# Thinking: Objects
## Contemporary approaches to product design

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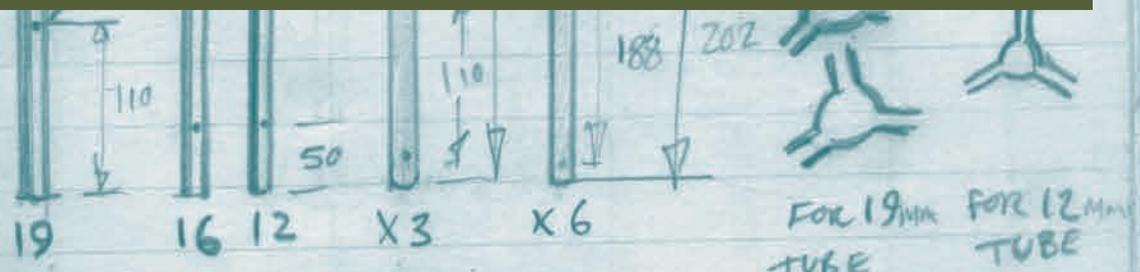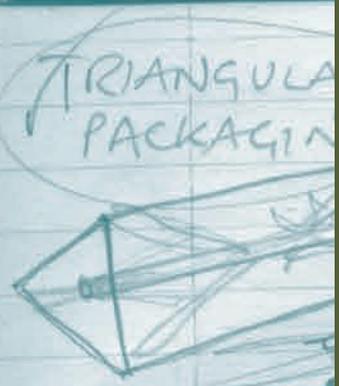
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## COMMISSION

**This section looks at the circumstances of being assigned work by a client, either as an individual or heading up a team. There is, therefore, some crossover with the context of the design consultancy, where external clients "commission" the firm to undertake projects, but here we consider this scenario from the perspective of the individual in charge rather than the employee. It examines independence as a means of enabling choices of who to work for and how to engage with them.**

### THE CHOICE OF INDEPENDENCE

"There is a certain joy to being the master of your own destiny", says designer Terence Woodgate, "I just do projects that I want to do, for the people I want to do them for." (1) Woodgate is one of many who choose to plough their own furrow in the world of product design. Considering that the frequency of decisions regarding what projects to take on as an independent designer is greater than the frequency at which those in employment change jobs, it is safe to argue that the former has greater control over the work they choose to pursue. The amount of influence they have therein, however, may differ dramatically.

Whereas the very title "designer" used to identify somebody who collaborates with clients and industry, those with critical voices who do not insist that they also have a rightful claim to the term, and are forcing the revision of this definition. Design historian and journalist Stephen Bayley proposes

that: "The entire history of painting after, say, 1830 can be understood in terms of the dilemma faced by painters: whether to be society"s picture makers or to be misunderstood visionaries." Bayley tells us that: "Dostoyevsky described this as the choice between lofty suffering and cheap happiness" (2). Under this new broader definition, designers now face a similar choice (although the suffering may be somewhat less harsh than in 1830). The options between forming and following a personal ideology still exist— making money at the points where it happens to intersect with market demand – or consciously seeking out that demand and working to fulfil it. Of course, the degree to which one can be said to have "sold out" has a lot to do with the nobility of the demand that one chooses to serve, not to mention who is doing the demanding. It's hard to shake off the perception that "you are who you work for". The principles of client and customer tend to rub off, even if designers' work attempts to confront them.

### TYPES OF COMMISSION

The range of work for which product designers may be commissioned is vast, and hence there is a necessity for them to define areas of aptitude, if not specialism. What are the skills and services being tendered and on what terms? Are designers prepared to "plug in" to projects being run by others – freelancing for companies or consultancies (in effect, undertaking short-term employment) – or is the idea to be at the helm? While there are those who go it alone from the start, there is a long-established model of others who "cut their teeth" in employment, observing, learning and subsequently leaving to set up shop, occasionally taking as many clients with them as they can.

