

DAYS OF FUTURE PASSED

I was one of a lucky few to have had access to a window on a large slice of the post war design profession. Whilst I wouldn't for a moment suggest the world of contemporary design grew solely out of the post war industrial boom, certainly our consumer society did and the need to give shape to the demand for new products spawned our beloved off shoot, Industrial Design. Industrial Design said it all. Design for industrial production; but more recently it's a term obscured and diluted by a general fragmentation into specialisations, usually in the name of increasing student numbers in colleges and because those on the outside want a slice of the action by the back door.

The main reason for writing is

Time To Think



Adrian Stokes takes a walk down memory lane and reflects on the nature of design education as well as the character of the industrial design profession

not (only) to moan but to indulge in some rosy eyed reflection on another side of life changed, but not improved, by political and social tampering. Reflection isn't a refuge for sad older people, (I may be older, but I'm not too sad) it can be a ready aid for good decision making and improvement; but then the general tendency

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in our world is less to do with the journey and much more being there first whatever the cost. I hate this. I always have and my antipathy to blinkered thinking grows with age; the chief reason being that the price is invariably just too great for the rest of us to pay; but pay we do, in our cities, our homes, our education system and most often our pockets.

During 30 years of practice I have become acutely aware of changes to the character of our profession. As a student designer I loved the arty professionals we occasionally came across. They all seemed so bloody nice; equally they all seemed utterly engrossed in their world, which was colourful and so interesting I ached to be amongst them. By the time I was, in 1977, change was afoot, but not so much that I didn't have the opportunity to glimpse the world that had created the best of these early models.

My second proper job was in London at the small studio of Sampson-Fether. My first had been at a large and what was by then an emerging model "design business". To me at the time, one was heaven, the other hell-ish. Both models were successful and both had at their heads ex students of the late 1950's early 1960's Central School.

It is worth remembering at this point that designers, like writers, painters, sculptors and that ilk, are often quite solitary and whilst team talk is constantly in the air, it is interaction on our terms we crave; quality, not prescribed quantity. The expansion of many Design Studios and the consequent influx of professional managers, or process controllers on the ad' Agency principle, has put the blinkers on and in my experience of consultancy, of industry and as a consumer, the corollary is wholesale predictability as something unpredictable is marshalled to the point that it has all the spirit of a painting by numbers. The design equivalent of Kraft cheese slices. There is a point to this brief sidetrack, so hang in there.

Actually another even briefer detour of all those who have worked at asa and who I worked with prior to asa, I can say without any doubt that the most able and most interesting, were the most self contained. I do hope they enjoyed and benefited from the time we



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had in each others company, but the truth is they had an instinct which only required endorsement and creative fellowship, not instructions.

Onward....

As anyone involved even on the fringes of design education will tell you blanket expansion has led to wholesale compromise; this has meant change to what, how and by whom the subject is taught. I recently talked at some length with Ben Fether (sometime of Sampson Fether/Fether & Partners/FM Design).

Now I often lament, on behalf of the students I meet as an external examiner, the loss of the wonderfully diverse vocational education I received and the practical and intellectual tools it gave me. On moving to London and joining Sampson-Fether in 1978 I was lamenting equally hard, on my own behalf, the **lack** of intellectual tools and insight I had received; I was clearly amongst another breed of designer. I imagine I felt rather like a Neanderthal realising that his less hairy counterparts had answers to questions he couldn't read. I often describe myself as having been an inventor amongst designers and I realised within hours that inventing was for Orcs and designing was for Elves.

Ben Fether was a product of the post war Art College system which, in the 1950's and 1960's, created the bedrock of the Industrial Design profession. His tutors included sculptor William

Turnbull, furniture designer Nigel Waters, art historian Rayner Banham, designer and design thinker Bruce Archer, designer Clive Latimer amongst others; an astonishing mix. He describes the experience as a “totally mind expanding experience.” Those I have met from that period, all have an unassuming sophistication and worldliness, acute curiosity and modesty.

My first sense of this at work was the utterly forgiving attitude towards my Orcish instincts; an apparent belief that in every Orc is an Elf trying to get out. This innate benevolence was partly a throwback to the world they grew up in and partly due to the subsequent education they received. Ben Fether and his like had obtained first hand information from the very frontline of the creative arts. My immediate realisation was that I spoke English in words of one syllable, whilst they spoke a variety of different languages with more colour than a Pantone book.

I scratched around on the surface and sniffed out a solution, they went to their inner library, where there was a world of possibility. I don't say there was greater talent or instinct but these faculties were certainly more developed and there was certainly greater urbanity and idealism across the board. It has to be remembered that these were attitudes shaped at a time when social change in the western world was raising expectations and required answers to match the aspirations of a liberated public. Many of those involved in education were passing on insights developed in “the white heat” of the post war social and industrial boom.

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Ben Fether's recollection was that the motivation of all his contemporaries was first and foremost to be well respected and as a result well known.....not just well known; an interesting observation especially today when celebrity and recognition is more sought than earned. Another recollection was of a high level of discussion and debate amongst his contemporaries who all shared the same sense of a vocation or mission.

I wasn't there in the immediate post war period but anecdotally I believe there was a real sense of a trail being blazed; designers and architects with agenda's most of which were socially and spiritually outward looking with a sense that their part in the new order could be a force for improving people's lot. Facilitating change requires knowledge, experience and curiosity. Another lamentable belief in much of the commercial arts is that nature doesn't require nurture. This has been made worse by the onset of digital media which can give ugly ducklings the impression that

fast hands and a clone stamp tool can make beauties out of little beasts. It can't; given encouragement and direction though and the transformation can be staggering and touch not only the tutored but the tutor. I know I was on the receiving end as both and we all got a few more white feathers from the encounter.

As an external examiner, I recently visited my current assignment and met with a “representative sample” from the class of 2006. Some of the students were truly excellent and the same self contained one off's from my earlier reference. Some needed more time but had it in

designbusiness



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them; most..... it's well rehearsed... we all know there are far too many students.

Of those that did have it, imagine for a moment if they'd had access to Bruce Archer et al; imagine if they'd worked together in a studio where they could dip into the views and experiences of a committed nucleus of like minds; then imagine how they would have benefited from the challenge that experience presented them with. Imagine then what these motivated bright minds would offer our business and if that business took its time what they would become..... in time. Industrial Designers not window dressers, crafting products with some longevity, that improve lives and are worthy of recognition. Then even I wouldn't begrudge them some celebrity. █

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This year the tutors on the Industrial Design course where I am an external examiner received a directive from the faculty that they should achieve a 70 per cent pass rate at 1st class or 2:1 degree level (actually it may have been higher); when a first class degree is awarded for anything over 70 per cent and modules can be selected and retaken that shouldn't be too difficult. Could help us.