Solitary Genius to Holistic Design by Patrick Le Quément, Renault Design Creator

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Patrick le Quément is a world famous Car Designer. As SVP Renault Corporate Design, his team’s products have included brilliant and bold designs such as Twingo, Mégane and Mégane II Scénic; the Espace models of 1994 and 1998; Kangoo; Laguna models of 1994; Avantime and the Vel Satis of 2002.

In this post, he comes back to the evolution of design over time, and how it impacts the role of design manager, as innovation becomes a collective adventure.

Yesterday’s design

Design was one of the key features of the second half of the 20th century and the exhibition of 1993, entitled “Design, Mirror of the Century”, held in the Grand Palais in Paris, was just one of many testimonies to its established role in popular culture, as the major exhibitions in Nagoya, Milan and London were before it.

Nowadays we use the term “design” in connection with everything that is created, whether in the form of culinary design as in the
proposed by the great Spanish chef Ferran Adria, hairdressing salons of varying levels of expertise, graphical design, digital design, multimedia design, interface design, the design of furniture or products including, of course, motor cars, as well as interior design or even ornamental design.

The semantic vagueness of the word “design”, now used to describe creative activities in such a wide variety of fields, has resulted in a diversity of implementations and interpretations that are reflected in the traditions specific to each country: the Arts & Crafts movement in Britain and the US, Art Nouveau practically throughout the world, Art Déco in France, functionalism and rationalization followed by standardization in Germany, a quasi-social design tradition in Scandinavia, a political conception in the totalitarian countries, or a craft-oriented view of design in the developing world. What these independent local traditions have in common is that all represent the cultural and economic underpinnings of design in practise.

In his book “Objects of Desire”, Adrian Forty states that: “In the history of every industry, design has become necessary as a separate activity in production once a single craftsman ceases to be responsible for every stage of manufacture from conception to sale”. Thus although, in his history of design, he describes the emergence in the 18th century of designers who specialized in the manufacture of pottery, he could equally well have referred to any industrial process through to the end of the 20th century.
Forty’s definition allows us to move ahead in our discussion and jump straight to the question: “**What is good design?**” This is a difficult question which Stephen Bayley and Terence Conran answer using a formulation taken from the great architect Le Corbusier – “**good design is visible**” – and adding that something that has not been intelligently designed will not work, will be uncomfortable to use, poorly manufactured, depressing to look at and will probably not represent good value for money.

Who would be stupid enough to want bad design? **Good design, in reality, is intelligence made visible.** It is, according to the hallowed formula, 98% common sense and 2% that mysterious or magical something that we refer to as aesthetics. Of course, it works at a **holistic** level: an iPhone is attractive in its entirety, through its shape and the employed materials, but also through its intuitive solutions and the quality of its graphics that have made it such a resounding success.
The word “design” is of Latin and Italian origin. During the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, probably the greatest designer of all time, practised “il designo”. This did not embrace only the art of drawing but also the ability to conceive ideas, communicate them using graphical means and, finally, delineate them more precisely through specifications, including the description of the materials, and then demonstrate them by producing functioning prototypes.

In French, the word “design” combines both the idea of drawing and “dessein”, a word referring to intention or purpose. It is associated with a mode of conception that focuses on humans and human utilizations.

What can we say about the talents required in an outstanding designer? A designer must be able to write a good scenario, develop the storyline of a captivating tale.

He must also have experience and empathy, and he must love history because, as George Santayama so appropriately said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Although a good designer must learn history, his vision is fixed on the future. As Peter Horbury, former Head of Design for the Ford brand, pointed out: “The designer’s task is not to repeat history but to invent it.”
It is essential to have a good knowledge of the market, to know how people live, be aware of their financial means and aspirations. He must also have a clear idea about why and how his design is going to improve the lives of his customers.”

However, a designer cannot work alone. The idea of Renaissance man is not a plausible reality today given the complexity of modern science and knowledge. As Enzo Ferrari once so accurately said: “Teamwork has replaced solitary genius”.

**Today’s design**

Towards the end of the 1990s, the corporate striving for enhanced performance resulted in a massive return to the fundamentals of good management including, among other things, a desire to clarify the roles of every different actor at a time at which the emergence of new professions had created functional overlaps that were not always productive.

While the effects of these changes were broadly positive, this focus on an increasingly precise definition of functions, and thus this return to a certain Taylorism, was, in contrast, not beneficial to many integrated design teams which, acting at the intersection between various disciplines, saw their role relegated to that of simple stylists.

This return to earlier practices was temporary because, very soon, an independent American design agency, IDEO, achieved a media breakthrough with a novel approach termed “Design Thinking” which enabled them to launch numerous innovations such as the famous first Apple mouse and the first Palm.
Based in Palo Alto in California, IDEO was founded in 1991 by David Kelley (a professor at Stanford University, founder of the Stanford d.school) and the Briton Bill Moggrige. Their collective, multi-disciplinary approach to innovation very quickly attracted attention thanks to their many publications and, in particular, the great success of the book “The Art of Innovation,” written by the firm’s General Manager, Tom Kelley, and published in 2001.

