NICK BUTLER: THE PRODUCT DESIGNER AS ANTI-HERO, published as 'Designer as anti-hero', *Blueprint*, April 1984

Nick Butler died in early 2012. Here, in a rare and relatively early interview, he explains why, despite being one of Britain's most successful 20th century designers, he preferred to keep a low profile

Nick Butler is 42. He became a Royal Designer for Industry three years ago, and is widely regarded as one of Britain's most distinguished design talents. Butler founded BIB Design Consultants, his practice, in 1967: today, based in Notting Hill, it has 32 employees, 10 company cars and a turnover well into the six figure range. Yet Butler doesn't give interviews. This one, he intimates, is an unrepeatable exception.

What future is there for industrial designers? In Britain, educating the breed is a highly organised business, with more students being packed on to fewer courses each year. But the funds aren't around to employ many industrial designers in this country, and you have to be very good indeed to get to the media nirvana in Milan. These days, freshly-trained industrial designers are more likely to join the drones who slug it out with a soldering iron on £5000 a year in the Western Corridor than they are to be celebrated in the press. Setting up as trendy 'designer/manufacturer'? That's something which usually requires a private income. Going cooperative à la Livingstone? This is the hazardous endeavour of jewellery and fashion designers, not creators of scientific instruments and domestic appliances.

The magazines may portray a small, elite brand of (mainly Italian) industrial designers as superheroes, capable of singlehandedly dreaming up anything and having it made in massive volumes. Yet the reality of industrial design practice today is rather different. And Nick Butler, whose achievements in a whole variety of product sectors easily entitle him to a place in the pantheon of superheroes, is a good man to talk to about this paradox. He cares little for the hype surrounding industrial design, but lots about the substance of the discipline.

Butler first trained at Leeds College of Art and then went on to gain a first at London's RCA. He took a fellowship in the States, did a stint on industrialised building systems at the GLC, and finally teamed up with Peter Isherwood and Stephen Bartlett to form BIB. After a while, Isherwood moved off to avionics, and, more recently, Bartlett has been away from BIB: he is a serious painter, and, though he is shortly to return to the company as a partner, a recent show of his work was a sell-out. The core of BIB therefore remains Butler, poised equally between engineering and aesthetics.

'You've got to understand engineering, even if you're designing vases. But to have that understanding you don't need to be an engineer'. Butler is adamant that mastery of engineering principles means more, not less freedom for designers: 'We used to get shot down by clients over engineering details. Now we can reply to every question. That means we can put our ideas about more'.

This attitude – that a problem like engineering, which most design critics find rather tiresome, can actually turn out to be a solution – is characteristic of Butler. His line on similar 'problems', such as microelectronics, robot production techniques and even the recession, betrays a consistent optimism about the future. Chips are good because they release 'sixty or seventy per cent of the constraints': the size of television screens, for instance, need no longer be determined by cathode ray tube manufacturing technology, but by human needs. Robots are good because they allow designers to apply machining and finishing techniques which would normally be uneconomic, and because they open the way to products made in scores of different design variations – customised, almost. And the recession is good at least in the sense that it has forced companies to give industrial design the importance it has long deserved. 'That way the prospects facing young designers are in fact better than ever'.

It's hard to argue with Butler, because the physical evidence is there to show that he knows what he's talking about. In engineering he has done heat exchangers for General Electric, medical equipment for Corning, marine radar for Decca. In electronics he has developed writing pads which computers can read. His gas welding torches for BOC were designed to be built by robots, and he is currently working on a robot-built washing machine for a Japanese client (constructed entirely out of plastics, it will be made by a workforce of 22, to volumes of more than a million a year). Lastly, in terms of the recession, he has shown that the opportunities are there to be grabbed. Lean, heavily worked and hedged in by client confidentiality clauses that are getting tougher and tougher, BIB is nevertheless booming.

The strategy that has built the business is simple. Four-fifths of BIB's income comes from abroad – though the British share is on the rise at present. In overseas markets, BIB has always made a point of setting its rates higher than local ones, so as not to invite charges of undercutting indigenous consultancies. Result: a fair amount of money has poured in.

There is, however, more to the strategy than going overseas. Butler also stresses that industrial designers have generally been unable to win the big budgets that graphic designers are used to, if only because 'they're usually paid out of technical development or engineering, whereas graphics people swim around in advertising or marketing'. His trick has been to take industrial design to the Americans and the Japanese and get it put into the marketing loop. And in this he has been aided, he makes no secret, by 'several young, zippy American graphics teams, people like Anspach Grossman Portugal. They've recommended us to US companies, and we them'.

Butler has been tempted to turn BIB in a multidisciplinary direction, but has found these informal arrangements with the world of graphics preferable to building his own team of professionals. Yet graphics is important to him. His impeccably reassuring industrial gas regulators, red and black and designed for BOC, boast not only improved pressure adjustment but also more intelligible graphics; his ultra-cheap kitchen scales for Prestige have similar merits. More broadly, his work shows just as much appreciation of colour and form as any graphics man.

