IT'S THE PRODUCT, STUPID!

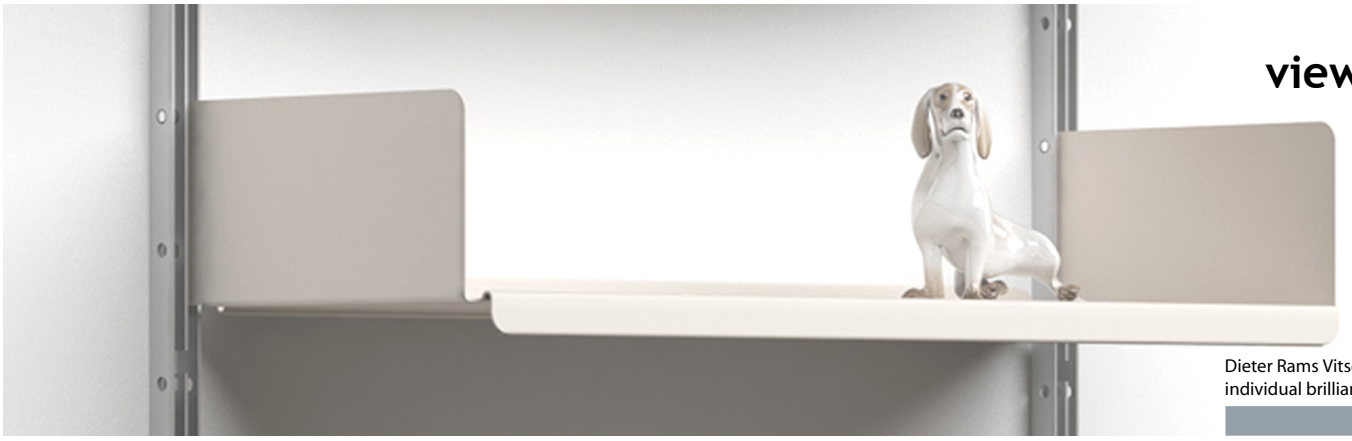
Adrian Stokes on the direction that design is taking in today's world

A question: which is worse, an aca - demic who imagines they know about design, or a designer who imagines they are an academic? The academic profess - ing an insight into the methods and motives of a designer,or a designer who turns coats in pursuit of letters?

Since the sister-ship to this article was published (new**design** 77), my attention was drawn to two interesting books and another Ted Talk.

Sir Ken Robinson is an academic who, unusually, has an often hilarious disregard for the methods and values of academics. I sus - pect many who have read this far, will have watched his brilliant 2006 talk *Do Schools Kill Creativity*. So far 1.8million of you have had a look on YouTube and probably more on the TED site... "Do schools Kill creativity?"..... Does what comes after, Kill what's left?

About the same time that I was given directions to the TED talk, a client told me about a book, now a bestseller, that was just making a mark: *The Case For Working With Your Hands* by Matthew Crawford. Ironically, Crawford is also an academic and probably because he and Sir Ken had conventionally academic minds, at an early age both were shunted in the direction of the library rather than the workshop.



Dieter Rams Vitsoe 606 shelving individual brilliance.

My last reference for this piece was written in 1927 by the travel writer H V Morton and is called *In Search of England*. In it he relates a telling story about a maker of "treen" he stumbles across. (Treen is a generic term for wooden household objects that predated pewter and pottery.) Using a lathe powered by a bent alder sapling, the maker quickly turns a bowl. On noticing a pile of similar, beautiful pieces stacked in a corner, each with "the individuality that only a man's hands can give to an object" the author says to the maker he thinks there is a lot of money to be made selling them. The response? "Money's only for storing up trouble, I think. I like making bowls better than I like making money".

This was interesting because 87 years on Matthew Crawford relates a story from the same era about the insidious rise of planned work, taking responsibility from individuals, leaving them hollowed out process workers, disenfranchised and sterile. The particular story was that of the US car industry in the early 20th century. In an attempt to increase production, the companies selling cars tried to encourage the scores of coach builders turned car makers to produce more cars by paying them more per car. What they found was that by paying them more they produced the same or less. What drove these craftsmen was not money but a job done well and pride in the end result. They required enough not more than enough and compromising the quality of their work and other aspects of their lives wasn't worth any amount of money.

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I wonder how long the "treen" maker was able to continue in his bubble; the car maker was soon replaced by a car worker whose role was reduced to that of a slobbering Labrador trained to beg for doggie chocs.

