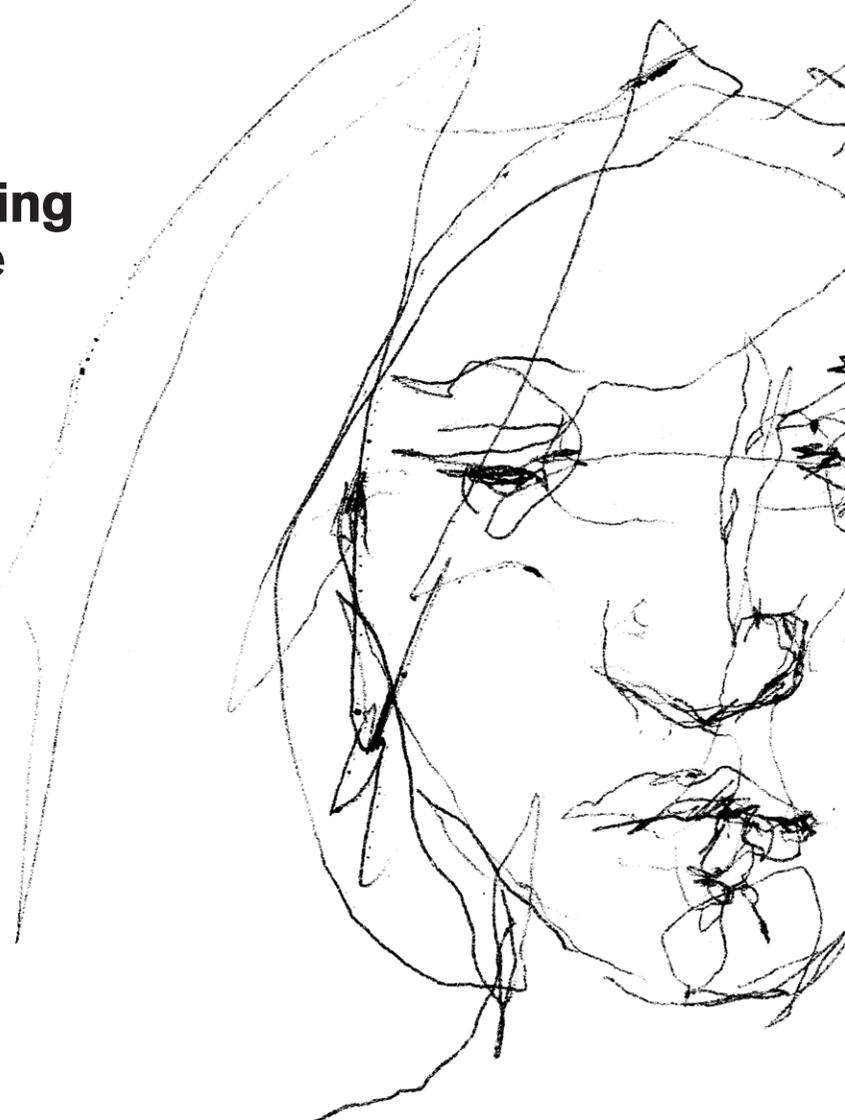


AN ESSAY BY LINDA CARROLI

# Humanising influence





## INTRODUCTION

This essay was commissioned to provide a critical review of the interior graphics project for the new head offices of Australian Central Credit Union. The writer has contextualised the work within contemporary thought on place-making and approached the text from a visual art perspective, affording a critical view on the design-centric processes.

In the concept development for interior graphics Working Images' aim is to achieve an economy and potency of ideas that are greatly distilled before being presented. This avoids the stakeholders having to wade through lengthy navigation of the philosophical and creative dilemmas unlocked in the process. Once the project is completed it's typically archived and forgotten and the considerable thought invested – the behind-the-scenes processes – remain largely hidden.

The aim of the text then was to provide insight into the thinking behind the project; some space to acknowledge the stunning work of the talented team involved – the artist, writer and illustrators – and some deeper insight into the ways in which interior graphics mediate between architecture and the people that occupy the space (an ongoing inquiry).

In addition there is a satisfaction on project completion when one can read the scheme as a completed whole – the sum of the parts. Only at this stage can one afford some meaningful reflection on the process and outcomes.

