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OPINION

Sydney's newest museum is lucky to look like our greatest design icon



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Commentator

The Herald charts the ups and downs of the creation of Sydney's newest cultural institution. See all stories.

You've sat on them. Stood on them. You may have even slept on them. If I reveal you've crammed them with vinyl records, then the game's up.

I give you the humble milk crate – a structure so perfectly designed it deserves to become an affectionate shorthand for Australia's newest museum, the Powerhouse Parramatta.

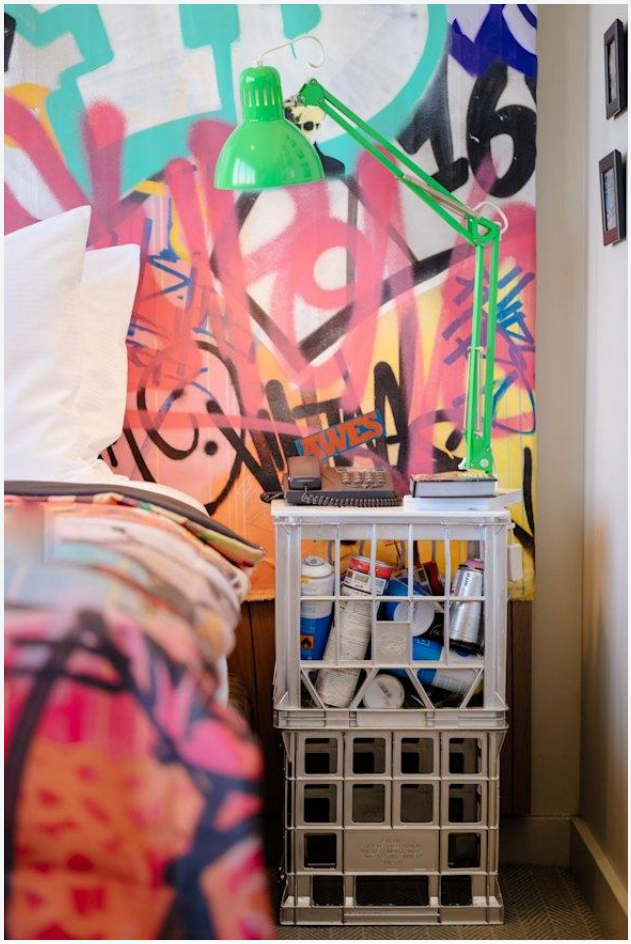


Geoff Milton, an engineer with Dairy Farmers, invented the milk crate as we know it today.
STEVEN SIEWERT

Before we invented the cochlear implant, Wi-Fi technology or even the triumphal winged keel, Australia achieved design perfection. In 1958, Geoff Milton, a young engineer from Glenhaven was part of a Dairy Farmers team that devised the one crate to rule them all. By the mid-1950s, the old wire and wooden crates were breaking under the strain of modern production. “It became obvious to me”, Milton said decades later, “that a better crate was essential”.

Early prototypes with solid plastic sides were abandoned. They were so ubiquitously useful for storage they regularly went missing. The eventual genius was in the skeletal frame that securely held 24 one-pint milk bottles. The new crate saved countless milkos from back strain and prevented litres of spilt milk and tears.

Strong, stackable and lightweight, the milk crate proved a logistical, productivity and backyard-shed revolution. Yet it remains unsuited to small, pointy objects, making it a sanctuary for serious and chunky ephemera only. No knitting needles, marbles or drill bits, please.



Just one of many uses.TIMOTHY BURGESS | IMAGEPLAY

Leaving home in my late teens, I took with me a lone crate, inherited from my aunty, Vicky. I lugged it, full of records, nervously through the doors of my first inner-city share house. My crate eclectically held my Verlaines, Swing Out Sister and Anthony Newley albums. It joined with the crates of my fellow tenants to build a stereo cabinet. This cratey monument became a sturdy shrine to our love of music, our unwillingness to cook, clean or pay the rent on time.

Long before a Nordic furniture giant went mass modular, I witnessed a flourishing of milk crate innovation across the sharehouse community. I saw bookshelves, side tables – one flatmate even built a bed base. No flat pack, no infuriating instructions, nor missing screws. Just five-sided wonderment with the staying power of the Giza pyramids.

A nearly 14-metre-high milk crate was proposed as part of a 2014 City of Sydney public art push. Its durability contributed to its downfall. One councillor remarked he felt unqualified to decide on an epoch-defining structure. A "crategate" copyright controversy ensued over who first thought of scaling up "something that already exists".

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Meanwhile, milk crates continued to inspire the storytellers, artists and musicians among us. Who in the performing arts sector has not fearlessly trodden boards supported by crates? My own outings in the musical acts – the Vanilla Chainsaws, then Lunarcide, and now, Crow – were unified in their dependence on a venue's orphaned but cherished crates.

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Whether bracing the plyboard stage at pubs like the Sandringham Hotel in Newtown, as a home to a tangle of audio cables at Melbourne's Tote or a guitar amp stand, the crate is a musical staple. Even as an object hurled by a punter at a struggling original band unwilling to "play more Creedence", the milk crate is, I sorely attest, mightier than the critic's pen. The crate deserves an ARIA award.

Nowadays, my relationship with my faded-blue crate has matured. It is a trusted, intergenerational friend that has carried plumbing segments, mower parts and timber off-cuts that “might come in useful someday”.

As a stalwart of the arts, construction, storage, furniture and, yes, dairy production, the Australian plastic milk crate has earned its design icon status. It is beautiful in its combination of simplicity and utility. But it’s not showy. An exoskeleton to all that it carries, it surrenders its purpose to its content. It has nothing to hide.

If our newest and boldest cultural institution, the Powerhouse Parramatta, is to meet its mantle, it would do well to embrace its wonderfully crate-like form. For a museum intended to “be at the intersection of the arts, design, science and technology” the milk crate would be a very fine moniker.

Should the manufacturers of my now-vintage milk crate, circa 1987, rightfully seek its return, I would promptly comply. And, pleasingly, plenty of chain stores stock replicas. But I must confess, surrendering “old bluey” after 30-odd years would feel like giving up humanity’s second-best friend – after the dog.

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