

In Search of Simple - Kick Starting a journey

Adrian Stokes completes his three-part series on how simplicity ought to be a key quality in industrial design



This piece is a long overdue conclusion to a series of three reflections on life in our cripplingly complex western world, its effects on the wider world and a small but potentially significant, intervention by students at one of Europe's most respected design schools. (ND 115 & 117)

I'm an industrial designer I know this because in 2002 having run my own studio and design team since 1984, I had an epiphany. I realised, a little late in the day, that what made me really happy was a problem and clean sheet of paper. Today I offer an advanced, bespoke, industrial design service. Put simply I'm a practitioner, much the same as a writer and I love what I

do. I recently completed a four-year tenure as visiting Professor of Innovation at Northumbria University's School of Design.

Industrial Design: (favourite IDSA definition) *Industrial Design is the professional service of creating products & systems that optimise function, value and appearance for the mutual benefit of user and manufacturer*

Innovation: *the introduction of new ideas or methods to meet new requirements.*

Innovation like many aspects of the Industrial Design profession has become a specialist subject, its true meaning buried inside a new language that's grown up around it. Ironically it was the clarity of good design we chose to carry our message of change and link people to the possibilities of a different approach.

Parts 1 and 2 of this "Search for Simple" centred on "Boulder Pushers" that author Doris Lessing described, in the early 60's, as bridge builders between a detached elite, "The Great Men", who initiate massive change with little concern for the consequences which her third group, "The Masses", have to live with. As boulder pushers Industrial Designers, have a responsibility & an opportunity.

In the west we live at a time when most exist immersed in a bubble of complexity they can't possibly understand, manipulated by a wall of

propaganda into patterns of behaviour that take little account of the effects on the world outside their fragile sphere. I'd like to believe I'm wrong, but like tourists on a beach looking blankly out at an approaching tsunami, I'm very afraid any possibility of avoiding a fatal soaking is about gone.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, is simple in the lives of people and yet as they order something they don't need without having to get out of bed, my bet is they'd think differently; they don't see themselves as victims as they unwittingly feed on the "great men's" fodder. The consumer world as we know it has to change or quite simply run out of resources to consume. The idea that somehow human ingenuity will find a way, without a dramatic rethink, is naïve and whilst the advances some enjoy are incredible, the

To reset our future we have to responsibly harness the huge potential advanced technology offers, to the desperate need for products that don't self-destruct



“Too many people live for the short-term, for now. I think we’ve a responsibility to plan for the future. I think design has a duty to get people thinking and caring about the planet”

consequences have brought us to the brink.

And so, in the spirit of turning away and neatly side stepping the ever bigger picture, when given the opportunity by the Royal Academy of Engineering to initiate a project at Northumbria University, we decided to start pixel small and harness the approach so cleverly employed at Cupertino to connect people with products; Industrial Design. From computers to kettles, beautifully conceived and detailed objects turn heads; rather like a virus in a computer, design has the power to disrupt lives, spread the word and sell a story. In Bert Wagendorp’s book *Ventoux*, I read that in October 1955 the Citroën DS was launched in Paris. In the first 15 minutes there were seven hundred & forty-three orders; by the end of the day twelve thousand and the first week eighty thousand, causing panic at Citroën. The car was a blend of clever, innovative technology, packaged by a sculptor Flaminio Bertoni. In the words of Shoeless Joe Jackson “Build it and they will come”.

To reset our future, we have to responsibly harness the huge potential advanced technology offers, to the desperate need for products that don’t self-destruct. We have to recognise and realise the latent potential that quality, longevity and personal engagement offers for the creation of radically new design, business and social models. The resultant products & services this new innovation might offer, are literally mind boggling. Our project, *Salon*, was intended as a kick start at the beginning of a long journey.

I just read Rob Penn’s Book, “It’s All about the Bike” a delightful tale about his trip around the world in search of component parts for his dream bike. As someone who travelled



“Bad design is something that doesn’t have concern about people & the environment, it’s like they’re empty things, empty products. Good design is design that respects people, can change lives, can change habits, can make a difference”

200 miles to buy a dust cap for a dream bike, I understood perfectly. His book is full of insights from manufacturing perfectionists who care. Like the maker of the best headsets in the world Chris King in the USA, “make something once and make it last”, or Birmingham frame builder Brian Rourke who matches man to bike by eye, translating the data from mind into beautifully crafted steel which may well find its way into the hands of grateful great-grandchildren. His journey contrasts sharply with the French description of our condition which he relates, “Tout Passe Tout Casse, Tout Lasse” (everything changes, everything breaks, everything wears out), a fair but sad assessment given the “Great Men’s” blinkered world view, which is unable to consider any other way...but they’re wrong.

If you’ve never worked with bright students, you should try it. In his TED talk Ken Robinson speaks about the young always being prepared to “take a chance” and if ever a situation called for courage and conviction this is it, an army of bright risk takers with the skills and creativity to think differently about the shape their future might have. When I speak to students and try to convey to them how much change I’ve lived through, since what seems like yesterday, I suspect they simply don’t know if I’m telling a story or spinning a yarn. Unconstrained ill-considered change has frogmarched us to a place that feels deeply uncomfortable and threatening. We’ve moved beyond the point when someone like me, in their first job, will be able to reflect on a forty-year career, as I’m doing right now and practice, as I will tomorrow. Preceding generations of “Great Men” have created a global uncertainty and it will take the rise of a new generation of “boulder



“Bad design is something that is poorly thought about, not calculated, it just doesn’t make sense. Everything can be improved massively, if we just take time to care”

pushers”, untainted by cynical selfishness, to shake things up from below.

