



mark of distinction

What's this piece about? Courgettes and design rigour. Jethro Tull and Rodney Cooper. Pig's heads and instinct. It's about being both considered and a tad quirky. It's about a *Mix* kind of designer.

Mark Simpson heads up the London Interiors Division of global architectural practice HKS and is as creative and serious about the business as you would expect. He's got a CV that stretches back to working under the legendary Rodney Cooper at BDP, and a portfolio of clients that would impress anyone. This is all fine and dandy and as you would expect from one of our industry's heavyweights. But let's face it, really interesting people have their quirks, like a bit of eccentricity and express outrageous opinions without a care in the world. Come on Mark, get real! Newcastle a big club? Vegetables unappealing? Coldplay boring?

'I come from South Shields on the North East coast. It's a grim town that used to depend on shipbuilding and mining – gritty stuff. Dad was a butcher – like his dad before him – mam was a hairdresser; dad was a hard grafter, in his shop at five in the morning. I helped in the shop during school holidays, making sausages, sweeping sawdust floors, cutting eyes out of pig's heads...

'I wasn't particularly academic at school, enjoying art rather than the basics, shall we say. I got a diploma in Art and Design at the local college and then went to Leicester Poly to do Interior Design.

'I learned the basics at college, but I really learned at BDP. I joined them when I was 20. It was a really exciting studio. The Interiors Division was headed by Rodney Cooper, a genuine character the like of which you don't see today. There was also John Barker, Simon Scott, David Lyall, Martin Cook, Franco Greco, Nick >>>>





▶▶▶▶▶ We move on to talk about the present. ‘It’s hard work at the moment for a small practice to keep going, everything’s going framework – big companies using big companies. I’m not a big fan of frameworks, I know why they exist but they stifle creativity, diversity and ignore the real benefit a small creative studio can bring to a project.

‘It’s very hard for a small practice to grow in that environment especially now. What once were estate agents are now project managers, cost consultants, workplace strategists, spaceplanners, engineers, and interior designers – they can’t be good at everything, can they? It’s all a bit sad but makes me more sure that good design is even more important than ever – that’s where we can still bring real value.

‘These are challenging times for everyone – but we are building a great Interior design team at HKS. We currently support the Health, Education and Sports architecture teams but have our own stream of work too. We’ve just completed Avon cosmetics new 110,000 sq ft HQ, currently finishing a 40,000 European HQ for Illumina and working on a significant 160,000 sq ft re-stack and relocation project for First Data as well as an exec ‘hotelling suite’ for the same client in London.

‘It’s a vibrant office and I’m really enjoying being here. Although HKS is an American business, London is very much a UK operation with an international portfolio. We’re building our own portfolio and get great support from the US. HKS is in the top ten global practices in terms of size, with 24 offices. Most of these are in the States, but the reach is growing – we now have offices in London, Brazil, Mexico, Abu Dhabi and India.’

A widower with two young children (Patrick is 11 and Cora 12) Mark is now Director of Interior Design with European responsibility. Doesn't he worry about all that international travel? ‘Not at all, this year alone, I’ve been to Basildon, Stoke, Swindon and Northampton,’ he comments.

Ok, so let’s talk about home in Muswell Hill. ‘I love Muesli Hill, great schools, green spaces – I’ve got an allotment. I grow spuds, shallots, sweetcorn, peas, courgettes. I don’t even like veg very much but the pleasure is in the growing and nurturing and it’s a place to think and earth myself. I go there to console myself when Newcastle get beaten.’

We chat a bit about Newcastle United, and how the Geordie fans are not delusional (‘It is a big club, just not managed properly.’) but we talk mostly about music, because we remember Mark making some scornful remarks about Coldplay. ‘They’re boring. Music’s a big thing for me, I went to 35 gigs last year. The other weekend I saw umpteen better, fresher bands at the Green Man Festival – bands like She Keeps Bees, Dirty Three, Beth Jeans Houghton, Blue Roses, Diagonal, 9 Bach, Pivot and er...Hawkwind. There’s a mental Texan three piece I like at the moment called White Denim – Jimi Hendrix turned up to 11. My taste is eclectic, from new bands to stuff I’ve listened to since I was 15 like Captain Beefheart or Jethro Tull. They had eccentricity, there’s nothing eccentric about Coldplay unless you count wrapping electrical tape round your fingers...it’s the same with design for me, it needs to stay fresh, challenge you, surprise you, inspire you – but the classics are there behind everything to remind you that everything has a heritage.’

Mark’s phone was beginning to rumble, a site meeting beckoned, details needed to be considered – it was time to go. Interesting and interested, an acerbic dry wit, and a desire to want the best for his clients blend to make Mark Simpson who he is. And you know what’s even better than all of that? He’s a top man. And you can’t say fairer than that ●