

Ideas Aplenty

PearsonLloyd in a landscape of change

Even after 15 years in practice, PearsonLloyd have had the nous to do some re-jigging and re-evaluating. With a healthy studio churning out designs for many impressive brands all this time, they had no apparent reason to reflect on their modus operandi, or to revise their way of working. But they have chosen to do so. After the crash and the resulting economic and social shifts, they realised that there is another, better way to go forward, one that values research and places a degree of emotional investment in the design process, in order to reach a solution that satisfies themselves as much as the client.

ANNA BATES

“Your sketchbook from college can last 15 years”, says Tom Lloyd.

“Running out of sketchbook material, you then go through another metamorphosis”, continues his partner, Luke Pearson. “You have a wave of enlightenment about what your skills are and what you can do, and I think we’re going through this now.”

The designers are sitting around a meeting table in their London-based studio, reflecting on their 15th year of practice. They set up PearsonLloyd back in 1997 after meeting at the Royal College of Art in London. “Tom had previously studied furniture and I’d studied industrial design”, says Pearson. “Then, at the RCA, we switched. Tom, being sociable, would come up to the furniture department in the evening with a pint...” Over a succession of beer-fuelled chats, it transpired that the designers were dissatisfied with both disciplines, and they began building a manifesto of sorts: to bridge the gap between

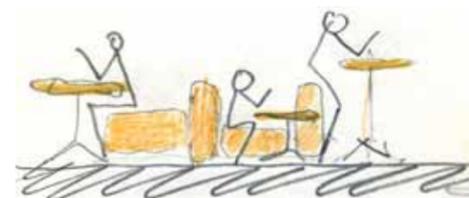
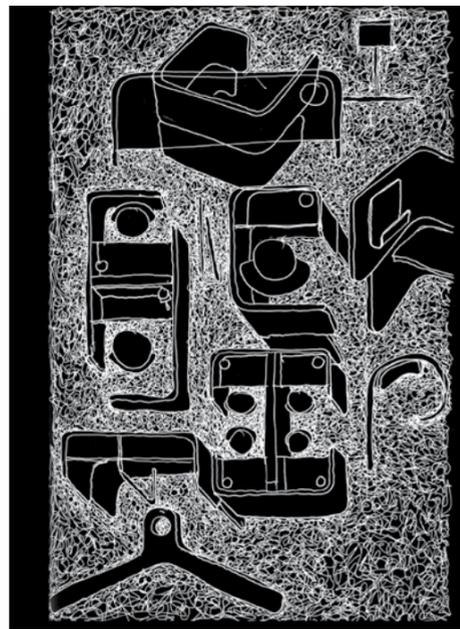
the atelier-restricted, craft-like practice of furniture design, and the market and trend-driven culture of product design.

TOWARDS A NEW STATUS QUO

They came up with the mantra “servants of the brand”. Positioning themselves against the trend for ‘star designers’, the duo set out to respond to the specific needs of each of their clients. Their plain-speaking, dependable and “signatureless” style has successfully crossed international borders and genres, rather like the furniture equivalent of Helvetica. But moments of expression – such as their playful approach to a curve, or the faux naivety of the shapes they use as building blocks – hold the eye that bit longer, at least long enough to pull in the brands. To date, there has been: a first class seat for Virgin Atlantic Airways, a business class seat and cabin for Lufthansa, and projects for Walter Knoll, Knoll International, Bernhardt, Magis, Danerka, Modus and



LUKE PEARSON AND TOM LLOYD
Photo: Mark Cocksedge



Tacchini. With their 12-strong studio, Pearson and Lloyd have clearly achieved what they set out to. So why do they talk of a metamorphosis?

“Before the crash, you’d go to Milan and it seemed like anyone could produce quite an invested product”, says Pearson. “Just go to China and buy a cheap tool. We talked about it ourselves: should we become manufacturers? Then the crash happened, and suddenly you saw that there was so much junk. You saw what the real content was, and how little there was of it.”

“The landscape has changed now”, Lloyd confers.

“People are talking about a double-dip recession, but I’m not sure about that”, says Pearson. “I just think it’s the beginning of what the status quo will be.”