My own belief, often repeated, is that if this is to happen, communication through normal channels is pointless. As Citroën found in 1955, for the right message, clearly put, there’s a large audience who will tune in and fortunately today, we have the means to get to them.

Northumbria attracts some of the very best students. Our worry when starting out was that their daily lives would be concerned only with module grades and apple upgrades. Over the first 3 years we tested and challenged their view of the world the outcome of which was that in early 2015 a small troupe of the most able & engaged 2nd & 3rd year students were selected to work intensively as a consultancy group under the *Salon* umbrella. They assembled in a large, beautiful studio space at Northumbria’s Northern Design Centre, their brief being to demonstrate how products designed under another set of rules might help open the eyes of a blinkered buying public and convince them to respond and take up our cause over the heads of those whose short term interests are vested in the status quo.

Our students were terrific; with guidance

The consumer world as we know it has to change or quite simply run out of resources to consume.



"I think people should be concerned about bad design because it's having an impact on everybody and not just now, but for future generations"



"Not only are we creating too much waste, but with a growing population we're just going to see this waste exponentially grow"



"When did our society become obsessed with the idea that the only thing worth anything to anybody is something that's new. It's a complete obsession. Where is the obsession with what's better?" Mark Adams-CEO Vitsoe

from tutors, external mentors & master's students, they engaged in a way and at a level we hadn't anticipated. In the design world there is considerable talk of emotional attachment, but in much the same way you only understand love when holding a first child, our group seemed to have its own epiphany and became both emotional & attached to the task at hand, showing a striking level of empathy & determination to rise to the challenge.

Realising this we commissioned a short film to tell their story. [YouTube/Vimeo: Northumbria University - Salon](#). In it the students can be seen speaking to the camera unscripted. This is particularly interesting because their eyes and words convey they understand only too well what's at stake. We also catch the thoughts of some of our mentors; Nick Oakley speaking to the students from his base at Intel in Portland is heard saying "with the current rate of progress in our global economy; I don't know... pessimistically I kind of feel we're toast y'know"?

Nick is a great designer and design thinker, who has worked in some of the most respected studios in the world and observed, over a long career, what unbridled change, over production and over consumption have cost us. He's not someone who's normally lost for words and so the moment when his reflections stopped and realisation dawned was an eerie one for me...

Mark Adams is a long-time advocate of the circular economy and products for life who's heard lamenting the modern obsession with wholesale change. As owner of the utterly brilliant Vitsoe company, he's devoted his working life and business to his beliefs and the need to change.

Sevra Davis, head of design at the RSA speaks

glowingly about the work of these eight young people. Whilst we knew our boulder pushers weren't going to create the 10 commandments we hoped they might give us some signs. In the event with a curious, open minded fervour they worried away at the problems discovering both the possibilities and ultimately that creating perfection takes time, which they ran out of. But the care, professionalism & unabashed chutzpah, these explorers had demonstrated, after a four-year excursion "In Search of Simple" left us proud, optimistic and a little emotional at their achievement.

The entire premise of the Salon Project was that Industrial Design has the power to direct the wider world to think differently by SHOWING what alternative products & related services might be. We knew our message needed to come from the generation whose future is most affected and the project set out to discover if today's crop of young talent had it in them to research and respond to the challenges; generating the fear, anger and campaigning zeal, that will produce our beautiful, functional 3D emissaries.

Over the course of these reflections I've written about the problems unconstrained consumption & ill considered design helps create in a world that has enough on its plate. Problems that happen to be very conspicuous and tune us in to our very worst instincts. There are plenty of people debating the issues, but not in a language which "The Masses" find interesting. These are the people able to vote with their feet and facilitate change, but they don't like bad news and are suggestible, hence the mountains of rubbish that litter EVERYWHERE.

What we know is that simple, beautiful 3

dimensional ideas make connections. They can open eyes, change habits and modify behaviour. Had the i-phone with all its technological and Industrial Design brilliance been designed with the realities of the 21st century in mind, then who knows how we might be shaping up now.

We should remind ourselves that not so very long ago the company that spawned the revolution for better or for worse, was at rock bottom, it took a young man from Northumbria University, with a visionary mentor, to make Apple the most successful organisation of its generation; a vision made earthly by Industrial Design intelligence, spawned and nurtured at the University's School of Design. As it happens this is the very same place that has also hatched a project requiring ID-1 to help realise another vision. If the sorcerer's apprentice (let's call him Jonny) reads this, perhaps he'll call up his alma mater and offer to help spawn and nurture a new breed of Industrial Designers who will shine brightly and learn to shove the boulders back where they came from, with interest, collaborating with organisations and businesses who wish to engage with the future, not be victims of it. |

Adrian Stokes Principal www.asadesigners.com

The entire premise of the Salon Project was that Industrial Design has the power to direct the wider world to think differently by showing what alternative products and related services might be