

Right | 606 Universal Shelving system designed by Dieter Rams for Vitsoe in 1960 to 1962



A Simple Philippic

What is the rise of celebrity doing to the business of product design? Adrian Stokes gives his personal view

Ours is a serious business. A well-crafted product design can improve lives, create jobs, wealth and promote social development. Cause and effect; it has always struck me how the sometimes chaotic activity of industrial design at an individual level, can have such far-reaching effects. A butterfly flaps its wings in Kingston upon Thames (I'm the butterfly in case you were wondering) and the sun comes out in Singapore (my client makes a fortune).

I was recently asked to write 200 words on what inspired me. I wrote about Dieter Rams - a man of unassuming brilliance who, despite his pre-eminence amongst industrial designers, is virtually unknown elsewhere. Try and buy a book about him. Funnily enough his influence is directly visible on the coolest of cool products from Apple and has generated much comment and blogging as a consequence. I don't know Dieter Rams and the biography I have of him is in German, but

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believe him to be someone who only ever wished to have the time and space to do his job as well as he could. This is an admirable trait but one that could leave you invisibly beavering away for an entire career, eschewing the opportunities that come the

way of an artful self-publicist.

I suppose when I started my studio, in common with the one I'd left, I always believed that if we did consistently good work respect would follow-on, the world would find us and recognition and more work would result. To some extent that has been the case. However, there is a vast difference between respect and celebrity. Celebrity gets the message out there and work follows because the individual is part of the sales proposition.

Witness how many "brands" now use celebrities to endorse products and how many new sets of new clothes these latter day Emperors have foisted on a name hungry world.

And so in recent years we have seen the rise and rise of celebrity, an affliction which took root throughout the 80's and constantly mutated to the present day when we find that most areas of modern life have become infected (can you be infected by an affliction),

Right | Braun hairdryer, designed by Dieter Rams, 1970

Would you open wide for a dentist who'd bought himself some gear and set up in his front room?



why even lawyers can have celebrity status. Celebrities are recognised; not necessarily respected. Recognition used to be reserved for deserving cases, not head cases. But, today even racists, famous for nothing more than being loud and offensive, have perfumes created in their names and are feted on moronic chat shows.

Unfortunately the design world didn't escape and competent self promoters quickly learned to use a growing interest in the media for all things prefixed or suffixed by "design". The outcome of this hijack was that many designers were actually embarrassed by the title and disturbingly design was increasingly reported in terms of style rather than content. This was bloody frustrating. I first became conscious of this phenomena in about 1983 when I used to pass by what I first thought was a scrap yard in Covent Garden, which happened to be next to a great bike shop I went to in my lunch hour. Inside were bent scaffold poles clamped together with old car seats slung between them - "Scrap Heap Challenge" comes to mind. That year I went to Orgatec in Cologne and whilst looking around a particular stand overheard a discussion between some journalists about

that very same scrap man. By that time I was seven years into my working life with some notable products to my name and even then felt I was on a precipitous learning curve. But suddenly the scrap man's face was everywhere whilst I'd had only a piece in Mobilia, which no one inside the UK read and another in Design Magazine, which no one outside the UK read.

Now I have frequently expressed concern about the lack of rigor in our profession. As a once aspiring architect I quickly found out that architects had to learn their trade the hard way (from the print room up) and that only then were they allowed to sharpen their pencils and draw the odd line.

Dieter Rams claimed that "A good eye is, schooled by years and years of experience, in order to be able to draw the right conclusion." I know this to be true, having travelled that particular path, rocks and all. Without the journey it's rather like trying to make yourself understood in a foreign country having bought a phrase book at the airport on the way out. You and your hosts would enjoy the experience a lot more had you attended a few night classes in the months leading up. So I developed an only slightly mellowing

indignance when I realised that I should have left school early and bought myself a good blow torch. Had I done so, the world would sit agog at my feet and I would gain iconic nay "celebrity" status. This is not sour grapes (no really).

