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# Turning Australia Into a Hub for Designers?

By ALICE RAWSTHORN

SYDNEY — Tucked behind Swadlings Timber & Hardware store in Rozelle, a western suburb of Sydney, is a cluster of small workshops. One is a traditional boatyard, another is a reclaimed timber mill, a third deals in marble and a fourth is an old shipping container that the product designer Henry Wilson has converted into an office and studio.

Once a wooden boat, restored by his neighbor, Sydney Harbour Boat Builders, has been collected by its owner, he is planning to install a second container. In the meantime, he has rigged up an outdoor workshop using the remnants of a catering marquee as the roof and the PVC sheet of an old McDonald's billboard as a wall. Thanks to the benign Sydney climate, he expects to carry on working there through the winter.

“It’s like a designer’s dream here,” he said. “There’s a hardware store next door. Timber, marble and granite over there. And as much space as you need, because there’s nothing but old railway land at the back. It may be a bit shabby, but it’s fun.” Having installed himself in Swadlings’s backyard, Mr. Wilson, a boyish 28-year-old, is now trying to piece together the network of local suppliers and manufacturers he will need to run an international design career from his native Australia.

Traditionally, Australian design has experienced the same efflux of talent as art, literature, architecture, dance and music as successions of talented young designers have moved to other countries. Typical is Marc Newson, the most successful designer Australia has produced. He left the country in the late 1980s, when he was in his early 20s, and has since lived in Tokyo, Paris and London. Even so, he has done much of his best work for an Australian company by designing aircraft interiors and airport lounges for the national airline Qantas.

Staying in Australia seems more appealing to designers of Mr. Wilson’s generation. Not only has digital technology eroded the traditional disadvantage of being so far from the traditional global design centers in Europe and North America, but the Australian economy is relatively robust and the country is promisingly positioned in the heart of the southern hemisphere.

Born in Sydney to an architect mother and a doctor father, Mr. Wilson studied furniture design at the Australian National University in

Canberra, where the course focused on working with wood using craft techniques. He then traveled for several years, attending the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States, before completing a master's degree at Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, which is renowned for its conceptual approach to design.

“Living in Australia, you read so much about European design — Dutch design, in particular — and it all seems quite daunting,” he said. “I found Eindhoven terrifying at first, but going over there sort of grounds you. I thought I was going into something where I'd have to rethink everything I did, but it ended up verifying my practice.”

Like many designers his age, he is committed to working responsibly in terms of the ethical and environmental impact of his products. “I'm very interested in longevity,” he explained. “I believe that if you make or buy something once, you shouldn't have to make or buy it again. And I like the idea that things can be used in different ways for different purposes.”

Rather than making new objects for his Eindhoven graduation project, Mr. Wilson decided to develop new versions of existing ones that he admired. An avid collector, he spent much of his free time in the Netherlands scouring flea markets and yard sales for intriguing objects and ingenious mechanical contraptions. “Australia is such a young country that if you go to junk sales here, you just find broken plastic, not beautiful knives and a Dieter Rams fan for €2,” he recalled. “It all seemed incredible to me, but some people in my class were like: ‘What do you mean? My grandmother had about 10 of them.’”

He reconfigured two products, which date to the 1930s, by replacing the traditional electric bulbs in Anglepoise lights with energy-efficient light emitting diodes, and slipping comfortable leather cases over Tolix's rust-proof sheet metal Model A chairs. “I'd see old Tolix chairs that had been kicking around for years in the flea markets — that's sustainability,” he said. “And the old Anglepoises are really lovely to work with because their construction is so transparent.”

Since returning to Sydney after graduating last year, he has developed products that he hopes will prove as enduring as the Anglepoise and Model A, while sharing their utilitarian style and method of construction. He began with the A-joint, which is made from bronze or aluminum and used to construct tables. Sold from his Web site as a kit to be assembled by the user, the joint supports the table top while securing the legs, which are slotted into it. The top or legs can be replaced as often as the user wishes, without needing to change the joint.

Mr. Wilson found a nearby foundry that can make the A-joint to the desired quality, and has identified suitable manufacturers for the products he is now developing, including a clock and a pocket knife. Controlling the production process enables him to check that the materials are sourced responsibly and can be recycled safely. But one of his biggest problems is the dearth of manufacturing facilities in

## Australia.

“I was lucky with the A-joint because the foundry is great, but I’ve been tearing my hair out trying to find someone in Sydney who can make the leather chair covers to the same standard as the people I worked with in the Netherlands,” he said. “It’s frustrating, but there’s still an enormous opportunity for designers here. I’m not sure if there is such a thing as Australian design yet, but the beauty of this country is having the freedom to do whatever you like.”