



simon le bon

We're fortunate to catch up with Simon Jackson, Studio Director Interiors Group and Principal of Gensler, at the firm's impressive new offices in Aldgate, writes Roger Croft. We say fortunate because we've been trying for a while to tie Simon down for this interview and we've lost out to Dublin, Dubai, Cannes and The Emirates Stadium – Busy? Successful? You had better believe it!

Now, as is the case with most 'investigative journalists' it is only fair that I come clean and admit that Simon and I have known each other for a few years – probably more years than either of us care to remember. What I'm intrigued to know then is why we only get together at The Emirates these days and not Dublin, Dubai or Cannes!?

Simon was brought up in the Channel Islands, eventually progressing through the education system into the 'real' world of employment with a stint in teacher training. He realised this wasn't the career path for him when, in the teacher staff room, he was lambasted for sitting in the wrong chair and later walked in on the Art teacher's class to witness him dangling a student out of a second story window holding a chisel to his neck! This incident proved the stimulus to leaving teacher training and taking up, and completing, a degree in Environmental Design at Portsmouth University.

The design degree led, in the mid-1980's, to Simon to joining Herman Miller's design department and from there he moved on to Fitch. These were the heady days of Fitch when Rodney Fitch was at the height of his influence with Terminal 4 and Burton Group very much to the fore.

This move proved hugely significant for two very different reasons. First, he met his lovely wife, Anne-Marie and, second, Simon was thrown in at the deep end, being given responsibility for running projects just two years out of college. 'It was an amazing experience to be involved with Fitch, having Rodney as a mentor; the whole Fitch experience so early in my career has held me in good stead.'





▶▶▶▶▶▶ By the late '80's Simon had moved to Officescape, or Designasty as it became known in certain quarters! 'I could write a whole series of articles on Officescape but you'll have to wait for my memoirs!' he smiles. Having had the benefit of knowing Officescape in those days not only can I not wait, I would very much like to be quoted in those memoirs!

From Officescape Simon moved on and was chosen as one of only three people deemed to have the right calibre to assist Charles Pfister in setting up the London operation of his elite interior design practice. 'Again I was extremely fortunate I was chosen to spend time in San Francisco to be mentored by Charles, Pamela Babey, along with David Moulton who ran the London office.'

With the premature death of Charles in 1990, Simon left to become Director of Interior Design for Michael Vacher Associates, completing a number of prestigious projects for Hutchinson Telecoms, Panasonic and English China Clays.

The success of these high profile projects led to the offer to join Percy Thomas Partnership and the opportunity to work on the MOD Procurement project at Abbey Wood in Bristol. Now the more experienced amongst you may well recall this ground breaking project, a true 'inside-out' scheme of some 1.5 million sq ft and 6,000 plus personnel and, at the time, the largest project in Europe.

Simon takes up the story. 'I led the Interior and Space Planning team who worked very closely with the architects and other

consultants who were all co-located with the client at the site in the original business park building. My team had a huge influence in developing the brief into the master plan for the site, the internal floor plate configuration of the 12 buildings and the design of all the interiors for offices and amenity spaces, which included conference areas, restaurants, library, gymnasium and crèche.

'Because of the scale of the project we were able to design complete new products such as the SAS ceiling system, which worked with the exposed slab and displacement ventilation system; a new office carpet tile by Interface and a new variant of Herman Miller's Ethospace system, which morphed into Vantage and became, for a few years, Herman Miller's biggest seller!'

As I said at the time Simon, it's a shame you didn't negotiate a royalties deal! Although for a small fee...

Simon continues: 'It was a great project and won numerous awards, BCO, RIBA, and MIPIM amongst them although, due to British Airways marketing machine, was overshadowed by BA Waterside development which completed soon after.'

As the MOD project moved into its implementation stage Simon received a referral to speak to Tony Harbour at Gensler. 'We got on really well and my design ethos blended well with Gensler's design philosophy. The upshot of my initial meetings with Tony was that I became Gensler's London office 40th employee. My 'inside-out' experience was quickly put to the test and I championed the ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶



›››building consultation group’ – a group that I’m still very much involved with. The group worked with developers and brokers to critique other architects’ work (we also work to keep our own architectural group in check!) and we look to ensure that the product is appropriate for the variety of tenants that would look to take space in a building.

