



barber exchange

This piece is not about, as Martin Barber-Redmore so elegantly expresses it, ‘buffing the flim flam’. Martin is the Design Director of TSK, and a more eloquent and passionate advocate for the commercial interiors industry you cannot wish to meet. Read on...but be warned: there are no beige opinions here.

Originally, I had aspirations to be an architect. In those days it was a bit too maths oriented for me, so I studied interior architecture instead. I went to Rochester, studying under an inspirational former President of the Chartered Society of Designers. At Rochester I did two years in Spatial Design and two years of Product and Exhibition Design. It was a good mix, using different criteria and learning to fuse ideas.

‘I’ve been in organisations where the rep talks to the client, pretends to listen to the client. The rep goes back to the designer – who’s had no engagement whatsoever with the client – and briefs him about how many desks to get in...and to ‘pretty it up’ a bit. Believe me, I’ve been there, and there are plenty who are still there. It’s about selling chipboard, and it’s sad.

‘Our designs are about people and process. I don’t lose sleep over the building – I’m more interested in the unique, dynamic elements of the people and their organisation. I could spend all day listening to these people talk about how they are going forward. They’re the ones who set the agenda for our work life – I want the opportunity to experience their culture. A brief is not a series of lines on a drawing – an organisation is a living, breathing organism. The important thing is generating a process with great individuals to deliver a model that captures that organisations’ dynamic. Designers are vane, wanting adulation, wanting to be loved. But the real issue is: does the design deliver the business objective? Painting the walls purple doesn’t do it for business and space planning on its own – doesn’t deliver business objectives either. These are just parts of a complex conversation: how to deliver an effective environment that gets the best out of individuals and the organisation. Delivery of product quality or compliance with statutory requirements is just the obvious base parameter. These things don’t add value or give differentiation in themselves. When a client says that revenue is up, or staff retention is improved, that’s the added value that makes the difference.



‘It was a gradual epiphany for me. Having worked for an architectural practice, a furniture supplier and in contracting I’d seen plenty of sides to the industry. What I do know is that it’s not about architecture, and it’s not about products. The focus must be on what is good for people and the organisation. How the business operates and how individuals communicate and collaborate forms the cultural experience. This is manifested in the brand identity. It’s clearly of massive benefit to start with a fantastic envelope if you can. But actually, it doesn’t matter if it’s a wrinkly tin shed or a glass box. You don’t need to pay rentals of £30 per sq ft to deliver.

‘I’ve had a learning journey, touched by people who’ve helped shape my way of thinking. I tend to strip out small minded focus on detail, and instead think, ‘I’m affecting people’s lives here, affecting their livelihood.’ If I get it wrong it has a massive effect on that organisation. I can reduce efficiency, limit integration; I can do all sorts of damage if I don’t understand the business.





▶▶▶▶▶ ‘Design isn’t about taking components or systems and lumping them together. It’s the business and its processes and practices that designers need to understand. It isn’t boring – it’s interesting because folk are folk. The foibles, the innovation, the creativity, their service, their product, their organisation – I learn something every day – that’s fantastic experience. We fuse that experience, we bring that experience to our clients and ask ‘What are you trying to achieve?’

‘You cannot distance design from the input factors, otherwise it’s just pushing geometry around. If you do that, it’s just Tetris. Pushing 2D and 3D shapes around a plan is all that it amounts to if you’re not involved in understanding the client.

‘It frustrates me when people talk about ergonomics, and all they talk about is office chairs. No! Ergonomics is any form of human interaction with the environment, from document management to spoons.

‘Design is about wearing the client’s shoes, and going on the client’s journey. If you can’t live it you’re not being rigorous – you’re just buffing the flim flam. The form/function debate is about the same thing. The sad thing is that a lot of designers forget about the function. The question is not ‘will it look good and work?’ because function is actually about human interaction with the environment. The question is ‘will it work for the user and the organisation?’

‘It is vital to communicate with the user to gauge whether something will work for them so they can feel the benefit. I love it when a client has a group of 25 people who want to be around in the design process. Fantastic! I want their input. I want to listen to them, not pay lip service.

‘A lot of good organisations can deliver good design. The front end is understanding the fundamentals of an organisation. Design and build firms are expected to do that, and lots can. Our difference is

doing the front end and the back end – engaging the users. We get them emotionally involved: with ownership they iron out the small things and the longevity of the project is increased. Delivering design is one thing, but you have to get them involved from the outset, you have to know the aspirations of the users or it won’t work. I get my designers to understand the processes and productivity. We look at making space efficient without affecting creativity.

