

More than words

**Design as a foreign language.
Here Adrian Stokes explains
what he means by this
statement**

I recently heard PD James, a guest editor on the 'Today Programme', interviewing Mark Thompson, the Director General of the BBC. At 90 years of age she was articulate, funny and incredibly intelligent making the poor DG retreat from his opening self confident, affably patronising stance, to that of a school boy asked why he hadn't done his English homework. It seemed he'd discovered a new language all of his own in which he'd decided 'y'know' and 'er', provided the answers to life, the universe and everything.

Two of her main themes were how much less articulate people are today and how creative people at the BBC were being stifled by the huge bureaucracy of senior and middle management, who were the recipients of disproportionate "largess" for roles that seemed to have no meaning in the world that she and we (the license payer in this case) inhabit. Like a banker on the back foot, the DG stuttered

that organisation was responding to change and paying the "going rate" to attract the best to fill new roles. PDJ was having none of it, making the point that the entire industry was under the cosh and that there was no shortage of good people who would give whatever limbs they could spare to work for the BBC, irrespective of the pay and that it was clear where economies ought to be made. The DG st-stuttered on saying that some senior executives weren't even being paid a bonus this year. (Oo-er, tell me again, why does someone who does the job they're paid to do receive a bonus for doing it properly?).

The entire interview was pin sharp and if PDJ ever starts her own political party, I'll vote for it.

The issues she raised though resonate in so many areas of public life and policy and I firmly believe the business of design and the education of designers have been ready recipients of

DESIGN THINKING.....INCLUSIVE DESIGN.....BRAND DESIGN..

abuse. The rise of the PhD has made education policy the preserve of idiolects (those whose role it is to make simple ideas impenetrably obscure). This would be bad enough, but so many expert designers use exactly the same obscure language and business bull to resell what, despite the advances in technology, is still a delightfully simple activity in the right hands. As Dieter Rams spelt out “Good Design is as Little Design as Possible” and it’s a shame that so many designers and academics that fawn at his feet haven’t, or don’t appear to have, a clue what he meant.

This may be a gross generalisation but a year or so ago I met with Dieter Rams for an hour and the most noticeable aspect of his personality was his quiet intensity. He was extremely self-confident but spoke as he designed, using the English language sparingly to communicate quite complex industrial design ideas. From Dieter Rams to Jonathan

Ive, this same intensity, modesty and drive to make their inventions accessible is very evident. In my personal experience I can’t remember a single individual of that quality who was any different. So, I wonder why it is that the same straightforwardness doesn’t trickle down and inspire lesser lights, especially those in my own field who should know better.

I was recently directed by a friend to a talk on TED.com on the subject of the new (nouveau) concept of ‘Design Thinking’. I watched with an open mind (I was in a good mood) and without a clue what was ahead. However, 16 minutes and 50 seconds later I did find myself wondering if it was the 1st of April. We were shown objects the presenter had designed as a young man juxtaposed with some of the work of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. One apparently being small design, focused on “aesthetics, image and fashion” like the design business of today, the other a systems approach, where a

bigger possibility is imagined, into which the objects are placed ... ‘Design Thinking’. His proposition was that designers should concentrate less on the object and more on the process. Had I been there I would have been looking around to see if this was a stand up routine and no one had told me. He was defining a process that any good designer or design practice would employ given the opportunity; advocating a “divergent” approach and the consideration of the “technical and cultural context” of any problem being faced. He went on to propose taking designers out of the equation, empowering those on the receiving end to create solutions (if you want your teeth fixed why bother a dentist) and the language he used to justify this “new idea” was laughable if it didn’t seem so laudable to those goggle eyed on the receiving end. This was market/project research in yet another new guise, asking the end user, doing workshops to coral their ideas

....**INTERACTION DESIGN**.....**USER-CENTRED DESIGN**.....

viewpoint

and then realising these, invariably a process that prolongs, over complicates and stifles innovation, resulting in committee compromise.

