

One-man brand

You've seen Henry Steiner's work. It stares at you from billboards, banks and other buildings – it's even lurking in your pocket.

Sarah Lazarus meets the father of Hong Kong graphic design as he celebrates his company's 50th anniversary.

Henry Steiner hates the word "fusion". "It's cheap, it's vulgar and it's a cop out," says the man who's become known as the father of Hong Kong design. Steiner is the leading exponent of cross-cultural design. According to the principles he pioneered, when East meets West the two don't fuse; they collide. "Because if you just throw everything in a blender," he says, "you get mush." Instead,

Steiner seeks the sparks that fly when images from different visual and cultural traditions are juxtaposed and invigorate each other. His work plays on the contrasts between East and West, high brow and low brow, old and new, the mundane and the extraordinary.

This year sees Steiner celebrating both his 80th birthday and the 50th anniversary of Steiner & Co, the graphic design consultancy he founded in 1964 and which has dominated the regional field ever since. When you're in Hong Kong, there's no escaping Steiner & Co: its designs grace the billboards, are plastered to the buildings and adorn the banknotes in our wallets. Steiner's client list through the years has included *Asiaweek*, Citic Pacific, Dah Sing Bank, Dow Jones, Duty Free Shoppers, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, The Hong Kong Jockey Club, Hongkong Land, IBM, Lane Crawford, Mandarin Oriental, MTR Corporation, Ocean Terminal, San Miguel, Shangri-La, Korea's Ssangyong Group and Unilever.

STEINER WAS BORN INTO a middle-class Jewish family in Austria in 1934. His father had a thriving dental practice in Baden bei Wien, a resort town south of Vienna, and his mother was a skilled seamstress.

"My parents enjoyed a nice bourgeois life," he says, "until 1938."

That was the year of the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. "The *Anschluss* terrified my mother and she started searching desperately for a way to get us out of Austria."

Finding asylum in America was difficult for Austrian refugees because a sponsor was required.

"My mother asked many people to vouch for us but they all turned her down. Then she heard about a Hollywood film producer called Julius Stoeger, who spent his summers in a villa near our home. She knocked on his door and told him her story, promising him that she would need no further assistance beyond the signing of an affidavit. Stoeger replied that he was sorry, but he couldn't help.

"In a last ditch attempt, my mother pulled out a photo of me and said, 'If not for me then, please, for my son.' The man relented. 'Madam, I have had to decline many such requests but how can I refuse this little Chinese boy?' he said softly.

