

A person wearing a plaid shirt, a beanie, and cargo pants is looking down at a surfboard. The scene is dimly lit, with a bright light source from the left creating a strong highlight on the surfboard and the person's face. The background is dark and indistinct.

retro revival

focusing on experimental board design: with words from Bob McTavish, Dick Van Straalen, Beau Young, Dain Thomas, Neal Purchase, Andrew Kidman, Dave Rastovich and George Greenough.

KIWI pioneer - darynMcBRIDE (circa pre-fashion)
Photo: jacobSTUTH

When I was talking to Bob McTavish about the future of the shaping industry, surf tech and mass-produced boards definitely came into the conversation. Asking McTavish whether he thought in another 20 years there would be anyone around who could shape a variety of boards; he said the following:

“Fortunately we have the Dain Thomas’s and the Ben McTavish’s of this world. They are the two I know right away who are here who can do that work. Dain is 25, Ben is 27, and they can do a board from start to finish. They want to understand the entire thing. They can do the whole lot. Fortunately there is a young generation of shapers coming through who are not interested in being pop-out, mass production shapers.”

Dain Thomas is like the opposite of mass production, he makes boards at home under his “Sea” label and he also plugs away shaping in the McTavish factory (in Byron Bay) to make ends meet. “Sea Surfboards” is Dain and his buddy Matt Yates keeping it grass roots. They have a shaping bay at their country farmhouse, they shape, they paint and they design boards with creative inspiration coming from the past, the future and abroad. The whole concept of “Sea Surfboards” is a timeless surfers dream... If you wound the clock back 30 years nothing has changed, Bob McTavish would have been doing the same thing; shaping boards at the farm with some of his buddies finishing it off with a touch of artwork and that is exactly what is happening today with ‘Sea’ and other small scale operations. It really brings home that the lifestyle of working, shaping and surfing is still a realistic option if you have the passion and the focus.

Due to the competitive nature of the shaping business these days, factory production of surfboards has to be just that, factory production. It is very difficult to put something new through the system; it takes more time to do a one-off shape and time is money. Without individuals in the surfing industry, experimentation with surfboard design would continue along the factory process of conformation.

“A lot of good designs have been overlooked because they are difficult to manufacture. To make a lot of surfboards of just the one design, it doesn’t really make sense to do it by hand, and keep it handcrafted. It’s a pretty manufacturing friendly design we are at today, the standard shortboard, and standard longboard. I also believe that there are a heap of designs scattered throughout surfboard design history that shouldn’t be made obsolete.” (Dain)

The mass production of surfcraft is a reality in the 21st century. Factory produced surfboards will indisputably always have a place in the global market from now on. At one end of the spectrum of modern surfboard creation is a giant company churning out hundreds of identical boards everyday and at the other end of the spectrum is a ray of sunshine hitting a country shaping bay.

“There will always be people who want a handcrafted surfboard with their name pencilled on the stringer, something they’ve been able to watch being created, having me think about them while I’m shaping it has some effect on the energy of the object. All of a sudden it is not an inanimate object; it has been created with a certain person in mind, with passion. There will always be a place for handcrafted surfboards.” (Dain)

Dain began shaping Sea surfboards because he could not find the boards he wanted to ride anywhere else. Today he is very involved with shaping full time at the McTavish factory, and for a country kid, he is well up-to-speed with the cutting edge of board design in the States, (with mates like Steve Lis and Thomas Campbell) and he translates all this information into functional surf craft for his local waves in Northern NSW.