BEST BEHAVIOUR

The studio has responded to these economic and social shifts by widening its client base and developing its approach: for starters, it focuses more on research now, and delays the form making “for as long as possible”, says Pearson. “You hear a lot of people talk about design thinking”, says Lloyd. “It’s an overblown term, and consequently a lot of people assume it doesn’t mean anything. But we’re doing more of this kind of work. It used to be: we need a chair, design us a chair; our practice was relatively linear regarding that process. We still do this – and we’re still happy to do it – but if you go back to the design process a bit, instead of starting with the craft of making an object, you get to a point where you make different decisions earlier-on about whether it should even be a chair, and why it will have an impact on people and behaviour.”

So what is the physical output of this rhetoric? One example is a project for Austrian office furniture



company, Bene. The brand “knew it needed something in a certain area, but they hadn’t quite defined what the space or the problem was”, says Pearson. “If we’d been myopic we could have produced break-out furniture in a traditional way. But instead, we started to speculate about behaviour. If you look at the last 100 years, the office layout hasn’t changed that much, it still looks like a factory production plant designed for a linear event. But unless you have rows of people doing similar tasks, that doesn’t serve your workforce. Today’s ‘knowledge economy’ depends on interaction and the flow of information between people, so companies need to get better at facilitating communication.”

The result of the studio’s research is PARCS, a line of products launched in 2009 and designed to assist the informal interactions that make-up the working day. Among the products is a series of multi-size modular blocks that can be arranged “and abused” as desired; to lean against, or to perch, sit or write on, as well as enclosed pods for those quick meetings that don’t require booking a room. This year, the line expanded to include DOCKLANDS, a range of enclosed workspaces to meet yet another un-met need in the workplace: quiet work time.

BAY CHAIR, 2012

DOCKLANDS, 2012
Concentration and privacy spaces

Manufacturer: Bene
www.bene.com

A CONFLUENCE OF IDEAS, 2012
Souvenir of the city of Vienna
Manufacturer: Vienna Tourist Board

Photo main image:
Mark Cocksedg



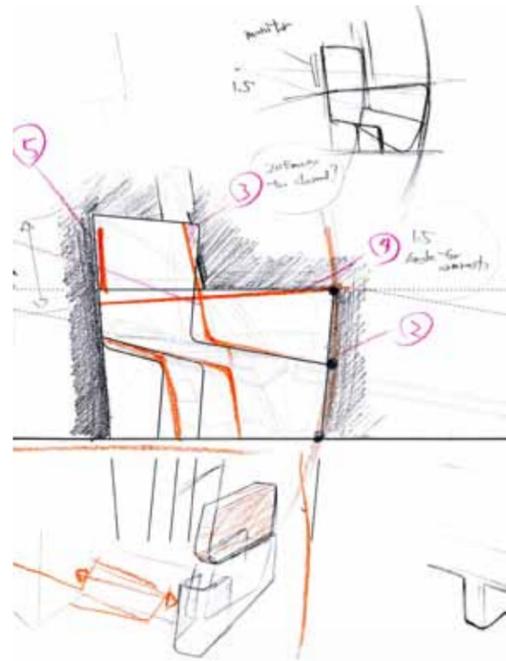
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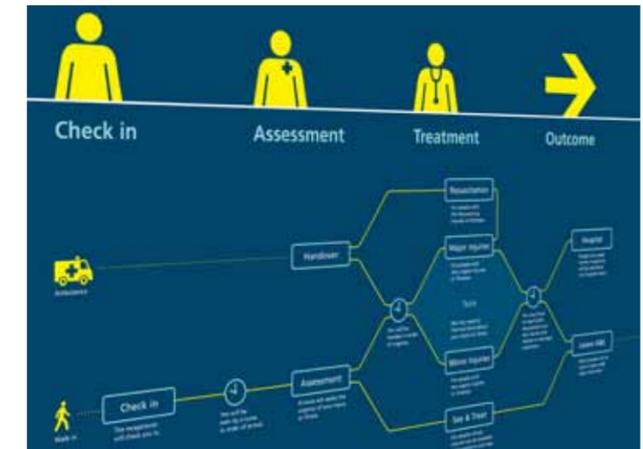
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FREEDOM

The plan is to enable companies to build the space they need, in an organic fashion: “We did a lot of research, looking at villages and the way communities build up over time, to see if we could plan informality”, says Lloyd. Our relatively new wireless landscape makes this much easier: “the culture has changed massively because technology has unlocked it”, he says. Indeed, the designers’ research led to some very profitable speculation: according to Pearson, this product line alone is the size of a medium-size company in Europe.