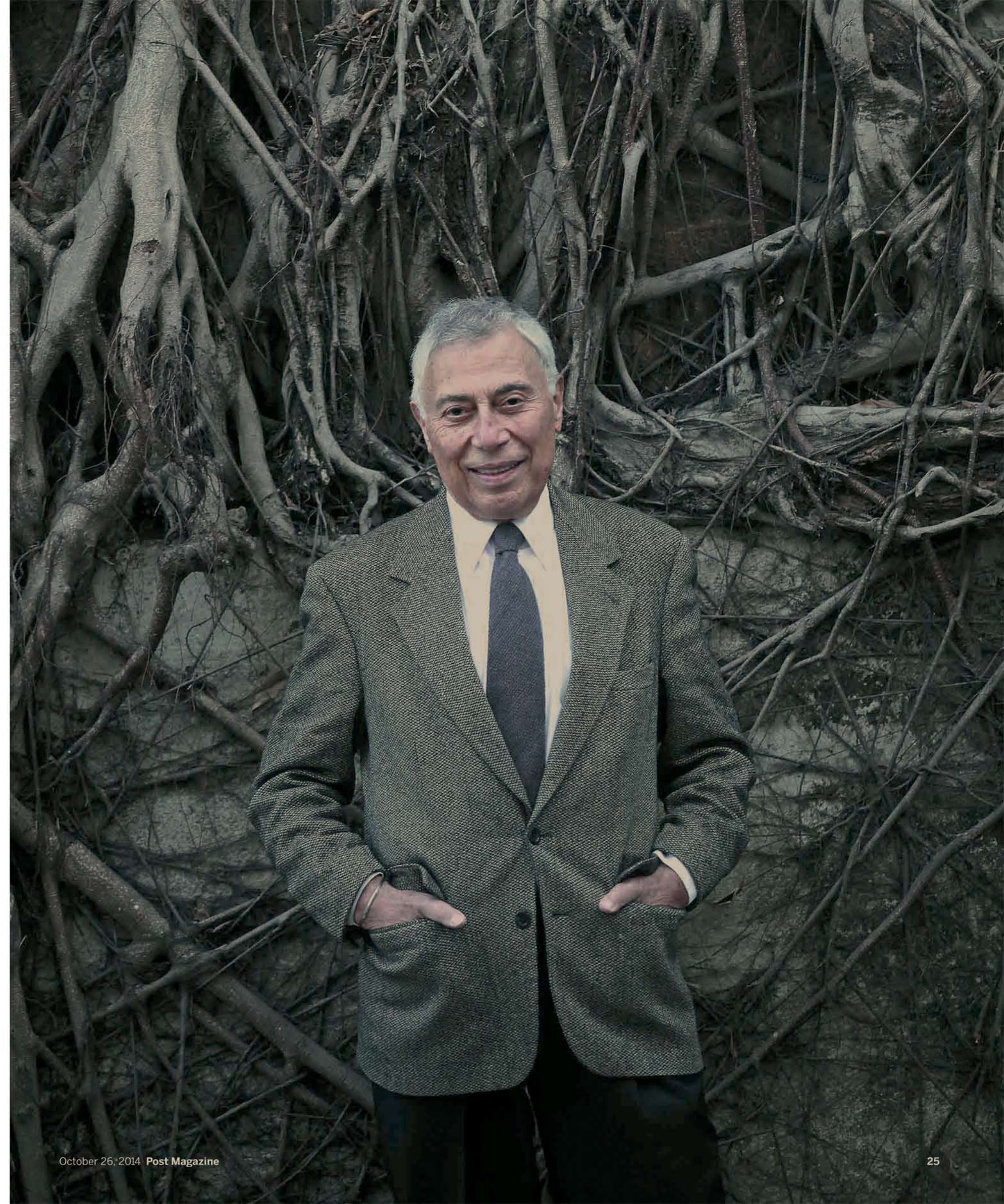
"We escaped just in time," says Steiner. "Soon after that, war broke out. Perhaps it was prescient that the man mistook me for Chinese, because I went on to spend the majority of my life in Hong Kong." What's certain is that his mother's persistence saved their lives. All Steiner's relatives who stayed behind perished in the Holocaust.

Steiner's family arrived in New York in 1939. An Ellis Island immigration official changed the name on the young boy's entry permit from Hans to Henry, suggesting that it might be better not to sound too German. The Steiners soon found themselves struggling in their new home; it was a challenge to fit in and finances were tight. Within a couple of years Henry's parents divorced.

Despite his difficult circumstances, Steiner, a bright child, won a place at Stuyvesant, one of the best high schools in the country. During his teens, he developed a passion for science fiction.

"This was the mid to late 1940s, the golden age of sci-fi. I realise now that my interest was fuelled by pure escapism – I was immersing myself in fantasy to avoid the reality of life."

Steiner attended Hunter College, where he decided to channel his >>



love of science fiction into a career, as either an author or an illustrator.

"I soon realised that it was much easier for me to draw one picture than to write a thousand words, so I chose the art stream. But it quickly became evident that I wasn't cut out to be a painter."

On graduating, Steiner took the advice of a mentoring teacher and enrolled for a masters degree in graphic design at Yale University. This proved to be his turning point. "In graphic design, I found something that intrigued me, that I enjoyed, and that satisfied me. It changed my life."

After Yale, and a year of apprenticing at advertising and design companies on New York's Madison Avenue, Steiner won a Fulbright Fellowship to further his studies in France, at the Sorbonne.