‘My first design project was British Gas’ HQ in the Adelphi building, quickly followed by Schroder Investment Management’s HQ in Gresham Street. It was around this time that my interest in strategic planning developed and I looked to raise the level of the briefing process to be more focused on business performance, image and brand strategy. This is now very much at the heart of how Gensler projects are approached, we want our design to make a difference to our clients’ businesses. The tools we have developed for envisioning sessions really help, we’re told, to focus executive steering committees on the opportunities presented by their specific projects.

Having joined Gensler in 1996, Simon was appointed Vice President (Partner) in 1999 and is now Principal and Studio Director for the Interiors Group. ‘Within the group we’re working on such diverse projects as State Street Bank at Canary Wharf and Dublin, Burberry’s London HQ and the law firm Reed Smith, who are moving into British Land’s Broadgate Tower.

‘Away from work, I love to spend time with my family (honest darling, I really do!) – my wife, Anne-Marie, and my three children, Joe 14, Matt 12 and Hannah 11. My weekends see me taking on the mantle of taxi driver, with the boys playing football on Saturdays and Sundays whilst Hannah is really into her dancing and shopping!

‘We also have a couple of season tickets for the best footballing team in Europe (Johan Cruyff agrees!) and although, trophyless for the third season running, we’ve been privileged to watch some truly amazing performances. (Ed, I may have called on my own experiences here as well, ok!).

‘We like to entertain, Anne-Marie is a great cook and I can turn out a mean pasta so we regularly have friends around for dinner on our Florence Knoll marble table – Anne-Marie hates the Mies chairs as ‘they are so difficult to move around’!

‘Music is also a passion. I used to play bass in a punk band called The Worst – I kid you not! We certainly lived up to our name although we also used to play to large audiences. True to the punk traditions of the time we split up live on stage, due to ‘artistic differences’, although, to this day I’m convinced someone literally pulled the plug out! I think we hoped that we would be asked to reform but, unfortunately (or fortunately), we never were.

‘My recent focus has been establishing Gensler in Ireland. I’m pleased to say that we have accumulated a great deal of work with some excellent clients – Anglo Irish Bank, Bank of Ireland, Matherson, Ormsby Prentice and William Fry.

‘I really enjoy working in Dublin – I’m privileged to have worked with some great, educated and knowledgeable characters with a terrific sense of humour. It is a joy and extremely satisfying; you could say it’s a breath of fresh air! We believe we’re extremely fortunate at Gensler with the quality of our young designers. They are prepared to take on responsibility and produce great designs under our ‘tutelage’. They are taking on the mantle – it reminds me of my Fitch days when I too was given this opportunity. I now get vicarious pleasure in seeing what these designers are achieving.

‘I still pick up a pen and sketch – much to the horror of my colleagues! However, design is in my blood and although my primary focus is management and business development as one of the leaders of the London office, I still get a real buzz being part of the design teams.



▶▶▶▶▶'I'm really energised about work; we have a great bunch of people throughout the company, not just interiors, but also in the other studios: architecture/master planning, landscape design, and retail and graphic design. We are in growth mode, very considered growth and Europe beckons.

'I'm also looking to break down the preconceived perceptions that Gensler do 'corporate design'. We design for our clients needs, which could be construed as corporate but, more than that, our design solutions are highly innovative, not fashion orientated, but forward thinking and 'future proofed'. We audit all our clients post project and without question the highest praise we get is for our design solutions and that is something you cannot put a value on.

'I have a very strong focus on client relationship management as part of the firm's global accounts group, so the feedback we get from our clients is invaluable to improving how we approach projects in the future.

Quite often it is the client who creates the opportunity for great design and, as I said earlier, we want to work with clients that want design to make a difference for their business – I guess one of my major goals for the future is to obtain clients who push us to be as creative and innovative as we seek to be.'

So there you have it, busy, diverse, Pan European, future proof – 'a design for 'corporate' life'!

I'm looking forward to the next installment and maybe we can conduct the interview in Dubai or at least Cannes... hang on, where's the Champions League final next year? That would be ideal! ●

