

Can you picture a utopian future where machines make work fun and products suit our individual needs and personalities? Welcome to the world of innovative British designer Sebastian Conran, writes **Jennifer Cosgrove**

Better by design

AS A child, Sebastian Conran wanted to be an inventor: "I guess I thought things fairly rationally," he says. Now he heads up independent London design studio Sebastian Conran Associates creating products for clients such as Nissan, Nigella Lawson and John Lewis.

The surname Conran needs little introduction and Sebastian comes from a creative dynasty: son of uber designer Sir Terence and author and journalist Shirley, brother to fashion designer Jasper and designer, cook and author Sophie.

He will be in Dundee tonight to talk about his long and varied career at the first in a series of events hosted by Design in Action (DiA) – the Arts and Humanities Research Council 'knowledge exchange hub' based at the University of Dundee – and closely associated with V&A at Dundee.

The series aims to enhance the reputation, status and understanding of design in modern day Scotland, underlining its potential for economic growth. DiA is led from the University's Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design and its principal academic partners include all of the Scottish colleges of art and design.

Sebastian (57) has enjoyed a career that began in the glory days of punk rock and now sees him creating stylish, contemporary products for retailers, manufacturers and businesses.

While studying industrial design at St Martin's College of art and design in London Sebastian booked the Sex Pistols for their first gig and ended up being a roadie, photographer, designer and general dogsbody for The Clash: "To a certain extent, I studied industrial design but graduated in rock 'n' roll," he jokes.

"Punk had a disruptive element to it – it meant anyone could have a go – and there was a naivety to it. I look back now and think of the Sex Pistols as a comedy act, whereas I think The Clash were the real thing. At the time it was exciting and we thought of it as some



sort of art movement – it was particularly rebellious."

As well as sharing his approach to a successful career in design, Sebastian will explore how the UK could do better at industrialising its world-leading innovation by bringing science and the arts closer together from the start of the design process.

"When I was at school you were either an artist or you did humanities. I studied sciences and then went to art school and it seemed quite peculiar but I knew I wanted to be an industrial designer," he goes on.

"I think Scotland is very important to the UK's creativity. There is a lateral thinking that's embedded in the culture and a constructive way of looking

Above: Sebastian at work. *Picture:* Jannecke Nilsen.

Top right: Equilibrium scales. *Right:* A piece inspired by Concorde. *Picture:* Manvir Rai for Junction Eleven Studios.

Below: Nissan Cube interior.

at problems from a different perspective. Einstein said a very interesting thing: imagination is more important than knowledge – and I think imagination is a very important part of the creative process."

Looking to the future Sebastian believes the idea of manufacture as manual labour is no longer accurate: "What we want to do is employ people for their minds, not for their bodies.

"I think it the past the way employment was viewed was that physical labour was required. Now we have machines to do all of it. I think the way people view work in the future will be much more as an enjoyable past time rather than it being a drudge. When I think of the effects of technology in my life the process of designing is much more enjoyable now because the tedious bits are taken care of by machines."

Aside from the future of design, he is also concerned about designing for the future: "Something I am interested in is how we are going to deal with issues of later life. In 30 years I will be 87 and things are going to be very different – people are going to have very different expectations of what the state will be providing or what they want from an environment.

"Will I be wanting to listen to Anarchy in the UK in 30 years' time the way that an 87-year-old now likes to listen to Glenn Miller? I think it's a mistake to think that older people will all have the same mental outlook.

"I'm always interested in the way people use things and why people make decisions."



Information

- Sebastian Conran's lecture takes place at 6pm tonight in the University of Dundee's Dalhousie Building.
- Tickets are free but booking is advised via 01382 385564/dundee.ac.uk/tickets
- vandaatdundee.com



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