

Lift drama at QT Melbourne.
Facing page: Fabio Ongarato at
Kisumé restaurant, Melbourne.



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Little did you know that the hotel foyer you enter is actually an experience in brand immersion. Nor that the restaurant you dine at is more sensory journey than mere trip for the tastebuds. And it's Fabio Ongarato's job to ensure that you never need to.

Story • STEPHEN TODD Photograph • KRISTOFFER PAULSEN



Above QT Perth opened in August.

In 1979 NASA realised that a space station it had abandoned five years earlier was starting to break apart and it had no way of predicting where it would crash to earth. As the world's media speculated on what might happen, in the early hours of July 12 Skylab disintegrated over Western Australia's south coast, scattering scrap across the Nullarbor Plain and putting Perth, for a few hot minutes, on the edge of one of the biggest stories on the planet.

Visitors to the city's new QT hotel, which opened in August, wouldn't know it but when they check in they're standing on a memorial, of sorts, to Skylab's fall. In the lobby, 3D computer renderings of silver surfaces collapse into a kind of shiny magma glimmer like so much disco debris on the walls. The disintegration of the US space station may seem unusual inspiration for a hotel billing itself as "an eclectic mix of style and luxury" but Fabio Ongarato is nothing if not a lateral thinker.

"We loved the idea of metallic objects falling to earth," says Ongarato. "We wanted to tell a story that mirrored the city itself, from elemental mining town to hotbed of '80s excess and future glam."

Neither architect nor interior designer, the Melbourne-based creative is a brand whisperer, an art director turned teller of narratives intended to

elevate consumer experience. He's the guy behind the elaborate branding of Crown Metropal, the mastermind of Aesop's digital archive (known as the "Taxonomy of Design" and viewable online) and it's his signage and assorted visual cues that help workers and clients navigate ANZ's headquarters in Melbourne's Docklands. His fingerprints are throughout Jackalope, the hottest of hotels, on the Mornington Peninsula.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria have both called upon Ongarato's services and now he's working with the Art Gallery of NSW while also providing a brand refresh for the Art Gallery of South Australia. At this year's Spring Racing Carnival, punters lucky enough to be invited into the new Victorian Racing Club stand at Flemington will get a taste of Ongarato's work on all five levels.

His influence is almost everywhere, even if at times it seems to seep into the woodwork. In the case of QT

Perth, once you've moved past the glinting metallic finishes in the foyer, you might notice native flora, such as kangaroo paw, liquefied into giant abstractions, its fibrous hairs taking on an alien allure. At ground level, mineral tones and psychedelic flora dominate, the mood becoming ever more ethereal the higher guests venture. It's a futuristic phantasmagoria doubling as a hip hospitality option.

To Ongarato's mind it's all a narrative, but one that tries to sidestep cliché. "It's about moving beyond the kind of iconography that you would typically see on a picture postcard," he says.

The same game is being played across the entire QT portfolio of hotels. For QT Melbourne, near the "Paris" end of Collins Street, Ongarato borrowed notions of burlesque, French noir films and crime thrillers; for Sydney, in the old Gowings and State Theatre building, it's all about exhibitionism with shop dummies cavorting in provocative poses; Canberra has head shots of legendary leaders, from Che Guevara and Margaret Thatcher to Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. The figure of Tony Abbott greets guests in the elevator.

"He's a purist who's not afraid to push boundaries," says Marita Burke, creative director of Mecca Cosmetics, with whom Ongarato works to develop brand identity, packaging design, in-store graphics and the like. "He even works with our architects to bring the brand to life, really crystallising the brand identity in whatever form it manifests. Fabio takes the world of design to a much more intellectual level. I always feel like we're getting a global standard, locally."

Indeed that is the level on which Ongarato often plays. Fabio Ongarato Design, which he co-founded with Ronnen Goren, has 38 staff in its Melbourne office and operates branches in Hong Kong and Dubai, with clients such as W Hotels. Having just turned 25, it has instigated its own jubilee refresh, renaming itself Studio Ongarato and resetting its compass to navigate the choppy waters of the experience economy.

A turning point came in 2010, when then-ANZ Banking Group chief Mike Smith sought help to devise more of a "breakout culture" in the bank's Melbourne headquarters that would encourage staff to leave their desks and collaborate.

"The interior architects at Hassell had devised a floorplan with all these breakout areas scattered about and we worked with them around core themes of move, play, grow and create," says Ongarato. "It was about workplace happiness, quite a big benchmark in 2010."

"What was remarkable about the ANZ project," says Robert Backhouse, chairman of international design practice Hassell, "was that Fab and the gang were involved right from the concept stage and within a month they were embedded in an integrated and collaborative way with our team. They look at things from such a strong conceptual, multidisciplinary perspective, which allows them to constantly come up with really cool stuff. They are quite likely to say something like, 'Hey, we should do a crazy neon light thing over there!' and make it happen."

Ongarato's crazy neon light thing at ANZ Centre is a zippy, white, ceiling-mounted sculpture which hovers above a "Move" hub, a fire-engine red breakout zone abutting an espresso bar.

Having worked with Ongarato for the past 25 years, Backhouse says the pair have developed a shorthand to spur one another on. "'I'm not sure that's very good' means 'it's crap' and 'is that the best thing you've ever done?' means 'it's really crap'. Happily, we don't have cause to say either often."