DREW RAIJA JOYCE, OCTOBER 2007

## Humanising influence

Design approaches to the workplace are one of many strategies that progressive employers are exploring to ensure optimum performance and productivity from their staff. There's an acknowledgement that if workspaces are well designed they will, together with other human resource management methods, deliver efficiency, productivity and teamwork returns. Ultimately, this results in higher quality products and service delivery, reinforcing the type of customer focus that we, as service users, have grown accustomed to expect. As part of a comprehensive fit-out for the Adelaide office of Australian Central Credit Union, principal of Working Images, Drew Raia Joyce, assembled a multidisciplinary team to develop the environmental graphics package for the spaces over five floors. Working Images was commissioned by architecture and design firm Woods Bagot whose design for the interior and workspaces

was purposely neutral and uncluttered. The graphics would provide colour, vibrancy, identity and character. The design and fit-out was necessitated when Australian Central relocated its head office in Adelaide.

The fit-out was grasped by all involved as an opportunity to rethink the workplace and reaffirm the company's values and philosophy. As design and architecture scholar Jan Å. Granath observes, a 'new building could be not only the symbol for the "new company" but also major proof of how well the organisation works together and how well it can perform in a major project'.<sup>1</sup> The challenge for Australian Central and the creative team was to do so in a way that was progressive and creatively expressed the personality of the organisation while giving the building users an opportunity to occupy the architecture. While work involves a sense of occupation, so too does architecture.

Publications peppered with neologisms such as 'workscape' reinforce the assertion that space is an organisation's second most valuable asset. Yet space, according to Granath, is largely taken for granted and little thought is given to how it impacts on our activities and culture through its use.<sup>2</sup> As MIT research associate Turid Horgen argues,

*Traditionally the workplace is viewed as a physical container for work. Its design is influenced by considerations of cost, work processes and organisational culture. But the workplace as a strategic element of the organisation is more than this. It depends upon the internal compatibility – indeed, the active mutual reinforcements – of spatial, organisational, financial and technological arrangements.*

Placemaking in the public realm is a vital and expected approach to urban design. Our private

environments are created as a particular type of place called home. So what of our workplaces? Is it viable or useful for notions of placemaking to enter the design vocabulary of work environments? Can place be meaningfully integrated into the spatiality and design of workplace? Many design theorists and practitioners resoundingly respond 'yes' particularly if this sense of place results in a collective sense of belonging and feeling of ease akin to being *in place*. Through extensive consultations with Australian Central staff, the brief to 'humanise the interior spaces' was developed. With this in hand, the design team interrogated the complex sense of the 'human' or the 'humane'. Developed through a process of design thinking, it's apparent in the resulting works that Joyce and his team have rigorously considered many of the environmental design questions associated with 'workplace-making'. Design theorist and educator

## Design, then, is an interdisciplinary practice that understands there are multiple means to a desired or projected end.

Charles Burnette describes design thinking as 'a process of creative and critical thinking that allows information and ideas to be organized, decisions to be made, situations to be improved, and knowledge to be gained'.<sup>4</sup> Such thinking evokes the design science theories of inventor and architect R. Buckminster Fuller – it is insufficient to solve one problem in a circuit of connections but essential to comprehensively address and anticipate the interconnectivity of a network of problems or issues.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a design task is transversal and processual, crossing a circuit of experiences and knowledges as well as being situated within a network of flows and interactions. While Fuller's experiments made a utopian argument, in the current fluid business world, flexibility, diversity and openness are more accepted.

At the heart of contemporary design is human-centredness. So, humanising the workplace

(or workplace-making) in a comprehensive and anticipatory manner, as a design exercise, crosses management, psychology, economics, culture and technology. Design, then, is an interdisciplinary practice that understands there are multiple means to a desired or projected end: it requires the ability to conceptualise what we know we want as well as the ability to conceptualise what we don't know we want. As design scholar Sheila Danko stresses, 'design is also a process, a verb, a tool for communicating visions and for engaging people in the process of change'.<sup>6</sup> The environmental graphics, artworks and other interior design elements are one aspect of *doing* what Horgen refers to as 'process architecture'.<sup>7</sup> Other than their obvious aesthetic appeal and impact, the interior graphics are effective because they were developed as part of an integrated and holistic method through a collaborative and consultative process. The consultations focused not only

on the qualities staff expected of the spaces they were working in but also how those spaces should communicate, exemplify or imbue the identity of the organisation. Consultation and collaborative are an inflection of design method and thinking – they are constitutive of the design. Derived from the Latin *signum* (sign), design is concerned with fashioning meaning and function. Communication and discovery, as the graphics testify, is intrinsic.

This is vital because, as Horgen argues, the economic and corporate world is rather unstable and subject to continuous change.<sup>8</sup> Stability, then, can be founded or enhanced via other means such as actively recruiting and retaining skilled and professional staff. Research consultant Mary Colette Wallace observes, 'a beautiful and utilitarian work environment is one way to reach that goal. Today, corporations are investing in people and what

makes them more productive – including redesigning the office work environment.<sup>19</sup> For Australian Central, an impetus was 'walking the talk'. Among the company's values is an expressed commitment to 'looking after our people' and the workplace materialises an ethos of care and attention to detail. There is ultimately a qualitative engagement with work and the workplace in which satisfaction and wellbeing are a secret ingredient of prosperity. Consultations revealed that there was a pervasive belief that the company was ultimately 'about people' and, indeed, the goal of humanising the workplace reflected the prioritisation of people in all aspects of the organisation's operation.

