







▶▶▶ British furniture has historically occupied the lower end, and now that sector has been taken by China. Years ago I worked with (and for) Antocks Lairn – a design led British furniture company. We had some great success with a well designed chair called IFD – they sold over 50,000 of them to the NHS. In the '70's the NHS wanted cost savings and government purchasing policies drove the price and quality down. In addition, this country's furniture industry never had any export heritage, unlike Germany. As a consequence our industry succeeded in selling furniture, with little or no tooling, to a government whose only criteria was price. It's great to see now that times are changing.

'After I left the RCA I was flattered to work for Robert Heritage – one of this country's great and undervalued designers. Bob knew how to produce great design for very little money. He could sketch a classic design on the back of a fag packet – those little drawings told you everything you needed to know about the product. Perhaps the most enduring of those designs were Concord Lighting's Track and Spot Systems and the QE2 and Tipster chairs for Race, all of which you can still see around 30 years later.'

We stepped back and asked about Roger's early years and influences. 'I was born in Nairobi. My father had been captain of a minesweeper during the War, and then on de-mob couldn't find anywhere to live or work in Britain. He saw an ad for an articulated architect in Nairobi's Public Works Department – and that's where I spent the first blissful 14 years of my life. In the early '50's he won a ▶▶▶▶▶

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‘We came back to England, living at first in the wilds of Romney Marsh in Kent. It was a very rural community with the nearest school 10 miles away. Because the school concentrated on agriculture it was actually a very practical hands on education – it’s what design is about too. After that I went to school in Finchley and did a lot of technical drawing, metalwork and so on. Meanwhile my father worked for Watkins Gray, helping to design Guys and The Royal Free hospitals. He hated it – he saw it as architecture by committee, a constant compromise – and I suppose that rubbed off on me too. I like to be involved in all aspects of the manufacturing and marketing to get my designs made.

‘The neighbouring grammar school had an enlightened headmaster who took boys like me with my four O’ levels into the Upper Sixth and I ended up with four A’ levels. I knew I wanted a career in the arts world, but was put off architecture by my father’s experience – I wanted to be hands on. So I did a foundation course in Art and Design at the local college. Stanley Pelter, an ex-RCA stained glass designer said ‘Come along for a couple of weeks and we’ll see how we get on!’

I learned then to always give someone the time of day. I get many unsolicited emails from job applicants – my attitude is if they follow it up I’ll see them.

‘By now I knew I wanted to get into three dimensional design, something that I could make. I make better than I can draw!’

After a stint in the north – a view of a different culture from London that Roger sees as invaluable – the young designer found



himself at the RCA. ‘That’s where I met other young designers such as Pete Bosson, Brenda Saunders, Ben Kelly, Paul Haigh, Geoff Hollington, Paul Brooks, John Bennett, Tony Wills, and I’m pleased to see they’re all established. I find it interesting that Ron Arad’s taken on industrial design at the RCA because in a way the RCA lost its ability to produce commercial designers. Perhaps it’s also a reflection on society at large, but there is a growing focus on celebrity rather than the designed product. You could always tell back then who was going to do well. Dick Powell and Ross Lovegrove, for example, were charismatic students then who had that ability to promote themselves. Most of us were just hard working gritty designers, and I’m pleased we came through. Britain is a very open, competitive market – you can only compete if what you produce is good quality, well priced designs.

‘After the RCA I worked for seven years for Professor Robert Heritage. One of the great things he did for me was to give me a great responsibility – working with companies like Gordon Russell, Race and Concord. I designed a multi-use table, which could be adjusted to six heights, for an English manufacturer client who hated it. So I folded it up and took it to Barcelona – in those days just post-Franco, a rather grey town. Carlos Riera at Disform (who employed a young man at the time called Starck) said he wanted it – he’d almost tooled it in a week! That table, Subeybaja, designed in 1978, is still in production.

‘After seven years I felt I needed to broaden my experience away from Bob’s studio. I’d been working on Artacula for Antocks Lairn, and Ian Finlator asked me to join him there as Design Manager. One of their biggest clients was Ian Matthews of Matthews (now EFG), with whom we developed a contract chair. After a couple of years Ian Finlator sold out to Wagon, then we formed D&D as a design consultancy, working for Steelcase, Hille and Matthews. Sure enough, I eventually left D&D and went out on my own – my first client being Ian Matthews. When Matthews was taken over by EFG I became involved with the Swedish company, who commissioned me to design a low cost task chair range – Teamspirit – which was a fascinating project for both EFG and me. Deliberately deskilled to lower manufacturing costs – it generated sales of over 30,000 per annum. I did what I do best on that project – getting really hands on and working closely with the people on the factory floor until it ►►►►►



▶▶▶▶ was just right. Teamspirit was a great success that still sells well today, as does Splice, a chair I started working on with Ian. Moose is my most recent product for EFG, the latest in a long line of collaborations and an example of what I often say: the last 10% of getting the product right is the most difficult.'

Roger's no nonsense practical approach has won plenty of friends over the years. This Prima will see a number of Webb designs at the Business Design Centre, such as IS, Connection's first major tooled product, and a new desk range for Verco – DNA. 'I'm very busy,' smiles Roger. 'I'm enjoying the opportunity of high investment tooling, getting the details just right. Maybe all those years working with companies like Stonebridge and Plako on components have helped me serve my apprenticeship. No one sees Sade or Callum, preformed seats and backs designed for Stonebridge – but they're complex designs, and they've sold over 500,000! I think I'm good at listening to the client, even the ones who don't give a good brief. What I do best is produce work that looks easy, but it isn't – limitations and restrictions of standards, components, budgets and manufacturing capability make design complex. My satisfaction is making a product well, that the client likes and sells well.'

We could have ended nicely on that note, but perhaps with our Milanese style theme hanging heavy from our opening we ought to ask Roger Webb about the designers he admires. 'My father was a big fan of Frank Lloyd Wright, and as a child at home I was surrounded by Eames' lounge chair, Hans Wegner, Harry Bertoia, Robin Day's Polyprop and so on. Niels Diffrient's a great designer, you can see the depth of research in his Freedom chair – and I love the Wilkhahn FS

chair. Joe Colombo of course! I travelled a lot when I was at college and met people like Franco Albini, Sottsass, Cini Boeri, Richard Sapper, Marco Zanuso, Bruno Matheson – some of the great designers of our times. But for me, the big enjoyment is working out my designs with the people on the shop floor, tool makers, metal manipulators, upholsterers, assemblers, making a partnership where you are one of the cogs in the wheel ●