I read somewhere years ago that there are two kinds of people in our world (only two note); talkers and doers. Talkers apparently talk about what they wish they could do and doers shut up and do it. But doers also actively avoid spending time with talkers. Suddenly this seemed good advice. Talkers aren't at the sharp end but like to keep those who are, under their thumb. There's also profit in talking, especially if it can be presented as a plausible thesis, which will deliver an advantage. It's a rather good way of parting clients from their money. Back to TED; interesting that 'Design Thinking' entails having ideas and trying things through prototyping early, in order to learn and speed up the process. Eureka... what I would want to observe is the end results produced by a good, experienced, enlightened, designer

and our speaker with his 'teams'. I reckon the end results would have equal merit except one would have happened in a fraction of the time and at a fraction of the cost. I have to say he seemed a little uncomfortable with the idea, which was more hot air than hot topic, even by modern standards. Good designers are invariably inventors first; nature rather than nurture, like a certain Isambard Kingdom Brunel who had an individual's vision and the intellect to draw together the necessary skills required to bring it into being. He certainly didn't ask the passengers what the design for SS Great Britain might be. My real point here is this, the clarity and simplicity that we would all instinctively ascribe to the best design is not **prescribed** and the army of camp followers that has sprung up has created an industry for their own ends which is ultimately reductive and replaces inspiration with perspiration, a telescope with a microscope and language with jargon.

But there we are, only 1500 words allowed in this piece, I must press on, so many cages, so little time to rattle.

It is the camp followers I am particularly concerned about. They have spread like a particularly nasty virus throughout the design world. They used to publish harmless picture books, curate exhibitions or hang around the Crafts Council, but increasingly they started to turn up in my world and with the advent in education of the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise), which is now an REF (Research Excellence Framework) (you can see where this is heading) a gravy train was built onto which many have filed and taken up their seats. Of course, the victims of this move are the students (clients by another name) as institutions fought for research funding, they turned from the delivery of high quality, **practice** based vocational education, to creating research strategies and recruiting staff

...SERVICE DESIGN.....SUPER NORMAL.....EXPERIENCE DESIGN.....

to service the directives of their initiatives. It amounts to what a friend and former Head of Faculty at one the UK's most notable design institutions describes as "a culture of meetings and conferences" whilst lamenting "the loss of focus on developing the subject of design education, for what is often at worse, extended bullshit".

Having sat around the table with extended bull shitters on interview panels and as an external examiner on a number of degree courses, I think he has a point; despite my own record as a designer the experience can be intimidating (all those Doctors) and if I've been away from them for a while it still can be, particularly if they're hunting in packs. But then "research" yourself and you will find little cause for nerves, the "Doctors" are not going to fix your bad elbow for free, or much else for that matter. Amusingly, one I read about in my local paper recently was a Doctor of Motorway

Service Stations. I'm not sure the students in the department he's head of would find it that funny though, they're paying.

And so, I think, I have arrived at the point of this piece; designers are individual and intuitive and what they conceive often defies explanation, yet the environment in which they are expected to operate is increasingly prescribed by those who have never faced a problem with a blank sheet of paper and a pen and don't understand the fear and elation which the process entails. Instead they define frameworks informed by "research" which attempt to deconstruct and define to the point where the exercise has more in common with doing a jigsaw than painting a picture. In the design **business** the same bogus bull has also found ready advocates amongst those who were either never in the line of fire or ran for cover long ago. These are the new **jargonauts** who seek to exert influence as pundits of the prosaic

within organisations. Sadly for practitioners, their verbal incontinence is often misread as informed, follow this link (www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TcZrTsRddc) if you dare - this character is being serious!

As PD James so eloquently described on Radio 4, for an organisation to deliver it must have the cross hairs unswervingly lined up on its original mandate. What many brilliant practitioners despair at, is that in areas of design policy and education, non practitioners have insidiously infected institutions creating a culture of cronyism and waste that fatally misunderstands and undermines design in our real world. Ad man Paul Arden wrote "an organisation's reputation is usually built around one or two people" "Good Design is as Little Design as Possible" great minds thinking alike. ■

Adrian Stokes is Principal of asa Designers Limited, an industrial design practice based in Kingston upon Thames. www.asadesigners.com

INNOVATION STRATEGY.....INTERFACE DESIGN.....IDEATION