

Chapter One

WHAT IS DESIGN?

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING...

'Design' is one of those words that we use a lot without examining its real meaning. In the context of this book, we're talking about a creative process that produces an end result: innovative products, beautiful rooms, eye-catching graphics, exciting new fashions, etc.

Note those two words, 'creative' and 'process'. They are key to the success of any designer. You can't be a designer unless you have some degree of creative talent and the ability to 'see' in a way that positively impacts on other people. Neither can you be a successful designer unless you have the discipline to work through the design process, to draft your ideas over and over again, and to meet strict constraints imposed by the people who'll use your designs.

IS DESIGN THE CAREER FOR YOU?

On the following page is a multiple-choice question. Answer honestly and tick all the answers that apply to you.

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You're thinking of a career in design because:

- a you've always liked drawing things.
 - b you met someone in a pub who said he was a designer, drove an Audi convertible, made more than £100,000 a year and never went into his office before noon.
 - c you helped your friend redecorate her house and she thought your ideas were really, really good.
 - d you want to be a 'creative'.
 - e none of the above.
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Hopefully your response was 'e'. If it was any of the other options, you're likely to struggle to earn a living and be very disappointed by the work.

Don't get the wrong idea. A career in design can be rewarding, exciting and varied. It can introduce you to stimulating people, and give you plenty of opportunities to express your ideas to a large audience. Most of the designers who contributed to this book wouldn't trade their careers for anything but a Lottery rollover win. But one point they were all eager to make was that design as a career choice involves hard work and a firm grasp of business principles. It's not a pastime for dilettantes.

There are thousands of designers working in the UK. Some work alone, others are employed by large corporations. Some *are* earning in excess of £100,000; others are barely making ends meet. Some design products; others design work processes. Some wear Paul Smith suits when they go to their open-plan, city-centre offices; others wear their pyjamas and work on the kitchen table. This is an industry that is full of variety and contradictions.

The important word in that last sentence is 'industry'. Design is a business process with a specific purpose.

It's important to be realistic about what a career in design involves because this is a very competitive field in which to work. An awful lot of

people think they'd like to be designers but only a few genuinely succeed in making a good living from it. Ironically, the explosion in the number of design courses offered by higher education institutions is contributing to the problem. There are more graduates than jobs, and it's harder than ever to get that all-important first break.

If these words of caution haven't put you off, then you're already on the right track because you have obviously thought realistically about why you think this is the career choice for you.

Let's try that multiple choice again. Tick all the answers that apply to you.

The real purpose of design – and that includes engineering design and architecture – is to get someone to do something, to create an action or a reaction from an audience. It's not about your preferences, but about appealing to others. If you love colours and want to express yourself, then go into commercial or fine art.

(Ian Loseby, Arris)



You're thinking of a career in design because:

- a you have a genuine passion for innovation and for coming up with new ways of looking at the world.
 - b you have a good eye for colour, shape and scale.
 - c you already show talent for art and design, and have started building a portfolio for your own pleasure.
 - d you enjoy using computer software.
 - e you understand that good design can make the difference between a product or service succeeding or failing.
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Hopefully you ticked all of them! If so, you're ready to start investigating careers in design and finding out just what's involved.

SO WHAT IS DESIGN?

In January 2009, Royal Mail launched a series of ten stamps featuring classic British designs of the twentieth century. The set included pictures of:

- the Supermarine Spitfire, the Battle of Britain fighter aircraft designed by R.J. Mitchell
- the miniskirt, designed by Mary Quant in the 1960s
- the Mini car, designed by Sir Alec Issigonis, which became both a fashion statement and a means of transport
- the anglepoise lamp, designed by George Carwardine, the first desk lamp that really did its job
- Concorde, the supersonic jet capable of twice the speed of sound, designed by Aerospatiale and BAC
- the K2 telephone kiosk, the bright-red and glass telephone box designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott
- the polypropylene chair, designed by Robin Day and used in public buildings throughout the world
- Penguin Books classic book jacket design by Edward Young
- the London Underground map that Harry Beck designed, based on an electrical wiring diagram
- the Routemaster bus designed by Douglas Scott and Colin Curtis, which became a symbol of London.

