'If I fall asleep on the flight, can you take my socks off? It stops me snoring'

The beauty of service design, *page 50*

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Why UK designers need an extreme makeover

Designer *Rachel Abrams* argues that creativity alone can't protect British design from global competition. The industry needs to establish a new role and a new mindset

Ten years on from Cool Britannia, sobered by a globalised economy and by urgent calls to live and work sustainably, the design industry is on alert again. Not quite red, but definitely flashing amber.

If it is all going so well for British design, why are we having a bit of a wobble? In the last 20 years, Britain's creative professionals have reinvented themselves to survive and thrive. Designers defeated the 1950s B movie-style threat posed by desktop publishing in the late 1980s and recovered from recession in the early 1990s to be lauded the world over for creative edge and inventiveness.

High Level Skills For Higher Value, the recent plan from the Design Council and Creative & Cultural Skills, shows that the UK creative industries generated £11.6bn revenue in 2004-05 – and £550m in exports. Design is popular at school, accounting for the lowest truancy rate at Key Stage 4 and attracting 60,000 students (8,000 from abroad) to further and higher education in 2005-06. Yet there are rumbles of distant thunder. Is it just that designers' grumbling, once pub chatter, is broadcast through blogs? Or do some things really need fixing?

What designers do all day

Designers still do pretty much what they've always done. They still apply specialised skills, draw on a range of insights, make decisions based on a set of values and follow a shared process to translate their creativity and trained, visually acute eye into effective work for clients.

This can sound like alchemy, hocus-pocus even, to the uninitiated. The popular stereotype has designers, headphones on, sipping overpriced lattes, as they flip back and forth between webmail and the software package *du jour*, joking about the noise deadlines make as they whizz past.
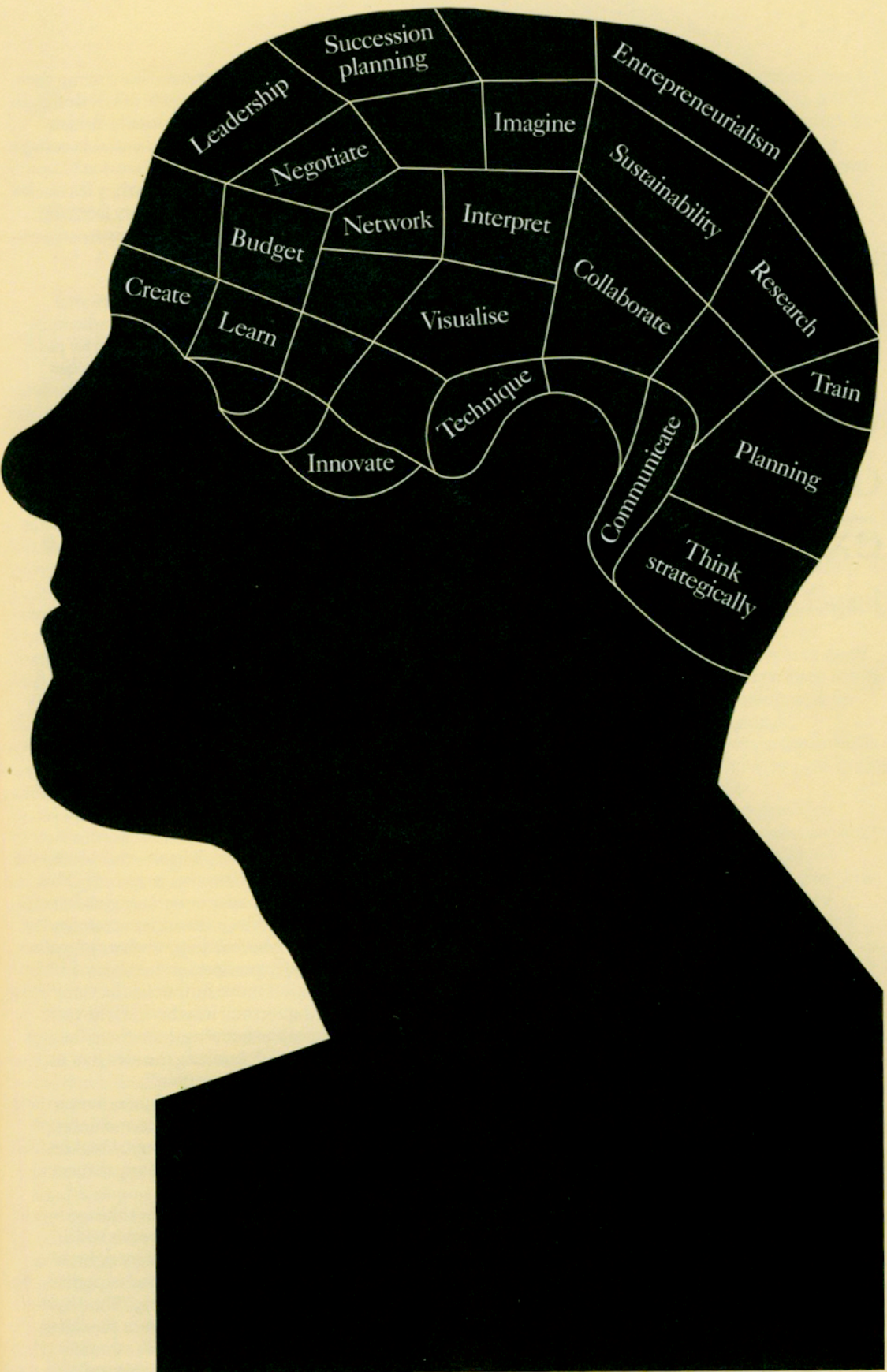
Design is too much fun to be folded in to plain old business, is neither wholly scientific or artistic and has a less prescriptive career path than architecture. So, just what kind of profession is design?

