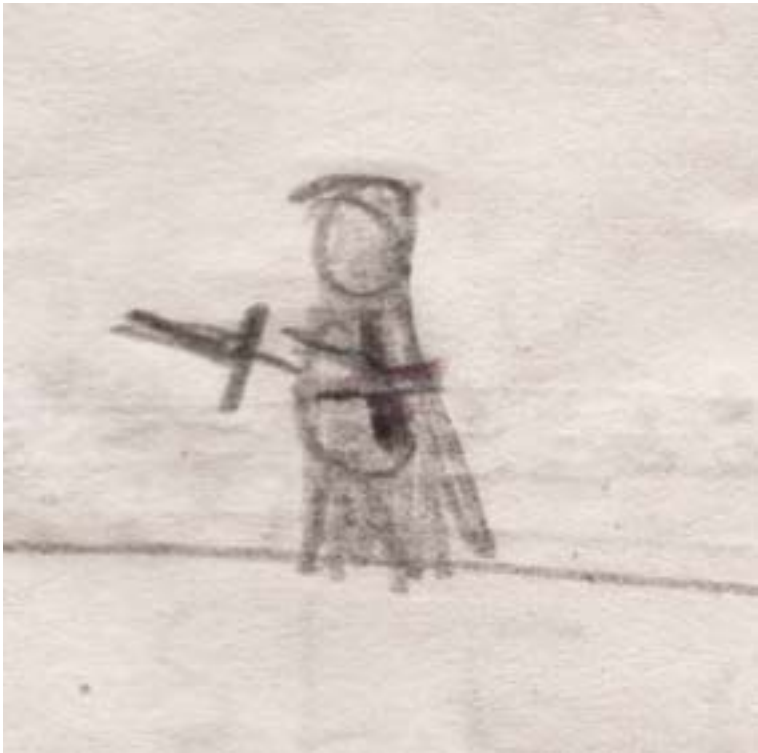


# ELUSIVE RIGHTNESS IN DESIGN



SLIGHTLY EDITED AND WRITTEN VERSION OF  
THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS  
GIVEN BY ROBIN LEVIEN RDI  
MASTER OF THE FACULTY OF ROYAL DESIGNERS FOR INDUSTRY  
AT THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS ON  
NOVEMBER 19<sup>TH</sup> 2009  
**ELUSIVE RIGHTNESS IN DESIGN**

The Faculty of Royal Designers was set up by the RSA in 1936, at the end of my 2 year term as master we will be celebrating our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I am sure that everyone who works at the RSA and the 27,500 fellows, believe they are helping to make the world a better place. I think this is the common ground between the RSA, it's Fellows and the Royal Designers.

I can't speak for any other Royal Designers but I for one believe that by designing better clothes, hats, graphics, products, vehicles, interfaces, environments, landscapes, by achieving feats of engineering, or by creating memorable sets for theatre and film, that the works of Royal Designers have improved our world. We have been trying to make our encounters with the man made world as variously efficient, joyful, moving & beautiful as we can.

This pursuit of imbuing the things with which we surround ourselves with beauty and meaning is a vital part of our culture and at the foundation of what it is to be human. Whether we are good at it matters a great deal. To make my point, rather than to show off, the design work that I and my colleagues have done for the bathroom manufacturer Ideal Standard over the past 25 years or so now means that one in seven UK bathrooms have our designs in them.



I made this drawing when I was at primary school and I have included it here to emphasise that whilst I hope to make some interesting and revealing points about design in this address, it is not a scientific or highly academic study.

Having hopefully convinced you that being a good designer matters and by implication how dangerous successful bad designers could be. I want to use some case studies to explore how some designers have pursued the essential but Elusive Rightness in their designs. I am talking about the 'it' factor, that extra bit of magic that elevates something above the ordinary. Many so called 'classic' designs have this 'it' factor, they have a quality that connects with human beings in a way that outlasts fashion. It is the pursuit of Elusive Rightness that gets me up in the morning, as I am sure it does people in many other walks of life.

