



a right touch

‘Although I like to make things, I have never wanted to be a designer-maker. I have never liked the overindulged style of designer-makers. Successful products are the result of collaboration – and designers need clients to inform what they’re doing.’



‘Occasionally spontaneous design works, partly because there is an element of furniture design that’s close to fashion, with its energy and personality. But as you move away from freestanding pieces and get into more specialist markets you can’t rely on spontaneity to work.’

Pigeonholing is bad practice (just ask any pigeon), but we think of Barry Jenkins as one of this country’s leading office furniture designers – which he is and he isn’t. Over the years Barry’s worked on airline cabin environments for Virgin Atlantic, Varig and others; street furniture for the likes of Adshel and Ollerton; notable signage and wayfinding for Liverpool City Council, not to mention products for other areas of the building sector such as boilers for Potterton and loo cubicles for Armitage Venesta. Indeed, his business, which sits between product design and architecture, works across four sectors: ▶▶▶▶▶





workplace, urban, travel and retail design. Currently there's a shedload of work on for the Liverpool Culture Company, John Lennon Airport and also heavy involvement in the South Coast Design Forum.

Having said all that, there are few people in this country with a CV to match Barry Jenkins' when it comes to designing office furniture – and in particular commercially viable office furniture



systems with work for Asher, Logic, OEP, Caplan, Hille and now Arenson. His thoughts, therefore, on such things as the design process, technology convergence, clients, commerce and Rothko are instructive.

'I've always been interested in the consultative aspect of design. To start with, no two clients are the same. There is a process, and one has to be wary of consulting arrogance, but my approach is to look at things widely, and to modify according to the client. That's the key, I think, to successful collaboration. One of our clients, for example, is Ollerton: makers of high quality, much imitated, street furniture. Ollerton is a passionate company, they do what they do, they have their own culture, they understand design – but the conventional design process is inappropriate for them. What they do is skill based rather than CAD based. It's what works for them. As a result the decisions in that process are influenced by that attitude. It's refreshing – I'm not a technology Luddite at all, but the technological approach wouldn't work for them. It sums up my consultative approach to design, which is to be flexible.

'Our most recent project, the Touch furniture system, just launched by Arenson, has a strong commercial focus. It's competitive in workstation clusters, based on a light, efficient structure. The main drivers in the brief were to address planning constraints, as well as working well as a system and as a stand-alone desk. It's got a different

▶▶▶▶taught me a lot. He has a profound sense of economy which pervades everything. Not designing on a shoestring but more a sense of efficiency, which is a very different thing altogether. It made a massive impression on me – I think about that every day.’

Some 14 years working with Paul Stead at PSD made a huge impact on Barry’s career after his period working under Kinsman and then Reeves. Covering all aspects of design including consumer goods, transport, urban design and the workplace, PSD Associates grew to be a multidisciplinary firm employing 70 people until its acquisition by Cordient and eventual consumption by Fitch Worldwide. The subsequent creation of Broome Jenkins sees Barry Jenkins as a contented man. A varied portfolio of clients on sectors spanning various disciplines, passionate involvement in the South Coast Design Forum alongside luminaries such as Wayne Hemingway and little to gripe about except certain people who don’t value design. At the risk of finishing on a moan – Barry’s demeanour is entirely positive – we’ll quote the valid comments of a designer who understands commercial reality better than most.

‘There is an element within commerce that expects designers should risk everything for a new product and not get paid. I’m partly talking about free pitching, partly about royalties. If a designer makes an approach with a product he’s initiated then fair enough. But if a client comes to a designer with a brief, it is reasonable to expect they are comfortable with the financial risk and commitment. Lawyers or toolmakers would not be treated like this. But crucially working closely with a client on a brief specific to them delivers more commercial opportunity. We have walked away from projects where there is no appreciation for the commercial realities of the design process. We are suspicious of potential clients who say ‘Give us some sketches, we’ll do the rest’ – this shows a lack of understanding of the design process.’

And if anybody understands collaboration and the design process, it’s Barry Jenkins ●