Design Council research suggests that the industry's work culture, job definitions, quality of training and career development vary enormously but the profile and location of British designers doesn't vary enough.

The mythical 'typical' designer's studio comes in all shapes and sizes. Of around 185,000 UK design professionals, 77,000 are working in in-house teams and departments and 108,000 are working in consultancies or freelance. Consultancies with less than five staff now account for 85% of companies in the industry.

Job definitions and career paths are equally open to interpretation: there is no professional standard or accreditation for promotion. Only a quarter of design graduates start work as designers (many put these skills to use elsewhere in business); the range of further and higher education courses that fall under 'design' is vast yet the only professionals who do as little on-the-job training are artists, and only 30% of designers belong to any trade body or organisation.

The British design industry isn't small. Nor is it perfectly formed. UK designers are usually based in London and the south east, and typically (over 60%) are white men under 40. The stats make dismal »

'It may be the designer's duty to suppress any desire for self expression'

Jasper Morrison

reading for women designers who want to run their own business. Shockingly, only 6% of UK designers are from ethnic minorities. Structurally, British design is in danger of becoming an unstable cottage industry. Over 50% of owners say they don't know what will happen to their firm when they leave – not an encouraging statistic as the industry faces the most competitive global market in history.

What has changed?

The design industry must respond to external challenges as well as to its internal contradictions: the economic clout of 'Chindia', demand for more sustainable design practice and saturated mass markets require designers to be more competitive, flexible and customer experience-focused than ever.

Sites like MySpace and YouTube have begun to nibble away at the idea that design is done exclusively by designers. 'Real' designers resent every man and his Apple Mac setting up shop as designers and worry that a glut of design graduates with variable marketable skills might further dilute the quality of creative output.

Projects are becoming more complex, interdisciplinary and international; customers are more discerning. To reinterpret an observation from John Barratt, chief executive of US design group Teague, interviewed on the blog Design And Emotion, it is no longer enough to satisfy people's visceral 'That'll do, I need one of those' needs – commercial products and public services must offer behavioural and emotional benefits, so people say things like, 'The more I use it, the more I love it!' and 'Wait till I show my friends what I use'.

Business is at ease with the concept of innovation, if not with design itself – the d-word still sounds too airy-fairy for number crunchers. This agenda of creativity as an economic engine frames a new role for design. The industry is encouraged to contribute within genuinely innovative enterprises and design effective products and services. In this approach, designers move further up the value chain on projects, bringing their insights in at the early definition phases and keeping them there through implementation, so debunking the idea that they're simply there to style and colour in.