There have always been different strands of practicing designer, most obscured from view by the indifference of their work. I was educated during the ascendant era of Mario Bellini, Richard Sapper, Dieter Rams, Vico Magistretti and Ettore Sottsass. All of whom had style and integrity, all crossed boundaries and their aesthetically and functionally elegant designs betrayed the simple fact that they had clearly served their time. The European design press had a respectful and intelligent reaction to their work and was prepared/able to delve under the skin to the inner space at the heart of any good design. I think it is worth reflecting on the deportment of these people; sublime, but self effacing, a manner common to those from any walk of life who are in control of their circumstances and know their trade; from dentists to designers. Quality is found in their wake of a kind that is not created overnight. Would you open wide for a dentist who'd bought himself some gear and

set up in his front room?

I recently had lunch with an individual who for 28 years has overseen the design of products that have played a major role in the continued fortunes of a globally successful luggage brand. (I won't mention his name, he'd likely as not deny it anyway) It is probably one of the most successful sustained relationships in product design history and some beautiful and successful work has emerged; an early example of which is still on the market 24 years after its introduction. The relationship has survived changes of management, many changes to his own small team, as well as an A list of celebrity designers from Giugiaro to Alexander McQueen seconded to inject glamour into the marketing campaign (it certainly wasn't for their product designs). This year will see our hero's entirely new range for the company, continuing this amazing record of success. In that period I have read only a couple of articles in the design press about this tale of excellence and yet these are some of the most difficult

products to design for one of the most demanding markets. The items were not sketched and lobbed into the court of some engineering team to sort out - they were conceived, developed, refined and worried into being in close collaboration with the client.

By any measure this has been a tale deserving of five star reviews and the central character our unswerving respect. But who is he and how can his name not be on all our lips?

Don't you just love Stephen Bayley? The A.A.Gill of design writing, articulate and well read enough to strip off the veneer and expose the gutless froth inside much media led self aggrandizement. In his recent book 'Design: Intelligence Made Visible' he complains about the new generation of "techno-organic designers" more interested in creating problems than solving them, splashing around in their own self indulgence. (Come on, if the cap fits). A perfect example of this is provided by the recent repackaging of a well loved tenet of good design "less is

Back in the early 1980s, Dieter Rams was becoming increasingly concerned by the state of the world around him - "an impenetrable confusion of forms, colours and noises." Aware that he was a significant contributor to that world, he asked himself an important question: is my design good design?

As good design cannot be measured in a finite way he set about expressing the ten most important criteria for what he considered was good design. Subsequently they have become known as the 'Ten commandments'.

Good design... is innovative
 Good design... makes a product useful
 Good design... is aesthetic
 Good design... helps a product to be understood
 Good design... is unobtrusive
 Good design... is honest
 Good design... is durable
 Good design... is thorough to the last detail
 Good design... is concerned with the environment
 Good design... is as little design as possible

It turns the heads of a gullible young audience who mistake simplistic for simple and, like contestants on X Factor, chase recognition

more" into perfect jargonese "super normal" (super normal, I ask you); Pseuds Corner made real as a means of self promotion. The unfortunate consequence of this is that it turns the heads of a gullible young audience who mistake simplistic for simple and, like contestants on X Factor, chase recognition believing make-up and a mouth will turn a trick. At the risk of repetition, I'm afraid it takes more than a few hours with a phrase book to learn a language and there are no short cuts. A limited vocabulary might yield 'Janet and John' but not 'War and Peace'.

This is where I came in. Ours is a serious business rendered lightweight by those who should know better and pursued by journalists looking for a subject to write up into the next coffee table dust trap. We all want recognition for a job well done and it is depressing that more isn't made of the stories behind the headlines. The concern I have is that the next generation of designers will think about design in much the same way as they might think about art if their art education had started with Tracy Emin. |

Adrian Stokes is principal of asa designers limited
www.asadesigners.com