De-fibrillating with Minis (Skirts and Cars)

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In the weeks before Christmas, when I was thinking about writing this piece, I received a couple of letters. They were not addressed to me or written by me, but I did have some input to them. They were both addressed to Mr Gove, the Secretary of State for Education and concerned his proposals for the 'English Baccalaureate Certificate' (EBC) as a replacement for GCSE. Essentially the core of the EBC is proposed to be English, maths, the sciences, history, geography and languages, and there is widespread concern about the lack of any creative dimension in the framework. The letters I refer to come from (i) the Creative Education Academies and (ii) the senior management team at Goldsmiths University of London.

The Creative Education Academies are a group of schools – mainly in the Midlands – where the curriculum is shaped around creative priorities and with *design* at its heart. Goldsmiths of course has a significant *design* department, so it's not surprising that design featured strongly in their letter too – and both were written in an attempt to persuade Mr Gove to revise his position on the EBC. Essentially, the argument in both letters was the same and a few snippets give the flavour of them.

From the Creative Education Academies:

- 'as a member of the Government Advisory Panel working extensively with the creative industries, I think the proposed range of subjects to be included in the EBC is too narrow to reflect the changing face of the world economy'.
- 'it is wrong to exclude the creative subjects – in which we number engineering as well as design and art'.
- 'We have re-united technology with art into a new syllabus for design that would be recognised by industry professionals…enabling this country to flourish in a competitive world economy'.

From Goldsmiths:

- The…marginalisation of creative subjects will immeasurably damage the flow of talented, creative and innovative students into a sector of the economy that is the envy of the world; and in which we enjoy not only economic success but also a global reputation for cutting-edge thinking. The creative industries employ 1.3m people in the UK, contributing £60bn in GDP to the UK economy, and it is predicted that Britain's creative industries will overtake the financial industry as a source of income by 2017. The UK's design industry is the largest in Europe and one of the strongest globally, with NESTA estimating that £23bn is spent on design and Imperial College putting the figure at £33.5bn in 2011.
- Britain is at the forefront of the creative uses of technology, whether in design, computer games, media or the performing arts: the present proposals give a strong message that this world-leading and innovative breaking down of boundaries is to be put back into the box.
- We risk losing the entrepreneurs of the future.

In both letters there is a strong utilitarian appeal. If we support and encourage design at school and university, the Creative Industries will flourish – will employ more creative youngsters – and will earn more money on the world stage for the UK economy.

As I read the letters, I was forced to reflect on the astonishing transformation that has taken place in the UK in my lifetime. Both art and engineering have deep roots in the British psyche, with many inspiring role models to draw upon: Reynolds, Turner, Brunel and Telford. But 'design' – as a label – barely had any recognition when I was at school in the 1950s and early 60s.

The nation's heart had been worn almost to a stand-still by the 2nd World War and the years of virtually bankrupt frugal living that followed. Issigonis' iconic mini-car (launched by BMC in 1959) stirred an emerging design consciousness through engineering, but it was the outrageous 60s splurge of fashion and the music industry that really kick-started Britain's headlong dash for design. The 1960s rocked the recumbent body-politic like a hit from a gigantic de-fibrillator, sending huge waves of revitalising energy through the nation. While Carnaby Street dressed the boys, and Mary Quant the girls, talk of style and design moved from fringe to mainstream and the emergence of the Design Council – from the original (1944) Council of Industrial Design – lent institutional support to the evolution of a national design consciousness.

If the 60s provided the initial impetus, it still took a while for design to permeate through the broader reaches of culture and industry in the UK. Only 15 years ago – in 1997 – I undertook a project with the Design Museum in London – attempting to gauge the public understanding of

design. What does it mean to the public? What does the public know of the impact of design in its various fields: architecture, engineering, industrial and product design, fashion, graphics, interiors? I planned *DesignForum* as a one-day event with a cross section of the community and based at the Design Museum. As a prelude to the event I undertook a survey of newspapers to see how much public exposure there was to concepts of design. I chose a single week in February and tracked every mention of design in the Guardian/Observer and the Independent – including all the weekend supplements. Looking back on it now, the results were surprisingly thin.

I have not had an opportunity to do a re-run of the survey, but last weekend just *one* of the supplements (of which there were many) was totally dedicated to design. Twenty pages of articles and advertisements from landscape to candles; from digital hi-fi to eco-food; from cars to pets. The torrent of media coverage on all things *design* is a clear manifestation of its broadly-based adoption. While Kevin McCloud introduces us to ever more Grand Designs, Wallace and Roux cogitate over Master-chef candidates, Jonathan Ive continues to master-mind the look and feel of Apple, McLaren burn up the rubber and Dyson cleans up after us. It's difficult to overstate the scale and breadth of the design revolution in Britain. From almost nothing in the 1950s, the figures in the Goldsmiths letter are a mind-boggling reminder of the speed of the adoption;…." employing 1.3m people and contributing £60bn in GDP to the UK economy". And only 50 years ago Mary Quant was opening up her 'Bazaar' in the King's Road.

It was perhaps inevitable that this transformation would be reflected in curricular change. In the early 1960s Art and Design colleges implemented the first generation of Foundation Courses – focused less on the skills of traditional art professionals (e.g. drawing/painting) and more on individual creative performance. And (as we all know) the same influence was at work on the school curriculum; the traditional 1950s school subjects of woodwork and metalwork (that I studied), along with cookery and needlework (that the girls' school provided) gradually giving way to design and technology.

But I'm not sure that I agree with the conclusions of those two letters. Of course I agree about the importance of design, not just for the nation's balance of payments but also as a personal liberation medium for so many young people. But whilst (on one level) the letters argue for a more balanced curriculum, they also (implicitly) argue for a more controlled one ('we don't want five strands to the NC – we want six'). My personal preference would be for less – not more – regulation. Specifying five strands (without a 'creative' strand) may be the worst of all worlds, since it clearly eats up the vast bulk of curriculum time and seriously reduces heads' ability to provide creative options. And to that extent I agree with the letters. But I'm less and less convinced that governments should be permitted to control the curriculum. I think I'd prefer two strands, or none at all. Maybe we should allow Mr Gove to specify just English and maths and let schools make the judgements about the balance of the rest of the curriculum. That was roughly what the very first (1870) Education Act provided – so Mr Gove ought to approve. It is astonishing that a party so wedded to 'free-markets' and 'competition' should end up in its current Stalinist mode; eliminating choice both in curriculum and assessment.

What would happen – I wonder – if Mr Gove completely withdrew from the curriculum debate and left it *all* up to schools? Would head-teachers suddenly stop teaching English and maths? I doubt it. And would they propose a curriculum devoid of creative expression? I doubt that too. They might think a bit about the youngsters in their care and what is best for them. Now that would be an enlightening transformation for curriculum politics.

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