



Photograph: Ralf Oberfell

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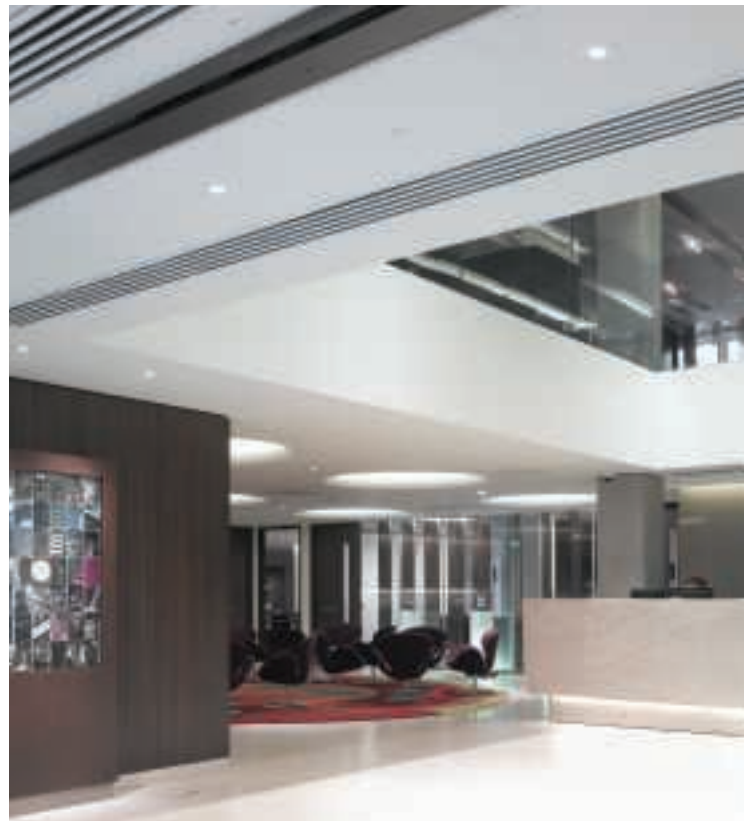
We like a bit of rock 'n' roll. Not ashamed to admit it. And we know that occasionally we may seem a bit like a music fanzine wrapped inside a monthly that really should be concentrating a bit harder on the business of commercial interiors. The thing is it's not our fault. Take, for example, this profile of Derek Treadwell.

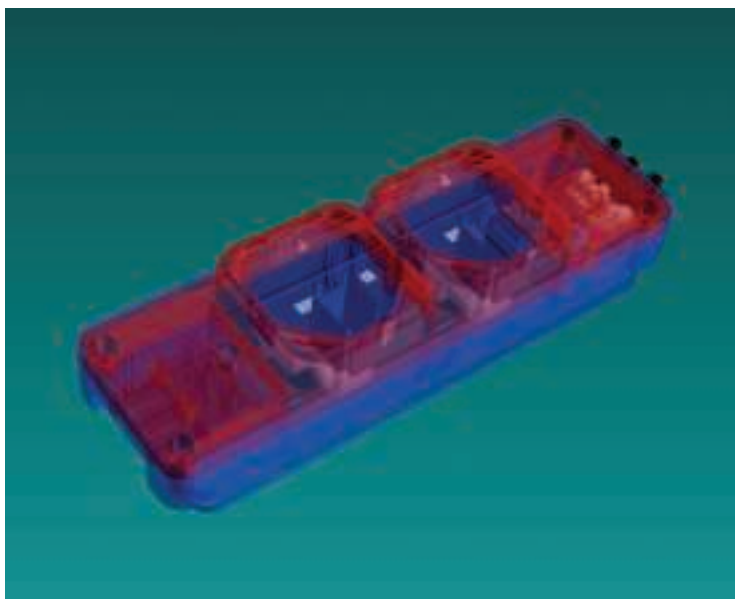
We've known Derek for over 20 years, and know him to be one of the top engineering designers in our industry. This is a man whose track record goes back to cabling Hille Office System, a designer responsible in a major way for the stellar success of Knoll's Hannah system, and an all round good guy who talks more sense about design than a brasserie full of self appointed gurus.

So, genuinely fascinated, we asked Derek about the design process, the integration of technology, his latest role at Dovetail, sending STL files off to the model makers, Raymond Loewy, craft, intellectual rigour...loads of good copy and more. And we're going to print what he told us, what he thinks – and it all makes for a really good profile of a self depreciating, modest designer who's really got his head screwed on.

But half way through our third cup of latte at Smith's, after we've got about 2,000 words of notes about design and stuff, we made the fatal mistake of asking Derek about growing up in 1960's Bexley. So we're going to print the music stuff first because it tells you a lot about the man, illustrates the wry twinkle in his eye...and because we can use a Van Morrison anecdote in an office design magazine. If you don't like music skip the next paragraph or two, and then we'll talk about Derek's work. Otherwise, hang on in there.

'I spent a good part of the 1960's chasing girls, getting into trouble...put it this way, I preferred the Stones to the Beatles, if you know what I mean. I spent a lot of time at the Black Prince, a very good blues and jazz place – where I saw the Animals, Pretty Things, Long John Baldry, Julie Driscoll, Sonny Boy Williamson and the rest.





