to put a photograph of a band on because you can’t see their haircuts so it becomes quite important for a designer to actually start to grapple with ideas again and it doesn’t just have to be the plastic package with a plastic thing inside, it could be anything, it’s a whole new creative area.”

Computer design

“I find the Macintosh a really exciting tool to work with and it certainly allows us to experiment with far more ideas in a shorter period than we ever could do before. As long as you don’t use the Mac as a solution, as long as it’s seen as the tool. I see a lot of work now which is so obviously Mac produced, which depresses me. In the seventies the parallel was the airbrush. Everything was airbrushed, you’d even airbrush a fragile sign on a box, nothing was untouched, you’d put your airbrush in your makeup in the morning. I’m sure there are designers out there who use the Macintosh to make their beds at night, but it is not a solution.

“The Macintosh is a tool and it’s just got to be put to work like everything else. I think it’s a great tool and I think that the best design of the next few years is going to come out of people who get to grips with the technology, or from people who reject it completely and go completely the other way. It’s going to polarise the industry a hell of a lot and for me the main roots should be somewhere between using your hands and using the mouth.”

The future

“What’s important about Helvetica is that it’s a modern type face and I think in the ’nineties we’ll be turning towards something that is very pure, very basic, very simple, almost back to a modernistic sort of ethic; not the 30-storey blocks of apartments, not the mistakes. We should be able to look at the mistakes and actually go back to modernism and move on in the right direction...post-modernism was just a bit of a glitch on the horizon and has to be ignored as such...but in the ’nineties we’re definitely going to be getting back to something which is much more fundamental but has its roots much more in communication of content and images, and the trick in a way is to try and approach that with a much more human face.”

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