A Boulder Pusher's Tale

Continuing his series on the place of simplicity in design, **Adrian Stokes** asks what we might learn from a rowing eight, vintage cars, and the fashion of Alexander McQueen

In Part One of this short series I wrote about feeling that we've handed over control of our lives to a small, smart, self-serving group. These super scientists and super salesmen feed a system we instinctively know is wrong for us and our planet, but which we feel impotent to change. But are we?

Ironically, we see in places like Syria and Iran, word gets around, for better or for worse. Today we have the tools to tell our story and if it's a good one, have it read by millions.

Part One (ND 115) reflected on a section from Doris Lessing's 'Golden Notebook' in which she predicts this state of things to come. A tiny clique of 'Great Men' blind to the impact their actions have on the 'Masses' living in their wake. And the so-called 'Boulder Pushers' (industrial designers for the sake of this tale) who try to help the masses make sense of the mess. The issues that have blown up since the book's publication in 1962 have become so overwhelming that many believe a global inertia has turned us into dumb observers, watching a few brave souls fight skirmishes trying to hold back corporate bulldozers in hot spots around the world, but essentially compliant.

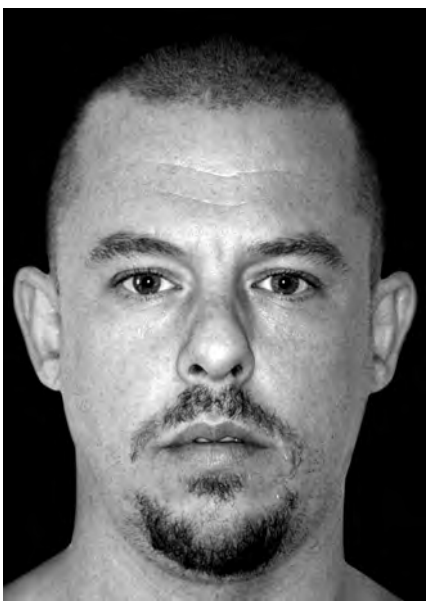
In 2011 I initiated a project at Northumbria University that aimed to inspire another small, smart, self-serving group (of students) to sow the seeds of an alternative future they wanted to see. We felt industrial designers were ideally placed to imagine, visualise and argue the case for, the alternatives our emerging world just has to embrace if it is to have a chance. We called our project 'Salon'. Part Three of this series will introduce you to the cast of the Salon story, but before that I have one of my own about the experiences and observations that made an old man very worried.

Currently I live outside London returning for a few days each month to catch up. Recently with my wife, I had a perfect weekend. This included a trip to Henley (you have to like rowing) a chance sighting of a passing rally of vintage cars and a visit to see the Alexander McQueen exhibition Savage Beauty at the V&A.

When I was about seven our father converted a lifeboat from a WW2 German battleship into a cabin cruiser and we took our holidays on it. At Boston, Lincolnshire, early in the morning, I'd hear then watch, the rowers pass the porthole by my bunk. It was 18 years before I had chance to row, having moved to London. As a seven year old it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, as a 24 year old rowing latecomer, I learnt that to make a beautiful shell move beautifully was as painful as it was pleasurable, but when it finally did the experience was utterly blissful. 30 odd years after my last regatta, each year we sit in the stands at Henley, an environment that hasn't changed, watching an activity that hasn't changed, practised by the very best. 'Poetry in motion' doesn't begin to do justice to it. What has changed is the way technical developments in materials and evolution of the details, have allowed lighter, faster boats to emerge.

Later that day we went to the V&A sat and drank something cold in the Quadrangle before filing in to see Alexander McQueen's Savage Beauty show: quite simply the best exhibition of any kind we'd seen

| Opposite: Adrian Stokes
| Left: Alexander McQueen: a fashion visionary



The next day we were walking up to see Glenn Howell's gorgeous visitor centre at Savill Gardens in Windsor Great Park and about half way there, on normally car free roads, a long line of vintage cars passed us. From Alvis to Austin a roll call of an industry that came and went in living memory, whose products had us standing, smiling and clapping at occupants waving and grinning back. The cars were between 55 and 85 years old, all eccentrically individual, like their owners who peered from behind fold out windscreens and perched in fold down boot seats. Brilliant: full of character and invention, beautifully made machines, giving motoring pleasure and involvement to owners and spectators down all those years.

Later that day we went to the V&A sat and drank something cold in the Quadrangle before filing in to see Alexander McQueen's Savage Beauty show: quite simply the best exhibition of any kind we'd seen, even beating the Railway Museum in York (that's some compliment; I want to have my ashes scattered there). Alexander McQueen was a taxi driver's son trained in Savile Row and later educated at Central School of Art. If ever looks belied the individual McQueen's did. His eyes clearly saw things the rest of us can only guess at. What emerged was unpredictable and exquisite, like a collection of radical experiments in medicine that somehow turn up successions of lifesaving treatments.