These stamps highlight different areas of design – vehicles and aircraft, fashion, products, furniture and graphics – in which British designers have excelled. This country has always had a reputation for innovation, and throughout history our designs have served as prototypes for style trends that have flourished across the world.

Launching the stamps for Royal Mail, Mary Quant said: 'I am highly honoured that the banana split dress with a mini skirt has been included

in the Royal Mail Design Classics issue and to be amongst such great company. Britain has the best art and design schools in the world and this attracts students from around the globe. The stamps are absolute design classics.'

What makes these designs iconic is the way that they combine style with function. The articles are good to look at – and they serve a practical purpose. They are aesthetically pleasing and easy to use. Arguably, that is the secret of good design.

Ultimately, design is about problem-solving. The design process begins when a problem or need is identified. Then the designers work through a structured sequence in which they research information and explore ideas until they come up with a potential solution.

What design isn't about is supporting your own ego. It's about helping your clients to achieve something they need to achieve, not about you coming up with brilliant ideas that will make you world-famous – or about buying that Paul Smith suit.

Of course, not everyone agrees with this definition. Many designers and pundits seek to elevate design to an art form.

In 2004, there was a major row at London's Design Museum when Chairman James Dyson – designer of the famous 'cyclonic' vacuum cleaner – resigned because of the museum's change in direction. He believed that Museum Director Alice Rawsthorn had betrayed the museum's mission to 'encourage serious design of the manufactured object'. Dyson thinks that design is 'how something works, not how it

Design has been defined as the process that links creativity and innovation. It does this by shaping ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Innovation – the successful exploitation of ideas – requires the use of design to develop new products, services or processes. This interdependency is why design is now increasingly seen as a vital part of innovation along with business and technological expertise.

(Source: Design Council Briefing 01 – 'The impact of design on business')

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looks – the design should evolve from the function’. His vacuum cleaners are iconic examples of modern product design – but essentially they suck up dirt. Rawsthorn’s agenda was somewhat different and her exhibition programme included Manolo Blahnik shoes, typography from *Harper’s Bazaar* and the work of 1950s flower arranger Constance Spry. Dyson believed that she was elevating style at the expense of substance.

What this row did was to show how divided the design world is about its role and function. So the answer to the question ‘What is design?’ is up to the individual. In this book, we’re looking at it from a business point of view because we want to help would-be designers start their careers – and to do that they have to be realistic about what the work involves.

The designers we interviewed for this book made the same point over and over again: design is a complex mix of creativity, communication and business skills. As Jonathan Armstead, who runs creative branding solutions agency bluestone design, says: ‘Design is a funny industry. Obviously the creative part is paramount – but it’s also about producing solutions that are functional and affordable. You can’t afford to be precious about your ideas. You have to listen to clients – and ultimately what determines everything is cost.’

His thoughts are echoed by Ian Loseby, from branding agency Arris:

To be a designer, you have to be a problem-solver – design is a problem-solving discipline rather than a decorative process. I enjoy solving other people’s problems, seeing things from a different perspective, thinking differently and getting the response that everybody is looking for. I think my main driver is seeing clients happy because their problem has been solved or they’ve done well out of the design solution.

What they – and many others – are saying is that successful designers have their feet firmly on the ground. They understand the basic business principles that drive their clients’ organisations, they can balance a budget and they can communicate their ideas convincingly.

BIG BUSINESS?

Although the term 'design' is often used generically, the industry itself covers many different areas. The Design Council identifies six major disciplines.