In Working Images approach, coherence or legibility results from the application of visual schemes and threads. Joyce purposely chose four different artistic styles to codify different spaces so as not to regiment

the design: Fleur Elise Noble's sketched portraits feature in meeting rooms; designed haiku texts by Samara Mitchell span glass walls; Gregory Roberts' floral panels enliven the kitchen spaces; and Dan Tomkins' graphics energise the open plan workspaces. Joyce describes the key graphic elements as 'story walls' as a means of distinguishing from the decorative. The story walls have intent and are instrumental and active elements in the space, contributing in some way to the telling of Australian Central's story. While there is a focus on surface and wall space, there is purpose and reason for the siting of these works beyond décor. There is a poetic inflection here if we accept, as philosopher Vilém Flusser proposes, 'Living-Between-Walls is part of the human condition and [we] strive to make the best of them'.<sup>10</sup> The visuals are equally communicative and engaging, taking a bold and progressive step away from a formal corporate message

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or branding. Consistent with contemporary workplace design and the growing emphasis on collaboration and choice in many work processes, the Australian Central office features a predominantly open plan environment with formal and informal meeting spaces. The most informal is the café style kitchen occupying the centre of each floor. Also included are meeting rooms of varying sizes for accommodating the gamut of work and meeting requirements including the need for privacy or solitary work. In this respect, the workplace offers its inhabitants options and mobility and most workers are not desk-bound. They are able to make choices about the spatial, mental or environmental needs of their assigned tasks and responsibilities.

In many of the meeting rooms, large portraits by Fleur Elise Noble adorn the walls. Having been initially developed as quick palm sized pencil drawings on

flimsy off-white paper, the artist consented to them becoming a limited edition of large-scale digital prints on canvas. The original tiny and frail works were enlarged to 10 or 20 times their size and printed on muted or pastel backgrounds. At this magnification, nothing of their intimacy and quickness is lost. There is more strength and power in the lines and the faces have more presence, life and poignancy. While the quality of the line is retained, a suggestive and grazed pencil mark is transformed into a flourishing gesture of facial expression. Expressiveness and expression is central to the success of this series of images. The face, as the primary social interface, is representative of humanity. Joyce describes them as 'intriguing' and, because of the unspoken and non-speaking quality, there is a compulsion to read the faces and inquire further. Who are they? What stories can they tell? Like all of us, they are, as the philosopher

Friedrich Nietzsche decried, 'human, all too human'.<sup>11</sup> And so, appropriately, as images for the meeting rooms they visualise people, in all their complexity, up close and personal, meeting face to face.

Also associated with the meeting spaces is a text work featuring two intertwining texts by Samara Mitchell. The texts are used as 'screening graphics' on glass walls, which mostly delineate meeting spaces. A wave-form graphic had been developed for the screening and is derived from Australian Central's existing graphic identity. The two intertwining wavy lines – one thinner than the other – are used in negative and positive to ensure compliance to safety standards as well as ensure privacy in meeting rooms. Text in work environments usually has a functional or didactic purpose rather than poetic or inspirational. Mitchell composed two complimentary intertwining texts – using the principles of haiku – that were designed into

the wave graphic, giving the texts a more visual and tangible dimension. In this form, the texts flow around each other and into each other. While some editing occurred in the review and consultation process, the haiku form apparently remained largely intact.

The narrower strand texts are quiet and intimate, perhaps an inner train of thought, such as 'delight drifts sideways, a parcel of time unravelling', and the broader strand features references to the corporate values, such as 'thoughts prospering and growing into goals'. As texts that intertwine and intersect, like a double helix, there is a sense that personal thoughts, issues and ideas are integral to the more outward articulation and illumination of corporate values. There is also a sense that, within the organisation and in relationship to the membership, the dynamic involves an ongoing dialogue and quite literally a meeting of minds. Just

as we are free to invent stories about the people pictured in Noble's portraits, we are also free to invent and interact with Mitchell's texts – walking up a hallway to a meeting or towards the photocopy room, it's possible to grab or randomly assemble words or phrases, reading every second word or letting the eye wander to mentally render improvised compositions. When looking into the meeting room from the outside, through the weave of the texts across the glass, Noble's portraits are viewed through the text and the wave-form graphic. This proximity or layering of the two artists' works creates a gentle association of thoughts and communications as expressed through the writing with human relationships and embodiment as expressed in the portraits. The openness of the images and writings encourages us to respond in a human or humane way – emotionally, compassionately, logically, joyfully, playfully. The schema of images

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and words does not marginalise that freedom; rather, it wholeheartedly encourages exploration of what it means to be 'about people'.

