

OPINION

In the post- Holden era, we can be a nation of clever designers

By Jesse Adams Stein

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Much has been said in recent days about General Motors' axing of the Holden brand. A great deal of this discussion has been about Australian manufacturing, with predictable amounts of finger-pointing. But it was 2017 when GM ceased manufacturing Holden on Australian shores.

The termination of Holden in 2020 is not really about manufacturing. The jobs lost this time are in design and sales – and Holden's last gasp this year marks a significant historical moment for Australian industrial design.



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This is not to grandstand about some kind of iconic Australian style that is now lost. That's not what is at stake here.

Historically speaking, Holden's design culture *was* unique, but not because of chrome curves or sleek fenders. It was unique because of how it drew from a highly skilled Australian workforce of designers and tradespeople. Collaboration

was at its core. Holden's design culture also emerged from a design and engineering partnership between the US and Australia.

Prior to GM Holden's 1948 release of its first "all-Australian" car, the nation's role in automotive design was very limited. Australia was a place for assembly; the creativity tended to happen in England, France and the US. The injection of Chifley government funding – alongside the high-quality training provided by technical institutes such as the Working Men's College (later RMIT) – changed this dynamic. A design culture that fused creativity with trade skills emerged.

In my research I have interviewed Australians who worked in manufacturing pre-production from the 1950s to the early 2000s, such as automotive clay-modellers, industrial model-makers, designers and engineering pattern-makers. Until recently, clay-modelling was a widespread method for developing the industrial design form of a vehicle's chassis.

Perfecting the surface of a car involves a deep understanding how light bounces off form, and clay-modellers and designers at Holden co-operated to get this just right. They understood how to perfect a smooth surface; they would feel for errors with the lightest touch of a fingertip.

Some workers told me that the design culture at Holden was distinctive. "Ford's very engineering-driven, whereas Holden is design-driven," said Scott Murrells, a former clay-modeller with experience at both firms. The word he most often used to describe his work at Holden was "creative".

Holden's design legacy matters because it broadly represents what has happened to Australian industrial design following de-industrialisation. Such shutdowns affect not only manufacturing. In today's world of offshored and largely digitised production, Australian industrial design offers far fewer opportunities for face-to-face knowledge sharing between designers and tradespeople. To our detriment, we are on the cusp of losing a generative fusion of innovation and practical know-how.

The end of Holden represents the risks to innovation when we allow our country to rely on other places for production, when we devalue trades training, and when we rely too much on the market to dictate what will happen to industries and skills development. This historical moment should be a warning sign: pay more attention to local design and rethink how it could be nurtured.

Australia still has a chance to excel in well-designed recycled plastic products, which would also be a convenient transformation of our plastic waste problem. But the market cannot be left alone to make this happen. History tells us that excellence in design and manufacturing requires targeted government support, not only for industry, but also for skills training, at tertiary and trade levels.

It is worth remembering that the idea of an all-Australian car emerged during the Depression and was brought into sharp relief by World War II. In the context of war shortages, and with the need to employ a large post-war workforce, the notion of designing and producing Australia's own motor vehicle made political and economic sense.

Today, as we begin to grapple with volatile markets due to climate change, global disease control and international trade tensions, the need for self-sufficiency may again become salient.

This does not mean Australia should be designing more combustion-engine vehicles, but design ought to be front and centre in a drive to produce things that make sense for our own time.

A lack of political will has meant that Australia may have missed the opportunity to be a global leader in the electric vehicle industry, for example.

By scare-mongering about Labor's 50 per cent EV target during the last election campaign, the government demonstrated a lack of confidence in what could have been a booming Australian industry. What other opportunities might we miss if we continue to devalue design and skilled trades?

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