

Design Experts: Interview three

Interviewer: Nick Spencer

Interviewee: Adrian Stokes

Date: Friday 3rd March 2006

Location: Adrian Stokes Designers, Kingston

Time: 2.09pm

A

Time: 0.06sec

Nick: My first question is what in your opinion is design?

Adrian: I consider my role is to, represent the person who uses the product I design and to make their lives better. We're working for our clients and we have a responsibility to them, but if we do the job well on behalf of the end users, then the client will benefit because people will buy it. It's a paradox; on the one hand designers are quite idealistic but on the other, it's a commercial activity. If products don't sell our client risks being out of business; there are many elements in the creation of a successful product.

B

Time: 1.43

Nick: No, that's great thank you, so in that case does that cover what you believe it's for, the purpose of design?

Adrian: The purpose of industrial design is to improve the lot of the enduser practically and spiritually if we do our job the client benefits; people buy their product and they are successful.

C

Time: 3.55

Nick: Do you think there is ever anybody who disadvantages from design?

Adrian: Phew, the world is disadvantaged because we design too much that is both unnecessary and poor quality. Replacing rather than repairing effectively dupes people into buying things they don't really need and is utterly unsustainable.

D

Time: 4.56

Nick: That is interesting because my next question is about what do you believe is going to be the future direction for design, could you elaborate on that a little?

Adrian:

Products are cynically designed to be updated and replaced not repaired. This feeds our worst instincts and makes us all victims of the very corporations who claim to design products under the banner of "service and the customer experience".

The reality is that the industrial designer came into *being* to "service" the needs of "the customer", but the role has been cynically skewed to have a different emphasis and one that in fact is focussed on the needs of the company not the customer; servicing volume and obsolescence.

I design a lot of consumer electronics; the market is strangely polarised; on the one hand there are products with lifecycles shorter than an average mayfly and on the other, products no less sophisticated technically & designed with their primary function in mind but with lifecycles often counted in scores of years and when they do break, they can be repaired. The best vacuum cleaner I ever had was a "beats as it sweeps" Hoover Junior. I took it over when it was 40 years old. Developed around a sophisticated take on "make do & mend" (the corner stone of so many lives not so long ago) but without any compromise in performance or diminishing of "service and the user experience" quite the opposite. Go to any dump and see the Dyson's lined up.

A change in attitude could open up a world of opportunity for western nations in need of new industries and protect a world being systematically stripped of its commodities.

E

Time: 9.15

Nick: What do you see as the change that needs to occur there, is it a change of attitude...

Adrian: Change will be driven by simple economics. The energy/commodity crisis will force governments and business to re-evaluate the entire economic model our globalised, consumer society is founded on. We can't consume resources at the current rate and the emerging economies of China and India have really focussed our attention on the urgency of the problem. Flying goods around the world, when it is becoming economically unsustainable to do that, at a time when we in the west can no longer feed ourselves is one example; like everyone I am just living in a bubble of activity at the moment and quite soon we are all going to be living in a world which is very different and quite frightening.

F

Time: 11.12

Nick: Is that one of your main motivations within design, looking at those issues and how we respond or do you have other motivations?

Adrian: My motivation is the sheer enjoyment of what I do; which may seem selfish but it has a moral, idealistic dimension. I consider my client to be the user not the person who pays my bills. I work very hard and I always have done on their behalf. I am extremely concerned about the future of our society, the inflated lifestyle that we enjoy in the West and the awful effects that it's having had on the lives of others elsewhere in the world and the environment we and they, have to live in. We live in a dangerous time, I am exercised and motivated by this undercurrent, but as a designer I don't have the opportunity to instigate the changes necessary, all I can do is talk, express a point of view in articles that I write and work hard on behalf of the people I design for. They are my prime concern and at that level I remain very motivated because I love what I do. Beyond that I remain very scared.

G

Time: 13.02

Nick: So what are the particular enjoyments and pleasures that you get out of design then? Where is that love for it?

Adrian: It's just the moment really, when ideas pop out of nowhere, as a student you have no self confidence in fact, when you have been practicing for 30 years you still haven't, but you learn that under certain conditions something will happen and when it does it's life enhancing. '*Where did that come from?*' Creative people talk about that moment and it's a fact. Subsequently there is a huge amount of worry to turn the moment into a finished product but that moment is where the greatest pleasure lies. Seeing it realised and people benefiting comes a close second.

Time: 15.13

Nick: Is that are they some of the criteria by which you would judge the quality of a project then? Or do you have other sets of criteria?

