

## Colour in Australian Design

By Kurt Brereton

The role played by colour in design is increasingly vital in our current global marketing economy. Issues of branding, identity and product positioning all draw on the power of colour to mark out differences in a crowded environment. How can we make sense of how colour is being used to help communicate and sell things under such conditions?

It is tempting to follow a well worn path and draw up a simple formula that makes apparently natural connections between colour, geography and identity, especially in Australia. Such a formula is fashioned from a series of *analogies* that act as boosters for specific mythologies about Australia as a country, nation, culture or even design industry.

Following the tourist public relations brochures, and the colours of Australian national sporting teams, you could wax lyrically about the golden yellow of the Wattle flowers or that dark bottle green that is symbolic of what?—Eucalyptus trees maybe. Note here the attribution of names for interior design colours found in charts for various paint companies. (see Fig. 1) An analysis of the history of colour chart nomenclature provides a fertile ground for reading a culture through the different names for colours. The names such as *Drover's Swag*, *Walkabout*, or *Billabong's Edge*, given to the paint samples in the WattyI colour system, evoke romantic, even nostalgic associations to the outback and its history.



**Fig 1** WattyI Colour Guide—Superior Exterior Paint for Australian Conditions-2000

What is built up here by designers is an image-repertoire of colour signifiers that can be neatly assigned to nationalistic and corporate agendas, be they at the macro level of the Olympics and the new Australian flag design competition

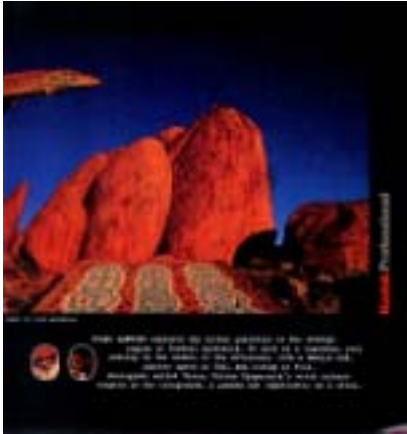
(see [www.ausflag.com.au](http://www.ausflag.com.au)) or at the micro level of individual graphic design commissions. In *The Festival of The Dreaming* poster (Fig. 2 ) for the Sydney 2000 Olympics we see a collage of familiar signs: corrugated iron, red sand of the Outback, blue ocean and boomerang symbols. Our voyeuristic gaze is returned / reflected via an Aboriginal eye seen through a hole in the corrugated sheet iron. The overall warm brown / red colour tone to the poster signifies a dreaming state. This is reinforced by the yellow ochre of the word “dreaming”.



**Fig 2** Poster for Sydney Olympic Arts Festival titled *The Festival of The Dreaming*, in “Earthstrokes”, an *Art and Australia* magazine supplement.

There are of course many competing design aesthetics at play in the media, advertising and publishing industries. A taxonomy of styles or trends, divided into dominate and marginal categories allows an easy means of arriving at what is distinctive about Australian design. While this builds brand identity it is also limiting in design terms. Simply because the Australian design industry can no longer (if it ever could!) be viewed as some isolated aesthetic Arcadia—even if our native flora and fauna do fit the “island cast adrift” model. Design styles are now increasingly constructed from a hybrid mix of imported and locally grown approaches (see [www.agda.asn.au](http://www.agda.asn.au)).

The seductive non-verbal (imaginative) power of colours is an economical way to persuade consumers of the equally powerful values of the product. A carefully design, if limited, palette of colours (warm reds, yellow ochres, deep blues and greens) are recycled to fit the advertising brief for a new soft drink, hamburger or Olympic. In the Kodak ad (Fig. 3) for a specially developed stock tailored to the Australian light conditions and intense colours, the body text notes that with this film it is possible to “capture the mythic qualities of the Pintupi region of Central Australia.”



**Fig 3** Magazine advertisement for a new Kodak E100vs colour film.

The term “featurism” has been used since the 1960s to describe the design process of picking out isolated signs (features) with colour. (see Boyd) Such a method enables a colour *system* to be easily applied to a range of subject matter. This makes the task of naturalising the placement of products as coherent and fixed rather than as fragmented, flux-like and contradictory.

It is almost a rule now, within both the rhetoric of advertising and cultural studies alike, that colours should and do reflect distinctive histories of place and culture. (Millard) Colour are an important means of evoking emotional responses. Colours in collaboration with names like *Wallaby* or *Brumby* go a lot further in cementing meanings in the minds of consumers.

## References

Kathryn Millard, ‘Beyond the Pale: Colour and the Suburbs,’ in Ferber, Healy and McAuliffe (eds), *Beasts of Suburbia: Representing Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, Melbourne University Press, 1994.

Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* [1960], Penguin, Ringwood 1972.