IDEO’s teams consist of designers, engineers, researchers, sociologists and ethnologists. These teams are mixed, that is to say they cleverly blend a variety of individuals who tend to think with the right-hand side of their brains with others in which the left hemisphere dominates and who work in close cooperation with one another. These teams work to discover the customer and the customer’s experience as a consumer. IDEO encourages curiosity and stresses the value of looking at users in new ways, for example by considering the two extremities of a Gaussian distribution in order to study users who live, think and consume differently from others. Their highly structured method is based on what they call the major steps of innovation: inspiration, ideation (emergence of the idea), iteration and, finally, implementation.
Through their successes, IDEO’s directors have proved that everyone can become more creative and that a good designer is someone who is able to identify patterns in a mish-mash of data and then draw together new ideas based on fragments of information and exhibit empathy with persons different from him or herself. Furthermore, they have shown that all this can be learned.

Nowadays, Design Thinking is taught at Stanford, Harvard and the MIT. Despite the fact that France was very slow to understand the importance of this movement, Design Thinking is now taught at the Ecole des Ponts & Chaussées (Véronique Hillen) and has more recently been offered as a course at the Ecole Polytechnique.

In addition, a number of enterprises have adopted a structured approach and achieved encouraging results. In 2009, Renault set up an organization named LCI (Laboratoire Collaboratif de l’Innovation), a small-scale structure that nevertheless possesses the tools it needs and which has recorded spectacular results, with three of its projects being incorporated in the vehicle model plan during its first year of operation.

At the start of the 21st century, designers have finally found their rightful position, not as decorative artists or solitary geniuses lost in the industrial or commercial world, but as key players within a collaborative team, just as Enzo Ferrari described back in the 1970s.

**Design and industry**

Even though Design has fully established its place in major enterprises, within the teams responsible for developing the product, and through the participation of designers, even during early exploratory phases, in multidisciplinary teams where they
deploy all the methods made available by Design Thinking, its role goes far beyond that.

Indeed, Design also has the upstream task of monitoring design tendencies at the global level and, in this way, of complementing the studies undertaken by Marketing. Then, when the exploratory phases have been successful concluded, it has the task of developing scenarios subject to the three constraints that designers must respect: feasibility, viability and desirability.

It also has the responsibility of defending the product to ensure it benefits from the highest possible level of perceived quality and of driving the business’s competences in this field, which is vital for competitiveness.

Finally, for over twenty years, Design has usually been represented on companies' management committees, thus indicating its perceived status as a key strategic partner. On several occasions, I have heard that Design managers have been called on to undertake cross-disciplinary missions in addition to their primary functions. This is the case of Jonathan Ive at Apple or Philippe Picaud when he was Design Director at Décathlon, as well as of Nissan’s Shiro Nakamura who headed, with considerable success, a team entrusted with the task of improving gender ratios at management level.

I myself directed Renault’s Delta cross-disciplinary team for five years. This team was given the task of reducing development and industrialization cycles and then of implementing the results of the performance study undertaken by the MIT on Renault’s behalf. The
approach we adopted at the time was similar to that used now in the field of Design Thinking. Later, I was to spend four years as Quality and Design Director and, if I choose this example drawn from my own experience, it is because it provides a good illustration of how mentalities have shifted and indicates that we are now far removed from the perception of the designer as an artist or decorator.

Design is a key element in the creation of values, not only in the field of product development but also in the dissemination of a method of operation, quasi-cultural in nature, that has enriched the practices employed in the engineering sector. One of the best examples here is the introduction of the spirit of experimentation that is so dear to the design world through the production of rapid prototypes which enable the team to move forwards swiftly.

That is why when multidisciplinary teams meet to share their ideas in so-called brainstorming sessions, there is a noticeable change in mood during a project:

1. Hope during the information gathering phase;
2. Doubt during the categorization of the data and the search for models and patterns;
3. Confidence when the idea emerges more tangibly and the first (quick) prototype is created.

This new culture of rapid prototyping, involving the production of so-called “demonstrators”, is becoming indispensable and it should be remembered that a prototype is a success not when it works without problems but as soon as it teaches us something
new.

Finally, the quicker ideas are made tangible, the sooner they can be evaluated and, in the worst case, be abandoned.

To summarize, we could say: to progress, it is necessary to test the idea. To test it, we have to prototype. This is now part of the common ground inherited by engineers and designers alike.

If the role of the designer has changed, if he is no longer this solitary genius who imposes his tastes in ways that blend with emerging cultural currents based on his transient moods and heightened sensitivities, he is nevertheless still someone who has the privilege of possessing the gift of drawing placed in the service of a purpose.

As Henri Matisse said: “Drawing is to give precise shape to an idea. Drawing is to give precision to thought.”

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Alan says:
September 7, 2012 at 2:13 pm

It would have been nice if you had spelled Bill Moggridge’s name correctly.

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