[1.]
Woodgate, T. 2007. [Personal communication]. 17 December

[2.]
Bayley, S. 2000. 'General Knowledge'. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions

The situation whereby the product or industrial designer establishes a strong, discursive relationship with a client that leads through a process of close collaboration until the release of the product is, to many, the most rewarding path to pursue.

However, other models of "offer" have augmented this, such as providing a menu of services, which may or may not include the design of a product (brand analysis, trend forecasting, lifecycle analysis, market research, ethnographic (user) studies and so on).

Alongside these come more making-based models of work, where the designer is responsible for both the design and production of one-offs or batches of objects. Here the designer may have a more or less "hands-on" aproach, either literally getting involved with the making of objects, or contracting it out to third parties. Alongside traditional designer-maker activity, the recently emerging field of "design-art" occupies this ground, with galleries commissioning designers to produce extraordinary objects at extraordinary prices. Similarly, many product designers, including some of the most renowned, have, as a core part of their business, undertaken the design and construction of exhibitions and trade fair stands, overseeing the sub-contracting of components and project managing their installation.

As mentioned in the last section, designers are being encouraged to see their skills as transferable and look for ways in which they can be applied in non-traditional ways. For those wishing to be commissioned, this means developing an awareness of emerging markets for their talents. Tim Brown from IDEO has noted that the commissioners are no longer who you might expect: "The people we are working for and are designing

with are changing. This is the way I used to think of the world: businesses produced, people consumed, governments regulated and NGOs [non-governmental organisations] advocated...Now we are in a much more interdependent world where people are both creating and consuming, NGOs are funding businesses, businesses are funding NGOs and governments are investing in NGOs. It's incredibly more complex than it used to be. One result of that is that all kinds of new participants and entrepreneurs have emerged...We need to evolve. We can't necessarily rely on the processes we'd developed before." [3]

Brown is not the only voice suggesting that designers broaden their horizons for their own good. Kevin McCullagh, head of product strategy company, Plan, and a former director at industrial designers Seymour Powell, describes a bleak outlook for those who focus solely upon designing objects: "Globalization has reduced the number of manufacturers to a small number of behemoths, and multiplied the number of designers pitching for jobs. The era of product design as practiced by a small band of gurus in Milan, London, Munich and New York is long gone. There are now thousands of competent product designers around the world able to give good form. Design as 'styling' or 'form-giving' has become commoditized, and competing at this level is already a tough, low-margin slog... If we shed the blinkers and see the world differently there are many positive shifts, like the mainstreaming of design in business and the public sector, which offer glimpses of a chance to drastically expand the frontiers of design." [4]

As China up-skills, a portion of its workforce is training as designers. Already, those who have established themselves are able to dramatically undercut Western design businesses. McCullagh recalls:

[3.]
Brown, T. (CEO of global design consultancy IDEO) speaking at Intersections conference, The Baltic Centre, Gateshead, 25 October 2007

[4. 5.]
McCullagh, K. 2009. 'Riding the Flux: Design is changing in myriad ways. Are you?' [online]. [Accessed 27th January 2009]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.core77.com/reactor/07.07_flux.asp>

[6.]	-
Mari, E. In: Burkhardt, F.,
Capella, J., Picchi F. 1997.
'Why Write a Book on Enzo
Mari?' Milan: Frederico Motta
Editore
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[7.]	-
Grcic, K. In: Bohm, F. 2005.
'Konstantin Grcic Industrial
Design'. London: Phaidon
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[8.]	-
Woodgate, T. 2007. [Personal
communication]. 17 December
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[9.]	-
Hecht, S. 2008. [Personal
communication]. 24 January
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[10.]	-
Berge, S. 2007. [Personal
communication]. 11 December
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"A Shanghai-based designer paid me the backhanded compliment, 'Your work is very good, but we do nearly as good for a tenth of the price!'" (5) While the objects themselves may be the central point of interest for many product designers and the idea of branching out, unappealing, they at least need to consider what will make their designs have more value than those of their competitors. Perhaps they will embody a more acute understanding of the market, or can be delivered through a supply chain of exemplary quality and provenance. Whatever the method of differentiation, the product designer of today is going to have to work much harder to find and maintain their niche than in years gone by.

