

# FINANCIAL TIMES

Monday July 2 1990

FINANCIAL TIMES MONDAY JULY 2 1990

## UK NEWS

### Museum has designs on growing audience

Alice Rawsthorn on Sir Terence Conran's creation

**I**T IS a year since the Design Museum opened to the public as the first museum in the world devoted entirely to industrial design.

The first year has been eventful. The museum lost its chief executive after less than two months amid a blaze of rumours about mutinous staff and feuding trustees. A few months later it lost its director.

The first few exhibitions were derided by the art critics who seemed rather snuffy about an institution calling itself a museum when it was filled with cameras and cars. Then there was a furore when the graphic design section, sponsored by Perrier, showed an exhibition of Perrier advertising.

After all the fuss, the museum is surprisingly serene and quietly successful. Ms Helen Rees, who was curator at the time of the opening and became director last autumn, is a far less flamboyant figure than Mr Stephen Bayley, the original chief executive. The mood of the museum reflects her influence.

The attendance figures are healthily ahead of expectations. At a time when corporate profits are under pressure and many institutions are struggling to find finance, the Design Museum's funding is secure for the next two years.

The museum is the creation of the Conran Foundation, a charitable trust founded by Sir Terence Conran, who wanted to raise public awareness of industrial design. Sir Terence recently resigned as chairman of the Storehouse retail group.

It was intended to be an accessible place for people who were not necessarily interested

in design. The centre of the museum is the permanent collection of 400 mass-manufactured objects, containing everything from furniture to a food processor from all over the world. There is the section featuring products which have not yet come on to the market. Then there are temporary exhibitions which have included French design and sport.

Originally the museum aimed to attract 150,000 people in its first year and to increase attendance steadily to 500,000 by its fifth year. By the end of the first year it is ahead of target with 155,000 paying visitors, 2,000 members and 15,000 school children and students. The response from schools and colleges has been overwhelming.

The museum has been bombarded with visits from every part of the educational spectrum, from primary school children, who like to play with the exhibits, to GCSE and art school students. At one stage the staff could not cope and it was forced to call a temporary halt to school visits.

Ms Rees says the only disappointment is that so many of the paying visitors, about half, are associated with design or advertising. She is determined that the museum should be "a populist place, not somewhere for the cognoscenti."

Healthy attendance has helped to secure more money. The Conran Foundation provided £7m to pay for the building, a converted 1950s warehouse by Tower Bridge on the south bank of the Thames in London. It also gave a £150,000 covenant to the museum covering its first five years.

The museum has to find the

rest of its money elsewhere. The running costs in the first year were £1.8m, which was just over budget, said Ms Rees, "but not so far that anyone who knew anything about money held up their hands in horror." It receives £500,000 a year from corporate sponsors, such as Courtaulds, Unilever and British Telecom, and £500,000 from tickets, catalogues and bar receipts.

At the time of the opening, the museum had raised enough money to cover the next 18 months. It is now covered for the next two years. Fiat recently committed £100,000-a-year for five years. However, funding may be harder to find in the future given the uncertain outlook for the economy.

The only cloud over the museum is the critics' response. As Ms Rees said, part of the problem is that exhibition reviews tend to be written by art critics who are well-versed in paintings and sculpture, but not always in design.

**S**he is anxious to avoid a repetition of the controversy over the Perrier exhibition. In future exhibitions will not be linked to individual companies. One exception will be a long-planned show next year on the designers and craftsmen who worked with Alfa Romeo.

At the start of its second year the museum is sufficiently confident to stage more ambitious shows and events. "We have a clearer idea of what we can do and how far we can go," said Ms Rees.

The next exhibition, Graphic Design in America, which opens early next month, will be its biggest show yet.

DESIGN MUSEUM



Helen Rees: determined the Design Museum should be populist and have clear ideas for the future



SATURDAY MARCH 2 1991

After the war: will the West be closer to understanding the Arabs?