No one can truly understand the insights of people like this but they can appreciate the end results and be extremely affected by them. In my case I confess there was some envy but mostly the feeling that the world's a much better place for having had the chance to be around at the same time, and yet he sadly committed suicide.

I decided to relate this weekend tale because the three strands in their ways support my belief that despite the enormity of the problems faced by our world, the blend of responsibly employed advanced technology, a reconnecting of people to their products orchestrated by creative and engineering brilliance, can demonstrate a dazzling alternative view of the future, with the power to galvanise large groups into a campaigning force and movement for change in search of better designed, better made, better quality, simpler life.

Clearly solutions to problems on the current scale aren't going to come through normal channels. The 'normal channels' are busy trying to find ways of continuing the systems that created this ticking time bomb. Nor can it be left to a well-meaning, middle aged, western middle class who've been such conspicuously silent beneficiaries to date. No, the solutions will only come if a motivated generation of Y's & Z's seize the initiative and articulate their vision for their future. But can they be bothered?

As an employer of industrial design graduates for over 30 years I became progressively worried about their narrowing view of the world and growing indifference to the context of their lives and careers. A certain lack of curiosity, with lives seemingly defined by technology and 'stuff', to the exclusion of what's been and the world outside their front doors. From an employer's eye view, the gap between my concerns and their indifference widened unrelentingly through the 90s and into the 2000s.

At the same time with manufacturing making the trip overseas and the education of designers becoming process driven ('analysis paralysis') it seemed the industrial designer's mantra 'to service the needs of the customer' had fast become 'to service the needs of the company that does anything but'. We lack an inclusive vision: this current generation thinks it's okay to create the biggest business on the planet based around gorgeous, superbly engineered, wonderfully well made products, designed to be obsolete within 18 months. Our goal has to be to tap into the potential of the next generation that must somehow have its eyes opened to what's happening to them and their world, before they are brainwashed into line.

As Mark Adams CEO of Vitsoe said at a recent event: "Where the bloody hell did our obsession with novelty come from? When did society became entrapped by the idea that the only thing that's worth anything to anybody, is something that's new?"

How did armies of service and interaction designers manage to create services and interactions that are so complex they are beyond most people's understanding and way beyond the attention span and patience required to even try?

What my perfect weekend helped confirm as it progressed, was just how research and technical advances in many fields have the power to augment performance and products, improving lives without making us feel superfluous, but so often they don't.

Below: A contemporary rowing shell and its forbear. Incremental change seeking to improve performance.

Opposite above: Alexander McQueen haute couture & fine tailoring
Left above & below: The Alvis TD21 and Austin 7. Simple, serviceable, long lasting, motoring pleasure. Connecting the user to their product, creating an experience we need to examine, learn from, interpret and enhance.

A rowing eight in its advanced bonded, carbon fibre and alloy clothes, is exactly the same product as its hand crafted wooden forerunner; but it lasts a fraction of the time, albeit the person suffering in it will move a little faster.

How many cars made in 2015 will be chugging around the Windsor roads in 85 years, looking as good and functioning just as well as they did when new?

How many of today's plastic and paper thin products, would allow their owners to enjoy the sort of hands on, feel good experience of motoring that we'd witnessed? Why have we lost faith in the brilliant individual's vision, or educated their individuality out of them?

During my tenure at Northumbria I went to the Royal Academy of Engineering's conference at Aston. A striking and recurring theme at the event came from employers lamenting the fact that today's graduates were increasingly unable to do "stuff"; problem solve, think independently find a way without calling a meeting.
If our engineers can't (or are not encouraged) to do stuff, I'm concerned.

I came to Northumbria troubled and am finishing less so. For all of the reasons described generally in Part One of this series and personally in Part Two, we need a rethink – that much is clear. It's also clear we have to initiate change outside the established channels and as discussed, stoke up a campaigning momentum that will spread far enough to create a movement for change; a movement that helps set rather than follow the agenda. Sadly if 46 year old John F Kennedy were alive today and instigated a seven year programme to put someone else on the moon it wouldn't happen. Our world and its systems are so complex and meddling, that the idea would not get off the ground, even if money were no object.

The Salon Project was designed to rewire young bright minds and connect them with their inner industrial designer, reoccupying the moral and spiritual high ground and showing our mesmerised citizens that not only are we teetering on the edge, but that we have options.

And so I'm at the bridgehead in this 'Search for Simple'. Salon has been a four-year experiment to see if our explorers can be helped to see through their conditioning, have their hackles raised, engage in our cause and produce a message worth sending. In the final piece we'll present the tale of Doris Lessing's young Boulder Pushers.....stick around!

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