



Interview : Sebastian Conran on the Meaning of Beauty



Sebastian Conran is a household name. The eldest son of **Sir Terence Conran**, he comes from a family of successful and well known designers. He went from modest beginnings stacking shelves at **Habitat** in his teens to running his eponymous and highly regarded design studio. Throughout his career he has collaborated with a multitude of clients including the likes of John Lewis, Virgin Atlantic, Nigella Lawson and Nissan, to bring thousands of enduring products to market. Following his studies in Industrial Design Engineering at Central St. Martins. Sebastian went on to join corporate identity consultancy Wolff Olins before taking moving on to Mothercare where he led hard-merchandise design transforming the appearance and performance of childcare equipment. In 1999, his design studio merged with The Conran Group and Sebastian was made responsible for all product and branding design. A decade later he decided to go it alone and re-established his own design studio which has gone from strength to strength. This year saw the launch of his new venture, **Universal Expert**, a range of homewares designed with the contemporary, urban home in mind. I caught up with Sebastian to find out more about his approach to design, his inspiration, his proudest moment and what on earth the "Beauty" movement is all about.



Did you ever consider a different career path or was it inevitable that you would get into design?

From when I was about 10 and read Professor Branestawm illustrated by Heath-Robinson I've always wanted to be an inventor and I feel very lucky to be attaining this childhood ambition. At school I studied Maths, Physics and Chemistry and studied Industrial Design Engineering at Art school.

Creatively, this was a very exciting time to be living in London. At Art school I became the Union Treasurer giving the Sex Pistols their first booking, and I found myself being a factotum for the Clash designing their stage sets, record sleeves, posters and clothing and some managing. Later, various people like Chrissie Hynde wanted me to play with their bands and Boy George asked me to be his manager...Eventually after a few years of Rock 'n' Roll, I returned to pursue my ambitions in the world of design.



How has being the son of Sir Terence Conran affected your approach to design and your career?

My dad has always been supportive of me being a designer and was keen to work with me, which I have done several times in my career. But at the end of the day, I was keen to run my own studio without getting into the complexities of being part of a family business.



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In your opinion, what constitutes good design?

Good design is almost a given these days. However, outstanding design needs to be original, inspirational, accessible, aspirational, elegant and simple. Over-design is an anathema.



Where do you look for inspiration when working on a new project?

The sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi once said to me that the best place to find inspiration is walking down the street with your eyes open. You cannot design in a vacuum; thorough research is the key to great design and innovation. We firmly believe in a 'Form Follows Fabrication' approach, so an intimate understanding of the making process is vital, as is understanding how things will be used and sold. One thing I do is hang around where things are sold, speak to the sales staff and see how customers react to items on display. Although I also spend a lot of time travelling and visiting museums. I find sculpture, especially Brancusi, particularly inspiring. My favourite museums are The Design Museum and The Science Museum.



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Who do you most admire and look up to in the design world and why?

Good question, there are so many inspirational people to choose from. Design advocates such as: my father, John Sorrell and Deyan Sudjic are often as important as the designers themselves like: Barber Osgerby, Tom Dixon and Jony Ive; as are the people who actually commission the design and architecture. Steve Jobs being the most obvious example of someone who did a great deal to promote people's understanding of the power of excellent design.



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You have worked with a long list of great names from Tom Dixon and Mothercare, to John Lewis and Nigella Lawson to name but a few. What has been your favourite collaboration to date and why?

At our London design studio, [SCA](#), we are lucky enough to be able to collaborate with a wide mix of ground-breaking clients and personalities, from Silicon Valley technology companies to start-ups in the heart of Africa. Some of our most innovative developments have come from truly collaborative work. Our current collaboration with the retailer [West Elm](#) of the Williams Sonoma group has been particularly enjoyable. I am always most passionate about the work that I'm currently engaged in. However, partnering & collaboration are our guiding principles - feeding each other, not off each other.



You worked for the Conran Group for a number of years as head of product and branding design. What made you take the decision to leave the group in 2009?

It became obvious that in order to progress further within the group I would need to become more of a manager and less of a designer, which is what I enjoy and am best at. I am far happier running my own product design studio and doing what I am really interested in, rather than stewarding a group with various interests from retail to restaurants.



What has been the highlight of your career so far? And what has been your proudest moment?

Actually, I am experiencing the highlight of my career at the moment with my fantastic design team, The Universal Expert Collection and all the innovative work we do as a result of being Designers in Residence at the University of Sheffield designing robotics for the home and really consequential work that enhances people's experience of life.



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Your Universal Expert range launched in the UK earlier this year. What was the idea behind it? Can you explain the name?

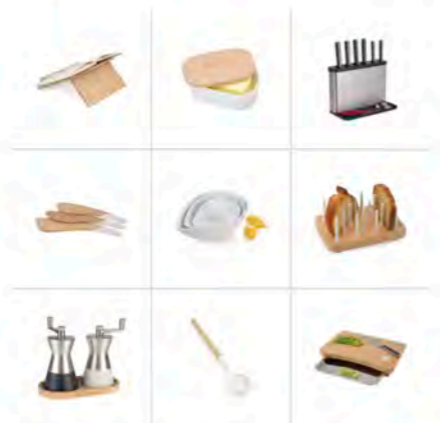
The name **Universal Expert** was thought up by my business partner Jerry Sacher, of Jerry's Homestores fame, referring to our design skills. However, it coincidentally is similar sounding to James Bond's cover company Universal Export [with all those gadgets, a childhood hero]. Now we see that our designs have Universal Function and Appeal as well as Expert Quality and Design. It works well for us as it allows the product to be accredited as 'Design - Sebastian Conran' rather than branded.



You have recently launched a very interesting **campaign** that is centered around the term "Beautility". What does "Beautility" actually mean and can you tell us more about this campaign?

Beautility is not a new idea and means many things: sustainability, practicality, usefulness, beauty, and accessibility. But principally it is about creating even the most humble of functional products in a way that makes them more emotionally satisfying to own. Our approach is to explore the home, examining things that could be better through thoughtful, innovative design. Just because something is primarily functional, it does not have to be clumsy-looking or over-designed or decorated either. As we believe in 'Form Follows Fabrication', we collaborate with a limited number of makers who we understand, and can build a lasting relationship with.

You can now find a variety of Universal Expert products available in the **Design Sheppard Shop**.



Powered by Showroom. If you would like to see your products curated by publishers, learn more [here](#).

And don't forget to join the Beautility movement!

CREATIVE
DESIGNED WITH EQUAL PASSION

VERSATILE
A GOOD OLD FACETLY CLEAN CHARACTER WITH AGE

#BEAUTILITY
Join the Beautility Movement! Follow the #beautility hashtag @ 8pm BST tonight for a debate with Sebastian Conran.

GOAL
100 supporters on Sep 4th at 1.00pm

e Universal Expert
@UE_home

Join this Thunderclap