►►► showroom presentation, literature and branding. Dovetail's an interesting company, starting with an incredible financial base because of its status as part of WPP. It's got a stability that most manufacturers would die for. What's more, there are really good partnerships with companies like Knoll, Fritz Hansen, Vitra and USM Haller – there aren't many companies who can put it all together in such a way.

'I'm interested in raising Dovetail's profile – I see that as a piece of design. Let's face it, we seem to be going into a difficult period, and I see that raising our game is a design game. It's about getting attention from the A&D in new, imaginative ways.'

We ask Derek to take his mind back to his early days. 'Mum was a housewife, dad was a factory maintenance manager. My earliest memory was when I went to dad's work and there used to be a big box of bits in the corner of the workshop. I loved getting a handful of bolts, old pressings and brake callipers and just making things. I went to technical high school – looking back I should have gone to art school. The rule was in those days that if you did technical subjects you couldn't do art and history, which were my two great loves.

'I became a technical apprentice, including three years on the factory floor, on day release. I did my ONC, but left half way through my Chartered Engineer course because I discovered cars, bars and girls – which seemed a more attractive option than night school three times a week.

'After I finished my apprenticeship I worked at a company called Abwood working with precision grinding machines. We made things like aero engine blades, hypodermic needles, grinding glass blocks for the prisms in submarine periscopes. Roy Chapman was very much my mentor – I owe him a tremendous amount. He gave me my first design job to do on my own – a high precision piece of metal (using special machinery with diamond tips) to hold three gears for United Aircraft of Canada. I designed it, all the bits were made – and Roy told me to come down to the shop to show the fitters how to assemble it. Inevitably, there was a screw left over after the cover had gone on which taught me always to check the assembly! A big part of the design process is the mental ability to visualise the assembled design. In fact, it's fundamental to design – there's an old cabinet maker's saying: 'Measure it twice, cut it once.'

'The most significant move in my career was to join the building services consultants Ronald Hurst. We were neighbours to Satherley Design in Dryden Street. We got on well, went to the bar together at the end of the day, and it wasn't long before I was doing stuff for them, eventually joining the team. We designed lock mechanisms, medical equipment like blood infusion controllers, all sorts of things. We got a call one day from Hille (who were agents for Knoll in those days). Herman Miller's Action Office was hitting the market and Steelcase were starting to sell electrified panels. What Hille wanted was a cable raceway to work on Stephens, Zapf and their own HOS. It was a success and that's when my involvement with furniture started.

'I left to set up my own consultancy with the now independent Knoll as a client and during 1986 and 1987 worked on developing Hannah for the Lloyds 1958 building. John Francis of DEGW had seen Hannah in the States, but wanted it adapted for Lloyds complete with desk top electrics. Despite the lack of any drawings, we got there and Hannah, and its subsequent iterations became a huge success. It was a beautifully engineered product and we made it jump through hoops!

'The design of furniture is a reflection of how people use their offices. When I left school managers had partner desks, salesmen had ►►►►



▶▶▶▶ oak desks and the drawing office had tops supported by tubular metal frames. Furniture says something about how you work, it says something about the company – that’s the driver. It’s taken maybe four years for people to wake up to the benefits of flat screens. What’s happening now is people are looking for value for money. We’ve come through a long periods of low unemployment and high staff retention – I think people are looking for a bit of individual ownership of their workspace, a bit of status – but integrated into flat management structures.’

We discussed the change in furniture design, noting Derek is completely unsentimental about systems designs from the past.

‘Designers are only interested in doing something new. Designers are not interested in old products, and in fact I would say that most designers are not interested in seeing their products once they’ve been designed. It’s not where they get their kicks from.

‘Some people moan about how the furniture industry has, by and large, failed to integrate technology. I know this – when I was at Satherley we had a project to design furniture with built-in monitors, drives and keyboards. Before we had finished our design the technology had completely changed – furniture can never keep up with technology.

‘I’m 60 now, and I’ve been in this business since I was 17. You get this thing – designers like trouble! And I reckon the next two years

will be challenging – as I said, it’s going to be about raising the game and being positioned for change.

Who does Derek believe have raised their games in the past? ‘Designers I admire? Raymond Loewy, who took the idea of industrial design forward. Philippe Starck, who is technically very good and always willing to take chances.

‘A big criticism of me is that I didn’t do publicity, I don’t think it was in my nature. But I admire people like Tom Dixon, with his finger on the pulse and the ability to change people’s perceptions. I admire Frank Gehry, I like his conceptual stuff.

‘I don’t like people who are intellectually lazy. I dislike the designer who, using CAD, can do something that looks beautiful but has no rigour – someone who doesn’t ask ‘How is this going to work?’ Sometimes you simply have to do the maths. Often you just think that it has to be 3mm, and 90% of the time that’s fine. But sometimes you actually have to do the maths otherwise it’s going to be lethal.’

Given the tone of the intro to this piece, it seems only right to ask if Derek Treadwell plays music. As in instruments, fingers, blowing and all that jazz.

‘I play the trumpet – I started 15 years ago. Now I play in a brass band, with some big gigs too in front of hundreds of people like at places like the Great British Beer Festival, Kew Gardens...’ ●