

SOUVENIRS

From market stalls on Piccadilly Circus hawking policeman's helmets and red telephone boxes to ranks of Matrioshka dolls guarding Red Square or fields of blue and white china windmills in Schiphol duty free, it's difficult to imagine another sector as ubiquitous and as tawdry as the souvenir industry – or at least the mass market souvenir industry. It's equally difficult to imagine another context where such clichéd and stereotypical representations of our national identities would be tolerated, let alone celebrated. Perhaps then it isn't surprising that souvenirs have not been considered a fertile terrain for experimental design. Yet recently it has begun to attract designers hoping to redefine what a souvenir could and should be.

Here I'd like to look at several recent souvenir projects including Dutch, British and Italian examples as well as that organised by INTERFACE of the University of Ulster in Belfast, which I would suggest have helped generate new ideas about national souvenirs as objects which set out to tell a more relevant and compelling story about the cultures they represent, and explore the issues these raise. My concerns are not just about what a souvenir looks like but also how it relates to its home culture and how it benefits from its sale? Questions that are increasingly relevant in the context of globalisation and the uneasy creep of global homogeneity.

First though it is worth reminding ourselves what a souvenir is: originally from the Latin 'to remember', it is usually defined as a reminder of a place, a visit or a keepsake. In other words an object that is treasured for the memories associated with it. With the popularisation of travel in the modern age it has, at least in the commercial sense, come to mean something bought or kept as a reminder of particular place or occasion. Souvenirs then are, or should be,

culturally significant objects that store and communicate memories, emotions and desires.

Yet what's most striking about today's souvenirs is how they still cling to familiar ideas of national identity and tourist iconography. INTERFACE of The University of Ulster in a master-class entitled 'Contemporary Souvenir' took familiar national, or regional symbols as a starting point but here instead of industrial production it looks at crafts and techniques associated with Ireland and its history and through material exploration managed to charge even the most familiar icons with new relevance. Aran patterns made by potato print evoke the ghosts of the Famine. A shamrock shape burnt into linen has a charred fragility that, rightly or wrongly, I found myself associating with Northern Ireland's recent history.

Perhaps clichés are part of what we look for in a souvenir but I found it disappointing that most designers were content to play on corny images rather than challenging what a souvenir might be. Souvenirs of Italy, initiated by Alessi and Casa d'Habitare invited prominent international designers to devise new souvenirs for Italy but mainly spawned riffs on the familiar themes of postcards and pasta. For example, Patricia Urquiola's pasta tongs in the emblematic shape of a gondola prow or Ross Lovegrove's phallic shaped pasta necklace. Maps, postcards and boot shapes were also prevalent. If a souvenir should be about triggering personal memories, Marco Ferreri's 'Macchie' tablecloth was more intriguing: a classic white restaurant tablecloth stained with blotches of red wine. A canvas that each of us can mentally overwrite with our own memories of lazy lunches on holiday in Italy.

Yet it can also be this extreme familiarity – even banality - that makes it a potent platform for contemporary comment. The blue and white ceramic windmill is just about the most clichéd emblem of The Netherlands but Miriam van der Lubbe has managed to give it contemporary resonance by decorating it with Islamic script – topical given the debate raging around Islam and immigration in The Netherlands that led to the murder of Theo Van Gogh and

forced fellow activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali into hiding. Lubbe has also made versions decorated in Chinese, Surinamese and Afrikaans script reflecting some of the other cultures mixed into the modern Dutch identity. If representation and celebration of national identity is part of the souvenir's role then it is high time it moved with the times.

Interestingly in souvenir workshops with both INTERFACE in Belfast and the British Council in Moscow it was the not official souvenirs that seemed to carry most personal significance for designers but small things harvested from memorable travels. A napkin pilfered from a Provencal hotel and the faded stub of a train ticket from a journey across the Andes were among the things cited. In other words things that were not manufactured memories but talismans given magical properties through the traveller's own associations.

Another contemporary souvenir project, Wish You Were Here, set out to bring a more personal perspective to the souvenir by digging deeper into contemporary urban life. Run by Scarlet Projects, two pairs of designers – one from London and one from Berlin - were paired up to make souvenirs of each other's cities. The first stage was a long distance dialogue introducing the foreign designer to a highly personalised map of the host's home city. Souvenirs that emerged include an A-Z that includes blank pages for storing ones own personal memories. A Ping Pong bat commemorating designers Abake's summer trip to Berlin where evenings were spent playing ping pong outdoors. Armed with a bat shaped to fit the back pocket of Levis 501 a passer-by is equipped to join any game they chance on. Martino Gamper's project is also intriguing - a mould to make a sandcastle of the DGDPR building that had just been pulled down. Gamper's idea is that the sandcastles might influence the form of the building built to replace it.

Another project, by Constanting Boym, is a contemporary take on the tradition of the architectural model as souvenir. It deals in imagery from the collective memory bank but instead of the usual tourist monuments these are buildings where terrible and tragic events took place, events that have shaped the 20th century. For example Chernobyl or the Oklahoma Federal Building, or The Dakota, the apartment block on Central Park west where John Lennon was murdered. This alternative and provocative view of recent American history is also a timely reminder that a souvenir or memento can be politicised. We are familiar with the t-shirt or the badge making a socio-political statement but probably not aware of the roots of this tradition. In the 18th century for example, Josiah Wedgwood, the English china company's founder, used the souvenir to engage in political and social issues of the day. Towards the end of his life he was passionately involved in the anti-slavery movement and in 1787 he made the Wedgwood Slave medallion in support of the abolition of slavery. It depicts a kneeling Negro in manacles with the motto 'Am I not a man and a brother'. Thousands of these medallions were distributed free sparking an instant fashion; they were worn as hairpins and on watch chains or mounted in brooches and bracelets. This turned out to be an important contribution to the movement as it brought the slave trade to the attention of the public and publicised support for its abolition.

Arguably the most successful souvenir logo ever is Milton Glaser's pop logo 'I love new York' at the start of the Iraq war I saw the familiar American emblem recast to read 'I Love Iraq'.

As we all know in the global age local characteristics are increasingly sought after and much of the unspoken charm of an authentic souvenir is its deeply indigenous cultural roots. As I mentioned at the beginning, how a souvenir relates to a culture is an important question and it's not just about its looks or content but also how it is made, where it is

sold and critically who profits from it. Is there such a thing as a honourable souvenir, should an equivalent of Fairtrade be applied to the souvenir industry? Here the Slow movement is an instructive model. Started on the day the first McDonald's opened in Rome in protest against incipient globalisation and its effects on Italian regional food, its core philosophy is bioregionalism: living a rooted, connected life with an awareness of the ecology, economy and culture of a place and making decisions that support these regional features. Since the mid-1990s the slow movement has spread to 42 countries and as well as slow food it now encompasses slow travel, slow cities, slow living and slow money. Principles that can just as rewardingly be applied to places you visit and the souvenirs you buy there as where you actually live. It is undoubtedly one of the reasons why local food and crafts are such popular souvenirs, and could surely be made much more explicit in terms of rooting souvenirs in the culture they set out to represent. Although – for the moment at least - these experiments are mostly far from the commercial core of the souvenir industry, they begin to offer some clues as to how we might make more resonant and relevant memories and to the schema of the souvenir's future. It is after all a massive global industry and one that is in dire need of regeneration.

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