Adrian: I wouldn't buy anything unless I thought it was fit for purpose functionally and aesthetically. I don't buy much but I do appreciate good work.

Time: 18.01

Nick: One of the things you mentioned before was putting yourself in a, or learning to have the confidence to put yourself in a particular position where something is likely to happen, could you describe what you meant by that?

Adrian: I found it very difficult the first couple of years I was at college. I just felt that we had to be taught things, that design would be a question of us learning enough information to solve a problem in a very methodical way. When I was a student I regularly used to drive up and down the motorway to visit relatives. At the end of my second year on one of these journeys I was thinking about a project we'd been set and the whole solution just came to me 'whoosh', it really sounds corny and from then on, in fact up until I had been practicing for about four or five years, at the beginning of a project, I would get into my car and drive around preferably on a motorway. I found I was able to recreate the conditions and repeat the moment. When it happened I would stop, record it in my sketch book and carry on. When enough had happened I would go back the studio and start working around those thoughts. Over the year's I grew to rely on motorways less and myself more.

Nick: And you didn't have to drive the car so much!

Adrian: If you knew where to look, I could be seen driving around the roads of Berkshire hoping to make something pop up. I believe strongly in talent and intuition, there are many technicians, but the designers I have most admired tend to work in a much more instinctive way.

Time: 21.30

Nick: That's very interesting thank you, how do you judge the quality of your own involvement in a particular project, how, when you look back, do you think that was a good job?

Adrian: When you're working for someone you gain experience and more independence to the point at which you feel you have some control over the quality of your work. Having started my own practice I found myself increasingly working through people using them, not as a tool exactly, but you're trying to nurture the answers from them and actually I found that I was unhappy with the work we were doing and the service we were providing. It was also very costly. After 18 years I just said enough; for me to be happy required that I was a designer 100% of the time. I didn't want to employ a team, or work through people, just to interact with my clients and make my own decisions without compromise. I have a CAD engineer and an administrator. I interact with the clients directly and love it. In the past the pressure of time and the relationships with my staff meant that I had to accept compromise for them to develop. I believe it's common to many, principals of design studios; they want to be designers and are unhappy but just accept that's the price of growth.

Time: 24.27

Nick: What would be your definition or how would you describe a good designer?

Adrian: A good designer isn't a specialist, but is somebody who is just interested, intuitive, never satisfied, innately curious and always striving trying to find a better way. I have employed some excellent people from the Royal College and Newcastle, Kingston, Ravensbourne etc and I can think of only a few who have, have developed and become inspiring individuals, in their own right. The rest became smug and complacent or stalled. [4.5.3] The art and craft of design is still dependant upon being able to draw, make, use computers, coupled to an extensive library of practical and cultural know how. Interaction with others can turn good into great and so the ability to work with others in an open handed and open minded way is another essential, as is trust in your own judgement. [4.5.10]

L

Time: 30.26

Nick: How do you improve and develop you own design practice?

Adrian: As a business or personally?

Nick: Personally.

Adrian: My external examiner at college was the head of a very large design practice and while most would have found it to be idyllic working in a Georgian mansion in the centre of Warwick surrounded by many clever people, I felt very quickly that it was process driven and less concerned with creativity & quality than getting the work out of the door and billed. I decided to move to London and had been searching for something less prescribed. Co-incidentally on a particular Sunday in March of that year I had been reading an item in the Sunday Times "Who will be who in the 80's" and Sampson-Fether was chosen under the design heading. Three people working form the crypt of a church in West London on a huge variety of projects from consumer products, to furniture and graphics. Their approach seemed thoughtful and the work beautiful, innovative and exciting. The next day I received a phone call inviting me for interview. I had another interview on the same day with Ken Grange at Pentagram and went to Sampson-Fether a life changing / career enhancing decision.

Nick: How do you improve your design practice?

Adrian: Design at Sampson-Fether (Fether & Partners) was just so different to the practice of design at DCA. It was uncompromising but practiced in an environment that was supportive and very informed both culturally and technically, a small team of excellent individuals working co-operatively together to generate the very best solutions. I felt then and still do today that there is an optimum size for a design studio and that the best relationships require a very close interaction between the client and the designer and at the highest possible level.