I recognise that Rightness in Design depends on a complex mix of ingredients, not least sustainability, but for this address I want to focus on aesthetics and I will explore this through three main themes, drawing, nature and sex.

My case studies are mostly objects that are part of my life. I am particularly interested in our emotional relationship with things, it's about visceral qualities. This begs the question, is there a language or code in design that connects with all human beings, a universal appeal.



Human beings have been drawing for a long time.

Drawing is a very direct connection between the mind and the hand, it is a physical manifestation of an idea, for a designer drawing is often a means to an end but also perhaps the beginning of the erosion of a dream. The Stone Age paintings at Lascaux have a directness and beauty that connects with us today even though we don't really know why they were made.

It is reasonable to assume that they were an end in themselves and not preparation for another work.



I am fascinated by the power of drawing to capture an idea. Drawing for a painter is often preparatory, as in this chalk drawing by Michelangelo for the Libyan Sibyl. The study was made from a male model, which in the final work was transmuted to a female in the Fresco in the vaults of the Sistine Chapel. The drawing is so much more expressive than the final painting.

Many designers' lives are spent fighting for a quality captured in a drawing and living with the reality that the end result will never be as good.

One of the skills of a designer who sketches, is to recognise which sketch has the essence of the idea, the DNA, on which the whole project can be built.

This reminds me of the wonderful piece of writing by Renzo Piano where he describes the creative process as like, peering into the dark.

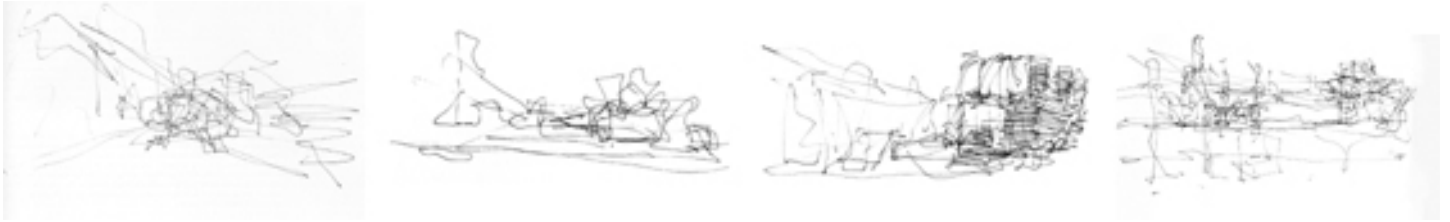
I paraphrase...

"When you enter a dark room, your eyes adapt after a while, the mind adapts too and that is the beginning of a moment of creation. In reality, the idea is not a solitary stroke of genius, it is a synthesis of all the efforts that have gone into research, into experimentation; it is that "trying over and over again" that Galileo used to talk about. The idea derives in such a natural way from the process that it is really hard to recognize the moment when it arises."

He goes on to say...

"Artists are not people who have a 'gift', rather they are people who master a technique and use it to attain their objective, which is art."

I think you can easily substitute designers for artists here.



Frank Gehry's sketches have been described as semi automatic and for me come close to illustrating Piano's idea of creativity being like 'peering into the dark'. I have never visited the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao but I find images of it intoxicating and inspiring.



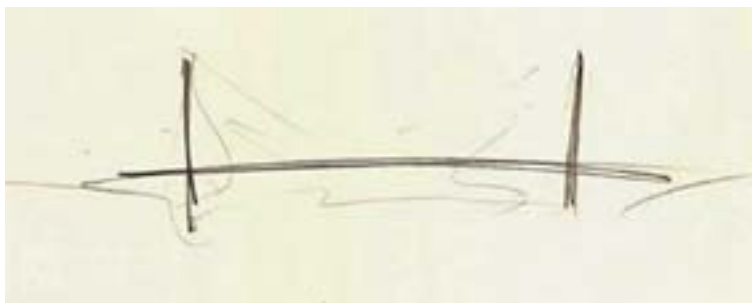
I was assisted by Tim Parsons in the research and writing of this address. Tim is a designer, writer and teacher; we have had many interesting conversations between ourselves and with other designers exploring Rightness in Design.