The implications? British designers have to hold on to the strengths that differentiate and define the profession – while responding to policy-makers' and employers' calls to adapt in other ways, to meet new goals on other timetables.

There's a tension here. It can feel like too much to ask. While the structures of, and roles within, businesses are changing, designers are right to be protective of their creativity, craft and expertise – the things that make British design great. But why don't more designers immediately embrace the call to become change agents in a dynamic, streamlined, strategic, collaborative, innovative culture?

Staff who had job-related training in the last 13 weeks — %

	%
Designers	16
Artists	16
Media	22
Architects	36
Management consultants	36
Civil engineers	37

Source: Annual Labour Survey, 2002-03

Which skills do designers lack the most? — %

	%
Business management	72
Understanding client's business	60
Verbal communication of ideas	44
Team working	24
Drawing skills	19
Creativity	18

Source: Design Council questionnaire, 2006

There is some merit in the old 'stick to your knitting' rule: that a company should stick to what it knows best. And the change agent role will not suit some designers. Many argue that they are minding their businesses, serving clients, pushing pixels. They are used to what they do and are generally – despite the groaning on blogs – fond of how they work. Besides, their plates are pretty full already.

Why, they ask, should designers try and do everything? If designers are forced to do more strategising than implementation, there is a risk they become indistinguishable from management consultants and planners. A designer might charge for consulting, but there is a risk that they will lose what distinguishes creative expertise from other disciplines. Behaving like a management consultant isn't what drew most people to design in the first place and there are, as yet, few famous inspirational role models to change that perception.

Finally, can it be good for the economy if designers try to do everyone else's jobs too?

So now what?

Ultimately, if the design industry digs in it won't prosper. As the case for design as a catalyst for innovation is finally recognised in other industries, now is not the time for design to hide behind its professional mystique – or ignore the parts of its collective CV that don't quite cut it.

The Design Council and Creative & Cultural Skills' development plan suggests specific ideas to improve education and higher education, and launch a UK design academy to set up a framework for professional practice and influence industry, designers, consumers and government.

Alongside that, the industry must keep its insights fresh, maintain its values, keep its processes intact, polish its skills and inoculate itself against going stale, while addressing the fragility and risk

involved in running small firms that typically don't join forces, or communicate with each other, much.

Getting really good at selling what designers do best – negotiating with clients, communicating across disciplines with other kinds of designers and strategists – could do wonders for the industry's confidence and bottom line.

Such transferable, knowledge-based business skills would separate designers from the dilettantes. Refining what the industry does might raise the calibre of the best designers. In his article *Top Ten Things They Never Taught Me In Design School*, architect/ designer Michael McDonough reminds us that, "95% of any creative profession is shit work. Most of the time there is paperwork, drafting boring stuff, fact-checking, negotiating, selling, collecting money, paying taxes and so forth."

There is experience that designers can only gain by working in the industry after acquiring and rehearsing skills in education at degree level, but universities are starting to take other industry-savvy areas of training seriously.

Collaboration need not condemn the creative process to design by committee. As industrial designer Jasper Morrison suggests, "It may be the designer's duty to suppress any desire for self expression." Enterprise partnerships, where small groups unite around a client project, can keep teams flexible and made-to-measure. Building capacity together, to innovate within small groups, departments or whole design practices, can nurture a culture in which creativity can thrive so a group can offer more than the sum of its parts.

The effort to standardise the industry's job definitions, structure its career progression and keep learning and educating others about design is a collective responsibility. If designers are going to do the work the way they want to do it, it is daft to expect any one stakeholder in the profession to make all the difference.

So what will a British designer be doing 10 years from now? Having jettisoned their latte for organic tea, they could be researching on the web, booking a course on succession planning and still casting a trained eye over various client propositions.

Those propositions could be broader and more complex. Strategic insight and systematic awareness of sustainability may be as vital as traditional input on styling, form, function and drawing. A designer's ability to define unmet problems and unarticulated needs may be more crucial than ever.

No small aspiration, but with a vision and a way of realising it, the UK design industry can keep building competitive creative businesses, collaborating to ride out instability and adopting new eco-efficient, eco-effective, globally competitive design methods.

That would surely signal a green light for British creativity into the next decade. DC