As the most informal and flexible of meeting spaces, the café style kitchen provides an ambient environment for the melding of work and sociability. Located in the centre of each floor, the kitchen spaces are intended to encourage a degree of comfort, simplicity and amenability. Each floor is designed with a different theme and colour scheme and each kitchen reflects this. So it was necessary to commission work that was adaptable within the colour scheme as well as enhance the ambient feel within the kitchens. For these reasons, Gregory Roberts developed a simple floral design that represents the geographic breadth of Australian Central's operations. In a clean graphic style, Roberts has pictured the botanical emblems of the three states in

which the company maintains branches: Sturt Desert Pea, South Australia; Desert Rose, Northern Territory; and Kangaroo Paw, Western Australia. These distinctive and uniquely Australian plants, interestingly, are among the hardiest and most enduring natives having adapted to particularly harsh terrains and climates. While the symbolic aspect of the flora is straightforward, it also provides another means of considering the corporate environment as ecology. The kitchens are also partly enclosed in glass, so Mitchell's text works also wrap around the space, providing another opportunity for the graphic styles and approaches of each of the participating artists to be juxtaposed. In this case, Mitchell's texts reinforce the Australian Central ethos or its driving force while Robert's images encourage an understanding of the company's geographic presence and impact in the country. The company is represented as not only being

a place, but also having a place in the everyday life of the nation and its inhabitants.

The final element of the interior graphics implemented by Working Images was a series of energetic large-scale illustrations by Dan Tomkins commissioned for the open plan office. When standing or moving around the office, a person can see across the large partitioned space. These feature graphics in highly visible locations provide another means of telling a story relevant to the company. In this instance the story is focused on the broader environment and culture of Adelaide, from the hills to the ocean. Each floor was assigned a theme – hills/parks, city/urban, beach/coastal and underwater/marine – with a view to collapsing the division of exterior and interior scapes. This is a conscious inflection of the external environment in the workplace. Graphically, this resulted in a series of playful illustrations

that had a confident graphic style and calligraphic appreciation of lines. Careful to avoid the look and feel of a mural, the artist's work is a composite of thematically linked fragments, like Mitchell's texts, rather than composed as a homogenous scape. In this, there is a representational challenge and the objective is not to tell the story by linear or literal narrative means. Boldness and vitality are essential given the relative scale of both the wall and the office space. Tentative drawings would recede, only to be lost from a distant view. There are also surprises to be had here, particularly given the detailing by the artist to ensure that the images 'worked' in some of the assigned sites. For example, the wicket in a beach cricket scene is wrapped around a corner so the batter and bowler are around a corner from each other. Elsewhere there is an image of children flying kites next to a window while a flock of birds fly across the reception

area. There is a strong sense of the familiar in these images, the sort of familiarity that connotes pride and pleasure in a place. People are able to imaginatively project themselves into these scenes – coffee on a Saturday morning surrounded by buskers in a busy marketplace. Again, in keeping with the themes of connections between people and prioritising people, this series of images is about people getting on with their lives, living in their community and enjoying what their environment has to offer.

With few exceptions workplaces, as physical or architectural spaces, are dominated by hard angles, flat surfaces and straight lines. As representations featuring curves and flows, the graphics change this economy by redefining the relationship with space and experience of work through images. Joyce refers to the interior graphics as 'visual real estate'. Where once the developers and proprietors of these

prime sites were management reinforcing the company identity from above, at Australian Central the visual real estate has been developed collaboratively with input from staff, management and the design team. As a workplace-making exercise, indicative of a growing trend in the styling of corporate environments, it demonstrates that the company trusts its staff and that it wants to listen to staff. Granath expounds the importance of participation in successful workplace-making and argues that the design professional needs to 'abandon the traditional role of taking the lead in the design process'.<sup>12</sup> In dominating the design process and outcomes, there is potential to diminish organisational development. However, when pursued in a participatory manner, design can and does play a role in organisational learning and change: this is evinced in the result at Australian Central. While rarely acknowledged, the environment can help build a

foundation of shared values and purpose while also motivating staff. Given this, the designer is integral in facilitating processes that bring people together to creatively share and communicate their aspirations. Through negotiation and dialogue, a designer can render some tangible representation of those aspirations.

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Cover image: *Untitled*, Fleur Elise Noble, 2005

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