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THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

On top of these global business challenges, the designer starting out as an independent without prior experience faces a bewildering array of variables and the "rules of engagement" are often unclear. Hammering home the need for these to be thoroughly discussed and understood, Enzo Mari once declared that "95 percent of the project is words." (6) The very first ones – those with which the designer must interest the client – are the first hurdle and can be among the most difficult. The problem with the rules of engagement is that they are fluid: different cultures, product sectors and companies have different protocols for engaging with designers, different expectations of deliverables, different methods of paymentand so on. The first step is to find out how (and if) the client company wants to

deal with an external, independent designer. If all goes well, a chance to assess compatibility will be set up, which could be anything from an informal chat down the pub to an intense show-and-tell of past work. Part of this process of investigating a possible working relationship, beyond establishing mutual respect, will be to ensure mutual understanding of the designer's, and indeed the client's, role in any ensuing project. The same applies if the company has approached the designer. Both must reach a clear understanding of why the other wishes to work with them and what it is they believe the other has to offer. Many projects break down at a later stage when differences in expectation come to the surface. Was the client primarily after a famous name, a house style, a pair of hands to direct, or do they see in the designer's thinking something that chimes with their own? Regrettably, the kinds of robust conversations that uncover such things can be tough to initiate and hence do not always take place. Yet they should be an intrinsic part of any project. "Design is always a two-way process, the result of a dialogue between the designer and the person commissioning the work", says Konstantin Grcic. "It's like a game of ping-pong: an exchange of knowledge, ideas and arguments, which only becomes exciting when both parties are equally strong players." (7)

Particularly difficult to establish prior to the design process getting underway is the extent to which the client feels they may impinge upon the designer's craft. "Once, early in my career, I let a client move my pen for me," recalls Terence Woodgate, "and I swore I would never let that happen again. They can give me constructive criticism on why something won't work, and ask me to go back and reconsider. And I'm

quite happy to do that. [But the design] has to please me in every way, shape or form, use of material, the production, the ethical issues…you have to be guided by your principles." (8) Woodgate knows as well as anyone that design is about fulfilling constraints, but he is also keenly aware that the designer must be given space to do what he does best. Sam Hecht sheds additional light on the situation by offering that: "The difference between a constraint and a compromise is in when the information is given", (9) explaining that, if provided early on, it forms part of the design brief (a constraint) and it is therefore the designer's duty to accommodate it. If the client suggests a change, it risks unbalancing a concept tailored to the initial requirements and resulting in a compromise.

The design process takes as much or as little time as its protagonists feel necessary – from a scribbled sketch on a napkin to years of full-time commitment. Settling upon the scope of the project is key. A watch manufacturer might work with a designer on the future direction of their product ranges right down to the effect of a fraction of a millimetre difference in the radius running round the bezel of one of their watches. Being clear about the areas in which their expertise is being sought is essential. Some designers argue that it is their duty to challenge the boundaries of the brief, especially when clients appear to have conservative goals. However, wilfully delivering solutions beyond the scope of the client, no matter how innovative, is to fail them. "You can always find a creative angle to whatever you are doing", advises Sebastian Bergne. "You have to identify where the room for movement is, and within that space, how far you can go; what you propose will be accepted." (10)

Once the territory of the project has been determined, the forms in which it will be delivered can be discussed. Again expectations often vary, not least regarding the number of alternatives that the designer ordinarily presents. Is it the designer's duty to give the client a selection of product concepts or should it be their role to synthesise the problem well enough so that one solution stands out? The context of the individual project will produce different requirements, but it is perhaps worth proposing a rule of thumb. To the unenlightened client, volume of ideas represents good value. Yet the best designers will filter out, through experience and elimination, the ideas that do not fit, and have no wish to let the client pick from among them. On this point, Milan-based designer Perry King explains that the dialogue and consequent understanding of the problem from both parties prior to the presentation of any ideas meant that when the (singular) idea was presented, the client knew it was the right one. It is therefore the designer's role to communicate effectively the rigorous process that they have gone through, and to illustrate that all the points raised during consultation have been addressed.

