

Working progress

Steve Welch talked to **Barry Jenkins** at **BroomeJenkins** about combining his experience of designing products for manufacture, with an understanding of how to make different types of environments work

Whilst product designer Barry Jenkins did not specifically set up his company BroomeJenkins in 2003 to specialise in designing for the workplace, its clients are now exclusively drawn from the contract furniture sector. "My aim with BroomeJenkins was to combine my experience of designing products for manufacture, with an understanding of how to make different types of environments work," explains Barry Jenkins, director of BroomeJenkins.

Having had a varied career, from starting out as a young designer at design firm Fether and Partners, five years with Rodney Kinsman, to a 14-year stint at PSD Associates, Jenkins has designed a wide range of products from small consumer products, housewares and consumer electronics, through to urban design, aircraft interiors and small architectural structures. The acquisition of PSD Associates by Cordiant Communications Group was one of the catalysts that set Jenkins off on the path towards establishing his own consultancy.

Soon after setting up, fellow designer Julian Evans joined him in 2004. As product designers with transferable skills they could essentially design anything but soon found their niche in workplace design. "Throughout my career, industrially manufactured furniture has been a constant aspect of my work and something that comes naturally to

me and my long-term collaborator, Julian Evans," says Jenkins.

BroomeJenkins' approach to furniture design is far from creating another item of furniture as a craft piece or styling exercise. Rather, the design team look at how a product is made or how it may be used and then find opportunities to differentiate and add value.

The challenge in designing for this sector, as Jenkins argues, is that whilst all industry sectors are challenging, if not for the sheer volume of competition, the furniture sector has dynamics that make it even more so. "As cost and necessity often restrict the use of materials and processes, this means that designing a new product often falls to reinterpretation of the familiar, but with a new twist," he says.

This was the case with the Fourfold folding table designed for Ocee International, which was previewed at Orgatec in Cologne in October 2018 and officially launched at the Stockholm Furniture Fair in February 2019. Folding tables are not a new idea and almost all use the same geometry of a central beam, 'T' shaped legs and cantilevered top. The new twist with BroomeJenkins' design is that whilst it still uses the conventional folding principle, it uniquely (for a folding table) has a leg in each corner. "The success of this design solution is due to

the intrinsic shape of the leg frames allowing the table to fold easily and remain stable and compact when folded," describes Jenkins.

In all its projects, BroomeJenkins likes to be very hands on in the design process, which is crucial when it comes to solving complex 3D problems like the Fourfold. So having sketched their ideas for the design they very quickly moved into creating physical prototypes. "It is impossible for us to think about developing an idea without making physical trials and models, as a part of our process, no matter how crude the trials may be. We have limited workshop resources, although we use them to good effect," says Jenkins.

In this project, the design team initially explored using rough wire models to prove the principle and assess whether the design would work. From there they made some scale models before creating a full-size working prototype, which helped to validate the stability of the frame. "Physical prototyping was instrumental in helping this design move forward. It answered a lot of questions and demonstrated that this was something worth pursuing," comments Jenkins.

Once the client team was involved, further tests with people who had no prior knowledge of how the table works were conducted. The resulting feedback helped them to further refine and adjust the geometry of the frame.

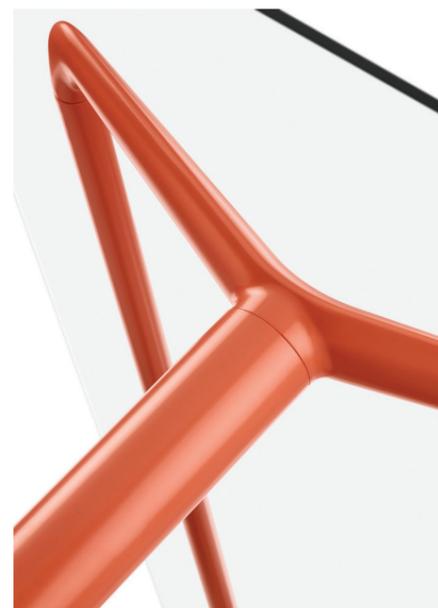
Below | Barry Jenkins & Julian Evans



Below | Boss ACDC



Below | Herman Miller Paragraph



Whilst timeframes can differ from project to project, the timeframe for this design was very rapid and resulted in an intense design process. It was barely a year from rough mock-up to fully resolved product and patent application.