"I arrived in Paris as a typical New York chauvinist. During my time there I developed a much more European sensibility, which has influenced the body of my work."

On returning to New York, Steiner started work as design director for a new publication called *The Asia Magazine*, a supplement that was to be circulated in the weekend editions of English-language newspapers all over Asia. It was to be printed in colour, which was unprecedented in the region, providing thrilling opportunities for advertisers. In 1961, Steiner signed a contract to spend nine months in Hong Kong overseeing the magazine's marketing design and its launch. He has been here ever since.

When Steiner established Graphic Communication (now Steiner & Co), in 1964, "graphic design" was a new concept in Hong Kong. Up to that point there had been only "commercial art", which required little training and wasn't a recognised profession.

In the 1960s and 70s, Hong Kong boomed as a centre of tourism, retail, finance, construction, transport and trade. Companies came to appreciate the importance of branding and the creative intelligence required to originate good design.

Steiner grew with Hong Kong. During this period he immersed himself in Asian culture and his work became increasingly informed by the rich and sophisticated visual traditions of his adopted home.

"Anybody with sensitivity has to have a profound respect for Chinese visual aesthetics," he says. "For example, they're aware of the impact of writing to a degree which doesn't compare with anything in the West. The Chinese are highly attuned to the contrast between black and white. Something I learned from them was the concept of nega-



Henry Steiner in 1939, aged about five.

tive space – how you see not just the objects or letters, but the space between them as positive shapes. A good calligrapher pays as much attention to the white spaces within and around the characters as to the strokes."

Though inspired by Asian iconography, Steiner's output has never been a facsimile. His outsider status, and his earlier exposure to American and European graphics, gave him a fresh perspective.

"As a *gweilo*, I wasn't stuck with an innate sense of having to follow the traditions. I felt free to reinterpret them." Thus his original and distinctive concept of cross-traditional design – elaborated on in his 1995 book of the same name – was born.

One of the earliest manifestations of Steiner's novel approach appeared on his own company's letterheads. For one 12-year cycle he redesigned his stationery annually to feature a contemporary reimagining of each year's animal of the Chinese zodiac. During the Year of the Rabbit, the

white rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* replaced the traditional Chinese bunny. The Year of the Horse featured a stylised child's rocking horse and for the Year of the Rat, Steiner riffed on the rodent theme with the unmistakable silhouette of Mickey Mouse on a slice of Swiss cheese (all below).

He has produced many vivid and enduring icons. For the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, he re-worked the stars and stripes pattern into the jaunty sail of a junk, set on a background of 13 stripes representing the original colonies of the United States. For the Yale Club of Hong Kong he created a wordmark; the letters composed of both the straight lines of the Roman alphabet and the soft brush strokes of Chinese calligraphy. The logo for RTHK's Radio 3 shows the number three in Chinese, Roman and Arabic numerals.