PearsonLloyd has made the ‘territory’ of ‘shared space’ their speciality. “If you look at our work, from transport and healthcare to offices and urban design, it’s all about how people who might not know each other interact with each other in a shared space”, Lloyd explains. Sometimes the effect is biggest when they simply tweak a small detail. The standout feature of their fully reclining business-class chair for Lufthansa, for example, is the removal of shelving surrounding the seat. The designers established that people only need total privacy around their head

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when they are lying down. This small reduction significantly changes the environment of the cabin, and customers reported feeling “freer”.

But what is particularly exciting about PearsonLloyd’s metamorphosis is seeing the studio branch into territories badly in need of design, like healthcare. The designers were invited by the Department of Health and the Design Council to pitch design solutions that could benefit three problems that cash-stripped UK hospitals are struggling to address: patient dignity, bugs, and violence towards staff in the accident and emergency department. Incredibly, they won all three.

BREAKING EVEN

From a design angle, the toughest of these briefs was the latter. One-in-ten NHS staff experiences verbal or physical abuse at the hands of patients and relatives every year, costing an estimated annual sum of £69m. A vast problem. So what can designers do? That which followed was a process of researching and of mapping behaviour in the A&E department: “In fact, the mapping solution we developed is a rep-

BUSINESS CLASS SEAT AND CABIN, 2012 (1)
Manufacturer: Lufthansa
Photography © Jens Goerlich

HOMER, 1998 (2)
Desk and storage solutions
Manufacturer: Knoll
www.knoll.com

COBI™, 2008 (1)
Designed in conjunction with Steelcase Design Studio
Manufacturer: Steelcase Inc.
www.steelcase.com

AD-LIB, 2011/2012 (2)
Manufacturer: Senator
www.senator.co.uk

MULTI-CHANNEL CITY INFORMATION SYSTEM, BATH, 2011 (3)
Client: Bath and North East Somerset

REDUCING VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION IN A&E THROUGH A BETTER EXPERIENCE, 2012 (4)
Client: Department of Health / Design Council

HEARWEAR, 2005 (5)
Client: RNID

DBO (DESIGN BUGS OUT) COMMODE, 2008 (6)
Manufacturer: Kirton Healthcare
www.kirton-dbo.co.uk



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resentation of the process we went through to understand what was going on”, says Pearson.

The map informs patients of the processes involved upon entering A&E, and displays live information on the changing status of the department and waiting times. The goal is to simply give patients a better understanding of what is happening around them. By communicating that there is order in the perceived chaos of the department, PearsonLloyd believe that anxiety – and the resultant anger – can be reduced. The project is currently being piloted in several hospitals throughout London and Southampton.

Did they enjoy this change of scenery? “We get our enjoyment when things are different and challenging”, says Pearson. “It was a politically motivated project; in terms of paying our staff, we might break even”, says Lloyd. “But for us, this work was particularly important in understanding how design can have an impact, as a broad idea.” <

pearsonlloyd.com

ELEVEN, 2011 (1)
Armchair (the range also includes a 2-seat sofa and 3-seat sofa)
Manufacturer: Alias
www.aliasdesign.it

PEARSONLLOYD STUDIO (2/3)
Photo: Mark Cocksedge

LOX CHAIR, 2010 (4)
Manufacturer: WalterKnoll
www.walterknoll.de

PLC, 2010 (5)
Dining chair (the range also includes a dining table, lounge chair and lounge table)
Manufacturer: Modus
www.modusfurniture.co.uk



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yatzer