Fether & Partners grew, it was the 80's and became 33 people with the same issues I was aware of in my first job and even though I was a partner in the practice by that stage. Increasingly I was working through assistants and not directly as I felt it was important to do. I set up ASA

with the intention of being the maximum of 5 people but then because of the demands of the work load we had quickly grew beyond that with a building in central London and the same set of problems emerging. I moved out of London in 1993 in the teeth of the recession, which meant I had the smaller team I wanted, but with the advent of new techniques particularly 3D CAD by 2001 I again felt detached from the work, but worse still I was unable to use the tools I invested in to design products; it was a changing world. In 2002 I decided to reorganise again and now work with a very small team directly with my clients having learnt to use the tools and determined that I will never expand again. I have a brilliant CAD engineer and administrator and take short-term student placements. After a career long search this is as perfect as it gets in my opinion. I'm convinced designers are solitary individuals, like writers and artists. We need interaction and endorsement but on our terms. Working in contrived teams is inefficient and frustrating and whilst I do believe there are benefits in sharing thoughts and ideas with like minded individuals, there are huge compromises in creating design businesses based on traditional business/company models.

Time: 39.40

Nick: What are the difficulties that designers encounter?

Adrian: New business and doing good work, on time, within budget. One regret I do have, is that I promoted my business, ASA, instead of Adrian Stokes. I should have taken a different approach. I think the best guidance I could give is to be happy. If instinctively you don't feel at ease then everything else will be hard work. The mere act of turning up to an office to work in an environment when you're not happy is soul destroying and once in that position it can be impossibly difficult to extricate yourself; the costs to you and others becomes too great. Designers require a high degree of inner peace and I spent many unhappy years grappling with the problems I had created or allowed to arise.

In a first job you work under someone else's rules. In your own studio the choices are yours but making the correct decisions, for your success and health is not easy. There is a conflict between what you enjoy doing and what you have to do. A business has to run; there are VAT inspectors and PAYE inspectors and to operate within a framework of others people's rules is a huge distraction. It becomes a case of swallowing hard and doing the best you possibly can, striving and hopefully creating the circumstances that put you in a frame of mind that allows you to do good work, which is all most designers really want the opportunity to do

Time: 44.03

Nick: And what you do believe that right frame of mind is? You have alluded but could you describe what that right frame of mind is?

Adrian: Being in an environment and working in a way which allows your innate enthusiasm and love for what you do, find its feet. Designers are enthusiasts with a vocation.

Time: 44.48

Nick: Are there any times during the day when you feel particularly restless or agitated?

Adrian: Mornings. I am quite excitable and I use exercise and the discipline it requires, to help bring everything into perspective and leave me more able to cope. Every morning before I start work I run or go to the gym and in the evening, walk. Without this outlet I can become pole axed into anxiety induced inertia.

Time: 46.38

Nick: That's a great description, thank you. What role do you feel your emotions play while designing?

Adrian: Emotions, I would say they are a huge factor. The feeling of moving things on, making the simplest decision about a detail which just makes sense; that moment can lift me through the next three or four hours of numb average-ness, it can make me believe in myself which is terribly important. It's alarming how confidence can evaporate; emotions are very fickle, lifting your mood sky high or just shutting you down. At those moments you never look at the bigger picture, 30 years of achievement for example & you think, '*Oh god I'm in trouble*'.

Nick: You obviously recognise when you have that mental paralysis, what do you do to deal with that?

Adrian: I take myself off, phone a friend, walk; that is the beauty of working as I do now. I don't feel any guilt at being outside my own office or talking to a friend for an hour. I don't feel that I have to be here, although I generally am. I have an inbuilt work ethic but in those moments I do what I have learnt I need to do to, get going again. I can be working on a number of projects at any one time so I can move around. A blockage in one area can be freed by doing something more mundane in another. It's a version of motorway driving again; putting yourself in the place you've learnt helps.

Time: 50.10

Nick: That's interesting. I think you have answered this a number of times already, but I will ask the question anyway, how would you describe your general condition when you feel your working really well, at your optimum if you like?

Adrian: High as a kite. In fact that I feel I can turn my mind to anything and a solution will present it self. At the best times I'll get up and mess around, make tea, just prolong the moment and try to share it with anyone in my proximity. It is really uplifting, corny as it sounds. I get interested, really interested and engaged with what I am doing. When those factors come into play then generally things happen and I am really happy when they do.

Nick: That doesn't mean it isn't interested though, it is interesting.

Time: 51.08

Nick: Do some of the different activities you undertake during design activities, do they require different mental attitudes or different mental qualities?