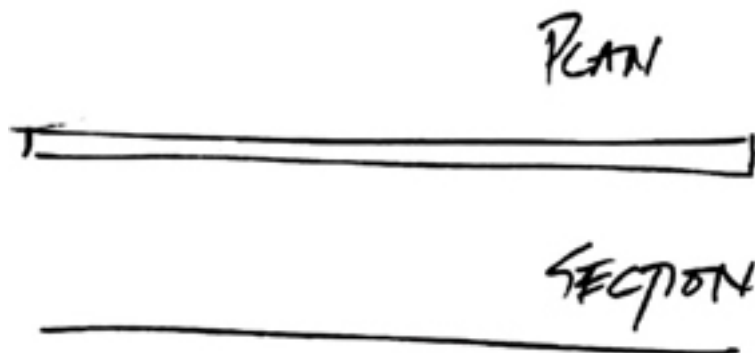
We talked to designer John Tree who works with Jasper Morrison. John has a theory that there are many designs that have a human quality because they contain a radius of 500mm, which is the length of an adult arm plus pencil. Examples are Ferdinand Porsche's 911 and Nigel Gresley's A4 Class steam locomotive.



This theory is closely linked to drawing boards though, a more up to date study might be needed. What is the radius generated by the flick of a designers wrist in sketchbook, or on the back of an envelope?



The engineer, Chris Wise captured the essence of his idea for the Millennium Bridge in his sketchbook. He explored various lines but ended up with a stunningly simple, single taut line crossing the river, this plan and section was his vision for the bridge.



Chris has written a very powerful piece about engineers and drawing called 'The Whole World in their pencils', this is the first paragraph.

“The sketched line conveys a physicality as great as the table on which it is written...describes in two dimensions a space as three dimensional as the building in which it is drawn.... and carries natural forces as powerful as the earth on which we stand”.

I told you it was powerful stuff!



I love the Millennium Bridge, it has helped to regenerate Bankside where I live and work but I put it to Chris that the line of the bridge had lost the tautness of his final sketch.

We all know the story of the wobbly bridge, Chris told me that there were 150 phenomena tested when designing a bridge, now there are 151.

The engineering to stop the wobble was overkill and the added weight of the dampers fitted underneath the bridge, have pulled the line down.



It is now three intersecting lines, a broken line. It is not so easy to see the breaks in the line but the handrails clearly show a severe change of angle. This story goes a long way to illustrate how Elusive, Rightness in design can be.

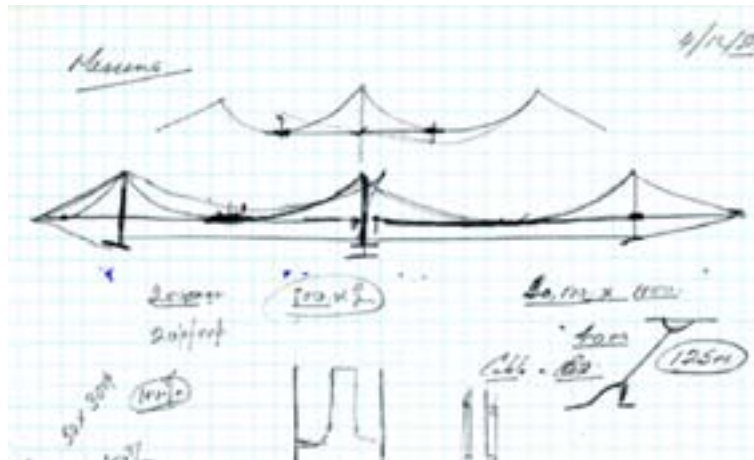


One of the privileges of being a Royal Designer is meeting other RDI's, designers you wouldn't normally get to meet.