Kingsley Amis on the brilliance of his three favourite jazzmen

All in the mind: Joe Joseph on the trail of the French intellectual

THE  TIMES

# Saturday Review



THE DESIGNER WHO TOOK  
AN EGO TRIP ACROSS AMERICA



# PREVIEW *Coming attractions:*

EDITED BY VICTORIA MATHER



Loewy-designed SI 6,000-horsepower locomotive.

## Designs on the American Dream

Beverley D'Silva looks at the ubiquitous work of high-profile American designer Raymond Loewy

WHEN RAYMOND LOEWY was just fifteen years old he designed a model aeroplane which won him the James Gordon Bennett Cup. Not content with basking in the glory of such a prestigious award, this schoolboy from the Paris suburbs was determined to patent and market his design. Thus began Loewy's lifelong love affair with the twin worlds of business and promotion – promotion which focused on Loewy as Star Designer as often as on the design itself, be it the interior of Concorde or a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes.

Was Loewy, as some suggest, the most influential figure in American industrial design this century? Or was he simply more adept at manipulating the media than other designers who began their careers in the Thirties, such as Henry Dreyfuss, Walter Dorwin Teague and Norman Bel Geddes?

These questions are at the heart of the first international exhibition of Loewy's life and work. What emerges is no categorical answer, but a display of the finest aerodynamic designs symbolising the American Dream.

The Loewy portfolio can't fail to impress. Spanning half a century it reads like a reference checklist for a Kerouac novel: the Greyhound Bus; automobiles like the Commander Starliner for Studebaker and the Hupmobile; logos for Exxon, Shell, BP, Canada Dry; and myriad artefacts that capitalised on American society's hunger for the new from before the First World War through to the mid-Eighties. Loewy died in 1986, but his proudest moments came in the mid-Sixties when he worked as a consultant for NASA, conducting habitability studies for Skylab.

Loewy's ability to diversify was legend. He shifted adroitly from the SI 6,000-horsepower steam locomotive for the Pennsylvania railroad to packaging for Shredded Wheat. But firsts were Loewy's priority: first industrial designer to be on the

cover of *Time* magazine (in 1949, with a cover flash boasting: "He streamlines the sales curve"), first industrial design company to realise the importance of market research.

*Life* magazine had no doubts about Loewy's supremacy, listing him (in 1976) as one of the 100 main contributions to American life since 1776. It can't be denied that compared to modern-day design stars such as Philippe Starck and Giorgio Armani, the range of Loewy's work was incredible. Loewy could travel the whole of the US in cars, buses, trains and planes and be served off tableware he'd created himself.

The perpetual showman, Loewy aroused resentment in his rivals by socialising with political and literary figures, including the Kennedys. His autobiography, *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*, was subtitled with characteristic modesty as "The experiences of the most successful designer of our time". Perhaps his arrogance and self-promotion has, in retrospect, detracted from his brilliance.

But when Loewy was asked to clarify, once and for all, his involvement with the Mae West-shaped Coke bottle, the design of which is often attributed to him, he was most uncharacteristically unavailable for comment. Loewy was in fact the designer of the Coca-Cola dispenser and the ribbed bottle for Fanta. Raymond Loewy: Pioneer of American Industrial Design runs from March 27 to May 19 at the Design Museum, Butlers Wharf, London SE1 (071-403 6933).

Loewy classics: the 1940 Greyhound bus (above). Below L-R: Shredded Wheat packet 1972; Coca-Cola dispenser; Lucky Strike 1942; Time cover and the 1939 Hupmobile.





# The Sunday Telegraph REVIEW

THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH JANUARY 6 1991

## REVIEW



Moving ahead: Paul Thompson with the Toyota Previa, which works, and the NEC linear motor skateboard, which is still only a mock-up Photograph by Nick Rogers

## A skateboard ride into the future

IF A floating skateboard sounds like a fantasy straight out of the *Back to the Future* films, a "video-phone", whereby you appear in brilliant Technicolor to the person at the other end of the line, may sound to most of us more like a nightmare. Both products, however, are likely to be available in Japan in the next few years — from where, presumably, they will quickly spread to Britain to join the array of technical wonders which have transformed our lives over the past couple of decades. (Who, for that matter, really needs a talking fax-machine — another device which, we are assured, is on the way?)

