







▶▶▶ which was advertising for labour to come over to England. So he came across to Chesterfield and said to my dad, 'Tony, you want to get over here mate, you get £10 a week!' So they all came over, and I've been here since I was two.

'We then moved to Scunthorpe – because the money was better in Scunthorpe – and I stayed there until I went to college. I spent a year at Grimsby Art College, did art foundation for a year and that was fantastic.'

We ask Franco if that artistic streak was always in him. 'I'm not sure,' he answers. 'When you're at school you're not really sure where your real strengths lie. For me, going through school, maths started to become a little difficult, physics got a bit out of control, and I was only left with art then or the steel mills! I decided I would be a starving painter! Interior design seemed the most natural progression for me so I came down to London and studied interiors at Middlesex Polytechnic'

Now we're really confused about our man's accent. Franco soon clears things up for us. 'I must say to all the readers out there who can't hear my accent right now, I've got this strange thing where if I start talking to people, say someone in Australia, I end up speaking in an Australian accent. I must have a medical condition! If I speak to someone up North, I end up talking in a northern accent.

'Middlesex was interesting. I spent a lot of time being a student really, but while we were doing our industrial release, as they used to ▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶call it, I got a job at Building Design Partnership. Rodney Cooper offered me a full-time job when I left college, and being a man of his word took me on.

‘It was a good place to start. It was a big organisation, they offered a pension and benefits and there were some really nice people there who taught me a lot of stuff about design and materials. I wouldn’t be doing what I do now if it wasn’t for those people – especially John Barker and Simon Scott, who were just fantastic old-school designers.

‘They had so much knowledge, they just knew what they were talking about and would pass that on. Knowledge doesn’t seem to be recognised as part of the job anymore. There was a time when you had a fee-scale and a time-scale and were given a reasonable amount of time to do a job, you did that job thoroughly and you were paid a reasonable amount of money to do it. I think the advent of technology now means you have less time because people assume you can do a job quicker, which is a bit condescending really because they are assuming that you can now think quicker! You still have to think things through. Then they assume it is easier to draw – well it might be if you’re doing 500 things all the same, but my work isn’t like that. People spend more money on the flowers nowadays than they do on the design fees!’

‘Everything feels too stylistic now. Interior design has been a growing profession for some time now – since the 1970’s really, before that it was just architects – and it is a developing profession. What appears to happen now is that a lot of designers have just become formulaic – they haven’t got any time to think anyway so ▶▶▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶they just do what they did last time, but with a curvy edge on it. And I think a lot of clients know exactly what they are getting. Some clients still have bollocks, but they tend to be in accounts, crunching a load of numbers and profit. If they've got a big plot in Shoreditch, they'll get some big commercial practice to put up some right swanky piece of work because it's worth about £200 a square foot to them. It's simply business driven nowadays. In the old days it wasn't necessarily driven that way because no-one knew what its value was. Now everyone seems to know the value. A lot of it's about where you've come from, and the processes you've come through. Even buildings only seem to last 10 years now before someone wants to rip them apart and add another 20 storeys on top.'

Franco spent 15 years with BDP, moving through to senior design level, although he did feel that he wasn't ever going to reach the level he really wanted with the practice. It was there that Franco met and worked with one of his current co-Directors at Forme, Mark Twigg. 'Mark and I had worked together at BDP for ages, and without each other knowing, applied for a job within the Interiors team at Sheppard Robson. When we both got offered a job we thought we would be sharing the same one!'

This wasn't the case however and Franco and Mark left BDP on the same day. It was at Shepherd Robson that Franco (and Mark) worked closely alongside the Head of Interior Design David Skeels and ID Associate Glenn Vaus. David had been responsible for setting up SR Interiors and, along with Glenn, had developed the team from a two man outfit to a team of 45 professionally trained Interior Designers. Finally the crunch decision came and after a few strategy meetings in coffee shops and pubs across London, Forme Partnership (now Forme UK) was born. A phased evacuation was planned, with David and Glenn leaving first to head up Forme, then Mark three months later, closely followed by Franco. The first Forme UK project was already in production at the GLA and this was closely followed by the second, a £23million fit out of Clive House at Petty France.

We ask Franco to move forwards to the present and tell us about Forme. 'We're sort of interior architects I suppose,' he muses. 'When you say designers everyone thinks of frilly long sleeves. We call ourselves interior architects because we do quite a lot of pretty invasive stuff. We've all come from that same background – all four partners at Forme that is – and we all think the same way. We offer a unique service in that each project is headed up by a senior designer from concept through to completion. Large practice experience, small practice efficiency, we like to say...and that has become our USP ever since.'

'Some of us are more intense about design, some of us are more intense about getting it built and some of us are more intense about running a professional business. I think it's a really good mix of people. If we all ponced about for 20 hours a day worrying about design details the business would soon go down the tubes. The business just happens to be design and we're very much involved in it – but it is a business and we do it to make money.'

'We are lucky that we do get to work with some pretty good clients, which is nice, and you do get pumped up when they come back. I've been doing this for 25 years now, and there are more nice people than bad out there on balance, and more people who know what they are talking about. I think you do have to have a certain level of intelligence to get by – depending on which aspect of the job you do!'

And with that we have to make our leave – although we could very easily order another bottle and spend the rest of the afternoon in Southwark with Franco, listening to his unique take on the design industry. There's certainly nothing formulaic about Franco Greco ●