Adrian: [4.9.1] I'm fairly obsessive about everything. I will bother about the position of a stamp on an envelope. I will make sure the typing sits in the right position on the envelope. It's an attitude that is ever present in my design work I'll tinker for ever. It's also a factor, that looking back on my experience as an employer, became a source of disappointment and anger; for the first 18 years I think I ran my business for my staff. I tried to create as good a working environment as I possibly could for the people I employed. I wanted them to feel respected, to have responsibility, look at the whole picture, learn from that and reciprocate. Unfortunately with a few exceptions, that that wasn't the case. They became complacent; designers and people who took things for granted and were more interested in being in the pub at 5.30 than they were about their work and the world around them. I became a disillusioned nurse maid. When people come through the door of my studio it doesn't have to be pristine but I like to think they leave with the impression we care. The sum-total of little lapses can be symptomatic of a bigger problem and I am obsessively concerned about the impression we create and the quality of anything that goes out of my office; I just like it to be right and I enjoy it when it is. When others don't share that concern, especially when you've worked hard to create the platform for them, it can be soul destroying. So, in answer to your question, in design and the business of design there is a common thread of concern that should inform everything.

Time: 53.58

Nick: Do you think that being involved in design or through the personal characteristics that brought you into being a designer that you look at the world or experience it differently to other people?

Adrian: Perhaps. As a child, my Dad built a huge three car garage which he never kept tidy; it was always a mess, which I just loved to reorganise. I would take a whole day remove everything and put it all back properly. I was 10 when I was first able to do that type of work. Later my Dad started to build a rockery at the back of our house which he never finished, so I did, crazy paving the entire back yard. I got immense pleasure out of building and making stuff. Incredible dens, things that I was certain would fly, a fantasy life grounded by a love of hard, grafting work. That's the case to this day it's just another version of what I do now and the satisfaction I gained from it is no different. I actively participate or have a keen interest in many, many areas of life. From music, as spectator and player, to sport, in the same way; I'm an obsessive reader, a repairer, restorer, writer, sometime teacher I don't think I'm unique, I would say that the designers I most admire most have the same curiosity and diversity in their lives and it's that which provides the foundation or vocabulary that informs their work.

Time: 58.51

Nick: And my final question is, are there any key moments during your life or career where you feel that your perspective or understanding of design has changed the way that you either do design or think about what design is?

Adrian: My career and attitude changing moment came on meeting Ben Fether, who was able to relate to people and express himself in a way that displayed incredible insight and just made absolute sense to me. I wouldn't say he suffered fools by any means, whoever he employed he did so because he recognised some potential and he had a unique ability to develop it. This was through force of argument and intellect and because he commanded from and offered respect to, all those who were fortunate enough to work with him. He made me realise that you didn't have to be a cruel to be successful and there's a much wider world than the blinkered world of design events in the company of other designers. He also changed me from a talented inventor, into an industrial designer able to refine and redirect raw thoughts into refined and inventive finished products that were conceived and developed on behalf of real people, not just an ego. Ben became a victim of his own enlightened attitudes and over time became disenfranchised from his own business, which is a great shame for the world of design which never really appreciated his genius, as a visionary designer or as a manager.

I am not religious in any sense but the idea that there is some inexplicable other factor at work in the creative process does make me wonder. I once employed David Tonge at The-Division, a great designer who introduced me to Jonathon Ive. They were best friends and did their major project together at Northumbria University. Jonathon was a Christian and his faith clearly offered him something very important in his pressured world. There are clearly other states of mind that allow design ideas to arrive, without any conscious input. That you can learn to develop mental states which encourage completely unpredictable ideas to emerge has always

been a interesting to me. I did know a model maker, an ex RCA designer who had some difficulties and used meditation to, as he put it, switch into another frame of mind very quickly when he ever felt unacceptably stressed. I loved the idea that this was possible and that he could enter this altered state so straight forwardly. Ben Fether, my former mentor, went into therapy to free himself of all the baggage and disappointments he felt late in his career. Talk to him and you're talking to a 25 year old mind with the experience of a 70 year old man. But given some greater understanding earlier in life then maybe he could have avoided the issues he confronted in his late career and we might have had greater access to the 25 year old mind that never realised its full potential. Like-wise perhaps this same frame of mind, which I've tried to describe, but which is a happy consequence of some odd-ball techniques, has more to it than we care to accept in a sceptical world.

Nick: That's something quite special.

Adrian: Yes I think so.

Nick: Well it's certainly been an absolute pleasure talking to you. Thank you very much for your time.

End of interview