I had some fascinating and enjoyable encounters with the late Dr William Brown RDI who designed many of the world's great suspension bridges. I travel to Hull quiet regularly by train and the sight of the Humber Bridge that we pass always lifts my spirits, to me it is a beautiful drawing in the sky.



Bill Brown showed me some of his sketches on one of my visits to his office and I felt a great connection with him through drawing, whether a suspension bridge or a teacup, our creative process was very similar.

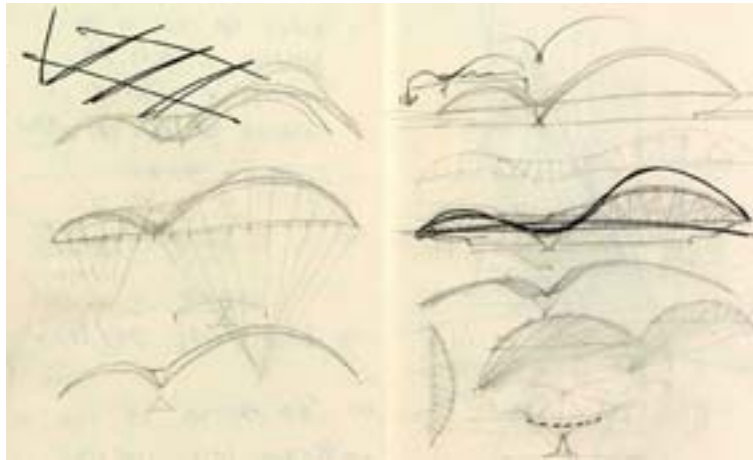


This sketch by Bill of the Messina crossing is interesting because it has two spans.



The final design has a single span of 3.3 kilometres, construction starts in December 2009 and it will be the longest suspension bridge in the world, another tribute to a brilliant designer.

Bridges and trains seem to be connected for me. I was on a train to Newcastle a couple of years ago with Chris Wise, we both had work to do so agreed to sit apart.



As we crossed the Tyne and were packing up to get off the train I spotted some wavy lines in Chris's sketchbook. I now know they were preliminary sketches for the Infinity footbridge in Stockton in Tees.



The short span is over a rowing course, it is half the size of the large span and acts as a damper; learning's from the Millennium Bridge. I think this time Elusive Rightness has been achieved.



Another comparison that helps to illuminate the power of a taut natural line is the Swiss Re building in London and the Torre Agbar in Barcelona. The Gherkin, as it is affectionately known, has a wonderful tautness, the Torre Agbar by contrast is rather ponderous and flabby. I am amazed that the profile in the drawings ever got built, to anyone with an eye for form, it is clearly a bad line.



Early lessons on form making for me included clambering about on the Acropolis in Athens in my twenties. Back in the 1970's there was virtually unrestricted access on the Acropolis. The Parthenon is a wonderful example of the manipulation of line and form to achieve Rightness.



The base of the Parthenon is curved like a crown green bowling green, the radius is 2 miles. The columns which are differently spaced one from another have a subtle curve which makes them look stronger. These clever devices are known as entasis.

We use these techniques everyday in our studio.



A good example to explore this a little further is the Glo Ball light by Jasper Morrison. This is one of my favourite designs, I live with four or five of them, it definitely has the 'it' factor. They are fitted with a dimmer switch and can be a midday sun or a glowing moon.



It is the squashed ball shape however that gives the Glow Ball it's magic human quality, after all we all get squashed occasionally, either physically or emotionally.



The key though is how Jasper did the squashing. The original idea was for two hemispheres joined by straight lines. There is a critical development sketch by Jasper showing the line at the top being lifted by two or three millimetres and at this stage an indeterminate radius being introduced. This single piece of design refinement is for me what gives the Glo Ball its Rightness. There is an added dimension, which is that the glass shades are hand blown and this little bit of inflation to the shape suggests an extra puff of air by the glassblower.



