

>>BOOK

DESIGN IN BRITAIN

Edited by Deyan Sudjic

Octopus, £45

Review by Kevin McCullagh

Kevin McCullagh is founder of Plan, a product strategy consultancy. He is currently looking at the future of mobile health and China's emerging design aesthetic

Right: Gibraltar-born John Galliano's Union Jack jacket, modelled by Kate Moss in 1993

Below: The ZX Spectrum home computer, designed by Clive Sinclair and released in 1982

The futile search for a contemporary 'British' national design identity provided a quaint theme for this year's London Design Festival (LDF). This was accompanied by some soul-searching in the broadsheets on what exactly constitutes British design and whether it has lost its mojo.

Long gone are the days when Brits designed for UK plc to make. Established and Sons, the poster boy of Blighty's furniture industry, tried to live the dream when they launched under the Made in Great Britain tagline in 2005, only to quietly shift most of its production to Italy, due to the lamentable state of our domestic manufacturing base. In an article that preceded the LDF, Alice Rawsthorn bemoaned the passing of a golden age of red Routemaster buses, K2 telephone boxes and Mini Coopers, an era of national design that passed decades ago.

Ron Arad and Jonathan Ive define the parameters of contemporary affairs. As a London-based Israeli, Arad spends most of his time working for overseas clients, while the very British Ive crafts Apple's technology in California, which is then made in China. Back in the UK, little sleep should be lost over Philippe Starck's despair at the lack of talent appearing on Design for Life, his Apprentice-style show on BBC TV. Reared on reality programmes, a generation of young and savvy designers simply didn't apply to get a placement with Starck's agency, understanding all too well that the show's mission is simply to humiliate.

Design in Britain, edited by Deyan Sudjic, wisely side-steps the obsolete notion of British Design. Instead, it frames its subject as an exploration of 'the impact of contemporary design in Britain'. As a celebration of 20 years of the Design Museum, it also provides a timely opportunity to review design's boom years before the crash, and asks

where now? It arrives amid calls for the nation's creative industries to step up and replace financial services as the UK's chief economic dynamo.

Conventionally enough, the book is divided up by the disciplines of product, architectural, automotive, graphic, fashion, interaction and brand identity design. Penned by industry insiders, it sets out to offer a helicopter view of the best contemporary design in Britain and illuminate the workings of different design disciplines.

Andrew Nahum's deft chapter on cars is the highlight. Focusing on the revival of Rolls-Royce, Bentley and Mini, Nahum demolishes the myth of there ever having been a British aesthetic. All these quintessentially British brands have, he argues, an 'undeniably mixed and transnational bloodline'. Early Rollers were influenced by French coach-builders; in Aston Martin's pivotal 1920s, its director was Italian, and of course the Mini was designed by Alec Issigonis – a Greek. Nahum cheekily goes on to suggest that our dim semantic perceptions of national identity could be likened to 'false memory syndrome'.

Sudjic delineates his review of architecture with Prince Charles' 1984 carbuncle speech, and contrasts the gloomy prospects for the profession then with its consequent late modernist triumphs. He also makes an eloquent case for David Chipperfield as a worthy heir after the long reign of Norman Foster and Richard Rogers. Simon Waterfall's account of the very short history of interaction design is unashamedly anecdotal and self-promotional. Wally Olins strikes a better balance between personal account and the long view. His authoritative sweep of identity's evolution from house style and corporate personality through corporate identity to branding is, if overly historical, usefully situated



in a rich social and economic context. Rick Poyner's comprehensive and impressively well-organised survey of contemporary currents in graphic design recasts branding as a necessary, if not altogether welcome, design imperative.

Pluralism emerges as design in Britain's unifying strength, but, at a time when so many yearn for traits of 'Britishness' the historical factors behind this lack of a coherent design ideology are left unexplored. As is its unspoken weakness – design's free-floating nature leaves it largely untethered from British industry, making it more easily transplantable to the next global hot spot. For 10 years after 1997, designers and multinationals decamped to London, buying into the multicultural narrative of the Cool Britannia projected by New Labour. With design now confronted by a very different era, one is left wondering what this fine collection of contributors think about its prospects.

Where does London fit into a multi-polar international landscape

alongside the increasingly assured creative hubs like Shanghai, Mumbai and Seoul? How will the recent, more self-indulgent, strains of design fare in an era of austerity? What about a grown-up appraisal of design's real economic impact, and of whether or not it can really step into the shoes of the UK's humbled financial sector? At a time when the traditional boundaries between design disciplines have blurred and the reach of design has expanded, this book seems overly constrained by conventional limits.

While contemporary developments such as service design, experience design, design thinking, design strategy and social design are hotly debated, their absence here looks like a missed opportunity, especially when British designers are among their pioneers. Such new avenues are only hinted at in the final chapter, based on a conversation with Paola Antonelli. She suggests that 'designers of the future will be not so much be "makers" but synthesisers'. A key point, that deserves exploring in a book of its own.