This is important, because Butler's principal reputation has been built around capital, rather than consumer goods. In one respect the reputation has been deserved, because capital goods are the sort of unglamorous, unpublicised affair he revels in. But in another it has not. Butler's scissors for Prestige are in millions of British homes, as are his drills for Black and Decker. Anyway his vacuum pumps look like coffee machines.

When he started in the late 1960s, Butler says, the bulk of his business was in capital goods. But since the recession and the explosion of High Street spending, the trend has been towards consumer goods – tempered only, most recently, with an upturn in capital goods as consumer goods manufacturers have begun to invest more heavily than in the past. Despite his reputation, therefore, a full 60 per cent of Butler's business today comes from consumer goods. The story of his cameras for Minolta can't be told yet; but the story of his torches for Duracell brings out very clearly his facility with consumer goods – his genius, in fact.

The torches, black and yellow and built with a beam that opens up like a cigarette lighter in reverse, were launched by the UK subsidiary of Duracell, the American battery makers, in November 1982. They now take 30 per cent of the European market for torches. The little one is made at 25,000 a day, 2.75 million a year. Two new models will be launched in June, cradle-to-production in eight months. Butler: 'Duracell were enlightened clients – they'd never made anything but batteries before. We knew that play value was important: kids like to read comics with torches. We also knew that no designer had yet done a good torch. The brief was to sell batteries, so the solution had to be cheap. We thought: go for a light source, not a torch. We made a big model, put in the articulated head to give variable geometry, built the head round invisible internal plastics mouldings, found that it worked. Then we did the same again for the genuine article, this time with soft moulds. Nothing happened. The head wouldn't budge'.

Eventually BIB fixed things. But despite much coaxing, the UK moulders of the torch failed to deliver. Now Duracell has built new plants in Belgium and Italy, with another due in Canada, to make up. End of tale.

Butler can be scathing about British industry. He praises TI's recent £8m investment in robotics (unveiled by the secretary of state for trade and industry, Norman Tebbit, only the other week). But he complains that, through Raleigh, the company is still making too many different types of bike designs. 'Ten years ago they had *ten thousand* models. Now they're pleased that the figures "only" fifteen hundred'.

The Japanese, by contrast, have these things sorted out: though the Americans may soon overtake them in robotics, they're already doing the customised design variations bit. 'In Japan market analysis and financial clout are integrated in a way that they aren't in Britain. The banks and the lifestyle analysts are on the same floor of the same company. Manufacturing is just a means to an end. If the market's there, they can mobilise even the enormous funds that are needed for getting into robotics'.

But the Japanese have their own worries – especially in the realm of single lens reflex cameras, one of their most famous strengths. Butler is fascinating about this. The world market for SLRs is saturated, with Japan exporting 70 per cent of domestic output. Therefore companies like Minolta face a dilemma. Should they try to stimulate demand by adopting the new product technology of Sony's Mavica, or should they wait for Kodak to bring out 1500 ASA film? The Mavica route means buying and then, for quality's sake, improving on Sony's licenses, which contain the secret of how to plug cameras into TVs and facsimile machines. 1500 ASA may mean an end to the use of flash and indeed threatens, if that is the right word, to turn photography into a simple pinhole camera affair once more. In practice, Butler says, the Japanese are not sure what to do, which is why holding operations like disk-based cameras are enjoying momentary popularity.

If, therefore, the British plastics industry cannot get it together to make British-designed Duracell torches, the Japanese camera industry is now a victim of its own success. Between the two, in planes to Tokyo and Texas, darts Butler, 'a left-winger with capitalist tendencies' as he describes himself. He has his own private design philosophy, like anybody else ('BIB had meetings about that last week'), but he also has both the inclination and the ability to *get published*. That entails working within the limits of profitability, 'but again that's a spur to being creative, not a hindrance'.

Where are Nick Butter and his profession going? We aren't, he stresses, in the age of the designer as superhero. The press is wrong to suggest that romantically-inspired individuals, Renaissance men, are the substance of design. 'Of course, you need a conductor to get the best out of an orchestra. But without the musicians you're nothing'.

Butler's attitude to publicity is of a piece with this. He doesn't want it. He can, he says, afford not to be in the *Financial Times*: 'I know it sounds awful, but we've got too much work on at the moment to take on any we might get from appearing there'. And he has no desire to be in the design press – 'I'd rather be in a trade rag, frankly'. He just wants to satisfy the consumer, and also 'affect the whole way we live, how we buy things, how we shop'. There's a need for literary barbs in design, he admits, but he finds the smaller items in *Blueprint* 'scurrilous, unconstructive'. He wants yet higher standards at BIB, so that his own design thinking is challenged and beaten more regularly by his colleagues. 'Oh yes', he concludes absently, 'I'd like to slow down'.

Postscript, Easter 2012:

The great graphic designer Mike Dempsey interviewed Nick Butler later on in his life as part of RDInsights, a series of interviews with Royal Designers for Industry, on