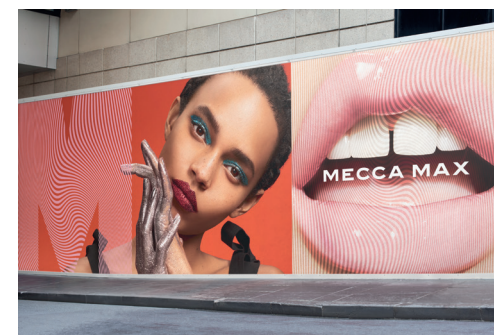
"THE BEAUTY OF COLLABORATING WITH DESIGNERS, ARTISTS, WRITERS, ILLUSTRATORS AND ARCHITECTS, IS THAT IT OPENS UP A DIALOGUE ON DESIGN." Fabio Ongarato

Fabio Ongarato was born in the north Melbourne suburb of Oak Park in 1971, the son of Italian immigrants. Educated with the Christian Brothers which he found "pretty frightening", his parents detected early artistic leanings and engaged an Italian painting teacher to offset what he remembers as the rough and tumble of school.

"I always loved the Italian Renaissance, of course, the perfection of the composition of a bowl of fruit and the dramatic lighting of a meticulous landscape."

He studied visual communication at RMIT, where his cultural references expanded to embrace the filmic extravagance of Bernardo Bertolucci and his storied cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, often referred to as a painter of light for such masterpieces as *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Last Emperor*. Other influences included German photographer Helmut Newton "who always had three points of tension in his images, for instance a huge stiletto, crazy hair and a leg brace on a beautiful, gargantuan woman"; the fashion of Martin Margiela which elevated the anonymous and the everyday through deft manipulation to the realm of the extraordinary; and the fragrance advertising of Viennese designer Helmut Lang who engaged conceptual artist Jenny Holzer to write the famous "I SMELL YOU ON MY SKIN" refrain which was variously printed and projected around the world.

He graduated with honours in 1992 as Australia was in the midst of then-prime minister Paul Keating's "recession we had to have" and set up his design studio the following year. "In a way, the recession was a godsend for me because, fresh out of school, I was necessarily agile, with no structure and no baggage. The giants of the time like Gary Emery and Ken Cato had to weather the economic storm, while for me it just made things seem really exciting."



From top: Mecca Cosmetics branding; W Shanghai; The "Move" hub at ANZ Centre, Melbourne.



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Goren, who was studying in the architecture department at RMIT about the time Ongarato was hunkering down in vis-comm, was another early client. He was putting together an exhibition of postwar Jewish architecture in Melbourne and needed someone to develop the graphic collateral. The pair hit it off, discovered they shared a passion for culture and communication, and decided to team up under the banner of Fabio Ongarato Design. Today, Goren is responsible for strategy and new business, while Ongarato concentrates on creative direction – although both admit to a lot of cross-over in the roles.

"More by osmosis than anything else, we discovered we had a business," says Ongarato. "We weren't so much concerned with the traditional idea of a design studio and how we should relate to that. At the time in Australia there was a lot of opportunity for us to grow, to push the existing paradigms and mould our own ideas of what a design studio could be."

As human-centred strategies become the catch-cry of the architecture, design and urban-planning professions, Ongarato is increasingly using narrative design – a paradigm which arose a decade ago in video-game development – to create "total immersions" that extend a brand's offer beyond product to encompass experience. (In geek speak it's referred to as "narratology" and has been retroactively applied to storytelling as far back as Aristotle.)

Naysayers dismiss the decorative obfuscation of narrative design, its drive to add unnecessary layers to corporate brands and fluff up bereft architectural structures with empty "meaning". If a brand or a product or an interior had real integrity, the argument goes, why would they need additional padding?

Ongarato insists that a contemporary art practice might offer a whole new perspective to a corporate brand. The beauty of collaborating with designers, artists, writers, illustrators and architects, he says, is that it opens up a dialogue on design.

In 2007 he was one of 50 graphic designers from around the world invited by the London Design Museum to create a graphic work to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Swiss typeface Helvetica, paragon of modernist precision and font

of choice for corporations as varied as American Airlines, Evian, Nestlé, American Apparel and Comme de Garçons.

Ongarato devised an oversized Helvetica treatment of the nonsensical word "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" from the 1964 Disney musical, *Mary Poppins*. "I loved the idea of doing something quite stupid with something so incredibly precise," he laughs.

For the W hotel Shanghai, which opened in February, the Ongarato team took core brand values, defined as "bold, witty with a lust for life", and developed these into a narrative around "captivating contrasts". These are expressed through vibrant visual cues, from a kaleidoscopic brass mirror mural behind the reception desk, designed to reflect the multitude of cultures and influences (and hotel guests) flowing through the city, to a neon installation punctuating the lobby with lighting crafted to incarnate Shanghai's "lilong" tradition of hanging wet laundry from lines stretched across narrow laneways. In its visual cacophony it effectively encapsulates the chaotic exuberance of the city.

"One brand, one experience is no longer enough," says Goren, citing a 2013 JWT Intelligence Study which found that 78 per cent of Millennials wanted brands, products or entertainment producers to make an active attempt to capture their imagination, while 61 per cent of Millennials put a high priority on the "wow" factor. Whatever that might be.

At Melbourne's Kisumé restaurant, Ongarato and team elaborated a slightly askew – to not say kinky – view of Japanese traditions by focusing spotlights on bondage-themed black and white photographs by controversial Japanese artist Nobuyoshi Araki. Playing on the tension between aesthetic refinement and sexual subversion, Araki's work is renowned for the frisson that arises when beauty rubs up close to danger. In a similar manner, the designer's use of circular graphics in other interior elements subtly inverts the Japanese flag – turning tradition on its head.

"While consumers are now more attuned, and resistant, to overt advertising, they are hungry for authentic experiences that shift their perspectives or offer them something genuinely enriching," says Ongarato. "Embedding a sense of culture into a brand can be extremely alluring." ●