Margin for error

Adrian Stokes says it's time for designers to rediscover the value of their craft

I suppose it started with the closure of the Design Centre, but there really is little contact between product designers these days and, as a consequence, less of a sense of what is happening in our business. This is a shame; the Centre was a good forum for bringing consultancy principals and designers together on a regular and informal basis, and I sense this has caused an erosion of the self-confidence that led to the creation of the Council for Industrial Design so many years ago.

Industrial design is not marketing or brand strategy or engineering, although it encompasses a knowledge of all these things and many more. I honestly believe that a designer has a unique perspective on the process of product development and the world, and that a good designer has few boundaries. This is a conviction borne out by 25 years' experience, during which I have practiced with, taught and employed some inspiring and – I believe – unique individuals.

Our profession is in danger of being hijacked by those who find it impossible to grasp the idea that such uniqueness can exist. In education, for example, we have seen the emergence of a series of 'product design' courses specialising in specific skills: highly structured, these discourage just the kind of enquiring 'one off' that characterised industrial design education until its gross expansion over the last ten years.

In my studio, the tools we use are as advanced as those used by any of our peers and they have made the process of communicating and defining ideas infinitely better. Without doubt we live in a sophisticated commercial environment in which the price of mistakes can be horrendous for our clients. This has always been the case, but we constantly research and employ methods and techniques that improve the mechanics of the service we offer and improve our vocabulary as designers. If we didn't we would be failing in our duty to ourselves and our clients.

The work of a designer should never be about doing the window dressing and leaving some resentful soul to actually make it work, and my experience of the consultancies I have worked with supports this. Design ideas ought to be conceived and detailed with equal care, be it as a sole development resource on behalf of a client or as part of a team interacting to achieve the same end.

I believe that a designer has a unique perspective on the process of product development and the world, and that a good designer has few boundaries

My major concern, however, is that in education and design practice we are so keen to learn someone else's language that we are in grave danger of forgetting the value of our own.

At my firm, ASA, we work on products with some of the best known brands in the world. I believe we win that opportunity because we sell the unique talents we as industrial designers have; and that we provide professional reassurance through the techniques and skills we use to express and define our ideas.

Industrial designers need to reflect more carefully; not on tools and terminology, but on recognising the value of their own profession. Both at an educational and a professional level, we need to rescue ID from those who simply don't understand the art of design and seek to marginalize it as an module of their own activity. ∎