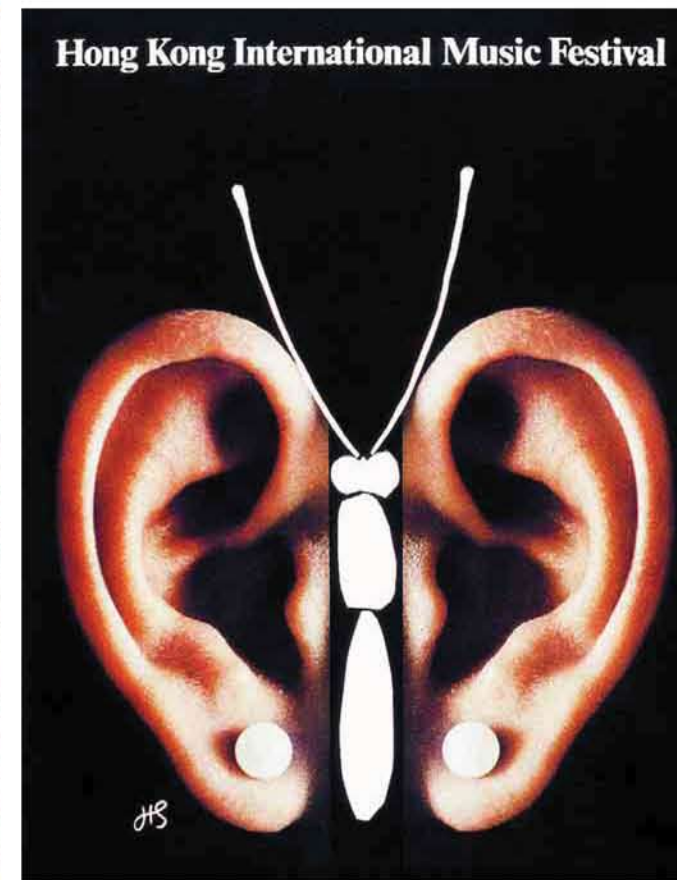
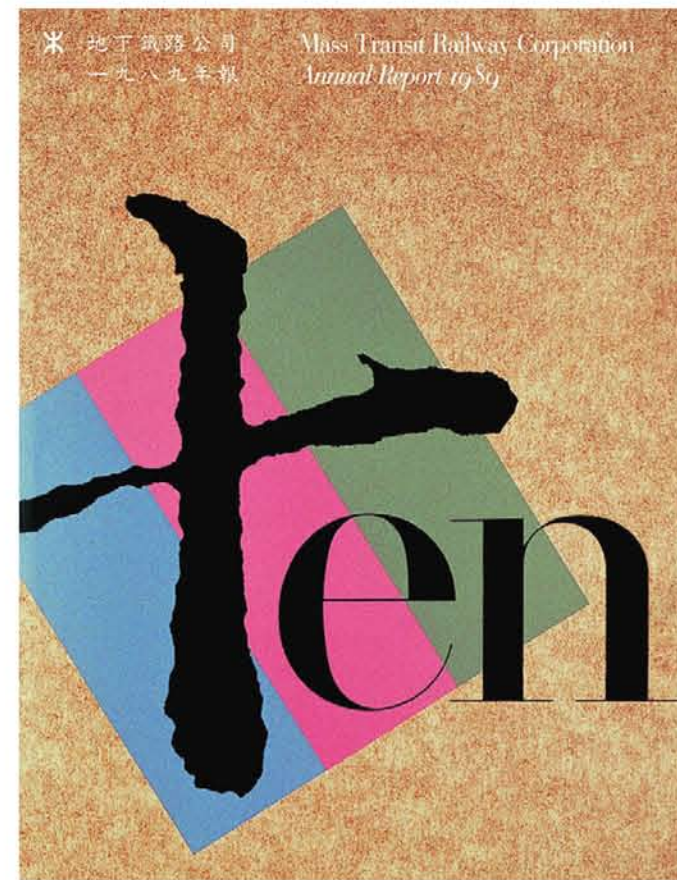
Steiner's best known logo is HSBC's ubiquitous red-and-white hexagon. He derived the design from the bank's saltire flag. Along with many colonial hongts – Swire and Jardine Matheson, for example – the bank has a Scottish heritage and a flag that contains some variation of the St Andrews Cross, the bold diagonals of which inspired the concept.

He's also recognised for having designed several series of banknotes for Standard Chartered, starting in 1979.

"Unlike other governments, Hong Kong doesn't use portraits on its banknotes, because choosing which cultural and political figures to feature would be too sensitive," he says. (It's thought that famous faces enhance security because people are more likely to notice a counterfeiter's distortion of familiar features). "That presented a challenge because if you don't have a pair of eyes looking up at you from your banknote, it's hard to feel a connection."

Steiner's solution was to show mythological Chinese animals instead. He set the animals in a hierarchy over five notes, from the fish on the HK\$20 note to the most potent creature, the dragon, on the HK\$1,000.

