profile

The McNeece Process

Adrian McNeece on life drawing: 'If you draw, you have to study things clearly and carefully. If you haven't got that background, then things are arguably just things. You have to see things for what they really are – 'that's not grey in that shadow, it's purple!"

half an hour later, Adrian McNeece on working on massive complex commercial projects for the likes of Merrill Lynch and GlaxoSmithKline: 'It was about seeing things clearly and bringing clarity and mapping out a coherent long term occupancy strategy. It was about focusing on the basics, and not confusing things by trying to be clever.'

While chatting with Adrian it became pretty clear that clarity is a central tenet. As head of his eponymous business, McNeece Consulting, whose specialism is Workplace Strategy – with rigorously clear analysis being the heartbeat of the methodology.

'Workplace Strategy as a developing design discipline is about understanding people, processes, organisations and their limitations or opportunities within commercial office property. It's about understanding complex problems and helping to deliver real measurable solutions. I acknowledge that from time to time the consultative processes employed can sometimes get lost in theory! But for it to work it's about asking the right questions, being open and as inclusive as project constraints permit – and I'm practiced at understanding complex strategic problems. Good Workplace Strategy exercises will clearly define the objectives at the outset, thereby identifying the commercial and social imperatives.

'In the architecture and design community there is a clearly defined role for Workplace Strategy. It's determined by a need to analyse an organisation, interpret needs, explore opportunities (for flexible working, for example), to learn, to test against property and capital constraints. This extensive analysis and research to inform the project brief is all carried out before the concept design phase commences. Some things never change – good design is good design. You'll find little argument that good design is about simplicity, clarity and functionality, it's effective and unobtrusive. Workplace Strategy is vital in helping deliver those timeless design objectives.'

Design is in Adrian's blood, as he explains.

'Mum and dad are both designers – they met shortly before becoming interior design students at Glasgow School of Art in the late 1950's. I left school aged 17 in 1982 and initially went to work at my father's design practice in Glasgow. As an apprentice interior designer, involved with all types of clients from IBM to hotel projects, restaurants and exhibition design, it was a terrific grounding. The company had a policy of sending its apprentice designers to Glasgow School of Art for one day a week...which is what I did for two years during '82 and '83. You had to really know how to draw in those days. So I went to life drawing classes too at this time. I learned

to see things as they are, study subjects carefully and make mental notes. I can remember an exercise when we were allowed to look at the life model for only 30 seconds, and then had to draw what we had seen from memory. If you haven't got that background in art, then arguably things are just things, without context.

'After four years full time study at Glasgow College of Building and Printing, I came down to London. My father offered to take me on at The Fletcher McNeece Partnership, based in Oxford Circus. It's worth pointing out that his company was one of the pioneer specialist interior design firms in the country when it was founded in 1963. By 1988 there were around 150 staff, with around half of those in London.

'This was a very interesting period for interior design in the late 1980's – it was the first time that computers were being used to create drawings. Until then they had been prohibitively expensive, but then AutoCAD became accessible to the whole A&D community. Some designers found it hard to make the change, but I embraced AutoCAD, particularly using it for space plans – replacing the dozens of iterations that we had previously had to continuously draw. Obviously it had a huge impact on work that normally involved multiple changes. I became interested in what else it could do – I was interested in computers anyway – and developed a strong understanding. The bottom line is that if you can automate the process it frees up your mind to be more creative with your design intent.

'After a couple of years at Fletcher McNeece in London I relocated to Melbourne, working at Geyer Design. The background was that I'd met some Aussies doing their proverbial world tour and struck up friendships. I secured the job at Geyer as soon as I arrived in Australia. I'd intended to enjoy myself a little more on my first world globe-trotting adventure, but it was a fairly big practice and I found myself working 12 hour days pumping out commercial office construction drawing packages.

'I did fulfil one personal ambition though. I walked up Hanging Rock in Victoria, while listening to Beethoven's 5th Piano Concerto in E Flat on my Sony Walkman – inspired by the enigmatic soundtrack to the 1975 Peter Weir movie, 'Picnic at Hanging Rock'. Classical music is a constant inspiration for me!

'I play a bit of blues/folk guitar. When I was 16 my guitar teacher was a fan of CSNY, Neil Young and James Taylor...so I know a lot of that stuff! I still play, but I admit that there was a time when I let it go by the wayside. As I approach middle age I realise how important music and art is to me. I've got a Gibson SG and a Martin DX1 acoustic – I've played Mike Oldfield stuff like parts of Tubular Bells and Ommadawn for years. I wanted a Gibson SG like his since I was 14, and finally got one a few years ago.