When the NEC linear motor skateboard — it "floats" on a magnetic field — arrived recently at London's Design Museum, Dr Paul Thompson, who runs the museum's Review section, could not

resist trying it out. The board, based on technology originally developed in this country, it should be said, can be propelled forward 100 yards by one kick. For all its highly finished realism, however, the product was a wooden mock-up. But when the real thing eventually reaches this country, it is quite likely to be seen first at the museum.

It's hardly surprising that the Review, devoted to new products and "concepts", is the most popular section in the Design Museum. Professional designers and students come to keep in touch with innovations from abroad, while the general public is, as usual, fascinated by novelty. A recent star exhibit was the Toyota Previa MPV (multi-purpose vehicle), a revolutionary new car shown here before its formal launch in Britain.

Yards away from the Previa, however, is the latest version

What will we be buying in five years' time?  
Kenneth Powell checks out the Design Museum

of the Ford Escort. There is nothing very revolutionary about the latter, you might think — and the museum is duly critical of its "unadventurous design and bland aesthetic". But it remains Britain's best-selling car and therefore has a place in the top-floor gallery of the sleek South Bank museum.

"We're not here to promote any particular version of 'good' design," insists Dr Thompson, "but to inform people what's going on." The new Escort may look much like its predecessor but it is more roomy, more aerodynamic and quieter — all genuine improvements which go beyond mere styling. So it deserves its place in the Review.

The Design Museum was founded, of course, by Sir Terence Conran — a man with strong views on the definition of "good design". However, Sir Terence has not tried to run the place and, if the galleries fail to display the latest range of Laura Ashley sofas, it's not

because of prejudice against the country house look. "It's simply that there is no innovation in a reproduction," says Thompson. "Such things fail to meet our criteria."

Paul Thompson insists that he is "no crusader — if I were, I'd be somewhere else". He points to an electric kettle covered in floral patterns. "It's now the best-selling kettle in Britain — a functional shape and well made, and the public apparently loves it." A number of professional designers have, however, asked him to remove it from display — "they think it's awful — immoral, I suppose."

The Design Museum's Review is, in effect, a place where you can see products that will be in the shops in the next five years or so. Very few of the items shown are yet on sale here. Nothing that is not genuinely "new" is accepted for display. Some of the foreign products may never be sold in Britain. Others will spawn home-grown copies.

Design, Thompson and his colleagues accept, is not simply a matter of finding the "best" solution to a functional requirement and promoting it. Thompson instances loudspeakers.

"Speaker design is going wild at the moment," he says. Teak or matt-black boxes are on the way out. Yamaha's Ikebana speaker separates the different components into three sprouting tubes that can be adjusted to provide varying sound effects. It's only a concept so far, but the Japanese company is already mass producing a hi-fi system which uses the basic idea.

If there is a natural taste for novelty, there is equally an in-built conservatism which has kept many basic objects unchanged over a long period. The many millions of word-processor and computer keyboards now in use around the world are based on a format invented, with the mechanical typewriter, in the last century. Swedish designer Johann Ullman has produced a prototype ergonomic keyboard shaped like a pyramid with two banks of keys set on the sides. No manufacturer has yet pro-

duced anything so radical but Japanese and American production models reflect a growing conviction that the traditional layout has a limited life.

Change in this instance is coming about because it makes practical sense. But where does the dividing line lie between design and fashion? Paul Thompson can raise little personal enthusiasm for a display of cutlery and glasses by the Czech Borek Sipek. Indeed, the shapes seem merely mannered and the glass — which lacks a base — seems rather impractical.

Alongside are prototypes of a new cutlery range by British designer Ross Lovegrove. Simple, graceful, and — most important — easy to handle these could be classics of the 1990s. Moreover, they could be made in Britain. Indifference to design has badly damaged British industry since the last war. The Design Museum could be one of the foundations of a design-based industrial renaissance.

● The Design Museum is at Butler's Wharf, London SE1. An illustrated book, *Review 2: New Product Design 1990/91*, is available from the Museum, price 29.95.