

In search of simple

In the first part of his series on simplicity, **Adrian Stokes** wonders if we have lost sight of the straightforward to our detriment



live with – an activity Lessing likened to pushing a boulder up a high mountain. In the valleys the Masses are fearful and anxious of a world they have no control over and which is beyond their comprehension.

Designers are Boulder Pushers, giving shape to big ideas that drop like avalanches from high up. From a Boulder Pusher's vantage point on the lower slopes, it's clear that for most people change is not progress. They live out their lives in a system they have absolutely no prospect of changing, coerced into accepting, what for them, is an increasingly dystopian future. How did this happen?

Like many of my contemporaries, I've become increasingly concerned about the world my children will inhabit. In our business the future arrives confusingly fast: another day another upgrade, keep up or you'll be as relevant as an 18-month-old iPhone.

Almost four years ago I accepted a visiting Professorship at Northumbria University's

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remarkable Design for Industry course. In my experience the most consistently innovative Industrial Design course in the UK and once home to "Great Man" Jonny Ive. For me having something new to say about Innovation at a centre for Innovation was a challenge, but in a world of emerging challenges an interesting one.

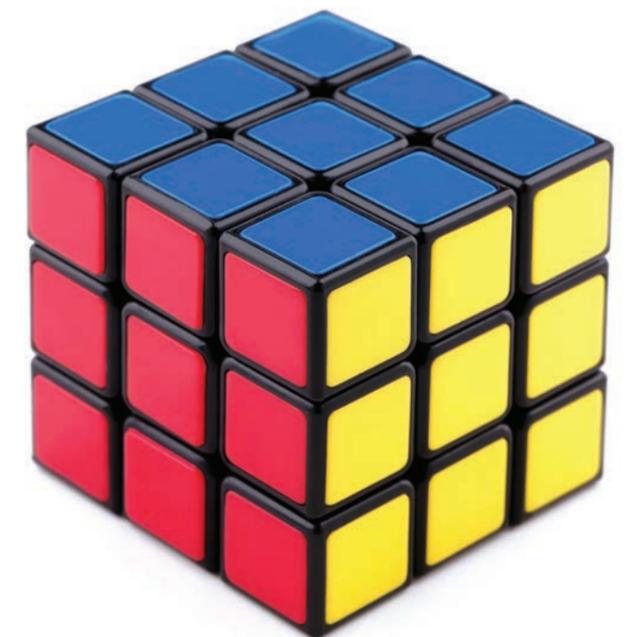
I used to think of innovation as invention without the rough edges, creativity without the mess, but it's no longer that simple. Innovation requires profiling and a strategy before you can pick up your pencil and implement. It probably also involves a dose of Design Thinking, go on Amazon and buy the books (there's no shortage of them) and if you manage to stay awake you might turn the last page with the overwhelming feeling that if we have to go through all that to innovate then we're in trouble. Any self-respecting Boulder Pusher will tell you this world needs answers: an innovation revolution NOW!

For many years despite the demands of my day job running an industrial design practice, my own interests have lain specifically in the area of new and alternative approaches to the design and development of products for an emerging world that, despite the rhetoric and propaganda, puts commerce before community. Globalisation has left large sections of our working population

deskilled and disenfranchised. It could be argued the current model was always a short-term financial fix for speculators and global business and not sustainable socially, economically, spiritually or practically. It's worth remembering that prior to the 2008 crash, soaring commodity prices had us teetering on the brink of an inflationary one.

It is also worth remembering that the decline in UK manufacturing has been far greater than many of our major European competitors and has left us with a growing deficit that despite our current South East based banking and property rebound, will leave many elsewhere dependent on insecure, low skill, low paid jobs.

In a world of seven billion individuals (a threefold increase in my lifetime) the solutions to the many specific problems in the developed world can only be solved by a complete shift of policy away from unrestrained consumerism to a model in which innovation in all areas of science, engineering and design takes centre stage. The



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scale of the problems and the nature of the solutions will require close collaboration between many different groups and whilst pondering the next economic model might be outside the remit of designers, I'm firmly of the belief if we were to consider what products and services would be like if they were designed in response to the emerging world and the very customers whose lives they are supposed to improve, then an incredibly interesting range of possibilities for research, design, development and collaboration would open up and feed into a wider debate about the nature of the future we want for our planet and its citizens.

