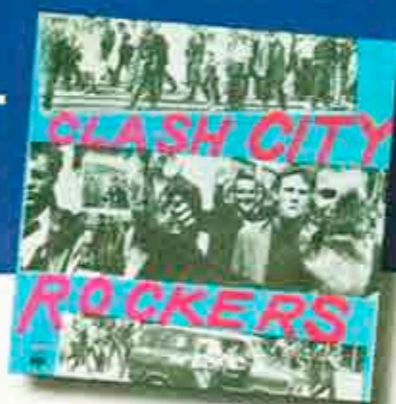


'I WAS PRIVILEGED IN THAT I WAS LUCKY TO BE BORN WITH A SILVER PENCIL IN MY MOUTH'



From punk rock to pushchairs, robots to recycled computers, designer Sebastian Conran always seems to know what people want before they do

WORDS JANET CHRISTIE PORTRAIT IAN RUTHERFORD

THE Sex Pistols, the Clash, "Life's too short to stuff a mushroom", Debenhams dresses, Habitat, Mothercare ... these are all familiar landmarks in our cultural landscape, but what do they have in common? The answer is the Conrans, a family so closely woven into the fabric of our everyday lives that we take them for granted.

There's Terence, head of Britain's biggest design dynasty, and his ex-wife Shirley the journalist and writer whose best-selling *Superwoman* and bonkbuster *Lace* made her one of the poster girls of the 1970s feminist movement.

Then there are their sons Jasper the fashion designer and his elder brother, Sebastian also a designer, who sits in front of me in Dundee.

A radical and innovative thinker, he's turned his attention to reworking everything from car interiors to kitchenware, buggies to babies beakers, and even created a Concorde nose sculpture out of five tonnes of polished steel. His work can be found in millions of homes - possibly even yours.

Conran's presence might be always in the kitchen at parties these days, but in his 1970s student years he was the man who booked the Sex Pistols for their first two gigs at Central St Martins College of Arts and Design in London and was so well in with the Clash that he did everything from design the record sleeves, posters and T-shirts to carrying equipment. "I put a lot of effort into making record sleeves look as if they hadn't been designed," he says. "I did industrial design and engineering at art school, but graduated in rock and roll," he says. Oh and he shared a flat with Joe Strummer, the lead singer of the Clash, too.

"It was like the *Young Ones*. A total mess. We didn't buy things and it was all second-hand. Everything was covered in mould. I knew the Clash before they became the Clash because we were friends; we've known each other

all our lives. I'm not sure that they wanted everyone to know they'd hired a millionaire's son as their general factotum, though. I still see Mick and Paul because we all live in the same part of London, yuppiefied Notting Hill.

"Back then I thought the Clash were absolutely fantastic. The Sex Pistols I wasn't so sure about. They came into the student office, where I was treasurer - only because I'd done maths A-Level and no-one else had - and I gave them their first couple of gigs."

All this is delivered in a matter of fact tone. He's not boasting. It's just how it happened. His links with the Clash were strong, despite his self-avowed lack of musical ability. "They even got me to audition as their drummer once. I was rubbish. Chrissie Hynde wanted me to be her bass player too."

Can he play the guitar?
"No, I kept telling her that, but she was still keen. Never took her up on it though."

You can see why everyone wanted Conran in their band. He is chatty, charming (he keeps offering to share his sandwiches, holds open doors and is curious about everyone he meets). He is also hugely enthusiastic about all things design, is full of ideas and completely lacking in ego. "I don't want to talk about me, it's about design," he says.

So, speaking of design, we talk about his early career at Conran Associates then Wolff Olins, then back to the Conran Group and Mothercare in the mid-1980s, before setting up what is now Conran & Partners. At Mothercare he came up with the award-winning Via pushchair, a plastic buggy that cornered the market and redesigned the leak-proof Anywayupcup that shifted 25 million and made £100m in profit.

"I wouldn't have got the job at Mothercare if my dad wasn't the chairman," he says. "It was through family connections that I found myself running it. I was privileged in that I was lucky to be born with a silver pencil in my

mouth. Design is in my DNA. My parents weren't wealthy until after I left school, but my childhood was very rich in ideas. My father got me to use my creativity and there were tools and a workshop."

If Terence Conran is a living legend, his wife Shirley is also a larger than life character who had a huge influence on her son. The couple divorced in 1962 when Sebastian was five. "My mother taught me the meaning of words. She wrote *Superwoman* when I was 16 and *Lace* when I was in my twenties. *Superwoman* was a fantastic feminist thing and completely original. *Lace*, I was less enthusiastic about, but it was driven by her thinking, 'what am I going to live on for the rest of my life?'" he says.

"She did a huge amount of research. I can remember her buying all these books on the female orgasm, and things like that lying around the house." He grimaces.

Didn't this give him street cred, especially with women?

"No. It didn't cut any ice down the Roxy night club. I tried to disown my parents as much as I could," he says.

Nowadays 57-year-old Conran is happy to hang out with his family, as well as his sons Max and Sam, and second wife Gertrude. The couple met in Marrakech at his brother Jasper's birthday party. "Ten years and 17 days ago," he says, exact.

It sounds romantic.
"It was. Very. Romantic and exotic. We met and then built up a friendship and it grew from there." Conran may be a romantic, but he's practical too, developing an egg cup with room for the soldiers to balance on an extended saucer because that's how Gertrude likes it.