- 1** Communications design (graphics, brand, print, information design, corporate identity)
- 2** Product and industrial design (consumer/household products, furniture, industrial design (including automotive design, engineering design, medical products))
- 3** Interior and exhibition design (retail design, office planning/workplace design, lighting, display systems, exhibition design)
- 4** Fashion and textiles design
- 5** Digital and multimedia design (website, animation, film and television idents, digital design, interaction design)
- 6** Other (a term used to cover advertising, aerospace design, building design, landscape design, jewellery design, mechanical design, etc.).

The Design Council has compiled a bank of facts and figures about the design industry. As with all statistics, they are pretty much out of date before they are published but they do give a useful insight into the scale of the design industry and its demographic.

- 185,500 people work in design in the UK. That figure includes 'non-creatives' such as managers and administrators.
- The turnover of UK design businesses totalled £11.6 billion in 2004–05. This sum is spread across a lot of companies: 77% of design businesses have a turnover of less than £100,000 a year.
- More than half of all UK design businesses work in communications, digital and multimedia design.

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- Traditionally this is an industry that provides scope for freelancers and small groups of associates: there are 47,400 freelance and self-employed designers and 59% of design consultancies employ fewer than five people.

At the time of the last analysis (Labour Force Survey 2003–04) the design industry was still conforming to the stereotype of being dominated by young white men in the south-east of England.

- 62% of designers are under 40.
- 61% of designers are men.
- 6% of designers are from minority ethnic groups.
- 31% of design businesses are based in London; 40% of the larger businesses employing more than 250 staff are based in London.

(All statistics taken from the Design Council, Design Industry Research www.designcouncil.org.uk)

Although statistics need to be treated with caution, there are some facts that emerge that may impact on your career.

- Certain areas of design are a good career choice for people who like working either alone or in small organisations. Nine out of ten design consultancies in interior and exhibition design, and in digital and multimedia design, have fewer than five employees.
- Although the design industry is concentrated in London and the south of England, designers themselves can work almost anywhere. You'll find small businesses and consultancies in almost every town across the UK – and a lot of freelancers working in isolated locations, from Land's End to John O'Groats, and overseas. As long as you have good communication links and are willing to work 'down the wire', you can maintain contact with your clients and stay in business.
- Designers have opportunities to diversify. Many consultancies and freelancers work across more than one discipline. According to the Design Council, 50% of all businesses working in communications

also work in digital and multimedia design. Although this can be demanding – as a practitioner you'll have to work hard to keep abreast of changes in consumer preferences and technology – it means that you can adapt your skills and run less risk of them becoming obsolete. So, for example, many traditional book designers and illustrators have moved into website design and production.

- The public is design aware. When we buy something, we're as likely to judge it on its aesthetic appeal as its durability. Whether it's fashion, interiors, mobile phones, or cars, we want them to look good. That means there is a constant demand for design services. Obviously no industry is recession-proof, but the services of a talented designer with a firm grasp of business principles will always be in demand.

Jonathan Armstead thinks that an economic downturn isn't a bad thing for the design industry: 'Companies will continue to invest in design because they recognise the need to make more noise, and that they have to do more to promote their unique qualities. That's an opportunity for companies like ours to move forward.'

THE DESIGN COUNCIL

Your first port of call to find out about different design sectors and disciplines should be the Design Council website. It's packed with useful, up-to-date information that provides a great introduction to the industry (www.designcouncil.org.uk).

Established more than 60 years ago, the government-funded Design Council is the national strategic body for design.

The website is a mine of information. It includes a series of papers on topics including how to write a design brief, ergonomics, computer-aided design,

We believe design can help people to do what they do, better ... we promote the use of design throughout the UK's businesses and public services. We demonstrate that design can play a vital role in strengthening our economy and improving our society.

(Source: www.designcouncil.org.uk)

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materials, trends and market research. The 'Live Issues' section has essays from industry movers and shakers on topical subjects, and its case studies examine the influence of design on business success and our lifestyles in general.

There is also a section on the site that features designers talking about their work and outlining their working routines – invaluable if you want to get a flavour of different disciplines.

