**Design dynasties**

Over the last half century British product design has been heavily influenced by the work of several prominent design families. **Peter Barker** looks at the multi-generational heritage of our new design dynasties.

Review British design and designers of the last 50 years and certain family names keep cropping up. *Conran, Harmon-Powell, Kinneir* and others recur in any list of the influential people on the UK design scene since 1960. Is there something in the *nature or nurture* debate that has long been raging in science that applies to the development of design talent?

Mark Harmon-Powell, a British industrial designer currently working in the US recalls the influence of his father David Harmon-Powell, an outstanding designer of the post-war period:

*Dad was a great influence on me, from the age of 5 onwards. He took me to work at EKCO Plastics in Southend-on-Sea and had me sanding down models! He had huge empathy with the technical staff there and initially wanted me to study for an engineering qualification when I left school. He introduced me to many of his friends amongst whom were some design greats; I met Giorgetto Giugiaro and Raymond Loewy. I took an OND in Engineering at Colchester Technical College but I realised that engineering was not for me and that art & design was where my future lay. So with Dad’s eventual blessing I went to Central School of Art & Design and studied for a degree in industrial design.*

Is this experience of design apprenticeship shared by other designers from our great families? Sebastian Conran, eldest son of Terence and Shirley Conran who were central to the British Design boom of the 1960s has a different outlook.

*I grew up in a creative environment but it was impressed upon me that designers are just one group of creative people amongst many. To be an excellent scientist or businessperson is just as creative but in a different way. The ‘creative industries’ are misnamed in my opinion. There is a strong correlation between dyslexia/dyspraxia and design ability, which seems to me evidence for good designers having a certain creative nature rather than simply having been nurtured.*

But surely to be born into a highly creative family must have an influence on a young person with design potential? Sebastian Conran again.

*Certainly I was encouraged to be creative and was introduced to the joy of making by my father and his mother. However I aspired to be an inventor rather than a designer and studied maths, physics and chemistry at A level not art (design was unknown as an A level subject in those days). It was actually an art history lesson given by Kerry Kennedy at the Central School of Art which turned me on the possibilities of design. He presented art from a rational point of view, perfectly understandable to me as a science student.*

For some of the members of Britain’s design families it is as much the external environment as the family home that fashions design talent. Ross Kinneir, son of outstanding post-war graphic designer Jock Kinneir recalls his student days.

*My route into design was different from the other members of my family. My father, sister and I were all at the RCA at the same time but they were in graphic design and I studied industrial design. I spent a year out working at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, Germany and there I received significant instruction in analysis of a design problem, synthesis of the solution and development of a product: the proper Germanic design method. I found this method very formative and supportive, it suited my technical and analytic outlook.*

But surely it cannot be denied that a supportive and well informed family environment supports a child interested in design? Ross Kinneir again.

*My parents had both been to art college and as a child I was given plenty of opportunity to fiddle with materials and make things although there was little discussion of design as such. The schools I went to were not particularly ‘high-pressure’ establishments in the academic sense and so I had plenty of time to study the subjects I wanted to study. I learned physics and maths which I added to the making and art skills acquired at home.*

So having received a grounding in design at home and in education how have the second generation of our design dynasties fared in the harsh world of commercial design? Mark Harmon-Powellis enjoying a successful trans-Atlantic career covering automotive, packaging and lifestyle goods amongst other fields. How does he evaluate the influence of his distinguished father David on his design work?

*My father is a highly talented artist but a very modest man. He taught me the values of craftsmanship, attention to detail and an appreciation of material quality that I have incorporated into my work. I love to design stuff that looks good but no-one will ever see!*

Is this self-effacing attitude to design work something that distinguishes leading British designers? Ross Kinneir has a similar outlook, he stresses the importance of design function.

*For me a design must be worthwhile: it must have a clearly beneficial function. The projects that I enjoyed working on most during my consultancy career at Kinneir Dufort were those projects where we worked in partnership with innovative scientific companies. To put together our skills in anaylsis and design solution synthesis with the client’s technical innovation produced some excellent medical and technological products. We went as far as choosing our own clients by a proactive, self-seeding process which was remarkably successful. We didn’t sit around in the office waiting for a phonecall. With the advent of cheap 3D modelling software there’s too much design for its own sake, that just doesn’t interest me at all.*

Understandably given a family background in design business Sebastian Conran sees the characteristics of British design from a different point of view again.

*I’m not sure that there is such a thing as British design, if forced I would describe it as playful pragmatism but in truth there are a whole lot of British designers working away in their own style and not a lot unites them. The internet ahs been the saviour of British designers as they can work for international clients without having to leave home. The Scots are the unsung heroes of British design, they have a wonderful capacity for lateral thinking allied to down to earth pragmatism. What’s important is excellence in whatever you do. Excellent fish and chips is every bit as good as excellent nouvelle cuisine!*

So what of the future? How does our trio of British industrial designers see the landscape for the next generation of design professionals? Ross Kinneir takes a strategic view.

*Twenty years ago no-one could have predicted where we are today in design. The boom in available technology, 3D software and printers, has fuelled an explosion in 3D design activity but that doesn’t mean that the quality of design work has kept pace. There are now too many people who are qualified to practise design and as a result there is design for its own sake. A lot of design output is relatively trivial. Creative thinking and analysis, that’s more valuable than endless re-styling.*

Also critical of education Sebastian Conran feels that schools are not serving students with design potential.

*Teaching is not aligned to dyslexic and dyspraxic children, a ‘normal’ approach to learning is most valued in schools . These unusual children are the very ones who may develop design vision and talent later in life. Thirty percent of students studying at the Royal College of Art are dyslexic and that is no coincidence. We need to understand and value these talents in children more highly, they may one day lead to significant innovations.*

It is perhaps significant that two of the three designers interviewed have encouraged their own children to go into design and the other creative arts. This is a vote of confidence in the future of British design and an assurance of the continuity in tradition of three famous family names appearing next to the significant design work of the future.