We asked Jasper for some thoughts to help us promote the bathroom range he designed for Ideal Standard, I quote...

“The best objects look completely natural but looking natural involves the right balance of form, proportion, detailing and materials. Naturalness also involves simplicity and subtlety of character which if achieved, ensure the product will age well rather than become dated”.

This is clearly about Rightness in design and for me captures the idea that a really great piece of design looks effortless, complete and natural and will do for a very long time.

Looking natural suggests a link to nature, the starting point for the Glo Ball shape was radii intersecting with straight lines, this doesn't occur in nature, lines blend with one another. Most designers will happily admit that they aspire to the Rightness that occurs in nature.



I wrote this poem by Josef Albers in my sketchbook at the very beginning of my Art and Design education. It means as much to me today as it did then, maybe even more.

I am very grateful to my fellow RDI, Mike Dempsey for this design of the poem using the font Walbaum.

More or less  
Easy to know  
that diamonds are precious  
good to learn  
that rubies have depth  
but more to see  
that pebbles are miraculous

*Josef Albers*



This poem reminds us that we, human beings, are part of nature, not separate from it and a very recent part at that.



These are what are left of terracotta amphora handles that have been eroded by the sea. I found them on a beach on the Greek Island of Karpathos, I don't think they are very old. What I love about them is that they are man made objects that have been improved by nature, in a way reclaimed. They are asymmetric, some might say imperfect but this is something I want to celebrate and work with. These bits of sea washed terracotta have influenced many projects at Studio Levien.

I remember a visit by the great American designer Charles Eames to the Royal College of Art when I was a student there in the mid 1970's. He was visiting the Furniture Department but I sneaked in at the back, hoping for some gems of wisdom, I wasn't disappointed.

One by one the students showed him a piece of their work and then he was asked for his opinion. He was charming and polite but told them they were trying too hard to make beautiful things and that when he designed something he always tried to get a bit of 'ugly' into it.

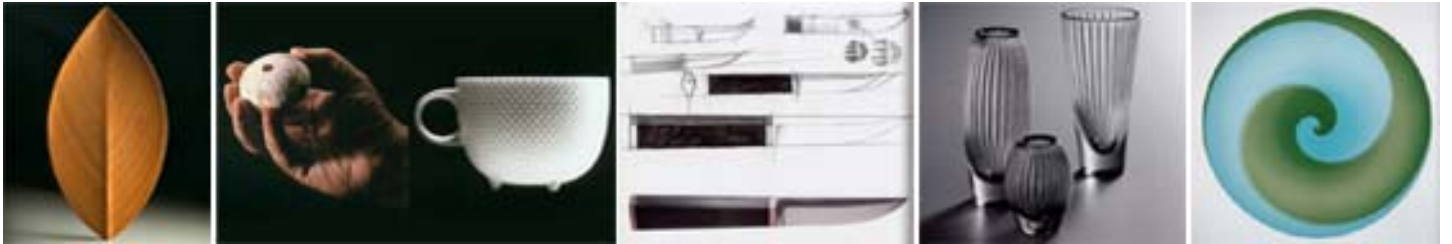
I think he was telling them that imperfection can bring a human quality to a design, after all human beings are far from perfect.

Charles and Ray Eames spent a lot of time in Japan and I'm sure knew all about Wabi Sabi which acknowledges three simple realities, nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect.

I, like many designers regularly get accused of being a perfectionist. I have come to realise that I am a perfectionist, trying to perfect the art of the imperfect.



There are many designers who take inspiration from nature, some of them have been an inspiration to me. Tapio Wirkkala, the great Finish designer of the last century spent much of his time living very close to nature and his designs have a Rightness that reflects his deep understanding of it.



The Wishbone chair by Hans Wegner almost feels as if it has grown rather than been designed and made.



The side struts are wider at the back, which refers to how a tree branch is thicker where it joins the trunk, or our arms are thicker where they meet our shoulders.