MC goes on to chart the rise of the so called "knowledge economy" and "knowledge worker", "team building", "team working" and the progressive replacement of the motivation and intellectual satisfaction which the tradesman, craftsman and individual enjoy, with the dumb pursuit of financial reward, in order to feed "manufactured consumerism" on which the global economy depends - life made bearable by the promise of owning something unnecessary, to fill a hole in the soul.

So down to business: how to stop information creep and the information creeps from stripping designers of the experiences and skills (vocabulary) they really need to do their job, in favour of witless methodologies that under a variety of contrived pseudonyms, strip good designers of the wherewithal and space to do their thing and improve lives. Without inspired individual thought, collective effort is about as interesting as a bag of Glacier Mints. Remember mobile phone shops before Apple moved into the market?

Ken Robinson is an educationalist who maintains that children are let down by a system that grades the value of what they learn along strict hierarchical lines, i.e. maths and science, languages and humanities with the arts languishing last in the pecking order. His talk tells tales of those who were deemed misfits or

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a product of true individual design leadership.

dimwits in this conventional world, but who, it turned out, flowered when by chance they escaped into a parallel one that acknowledged they were different and allowed their "talent" some freedom of expression.

He maintains that education in the so-called first world economies is killing creativity.

I think many industrial designers (my audience here) will recognise themselves in the stories he tells. In my case when I made it to art college, someone switched the lights on and after four years I did rather well; a nice change for me. What those four years uncovered was that under the right conditions, with the right ingredients, sparks would fly. My favourite flying sparks story is of a motorway journey to London when, without any conscious help from me (motorways make me narcoleptic, don't they you?) a solution to an intractable college project flashed fully formed into my mind, with the nice bonus that it was patentable. If I'd been John Lennon I would have just dreamed up "Imagine" and made some money; as it was, the moment didn't pass but developed and became an essential part of my everyday life. Without it I would practise but never perform.

I've often wondered, when many a "great leap forward" in art, science and technology has resulted from moments of individual brilliance, why there is a new model army busying itself developing systems of education and work that favour only collective effort, "co design" and "design thinking," unable to accept that individuals can possibly turn the clock forward without some boxes to tick. A physicist and even a writer can get away with it of course; traditionally educated, their foundations are built on a bedrock of hard facts. But the designer, like the artisan before him, is meat and two veg for historians, philosophers and their like, affording them easy access to a lovely big platform from which to pontificate and strap the little darlings into a creative straitjacket.

A rather well-known physicist said imagination was more important than knowledge and that the only thing that interfered with his learning was his education. Good points, but then Einstein was unconventional, not merely exceptional and he could do maths, so people believed him.

So what's my point? Well it's this; designers lose faith in their instincts at their peril and it's worse still if they hand over responsibility for the education and direction of the next generation of practitioners to outsiders; then the rest of us will increasingly occupy a world stripped of the sunny eccentrics that have collectively made us smile with appreciation at the wit, intelligence and sheer "life affirmingness" of their work and we will have replaced them with the sorts of dipsticks who dreamed up cars that don't have them, owning job titles like "user experience architect".

When all's said and done the design team at Apple do a wonderful job thanks to their "great leader". The design team at Braun did a wonderful job until their great leader left. Herman Miller is to this day defined by the work of a handful of design individuals whose work stands scrutiny up to 50 years on. Great companies, great brands with great designers, whose great products count; a great design, in response to any problem, is more often the result of an inspired moment worried into being by hours/days/months of whittling by the wing men and it is this complex interplay of intuition, innate skill and knowledge (gained from a natural curiosity and desire to know

1month of individual inspiration gave BT a stake in home broadband

stuff), that allows a designer to operate and make breakthroughs that can defy any amount of analysis; and funnily when the whittling stops and the job's been done well, everyone gets it; the mark of a truly great design.

Unfortunately, at the asylum lunatics are assuming management roles; I've seen the future and it's bland...I'm driving in it, sitting at it, watching it, listening to it, communi-cating on it, eating with it and vacuuming up the crumbs, it's no fun and here's why. Like Matthew Crawford's car worker, or Ken

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Robinson's children, increasingly there is a line that must be toed. It denotes that from kindergarten to gold watch, nothing can be left to chance. It's depressing to see the designer's instinct for simplicity replaced by an intel-lectual's instinct for complexity and more depressing still is the realisation that it is the latter group that holds sway in most areas of life including mine, industrial design. What I would advise is that when these people next grasp something really beautiful in their hands, or rubber-neck a passing 1968 Mercedes 280 SE coupe (a personal favourite), they should reflect and acknowledge that it isn't the proc-ess that's making their heart skip - no, and that's my point: "It's the product...stupid". And, in answer to my first question, it's obvious isn't it? They both want shooting. ?

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