An analogy may be made to the clothes retailer and the tailor. The tailor discusses your requirements at length, getting to know your preferences and needs and only suggests fabrics and cuts that are right for you. Having identified these, he will present one garment, but with the understanding that a fitting will take place to allow modifications. The retailer lines up choices in the hope of covering a range of tastes, but these rarely fit as precisely as the tailored garment. One is a time-consuming and, hopefully, rewarding process for both parties. The other is a gamble that may or may not pay off. It is worth remembering that the

[11.]                    -
Bierut, M. 2007. '79 Short
Essays on Design'. New York:
Princeton Architectural Press
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way a product idea is presented can be fundamental to how well it is received. Hence, the same idea, dismissed when presented on-screen in an email, may be welcomed when presented in person supported by a verbal rationale of its context along with drawings and a model.

Aware of the competitive nature of the profession, some of the more sought-after clients have changed their practices. Rather than building deep-tailored relationships with designers they know and respect, some have resorted to a pitching process where designers are encouraged to send in speculative ideas. Like spoiled children, the most oversubscribed firms are instantly gratified by picking from the many projects pitched to them every week. Yet with each piece of work receiving such scant attention – most being sent by email rather than presented in person – there is insufficient time for the designer to explain any depth of meaning and the process becomes dangerously similar to that of a beauty contest.

While many young designers are happy to spend time on such work, the "hit rate" is extremely low and encourages a scattergun approach. Designers who work this way – detached from clients, firing product ideas at them "on spec" – may be able to predict some of the company's requirements based on existing ranges, but they cannot know their plans for the future. For the businesses concerned, it is a way to shortcut the payment of fees for ideas development, which designers must try to offset through other income. Ultimately, designers have a choice as to whether to take part in such a process or instead attempt to establish more meaningful links from the start. What is more important is that once any selection process is out of the way, the relationship is allowed to deepen so the project can be developed harmoniously, rather than at arm's length.

In the case of working with product manufacturers and distributors, another key contrast occurs in the extent to which the client has the capacity to undertake parts of the development process themselves. It must be established in early meetings, whether the designer is charged with defining the object in relation to the subcontracting of manufacture or if they must respond to specific existing facilities. Either way, they must determine where their role ends and the company's begins – a sketch, a model, a technical drawing, a CAD model, or drawings of tooling for manufacture? Companies with in-house engineering designers will be able to take drawings and models and cover the necessary engineering of the production process themselves. If this becomes part of the external designer's role, it can represent a considerable increase in the amount of technical knowledge required to complete the project.

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THE MYTH OF THE PERFECT CLIENT

Designers are forever moaning about clients who appear to take no interest in the finer points of what they are trying to achieve, focusing only on the bottom line. They long for enlightened clients to whom they feel they can relate. Yet as Michael Bierut points out (11), these "perfect clients" have at their helm, or in positions of power, individuals with a personal passion for design that they choose to bring to work. This is, Bierut says, the kind of passion that one might have for wine or music, and it becomes company strategy as opposed to emerging from it. Furniture magnates Giulio

Cappellini, Eugenio Perraza of Magis, Rolf Felbaum of Vitra, and, of course, Steve Jobs of Apple, are the most well-known examples of the company director immersed in the concerns of his designers. The output of all four firms typifies innovation and it is through this commitment that they have become the most respected names in modern design. These extremely rare and special cases are held up as the standards to which designers should aspire.

Looking at the issue another way, it can be argued that designers shouldn't expect manufacturers to have the same level of interest, enthusiasm or knowledge about design as they do. After all, a plumber wouldn't expect a householder to be interested in the finer points of u-bend specification. However, it is perhaps not too much to expect the client to engage with why the job needs doing, what a good (as opposed to mediocre) result will achieve and how this will be recognised.

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