

A view from the inside

As a designer, Adrian Stokes provides an insiders perspective of collaboration

The most quotable rejection letter I ever received came from Dr Rolf Fehlbaum at Vitra. "It is my experience that good results can only be achieved in a long term and intense designer client relationship". In a 27 year career the only other statement I have held onto is from my early mentor Ben Fether, quite simply "Good design depends on the quality of thought that lie's behind it". Now call me old fashioned but I do like simple ideas simply put.

The first of these statements was made by a man whose company Vitra is a beacon for designers; where products are intelligently, creatively and commercially (well mostly) conceived; where quality and consistency are maintained year in year out. So to succeed, find a sympathetic client and think before you fire up the CAD system.

From a personal perspective I've been lucky to have coincidence on my side for most of my career, finding myself in a short series of situations that have consistently reinforced those two statements.

Setting up from college was never an option; mainly because I always felt that to practice you needed to practise. With that in mind an early break was to have an external examiner who ran one of the largest and most successful design studios in the UK, David Carter and DCA. Straight in at the very top...? Well maybe, but in 1978 whilst flicking through the Sunday Times, a feature on "Who will be who in the 80's" stopped me in my tracks. Under design was Ben Fether of Sampson Fether (the other was CAPA with Dick Powell) working in the crypt of a church in West London with two partners; for me a place I could only dream of working.

On Monday I received a call from Sampson Fether asking me to go for an interview. (Yes, the Design Council paired jobs with those looking for them). The other interview I had on the same day was at Pentagram. There was no question.

SF was a design studio. At Sampson Fether I worked with rather than for, an important distinction; "tell me and I might hear, show me and I'll understand"three quotable references.

Until then collaboration might happen playing doubles at table football, but design was everyman for himself. At SF I learned that given the right guidance there was another way.

"What do you think"....."what do I think? erm, well if we" "yes but have you considered"..... "oh god no I haven't" "that's okay just have a look".....

There is a serious point; to this day the best relationships I have remind me of a benign game of ping pong, gradually making okay, good and good, great and anything after that's a bonus and a source of regret if it wasn't thought of before the product was signed off.

In a wider world witness Jonathan Ive with Apple and historically Ken Grange with Kenwood and Dieter Rams with Braun. Brands raised to the roof by just that open-minded open-handed collaboration between designer and client/employer.

When I left Fether & Partners to set up my own studio in 1984 I did so because I firmly believed that for the dynamics of a design studio to work effectively, individuality should be allowed the space to show itself and that interaction should be open handed not competitive.

I think that many designers, particularly of my generation found themselves trapped by success and unable to recapture the creative freedom that had made them successful in the first place. Either they had become managers of designers or created hierarchies in order to service volume. Tesco's instead of delicatessens.

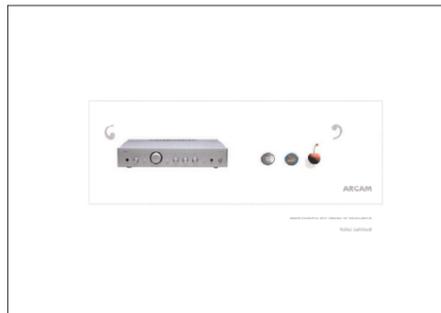
Back to the beginning...in a design practice there are two strands of communication - between designers and designers; and designers and clients. Eighteen years in private practice have seen a constant search for nirvana; a studio where talented, individuals understand the need to communicate...constantly and where good work is completed in collaboration with appreciative clients, able to draw the best out of their charges.

Creating and maintaining a balanced team that work well together is not easy. I often looked enviously at designers/peers who had promoted themselves as brands, whilst knowing the catalyst for creativity that collaboration with other designers activates. I also believed that to service the needs of the clients we had implied a certain controlled scale.