One great mistake from the last 30 years has been to design the customer out of the equation. Whether it's a product, a service, or both, the experience today is one that offers increased levels of frustration and cost, whilst building the unacceptable mountains of waste that define life in the developed world.

Just imagine cars that reacquaint owners with the essentially simple systems that in even the most basic of today's models are designed to make it impossible for individuals to carry out any routine maintenance. Add to the equation advances in design, manufacturing and technology that would make these products last longer and function more efficiently, designing out waste and designing in quality and longevity, saving costs and reconnecting owners with the vehicle rather than

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a service engineer. The approach would change the nature of the car, the nature of the relationship the owner has with it and the service that makers and dealers have to provide for their customers.

Now apply that approach to other areas of product and associated support services: imagine architecture that puts the varied needs of occupiers and the environment first and consider the effect on homes which are no longer dull pastiches on soulless dormitory estates built to maximise the take of speculators, but which are reinvented to service the practical and spiritual needs of individuals, families, communities, the environment and the increasingly blighted visual landscape.

There is a connection here. The developed world has to learn to "cut its cloth" and quickly and for most this will mean a cut in living standards and a future that offers uncertainty and slow decline unless we "rebalance" our approach to work, the way we treat our people and live our lives.

Out of crises come opportunities and I firmly believe we need to stop the micromanagement of creativity and the design process, free up and rally behind some big ideas. If we are to return from the brink we have to put some lead back in the pencil of our economy, society and the "brands" that today are often merely words on paper not supported by any local manufacturing activity.

These thoughts aren't centred round some naïve idea of a social idyll, but rather tap into the real and perceived disconnection a large percentage of us feel about many areas of life, concerns which suggest to many that events are out of control.

The brilliant BBC documentary series The

Century of Self charted the rise of propaganda, or public relations, as a means of controlling "the dangerous crowd" creating an insatiable desire for what American Scientist Jared Diamond in his book *Guns, Germs & Steel* terms, "Cargo". Populations profiled to such an extent that organisations predict and continually coerce us to conform to their insane business model. Ironically Professor Diamond contends that the net effect of first world "development" has been a genetic dumbing down of the majority in these societies, no longer encouraged, and increasingly unable, to think and act independently. Medical science allows record numbers to live to telegram age, sadly bed blocking in hospitals or slipping into old age in care homes that are no more than cripplingly expensive prisons. Meanwhile we turn our backs on the frightening realities of climate change, ethnic and religious strife, energy, food and water security, waste and resource depletion, over population, mass migration and their dire effects on the natural world.

What I've found increasingly uncomfortable is the industrial designer's role in this bleak state of affairs. Dieter Rams encouragement in the late 1970's to design "Less but Better" and not burden products with non-essential features is as far from today's reality as platform 9 ¾: an innocent fantasy. 35 years on, few products live long productive lives and the industrial designer is once more a stylist, connecting consumer to consumable, putting "lipstick on the donkey". What price Rams' campaigning zeal now?

Ironically and despite our complicity, no one is better placed to deliver a metaphorical pinprick in the backsides of our stupefied society than the industrial designer.

"Tell me and I might remember, show me and I'll understand."

I'm not a fan of idioms as a rule, but this one used by a client Steelcase Strafor is true. Doris Lessing's Great Men have fashioned a quagmire of complexity in our lives, creating inertia and leaving us wholly suggestible. If her Masses are to snap out of it, they have to be shown a better way and helped to understand the implications for their futures. Enter the Northumbrian Boulder Pushers.

I may be a little biased but in view of all the above, a 4 year long opportunity to build an initiative with Northumbria's School of Design (NUSD) was too good to pass up (much can be achieved in 20 days a year). The time, the place, the reputation, the educators, the alumni, the brilliant students, the networks, with business and engineering schools on the door step, in an area that was, once, an innovation and manufacturing heartland. We have to find a smarter, simpler, sustainable, design and business model and Salon is our vehicle for that search; I hope you'll join us on the trip in the next installment. |

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The Great Men "create in their minds visions of a society full of free and noble human beings" but they have no interest in implementation

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