The more you study the Wishbone chair the more complex and refined it becomes, yet it seems effortless and natural, it's good to sit on too.

So now to my third theme, sex.



We designed a range of bathtubs for American Standard back in the 1980's and an image of a bath grip was featured on the cover of Design Magazine that was published by the Design Council at the time.

I was quite astonished when the editor of the magazine phoned to tell me that the wife of a senior executive at the Design Council had complained to him that the cover of the magazine was too sexual. If she had said too sensual I would have been delighted. It is hard to refute that sex sells but it is sensuality that I strive for when I am designing.

One of the best compliments I ever had was a lady who picked up a teapot I had designed and said she wanted to put it up her jumper and incubate it.

There are thousands of designs whose appeal is rooted in sensuality but one of my favourites is the Little Tulip armchair by the late Pierre Paulin, he designed it in 1972 and it is one of the most beautiful and sensuous chairs I know.



At the end of Françoise Foulous's forward to the Pierre Paulin Designer book she says... "Pierre Paulin is all at once... vigorous and sensual... in control and voluptuous... submissive and rebellious. But he never cheats or pretends, he just is. This is where his modernity in fact resides." .....Isn't that wonderfully French!



Another example of sensuous furniture is the Lem barstool by the Azumi's for La Palma, it definitely has that extra bit of magic that elevates it above the ordinary.



I talked to Shin Azumi about the design and soon discovered that sensuality was the last thing on his mind. He started out by looking for a new typology for a barstool. The key breakthrough was joining the footrest to the seat, this means the optimum distance between the two is maintained, unlike most bar stools where the foot rest is connected to the leg. More importantly though it simplifies the design and in a way liberates it, it has a floating quality.

I pushed Shin on why he thought the Lem barstool has the 'it' factor and I got a revealing answer. Shin who is Japanese has lived in the UK for many years but he still feels isolated in a way that designers whose first language is English don't. Shin told me that he feels the need to communicate through his work; it does the talking for him. He has turned an adversity into an advantage, as it is the clarity of the Lem barstool design that delivers much of its Rightness, the sensuality that I respond to in particular just happened. Shin runs a workshop with Vitra every summer, the theme is always the same, communication.



The Lem barstool is very successful, La Palma are producing 4,000 a month.



There are many copies of the design but they all eloquently demonstrate how elusive Rightness in design is, they illuminate how good the original is and in my view the world would be a better place without them.



The great ceramics designer Eva Zeisel wrote a book called 'The Magic Language of Things'.



She starts the chapter called 'Crisp and Soft'... "Whether it is the wing of a building or a teapot handle, when one part is joined to another the designer faces a delicate problem, they must decide how to join the different parts together, by having them seem to grow from one to the other or by creating a crisp demarcation line. The former was the Art Nouveau fashion, the latter that of the Modern Movement. Eva should know she has lived through both.

I was very honoured to help with her nomination to be an Honorary RDI. We wrote to tell her about her election to the Faculty and to invite her to the awards ceremony at the RSA in London; she asked if she would get to meet the Queen.

Tricia and I went for supper with Eva in her apartment in New York when she was 98. We were with Norman Tempest from the ceramics company Royal Stafford and he needed her approval for a small jug that she had designed. Norman handed the jug to Eva but her peripheral vision meant she could only evaluate it by touch, she fondled the jug for well over a minute before handing it back to Norman saying it was fine.

I found that very moving.

Sensuality never leaves us and this for me answers the question, “Is there a language or code in design that connects with all human beings, a universal appeal?”

The answer is sensuality.

Luke Johnson in his chairman’s lecture at the RSA “The Importance of Invention” last month, talked about the importance of... enterprise... invention... design... and education.

I plan to use my two years as Master of the Faculty to encourage fellow Royal Designers to help the next generations of designers become, maestros and magicians in the wonderful pursuit of beauty and meaning through design, to enrich our culture.



I wish you all much success in the fight to achieve Rightness in whatever you do.

**Robin Levien**

**November 2009**