

# WHEN WE HAD QUALITY

**B**ACK IN THE 1960s, I AM TOLD, there was a thing called the Australian Design Council, and they held an annual award for best design and manufacturing quality. Winners were given a black-and-white triangular sticker with rounded apexes to place on the products bestowed with prizes.

According to this story, the Council advertised often and the general public knew about it. Goods with the award sticker on them were sought after, and companies which consistently won awards did very well. Then a darkness descended on Australian manufacturing, and it appeared that, as factories began moving offshore, as Australians were exposed to cheap imports, a different mood settled on the nation and the era of the engineer seemed to have come.

Under this new regime, design and designers were passé, the Design Council became invisible, the black-and-white award stickers vanished, and the disciples of hairy-chested engineering took over the remaining manufacturing firms. The fusion of quality design with excellent engineering was replaced with an emphasis on the product's undersides and hang the look of its exterior. Looks are for wimps.

Product design became conflated with fine arts-influenced handicrafts, and relegated to an inferior status, which you can easily confirm by attending the object design shows at Sydney's Customs House in Circular Quay. Global design stars like Marc Newson have to launch their local careers as craftsmen of the one-off, then move overseas when it becomes clear that our mass market manufacturers barely give a damn.

Now, if you want to collect objects of all kinds that have some kind of imprimatur on them, you go in search of the British Design Council stamp of approval. Beautifully-designed handtools are the things you will most easily find in Australia with this other Design Council's sticker on the package.

That organization has had a checkered history as well, but its mission has remained clear despite the ups and downs.

One of the most recognized products in the Australian Design Council's heyday, in this western edge of the continent, was a ubiquitous and humble object, made by a ceramics manufacturer but not of porcelain, looking like a hugely oversized version of a tiny wooden thing. It was the Caroma bathroom stool, most often found made of glossy white plastic.

I was searching through the back quarters of my local hardware megastore the other day when I happened upon a

scattered pile of shiny white plastic parts. Something that looked like a lid had a logo impressed into it, and the name "Caroma" was above it. "Caroma" was set exactly like that, with quotation marks around it, as if the maker was unsure if it really should be awarded the name and was finger-quoting it for safety's sake.

After a while I worked out that the lid belonged on top of two other parts joined together, each of which resembled half a wooden spindle for holding cotton thread. Clicked together the object made a functional seat and I knew that here I had the famous Caroma bathroom stool.

I had been discussing product design with some friends several weeks before, talking about the recently closed Marc Newson retrospective at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and the news that Philippe Starck was about to start work on several architectural projects in Melbourne. The Caroma stool came up as always, and we compared it to the two Starck stools my friends were sitting on—Bubu and Prince Aha. We wondered whatever had happened to Australia's celebrated seat.

My new Caroma stool fits in well with such distinguished company, even though it costs so much less than they did—\$12.95 against just below \$100.00 each. Bubu and Aha were designed more recently than the Caroma stool, but all three products have a similar heritage—Joe Colombo's glossy plastic furniture of the 50s and 60s, late 40s and 50s curvy organic design, a touch of Ettore Sotsass' Valentine typewriter for Olivetti.

On a more contemporary note the Caroma stool closely resembles the style of OXO's massive range of excellent household products, which in their turn have now vanished from the stores in Perth that once stocked them as if they never existed.

I would love to know who designed the Caroma bathroom stool, and have begun doing the research, but so far my efforts have been fruitless. The Caroma website is a typically rotten corporate effort, with impossible navigation, little conscious architecture so far as I can see, and no mention to be found of its most famous product ever.

A search for the Australian Design Council on the web has only revealed something called Standards Australia, which appears to be a catch-all organization with many different purposes, one of which is running the Australian Design Awards.

Funny, I don't recall seeing any products with mention of that on their package in all my travels around this continent. ✎