

WHY DESIGNERS DON'T READ (DESIGN MAGAZINES)

We have recently had a few journalists talking to us at the RCA's design products department. Editors from Blueprint, Icon and Frieze Magazines came to discuss the content and format of their publications. But what struck me most from these talks was a question raised by one of our guest speakers: whether young product designers actually read design magazines. In fact, it was provocatively stated that we do not read at all. This comment was received with a stunned silence that definitely hit a nerve or two.

"Of course we read", was in all of our minds -or at least in mine, one of the accused. But just then I couldn't exactly explain why it is that I do rather read a New Scientist or National Geographic than Icon or Blueprint. I am a designer, after all.

The fact is that most product design magazines today are simply not interesting. Take Icon as an example, featuring shamelessly, month after month, glossy articles about vacuous pieces of furniture, next to so-called-designers who cover a light bulb with a piece of rapid-prototyped plastic and bald-facedly call it cutting edge lighting design; or Blueprint, dedicating several pages to indulge the latest pop-star-designer-in-the-making proudly proclaiming their precocious greatness. Who cares? Who cares what an aspiring designer has to say to journalists about themselves? Grow up and show us some interesting, thought provoking work.

We all know what the score is anyway: you design something that looks good on a magazine, it might then be published and you get the acclaim. Fame and fortune are at your doorstep. The next big thing, the next Philippe Starck...

That was clear during the degree shows this summer, where the projects receiving most attention from the press were the photogenic pieces, their meaning shown as a secondary element, if at all mentioned. Not that they did not deserve the attention, they were great projects, rather the way in which the work was portrayed seemed both shallow and slightly patronizing. Captions next to beautiful photographs mentioned the journalist's instant reaction to the pieces and maybe a short biography of the designer. Not much about the subject matter, which to me seemed to imply that either the piece wasn't deeply interesting, or that it wasn't expected to be. I would rather read about why someone would design a donut shaped cereal container, than the fact that the designer comes from Korea.

We are exposed to plenty of shallowness at private viewings and design shows. It is sufficiently depressing to see all that at 100% Design and Designers Block,

not to mention most of the graduating student shows. We don't need them repeated on every magazine we pick up the following month. Not unless there is some critique about the pieces, something to let us know that we are not the only ones worried about the amount of rubbish designs out there.

Where is the knowledge, the questioning of reasons for designing the pieces in the first place? We need more than Hello Magazine style shots of – and I cringe while I type this - 'Celebrity Designers' at cool parties. What next, red carpets outside the Design Museum on private viewing nights, only to go inside and be confronted by the latest plastic blobs? Famous designers portrayed on the cover of the magazines to boost sales? Oh dear...

I do flick through 3D Design Magazines, as I feel I should know who is in them and how the media is portraying their work. A bit like reading daily newspapers: we find some news depressing, but we still need to know what's going on. But unlike the daily newspapers, when it comes to thinking, learning or getting inspiration, these magazines are definitely the last place I would look.

Picking up a daily newspaper one finds much more interesting material than in the entire selection of product design magazines on offer. Real issues, things that are happening to real people in the real world. And these are the ones we should be learning about and designing for. Not for journalists who know zilch about design, only about what looks good on their glossy spreads.

There are a few exceptions to the rule, such as Domus, which despite consisting of a ridiculous amount of advertising before one actually reaches the editorial, often contains articles worth reading. A recent example was an issue with discussions between Sottsass, Castiglione and other Italian old masters. Not advertising their own work, they are beyond all that, but actually discussing what Design is all about. Why we do what we do and what effect it has on the world around us – or what effect the world around us has on our work.

This I say to design journalists more than to designers themselves. Let us hear it from the ones who have something interesting to say, or at least acknowledge that most don't and discuss why. Your job is to challenge, spark thoughts and prompt discussions, not to create disposable celebrities. We don't want happy glossy articles, we want content. If we can't find it in design magazines we'll just have to look for it somewhere else.