

# Designing is like choosing someone a present.

An interview with Jane Dillon

Jane Dillon studied furniture design at the RCA between 1965 and 1968. After graduating she worked alongside George Nelson and Ettore Sottsass in Milan before returning to London in 1971 to set up Studio Dillon. Throughout the years she has consulted for major companies, designing everything from office furniture to glassware, though focusing mostly on mass production with an emphasis on new materials and technologies.

She has also been tutoring in the Design Products course at the RCA for many years. Having recently disengaged herself from running a platform, she now runs the 'Wise Old Bird' lecture/discussion series, where her knowledge is shared through conversations and excursions.

In the sixties, when Jane studied at the RCA, the furniture course was, as she describes it, very 'nuts-and-bolts'. Most students were men and did not seem interested in the spatial qualities of things. They designed in the closed world of practical solutions. A lot of things were just accepted, very little was questioned; seating consisted of a three-piece suite and little else. It must have been a frustrating environment for one of the few female designers and one who questioned preconceptions, considering the ephemeral as well as the practical.

Today the situation is reversed: we are constantly encouraged to subvert even the clearest of briefs, and general arrangement drawings are unheard of. In the 60's the course was three years long, the first year about the basic understanding of processes, materials, technical drawings. Today we seem to skip that year. We don't draw as much and don't develop things intricately. Ideas are presented as final pieces, when, in reality, they are a long way from being final at all. That's Jane's biggest gripe currently, the way basics are taught and how some things get left behind. At a certain point you have to take an idea and apply it. Maybe in fear of the mundane, many young designers tend to avoid application altogether.

But where does this hurry come from? A lack of grounding, perhaps? A lot of young designers seem to have to run before they can walk. Unless you are interested in completely new technologies, in most forms, most things have mostly been done before. **With the amount of pressure to be original, to be seen as someone who's 'the one' to watch, there doesn't seem to be time to stop and think, to look under tables and in book, to actually develop anything.**

Dillon has said that very often she sees a lack of clarity in the development of projects. 'Often I see someone standing there with a tennis racket thinking they are off to play badminton. If people would stop sometimes to put some parameters around what they were doing, things would fall into place much easier.' Arrogance also plays a role here. Often students are too quick to dismiss something because it's from a different generation or it's connected to a no-no area. But sometimes that no-no could be what

would make their object work. Many young designers don't get enough out of more experienced designers because they have a preconceived idea about them.

According to Jane, as a young designer she also was unbelievably arrogant: 'I guess that's the thing about youth isn't it? That's what makes you get on, to be seen and heard' At the RCA we are encouraged to be arrogant, and in a funny kind of way it gets results. It pushes people. But for some people this push has a crushing effect.

The pressure resulting from the wish to be seen - especially by the media under the great spotlights on degree show - also has an ambiguous effect. It drives students to produce amazing work, but also encourages graduates to think that once they have been picked up by the press, that's it, they've made it. **In fact, a huge amount of people just take a big fall after they graduate. The strong ones then get up and carry on.** That is the way of the world today.

I asked Jane if she thought that designers today thought enough about the social utility of their profession. We both agreed that our industry would benefit greatly from more discussions. For example, there seems to be a taboo around talking about aesthetics, as if it's something outdated. But at the end of the day, the input that we as designers have to offer (what makes us distinct from straight engineers) is that we have the ability to consider not only the appropriateness of an idea, but also the physical qualities of it: the detailing, the materials, the colour.

**,'Design is like choosing someone a birthday present,' Dillon says wisely,** 'the right balance between something that they will really like and you find quite nice too, even though you might not necessarily want to have it yourself. '. The word 'appropriate' here is key. What might be appropriate for you is not appropriate for me, which is why we need so many different things in different ways. It is also important to understand why we are using something. A huge amount of products look as they look for no other reason than that they have always looked, behaved and made *us* behave like that. These are the things, according to Dillon, we should look at and discuss.

---

897 words

Cristina Bilsland, May 2005