To ensure the design was well engineered and worked reliably, the relationship with Ocee International's design engineer was essential. As Jenkins says, the role of the designer differs to how it was when he first started his career when there was a distinct difference between design and engineering in terms of discipline. "Designers can no longer ignore engineering and so we need to deliver a far more complete package than I would have done 15 to 20 years ago," admits Jenkins.

"Although the use of 3D CAD means that we can apply greater scrutiny to what we do, it

also means that we have to go further into the engineering. It's not just about creating a visual ambition it's actually proving that the design is going to work."

For this reason, BroomeJenkins likes to work in mutual collaboration as part of a wider team and relishes the opportunity to work with its clients' designers, engineers and product specialists and marketing departments. As Jenkins says, this really ensures that a product has the best chance of success.

This is how the relationship works with its two longest serving clients: Herman Miller, who they started working with in 2005, and Boss Design Group, who have been a client since 2011. Similar relationships have been established with newer clients including Icon and Ocee International. "Given the increasing specialised nature of the work

we do, it is inevitable that we work with a few but highly crucial clients," says Jenkins.

Having worked in workplace design for many years, Jenkins has seen various trends come and go and is familiar with the constantly evolving ideas about the workplace, including the debate about the benefits of open plan offices.

"Although open plan was symbolic of throwing off the hierarchical nature of offices, today with an interest in mental health in the workplace, it raises questions about the employees well-being, acoustic privacy and quiet space to concentrate to reduce stress," says Jenkins.

Of course, another trend that has been predicted for many years is the paperless office, although whether this is achievable is another matter. However, to a large extent, many files can now be stored digitally. Whilst this may

Below | Icon Bedouin



free-up floor space by reducing traditional storage, employees still have things to store and alternatives to the lateral file unit.

"Open shelving is something that we predicted would become part of the workplace culture back in 2012. Whilst we may not need as much paper, we still need storage space in the office for gym bags, packed lunches, cycle helmets, running shoes, laptops etc. One expression of where to store it has been shown in the recent growth in grid systems, which are used architecturally to create zones in the office," describes Jenkins.

The ability to stand and work is regarded as beneficial both for productivity and health, and led to the growing use of height adjustable tables and desks. Launched in February this year for Boss Design Group, the ACDC height adjustable table



range offers the user the freedom to choose a range of seated and standing postures for meeting, collaborating and working.

As with all its work, BroomeJenkins achieved differentiation by creating a beautifully resolved product in terms of structure and form with particular consideration being paid to the treatment of the underside, including the frame, control housing and the cable management shroud. "Importantly, to address the desired level of refinement, the design considered how the frame looks from below, because at the higher range of adjustment, the frame and cable management is highly exposed," says Jenkins.

The ACDC collection consists of the height adjustable collection (AC) and its static counterpart (DC), both of which are available in a range of

sizes, materials, finishes and colour options.

While BroomeJenkins is predominantly focussed on designing furniture for the workplace, Jenkins says that to balance this industry focus the agency has until recently, undertaken work in the public sector with local authorities to develop strategies and design solutions that cover tourism, urban regeneration and place making. "Creating a sense of place, a term used in the urban context, has many parallels with the work we do in the workplace," says Jenkins.

"It is about creating the setting for unique cultures to develop and thrive. It is about enabling and supporting human activity and it is about designing physical assets and amenities - or 'products'. The work we have done with local authorities has therefore fed into our



strategic thinking about the changing workplace to complement the tactical aspect of designing a particular product."

In the past year, BroomeJenkins has had several product launches in close succession. In addition to the Fourfold table for Ocee International and the ACDC for Boss Design Group, there has been Paragraph, a volume storage product for Herman Miller, and Bedouin, a new mobile screen for Icon. Other product launches are planned for later in the year.

This may look like a prolific period for the agency, however, it is just the way it has fallen. It is the result of this small agency putting the work in and whilst their product design skills may be transferable to other sectors they have certainly found a niche that suits them very well. | www.broomejenkins.com

Below | Ocee Design FourFold

