

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN: RETHINKING THE FUTURE...

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Industrial designer Adrian Stokes trained in a world that celebrated simplicity, clarity and beauty, but finds himself in a complex, opaque and ugly one. His interests lie specifically in the area of new and alternative approaches to the design and development of products for a world that has left large sections of our working population deskilled and disenfranchised.

The decline of manufacturing in the UK has been far greater than most of our major European competitors and now Brexit uncertainty is inevitably affecting swathes of the manufacturing we do have. In a world of 7 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 major shift of policy. This must be away from unrestrained consumerism to a model in which innovation, in all areas of science, engineering and design, takes centre stage.

The scale of the problems we face and the nature of the solutions will require close collaboration between many different groups. Whilst pondering the next economic model might be outside the remit of industrial designers, were we 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 interesting range of possibilities for research, design, development and collaboration would open up and feed into a wider debate.

I have a 55 year old Kenwood chef and 45 year old Morphy Richards toaster that work as well now as they did in their prime. If they do have problems I can diagnose and repair, rather than replace them. The simplicity of their construction and quality of the materials used in their manufacture has been key to their survival. The great mistake of the last 30 years has been to design the customer out of the new product equation. The jargonised ‘user experience’ today is one that offers only increased levels of frustration and cost, whilst building the unacceptable mountains of waste, that define life in the developed world.

Imagine cars that reacquaint owners with the essentially simple systems that in even the most basic of today’s models 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 complexity and waste and designing in, quality and longevity, saving costs whilst reconnecting owners with the vehicle rather than 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 need to provide 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. Consider the effect on homes which will no longer be dull pastiches on soulless estates, built to maximize 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 must learn to ‘cut its cloth...’ and quickly. For most this will mean a cut in their 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 the way we live our lives. Out of crises come opportunities and 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 must 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 are not centred round some naïve idea of a social idyll, but rather tap into the disconnection we feel about many areas of life; concerns that suggest events are out of control.

For too long industrial designers have been complicit in creating a world that consumes too much in the name of globalisation, an idea that is morally, socially, and commercially unsustainable. We are awash with products designed to self-destruct, polluting the planet and leading to a serious depletion of its natural resources. In the UK, poor policy making and over reliance on the service sector at the expense of skilled, innovation led, manufacturing, has left the UK needing to adapt if it’s to provide a future for its citizens, that offers a fulfilling and dignified way of life.

If they are to behave differently the eyes of consumers must be opened to the nature and scale of the issues that are coming their way. Paradoxically, industrial designers, are ideally placed to show how products developed under a different set of rules might create opportunities for new business and enterprise that reduces waste, extends useful life and helps re-acquaint individuals with the products they own.

For example, if organisations like Philips/ Apple/ Vitra with UN or World bank help, were to co-sponsor an initiative, bringing together a smallish team of the very best postgraduate students from industrial design, engineering and business whose initial task would be to create a set of concise guidelines to which all products designed for the emerging world should conform; in much the same vein as Dieter Rams tenets did in the late 1970’s. These would provide the platform for an exercise that took a series everyday items and redesigned them within the guidelines.

The products would be beautifully detailed and engineered; functional, high quality and long lasting; easy to disassemble and repair with lowest possible part count and stripped of unnecessary features and gimmicks. Each product would be supported by a clearly argued manufacturing and business case and then shared as widely as possible through all forms of media, acting as examples of change that a wider public can truly engage with and industrial partners might wish to try out.

A proposition in which future products are designed to be maintained and repaired, should spawn local activity, perhaps high street franchises, required of, and facilitated by, manufacturers. These would not only offer technical advice and parts but also have the facilities to allow local making of replacement parts. Developments in rapid manufacture, 3d printing, CNC machining and so on, allow high-quality metal and plastic parts to be made on site. Detailed online manuals and videos would aid customers prepared to ‘have a go’. In his book *The Case for Working with Your Hands*, Matthew Crawford academic and motorcycle nut, describes the motivation and intellectual satisfaction, which the tradesman, craftsman and individual enjoy from a job well done.

The loss of the opportunity to own and engage with products is tragic. The concern I have is that technology and technologists, who are driving change, seem to look only one way and as a result there is too much mindless progress (of sorts) and not enough reflection, re-thinking and consideration of the effects change has on the lives of the majority who must live with its implications.

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