‘We’re passionate about this. TSK stand for time, space, knowledge – and our philosophy is ‘workplace design around people and process’. It won’t go out of fashion. This isn’t funkyinteriors.com, or benchingsolutions.com. This is not a trend. It’s about aligning the things that matter.

‘I look for three ‘C’s in a designer. Firstly they have to be creative, to take the information, to process the input and to think out of the box. Second – communication. It doesn’t matter if it’s a Mont Blanc or a mouse. My tutor said the designer’s most powerful tool is the telephone, not your technology or CAD drafting skills. Communication gets the vision across, and it’s listening as well as talking. Sit there, shut up and listen to the brief. The third ‘C’ is to be able to co-ordinate. A designer is a conductor – you can’t do it all yourself. Bringing together the vision and the supply chain in a limited time frame on an occupied site – that’s co-ordination. My job is to push and stretch our designers to become the best they can be. Mentoring is about saving them time, ensuring they’re thinking in line with the client’s objectives. I see some designers who are stuck in a CAD rut. That’s not a skill set – you can learn the technology easily. Show me the software for creative thinking!

‘Don’t get me wrong, having the right integrated tools – so they whole project cascades through – is vital. We simply don’t have eight weeks to navel gaze and think about the construction drawings. Tools▶▶▶▶▶

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▶▶▶▶ like CAD are about taking out the stuff that's not about thinking. Space planners aren't low life – let the tool take out the drudgery, freeing the designer to do decision making. Creativity, communication and co-ordination – these don't cost money, they don't even save money. The three 'C's make money.'

We ask Martin about activities away from the industry. 'I've always been keen on sport, and I've always been very competitive,' he admits. 'Here I am, 25 year later, coaching at Warrington Athletics Club. I'm mentally ahead of them, if not physically these days! I like that challenge. I've had a lifelong love/hate relationship with martial arts – Judo, Karate, Tai Kwando, Ju Jitsu – with black belt in some. It's about mental self-discipline. It's about finding stillness. Focus, in a raging physical environment. I'm a martial arts teacher. Kata means form – it's about thinking as well as physical aspects: meditation, breathing, focus. I bring that, that single-mindedness, to work. I also like the team; I like five-a-side football with the guys because it's about us.'

'Apart from that I go up mountains, walking in the Lake District, taking the van up hills in Cumbria. These are inspirational environments – is there anything better than being up Helvelin getting your face ripped off in a storm?'

If you've been to Mixology you will have seen Martin Barber-Redmore: always one of the first to strut his funky moves on the dancefloor. So we thought we'd finish by asking about the man's musical tastes.

'I was always a massive heavy metal fan, with a ponytail halfway down my back. I love all the '70's rock stuff all the way through to glam rock. I did Donnington and Reading complete with the rain, the mess and the bottle throwing. These days there are over 9,000 tracks on my iPod from metal and Indie through to Andrea Boccelli – diversity's exciting. I took up guitar last year in my ongoing quest

for self-expression. All I'll say after a year of lessons is that I've got massive respect for anyone who plays well! The best thing about music now is the fusion, the cross fertilisation that's everywhere. Fusion is everywhere, from food to your work/life balance. Fusion is about bringing the best together.'

The conversation moves back to working matters. 'I'm a member of the CSD,' Martin reveals. 'I think it's important to raise the quality and profile of the people working in our industry and independent peer review is a good way to do that. Our industry needs to get more professional if it's to offer a real alternative to traditional construction routes. Most of the standards that we use are drawn directly from that traditional methodology with organisations such as RIBA, CABE, BCO leading that progression. We need to start setting some of our own benchmarks and enforcing them if the market is to see as a viable alternative.'

'We've spent a great deal of time at TSK developing our business process and having it measured and certified. We've just received accreditation for ISO 14001 and 18001. We feel a great sense of achievement in getting these but we are in the minority in our industry. We've have a strong Dun & Bradstreet rating which should give our clients some assurance, especially in current times. Yet with all this time and effort going into developing our people and improving our business we still find ourselves at the races with businesses that can't even afford the entry ticket, never mind started the process of accreditation. As you might imagine it's a huge source of frustration to us, but whose fault is that? It's the leaders in our industry collectively and we need to sort it out. We see potential clients insulating themselves from the risk of choice by picking organisations with scale, and it's hard to fault them for that, but we have no aspirations to be the biggest anything at TSK. However, we have a strong desire to be the best at what we do.' ●