'I find music can really affect me – different pieces at different times. Genesis, Bowie, Pink Floyd and The Raconteurs...like design, good music is good music. I can find music very motivating. Sometimes when I'm preparing to give a presentation to a new client I'll listen to the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth, the Choral Symphony. It's very uplifting and it brings me to a higher place. I'm in awe of the creation of music; it's a wonderful product of humanity. Except jazz of course, which, let's face it, no one really likes.

'Art is important to me, particularly abstract expressionism. Broad strokes expressing physicality on the canvas – it looks easy but I know from my own efforts that it's not. I admire artists like Richard Diebenkorn of course, and also Barbara Rae and Joan Eardley.'

We talked some more about photography, another keen interest (Adrian's examples adorn this piece), before refocusing on work.

'I've worked for over 20 years in the design industry, in companies like HOK, Morgan Lovell and Pringle Brandon, but I feel I really learned the most at Swanke Hayden Connell. It was a great combination of the people I worked with and the projects I worked on. People like Sharon Turner, who I rate highly as an early pioneer in Workplace Strategy. Sharon had such a clear understanding of the importance of brief development, whether in interior design or architecture. Working with Sharon was both enlightening and invigorating. Another colleague at Swanke, Derek Kilpatrick, was another big influence. Derek is very focused, hard working and passionate about providing creative solutions. Sharon and Derek were very inspirational to me.

'While an associate and workplace consultant at Swanke, I cut my teeth on a couple of massive projects. Merrill Lynch were seeking to relocate from five London sites into a single new European headquarters, ultimately based in Newgate Street; and there was GlaxoSmithKline too. Both projects involved multiple sites and close to 3,500 staff co-locating in each project. I was at the core of the briefing process, carrying out work that at the time was absolutely groundbreaking in terms of what we now call Workplace Strategy. Both companies were seeking to make massive changes to their working practices, tying in with the impending impact of new IT technologies. I developed extensive empirical analytical tools taking in interviews, workshops and questionnaires (all on Excel – very new tools at the time) so that we could understand both individual and team activities within organisations. For me it was pioneering – we were trying to gather and distil huge amounts of complex information into something useful and meaningful in terms of the design brief for what remains two of the largest and most successful commercial office projects in Europe to date.

'What I do now at McNeece Consulting is essentially workplace consulting focused on managing change and managing stakeholder expectations. Asking the right questions, canvassing opinions, running workshops, and analysing what people do with their time, and how they feel about their work and their workplace. Focusing on desires and expectations (and channelling them) of course has to be balanced with hard corporate and operational objectives

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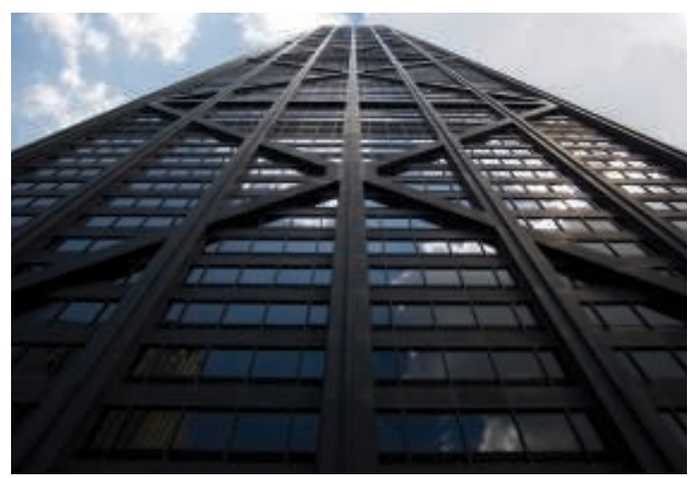

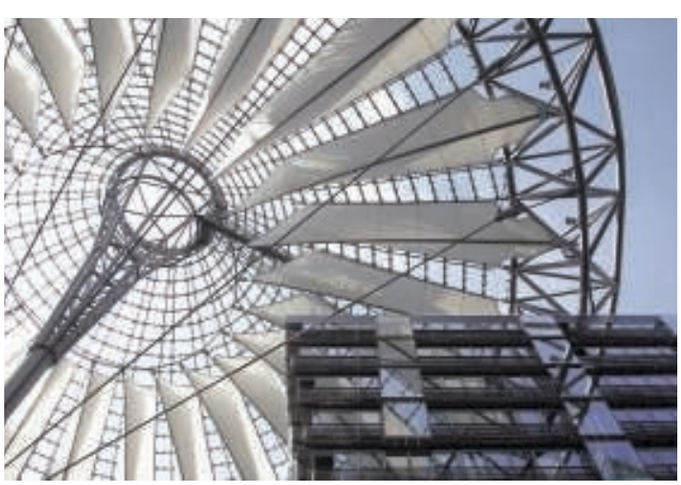

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