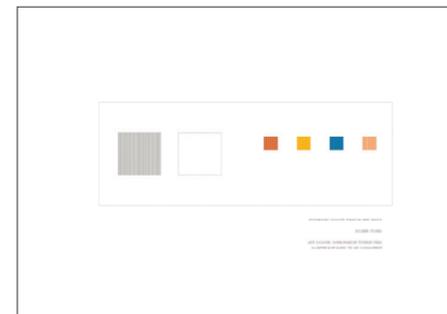
By the mid 90's though, the tools of our trade began to change dramatically. The impact of 3D CAD was felt in many ways, transforming the way products were created, communicated and realised; more subtly, as the skills required were centred in specialist hands, a com-

Arcam, 'An intelligent, thoughtful company, producing beautiful products that enrich life.'

MISSION STATEMENT



calm enrich personal love relax 'reach out' sharing
re-living pure correct respect enthralling canvas
tapestry scope range scale 'really listening' the whole
opera tone timbre beautiful designed detail 'quote'
desire fulfil higher level the best excellence quality



munication gap opened up between users and non users, making collaboration and the ability to express alternative thoughts, difficult.

I don't presume to prescribe the perfect solution for everyone but my own experience has led me to a series of conclusions.

To remain relevant as a designer and not just an aging overhead, it is vital to practice at the coal face.

Appropriate skills are essential and these must include contemporary tools.

Being part of a creative critical forum at a studio and client level is equally essential to avoid complacency, open channels of thought and be efficient.

The frustration of being hamstrung in a changed world caused a radical re-look in my own case. Two years on and I work directly with my clients, use the tools and enjoy the experience in a way that I'd long forgotten. My studio is small (an engineer, an assistant and a secretary) and instead of employing directly, I have an elite network of individuals and suppliers to draw on.

Missing from this perfect world are other designers; an opportunity to canvass opinions, exchange ideas, meet, sometimes work, without the baggage that accompanies these requirements as an employer

"Salon" is a collaboration of five designers with a shared outlook and purpose. The record of work and achievement represents a formidable creative resource. All are established independent figures with a simple aim to achieve design excellence and significant improvements to the lives and fortunes of clients and end-users.

Participants are: Ben Fether who has quietly been at the head of one of the most successful product design practices of the last 25 years. David Tonge of the Division who worked with Ideo and Pentagram in San-Francisco, where his practice is currently based. Bob Pulley, Principal of West Dean College, a world renowned institute for applied arts. David Eldridge, Principal of Two Associates, a graphics and communications design practice whose clients include the River café, Issey Miyake, the Guardian and BBC.

Our aim is to offer a real alternative to the inertia we have all experienced in large organisations, our own and other peoples. Whilst

in its infancy, at one level it is an ego free forum for discussion, or another point of view an email away; and at another, wide ranging creative muscle working at a strategic level with larger business partners and organisations.

In April 2004 I read an article in Lighting Design describing a development between Ken Grange (remember him?) and Anglepoise. Working in an "intense and long-term designer/ client relationship they have produced exceptional results". Ironically the talk is not of Grange as head of a large multinational design business but in his workshop crafting the new product into existence. Perhaps my position was not so unique though I think the outcome is.

Recently I designed a new product for a long term client which offered a small but useful test. During the course of the development a crisis of confidence had me scuttling to my computer mailing CAD files; four reactions... some discussion... prototype commissioned... client delighted... mood through the roof. The product is a major departure for a company that has recreated itself moving from component hifi specialist to provider of AV solutions to a global market.

To communicate this strategic change in an appropriate and sophisticated way is extremely important and David Eldridge joined an invited group of contributors to discuss the issues. Adjustment to the brand identity through the graphics, web tools, etc are underway as part of the long-term plan to project an uncompromising picture of quality in all things.

Salon is not a business it is a small network and an access to many other small networks. How it is used is up to the individuals, who are at liberty only to turn up for a meal and a chat; or to use it as a promotional tool; or to make a joint pitch; or to ask an opinion; or to involve/ bring in others from outside the group. It's fluid; but more than anything it allows a wholly open selfless collaboration between those who know better. From a client perspective it offers a range of "soft benefits" from other skills to wide breadth of unencumbered creative input.

Nirvana? Well is a designer ever satisfied? y

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