The latest series, released in 2010, uses the reverse side of the notes to explore the relationship between Chinese heritage and contemporary technology. Most of us take our cash from an ATM without a second glance but, when you stop to look at the notes, you can see that they are both striking and profound. The HK\$20 note sports an abacus casting a shadow on a pattern of binary code. The HK\$50 note sets an ancient Chinese combination lock against the door of a modern bank vault. The HK\$100 note depicts a seal with Song-dynasty characters superimposed on a



Clockwise from far left: Steiner's designs include the cover for the Mass Transit Railway's 10th anniversary annual report, in 1989; a poster for the 1969 Hong Kong International Music Festival; the logo for the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong; the Radio 3 motif; the Hong Kong Jockey Club logo, designed in 1996; and the HSBC hexagon, which he designed in 1983.



printed circuit board. The HK\$500 features a traditional face-reading chart and a biometric recognition system. The HK\$1,000 compares a Tang-dynasty coin with a smart chip.

"I'm especially proud of this most recent set," says Steiner. "I've now evolved the animals to a point where they've got an almost human presence and they look back at you. They've got attitude."

It's an attribute they share with their creator. Steiner has a clear idea of what graphic design is, and what it's not.

"Graphic design isn't decoration and it's not just about aesthetics. It's first and foremost a form of communication and persuasion. The right logo can benefit a company by visually defining a coherent identity. You can attach brand values to a marque – it's like a flag that everyone can salute. But branding has its limits. Ultimately, a company needs decent products and a good business plan, and if that's lacking there's no design on Earth that can compensate."

During his 50 years in the industry, Steiner has witnessed a technological revolution in graphic design.

"Computers have made some things easier. For example, we used to create colour mock-ups by hand with paint or pastel to show clients how a finished design would look. Rendering the whole thing might take a day or more to finish, and any alterations after seeing the result could

mean a long night in the studio. Now, with the images on computers, you can make changes instantaneously. But the computer can't replace human ingenuity and creativity.

Too much of what's generated on computers is what I call digital wallpaper – it's just eye candy. A computer won't give you a great idea. It's also true that the strongest designs are the ones you can sketch quickly on a piece of paper. You'll know if it's a really effective piece of communication because whoever sees it will get exactly what you are trying to say."

Over the same time period, Steiner has experienced the transformation of Hong Kong.

"I was a bit apprehensive in the period leading up to the handover because I'd survived one *Anschluss* and I didn't want to go through another. Along with everyone else, I was pleasantly relieved when the return to China turned out to be much more benign than we'd feared. But, at the same time, I'm disturbed at the way Hong Kong's distinct abilities and personality aren't valued. It's in danger of becoming another generic global city, without a character of its own. What made Hong Kong a special place is being lost as small enterprises are forced out by imported brand names and fast food chains – it's becoming one big shopping mall. It's getting harder to find pockets of the authentic Hong Kong."

Steiner has been showered with awards and international recognition but he isn't standing still. He brims with new ideas as he anticipates how a fast-changing world will influence the needs of his clients. He's eyeing the mainland optimistically as the country moves from manufacturing goods for others to developing its own brands for the internal market.

"China is going down the same route as did Hong Kong earlier. It kept business simple by making things for other companies and other countries and avoided the *ma faan* [nuisance] of designing, licensing, promotion, distribution, pricing, sales and so on. They're now realising a big part of the revenue is being lost. Additionally, the original model is no longer working so well because production costs are now higher. Today, the smallest portion of profits comes from manufacturing.

"I think China must change for clear economic reasons. With a few notable exceptions, such as Alibaba or Lenovo, there's as yet no real awareness of domestic branding design in China. But it's clear that they're going to have to start making and selling their own products and, in that case, they will need to brand them to international standards.

"This will be a great opportunity and I plan to be there when it happens." ■



Stationery for Graphic Communication features Steiner's reinterpretations of Chinese zodiac animals: the rabbit, the horse and the "rat".