Part of the Design Council's remit is to carry out research on the impact of design. *The Value of Design Factfinder* contains research from the *Design Council National Survey of Firms 2005 and Added Value Research 2007*. It is worth examining because it offers some valuable information about the way that businesses view design and purchase their design services. Their research indicates:

- a positive relationship between valuing design and growing a business: businesses that place less importance on design only grew moderately, stayed the same size or shrank in size
- just over half of the UK's businesses use designers, with one in five commissioning external agencies. However, employing designers internally is the preferred method
- personal recommendation is the most popular way for businesses to find and choose a designer
- nine out of ten businesses buy all their design from within the UK, and don't shop for services abroad. The same proportion is satisfied with the services that they buy.

Don't dismiss these statistics as irrelevant to you. They give a snapshot of the industry and suggest which disciplines are likely to increase in demand for creative, qualified and experienced designers.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT MONEY...

We've deliberately avoided including specific salary information in this book because it's hard to find any information that is valid in the long term. The amount that designers earn varies wildly depending on:

- what discipline they work in
- whether they work for a large or small organisation
- where they work (salaries are higher in London and the south-east)
- the state of the economy.

However, we accept that anyone considering a new career is interested in salary, so here is some *very general* financial information.

Salaries are not brilliant, particularly when you start out as a designer. There is a lot of competition for jobs, and this is a creative industry where people are expected to work for love rather than money. If you become a partner or director of a successful agency then you could be raking in the dosh – but it's unlikely, particularly in the current economic climate.

- Junior designers can expect a salary of between £13,000 and £20,000, depending on where they work. Many young designers have to subsidise their salaries when they start out. Competition for first jobs is such that some agencies report young graduates offering to work for free for a few months so they can get work experience.
- Middle-ranking designers with two to three years' experience can anticipate salaries in the region of £22,000 to £28,000.
- Senior designers could hope to be earning £40,000 to £60,000.
- At partner or director level, your earnings will relate to the company's profits, so the sky is the limit – or you could be counting the pennies.

This information is very, very general. Organisations that employ designers vary enormously so there are no rules. If you go to work for a large company that has an in-house product design department, you may have a formal salary structure, pension plan, private health insurance, on-site gym and health club, and all the perks of life in a corporate environment. If you work for a small agency (as many designers do), your boss may treat you all to a drink on Friday night to thank you for your hard work – and that will be the full extent of your 'perks'.

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In the next chapter we'll look in more detail at the different fields of design that this book covers and what factors you should consider when you're choosing an area in which to specialise. Meanwhile, here are a couple of suggestions for things that you can do to broaden your knowledge of the design field.

Take action

- Think carefully about whether you have the dedication and persistence, as well as the creative talent, to carve out a career for yourself in design. We suggest that you talk to qualified people who can advise you about your career choices, such as school, college or university careers advisors.
- Think about how your career ambitions marry up with your personal commitments. Will you be able to go where the jobs are? Can you deal (both financially and emotionally) with job insecurity and the fact that it may take a long time before you earn a decent salary?
- Start your own research. Use the Internet (though, as we've already said, this can be frustrating because there's so much information out there and a lot of it is irrelevant) and libraries to find out about current trends in design. Get copies of some of the main design magazines, such as *Design Week*, *Wallpaper* or *Icon*, and look at the areas they focus on.
- If you're seriously considering a career in design, make every effort to visit the Design Museum in London. Twenty-five years ago, Terence Conran established the forerunner of the Design Museum, the Boilerhouse, in the basement of the Victoria & Albert Museum. The Design Museum is now one of the world's leading museums devoted to contemporary design in every form, from furniture to graphics, and architecture to industrial design. Its permanent collection includes over 1,000 pieces of contemporary and twentieth-century design,

including selections of domestic artefacts such as radios, computers, typewriters and chairs. Depending on what is on show at any particular time, you could see highlights from the collection such as Clive Sinclair's electric vehicle, the C5, the Hot Berta Kettle designed by Philippe Starck, and the recently acquired ambitious One Laptop Per Child by Yves Behar.

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