

Short And Sharp

The snappy Pecha Kucha format of speakers showing 20 slides in 20 seconds each has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Lee Suckling interviews the Tokyo-based architects, Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein who started it all.



FROM LEFT: Richard Hayman, Senior Architect at Jasmx's Christchurch office speaking at Pecha Kucha Night Christchurch; a Pecha Kucha night in Tokyo; Jim Newberry's Pecha Kucha presentation; Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham; Simon Courtney, Designer at Deflux speaking at Pecha Kucha Night Christchurch 03.

“Few things - except, perhaps, Apple computer products and Moleskine

notebooks - have been embraced as universally as Pecha Kucha has”

WE'VE ALL SAT THROUGH painful, long-winded slideshows. Whether an unending show of conceptual drawings or a summary of a business trip, slideshows, by nature, seem to drag on. And on. And on.

But not at Pecha Kucha. The format – presenters show 20 slides for just 20 seconds – makes the ability to waft on impossible. And makes this an adrenaline-fuelled, fast-paced party.

Founded by Tokyo-based architects Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein, Pecha Kucha has spread from Japan through Europe, America and the Antipodes until, at the last count, 190 cities are hosting these slideshow evenings. Internationally, Pecha Kucha nights have attracted speakers such as comedian Johnny Vegas, actress Joanna Lumley and designer Tom Dixon. In New Zealand, personalities such as TV chef Richard Till and sculptor Neil Dawson have presented 20/20 Pecha Kucha slideshows.

Lee Suckling discusses the viral spread of Pecha Kucha nights with Dytham and Klein.

Lee Suckling: What was the inspiration for Pecha Kucha?

Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein: We wanted

to get together with other Tokyo architects on Friday nights to talk about the projects we were working on. Architecture, being a visual industry, needs to be supplemented by images. But we were wary; when you give an architect a microphone, it can be hard to get them to put it down. We know how to draw things out. Our firm had a cooperative events space that needed 100 people to fill, so we invited 20 presenters, hoping each would bring five people. We figured out that 20 presentations of 20 images, for 20 seconds each image, would total just over an hour. It seemed the perfect amount of time for both the presenter and the audience, and so the 20/20 format was born.

The Japanese word Pecha Kucha (chit-chat) stuck out to us as a good name. The Japanese shorten everything. They pronounce it 'pe-chak-cha,' which summed up what we thought these events should be: short and sharp.

How do 20/20 presentations avoid the dreaded feeling of 'Death by PowerPoint?'

The Pecha Kucha format keeps everything

under control. In the digital world in which we now live, we've lost the ability to edit. As our hard drives get bigger, we've forgotten how to use the delete button. We hoard images, and often feel the need to show every single one of them in a presentation because we have infinite storage. Pecha Kucha makes you think about your points, as you only have 20 images to supplement your ideas. There's no text on the screen, so you can't recite anything. You have to know your slides, and put forth a tight, cohesive message.

Architectural critic John Kendall said “Few things – except, perhaps, Apple computer products and Moleskine notebooks – have been embraced as universally as Pecha Kucha has.”

For the first three years, Pecha Kucha nights were just held in Tokyo. We did one during Design Week, and it gained a bit of interest. Astrid then organised one in Switzerland, someone took one to LA, another to Berlin. We set up a website giving people information on licensing the format, and before we knew it, there were 25 cities hosting Pecha Kucha events. Three years later, there are now 190 official

cities hosting them around the world (including six in New Zealand). We've never sent out any press releases or done any active marketing. People just started talking, bringing their friends along, and taking it to more and more cities.

Pecha Kucha is a great way for budding young creatives to get noticed. Why does the concept work so well?

Pecha Kucha works because it gives anyone a chance to voice their opinions, or say something interesting. You don't have to be part of an industry clique to get heard. There is really nowhere else in most cities where young people can show their work. Perhaps you've just graduated from university and have designed a sculpture for your parents. You probably still don't have a track record to get a showing at a gallery, but Pecha Kucha gives you that opportunity in front of an interested audience. It's a nice, simple format to put something forth to your peers, and maybe get to talking with an interested editor or client afterwards. It creates a physical, social network that doesn't hold any prejudice on experience.

Bestselling author and entrepreneur Seth Godin is a big fan of Pecha Kucha. He once said, “Tell me a problem that can't be outlined in six minutes and I'll show you a problem – it's probably not worth having a meeting about.”

Do you believe any message can be conveyed in 20 slides for 20 seconds each?

Someone once told us we should get a Nobel Prize for economics for shortening meetings... there is nothing that can't be condensed to get out the most important points. As creative people, we talk too much. Buildings and drawings need to be able to speak for themselves. We've found that this isn't restricted to the architectural industry; the format has even been adopted by businesses and universities. Pecha Kucha is even moving into politics with several mayors stepping up with a 20/20 presentation.

City to city, how do Pecha Kucha nights differ?

Pecha Kucha is very localised. We encourage local content and feeling as

much as possible – we don't want to put a stamp on the globe of what this is all about. In Tokyo, for example, presentations are very laid back. It's okay to mess up, because there isn't a confrontational culture in Japan. Conversely, in Paris people can be very self-conscious because of the European nature of speaking up. Presentations are rehearsed down to a tee. They're all trying to outdo each other, and that's a good thing. It's a very French way of creating a conversation, which is important.

What makes a great Pecha Kucha presentation?

Humour is a really essential element. The 20/20 format works the best when the presenter is talking about something they're really passionate about, perhaps something they're not known for. If you get up and just be yourself and let your natural charm come through, your presentation will go down well. The magic all happens when you're a little nervous. You've just got to be real about it; Pecha Kucha doesn't work when you're just reciting your manifesto.