Conran has spent the previous day with his father who was reading a book about Josiah Wedgwood, which prompts him to remark that he's a modern day version. Meanwhile his mother drops into his design studio a couple of times a week. "My mum and I have an hour-long phone call every Sunday at

8am. We talk a lot about design. She's writing a book for iPad users because she loves them. She phoned me up and said, 'you know your iPad? When you come to buying a new one, can I have your old one?' So I gave her one for her 80th birthday. Then she phoned me up and said: 'This has improved my life by 30 per cent.'" He roars with laughter.

Conran lives, eats and sleeps design, which is why he's in Dundee, about to deliver a lecture on the subject. It's the first in a series hosted jointly by Design in Action (the Arts and Humanities Research Council knowledge exchange hub based at Dundee University) and

V&A at Dundee. Conran is head of the steering group that is looking at the impact of design on the economy. As well as being a trustee of London's Design Museum, he's on the council of the UK Design Council.

He's also designer in residence at Sheffield University where he enjoys working with young people who he reckons keep him young and bear out Einstein's quote: "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

"Students have heaps of knowledge and I can bring experience. Curiosity is the cradle of creativity and nurtures the imagination," he says.

His message is that the designer needs to be involved right at the beginning of the manufacturing process and all the way through, not just appear at the end to add a design element.

"It's not just about making things look good, and when something looks like a bit of an abortion calling in a designer," he says. "It's very important to collaborate all the way through, because design is about having conversations and adapting all the time. There's nothing designed by a man that can't be designed better - that's why we need more female designers," he quips. Spoken like his mother's son. "It's also

about beating down the barriers between science and creative industries and witnessing a new enlightenment where the artistic world embraces technology."

Conran believes that good design comes out of communication and it's because he hit it off with Nigella Lawson that her kitchen range made £20 million. "She was huge fun. I learnt a lot about the inner child and evoking memories. It was about instilling objects with emotion. How do we create a smile in the mind? How do we emotionally connect with the consumer

ABSTRACT THINKER
Sebastian Conran believes good design comes out of taking risks

because it's emotion that makes us want things?" Conran also believes that good design comes out of taking risks, not just giving people what they want, especially since what they want may not exist yet. He quotes Henry Ford, who said "If I asked my customers what they wanted they would say a faster horse."

"If I'd done market research on my buggy it would never have been made, but it was the most successful product ever. If you don't take risks, you won't get anywhere."

Conran's ability to come. at a





problem sideways and strike a new path may have been forged in his childhood when schoolwork didn't always come easily. "A teacher once said to one of my friends, 'That Conran seems so clever, yet he does so badly in exams, I wonder why?'"

No-one diagnosed him, but Conran later came to realise he had dyspraxia. "I don't want to talk about this because it impacts on my children, but when they had learning difficulties, I thought, 'this is a lot of Hampstead nonsense'. Then I did the research and thought, 'this sounds awfully similar to me'. When I was young, I just thought I couldn't spell, but there are other issues, such as finding it difficult to be organised and thinking in a slightly different way."

Conran's view is that everyone has different brains and that education systems were in the past focused on quite a narrow bandwidth, outwith which things became difficult. Thus, his role as chair of the Design and Technology Alliance Against Crime, a body established by the Home Office, to tackle crime with design ideas. Solutions include anti-terrorist rubbish bins, or artwork around cashpoints to delineate safety zones.

"It's significant that 30 per cent of inmates at Holloway are dyspraxic - interestingly 32 per cent of Royal College of Art students are too," he says. "What happens is you're in a class not understanding and you get distracted, then reprimanded and start feeling inadequate so you compensate. People build up their esteem by bullying others, or drink and drugs are the natural haven so it becomes a nasty spiral. None of this applies to me by the way. If you catch it, you can reduce instances and allow people to have happy and more productive lives."

Conran believes good design is about enhancing the experience of life and it's perhaps inevitable that someone with ageing parents would focus on what he can make to make it better. So his Universal Expert range includes salt and

pepper grinders that are easy to grip if you have arthritis and his kitchen towel holder can be operated with one hand. "Ingenuity is what I'm meant to be good at. I'm just trying to do what seems logical for people with arthritis or dodgy hips. The current 80-year-olds lived through the war and have a make do and mend mindset because they were born before the welfare state. Next we'll get the Rock'n'rollers, then the Inhalers, then the Children of Thatchzilla. They will have different expectations and a sense of entitlement. When you design, you have to take all of these things into account," he says.

He's working on robots which he describes as an iPod with wheels and GPS or "granny tracking" that can help you out of bed and give you a lift if you're tired. Another project is mobile phone

DESIGN CLAN (From left) the Anywayupcup; Tom, Sebastian, Sophie and Jasper Conran in 2006; Terence and Shirley with Sebastian as a baby in 1956

chargers for people in Tanzania. "Recycling yesterday's Dells," he says.

With his audience arriving, it's time for him to be fitted with a microphone, so he jumps to his shiny, well-shod feet and dons his smart grey jacket. "Yes, good jacket this ... Kenzo when it was Joseph. Doesn't fasten now though - too fat. He heaves at the button. "Oh, yes it does!"

He takes a last bite of sandwich and a gob of something green drops on his grey and black paisley tie. "Oops, there goes the tie ... gift from my brother Jasper."

Once a punk, always a punk. ■

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Sebastian Conran's Universal Expert range (www.universalexpert.co.uk) is available in John Lewis, V&A at Dundee (www.vandaatdundee.com)

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