



# VISITORS

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT GLOBE SHOPPERS | ISSUE 12 SPRING 2015



## GOOD DESIGNS

Kim Colin talks about designing the product the consumer is really looking for.

### 'BLEISURE' TRIPS

Mixing business trips with leisure is becoming more and more popular.

### GOING FURTHER AFIELD

How can brands make it in the Chinese luxury market?

### DATA'S GETTING BIGGER

How retail companies are tackling growing business data.





# DESIGNING FOR TODAY'S CONSUMERS

ARCHITECTURE-TRAINED DESIGNER KIM COLIN HAS DESIGNED PRODUCTS FOR SOME OF THE WORLD'S BEST-KNOWN BRANDS. SHE SHARES HER INSPIRATION, WHY SHE LOOKS FORWARD INSTEAD OF BEING HAMPERED BY TRADITION, AND THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER IN MAKING PRODUCTS WHICH SIMPLIFY LIFE FOR CONSUMERS.

---

By Alannah Eames  
Photo Chris Gloag





“THE HARDEST THING IS TO THINK BEYOND ONE’S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND HOW TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE – HOW TO REACH PEOPLE WITH A GOOD MESSAGE”

Kim Colin



“Second Phone”, designed for Muji.  
In production 2002–2006.



Los Angeles native Kim Colin is co-founder of Industrial Facility, an industrial design company based in London. Yet this established designer started her career with a degree in art history and a Master’s in architecture. That led to a publishing job in London, commissioning books on architecture and design. “It was not a straight path,” she admits. It was in London in 1998 where she met Sam Hecht, an industrial designer, just back from a three year work stint in Japan. “We started a conversation back then and that fuels our studio today,” Colin recalls.

With her architectural background and Hecht’s product designer skills, Colin believes it’s a perfect match. “We have a strong interest in the same topics but come at them from very different points of view. If you are an architect designing a building, you look at how it’s going to fit into the city and the environment. A product designer looks more deeply into the macros and at how details operate. It’s these two different ways of looking at things that enriches our work.”

Despite having lived in London for almost 20 years,

she hasn’t lost touch with her West Coast US roots and confesses to missing L.A.’s edge in creative fields such as graphics and the art world. “What I also love about L.A. is that it is the edge of the frontier – it’s the very last piece of land before you reach the Pacific Ocean. And L.A. looks forward and is not hampered by traditions like in Europe. Its architecture is really non-precious about buildings. You can scrap things and build something else. It’s not the feeling of permanence like you get on the East Coast [US] and Europe. Yes, I do like to look at history and respect it a lot but I’m not stuck there,” she adds matter of factly.

IMPROVING LIFE

What fascinates her as a designer is how we live with the things around us. “I’m really interested in the fact that products are often over-specified for what we want to live with. And they often don’t acknowledge that we have other products which do other tasks for us.” She shares the example of the very basic landline phone which she designed for Japanese retail giant Muji. “We wanted a very simple phone that would be used only for calling, dialling and picking up with no



other fancy features. The result was a quiet gadget like an extruded brick that fits on any horizontal base and does not need to sit in a cradle. It can be completely dormant in a room," Colin says.

So it's no surprise then that good design for Colin means making something which is relevant to the way we live. "I appreciate part of it is all about fantasy and future ideologies but for me good design improves the way we live and good business practices."

Since she set out in the design world, globalisation and technology have brought both new challenges and opportunities for industrial designers.

"I think the hardest thing is to think beyond one's individual needs and how to make the world a better place – how to improve manufacturing, how to make distribution better, how to reach people with a good message," she elaborates. "But it's really important to think about designing products that will stay around for a while. We might want to design things that are quick, cheap and good but in our experience, you can't have all three together – you can have two of these things but not three."

Colin believes that companies and products trying

to have a more intimate conversation directly with their consumers is a huge opportunity for designers today. "In the old advertising world it was all about selling the product. Now, the relationship with the consumer doesn't end at the point of sale. Things are getting more connected and more geared towards longer term relationships," she says.

#### THE INTERNET OF THINGS

Likewise, the Internet is forcing designers to look at technology in a different way. "One of the biggest areas of design opportunity, in my opinion, is the Internet, and how products are connected via the Internet. How can we manage all these relationships?"

Colin elaborates: "It's one thing to have a thermostat that controls the temperature at home and provides the visibility to manage it. But what happens when we have ten things like that in our home all demanding our attention? Then, on top of it all, I have a relationship with my network provider, my phone manufacturer. There needs to be a relationship manager for all these things so that's where I see the





opportunities for designers – to find ways to help manage these relationships.”

Colin predicts that this will become a huge trend in the future. “I think we’ll see more connected products where the relationship with the consumer is even more intimate than before. Appliances, electronics et cetera will have a different relationship in how they are used. They’re already trying to do it with white goods; people are now trying to squeeze it into furniture; it’s been in fashion for ages. There’s no limit to what connected products can do. Time will tell in terms of longevity. Technology and longevity don’t always go together.”

#### KEEPING BRANDS ALIVE

Colin’s no stranger to working with big global brand names like Hitachi, Issey Miyake, KitchenAid, Louis Vuitton and Muji. In addition, Industrial Facility is a creative advisor to US furniture giant Herman Miller for whom it designed the award-winning Locale Office, which is part of their ‘living office’, Formwork and Wireframe Sofa. Her products are simple, functional and contemporary with a sense of longevity, which pretty much sums up Colin’s style: a thoughtful reflection of how we live today. Locale, for example, is an office furniture system that promotes a collaborative work environment in an open plan office. It turns the

**“DNA IS NOT A DEAD THING, IT IS A LIVING THING. EVEN IF A COMPANY HAS A BRAND MANUAL, THE MINUTE THE BRAND BECOMES STATIC, IT DIES.”**

Kim Colin

architectural scale of an open office plan into a tightly knit, compact neighbourhood where people can sit or stand at their desk or have a coffee. Modules are used to accommodate a variety of work styles and give variety during the workday.

But does working with major brands and inserting their DNA into a product smother a designer’s creativity? “No,” says Colin. “DNA is not a dead thing, it is a living thing. Even if a company has a brand manual, the minute the brand becomes static, it dies. I think we are now in a new wave of understanding what brand DNA means. A lot of companies have gone through a phase of redefining their brands and then find that they can play this out theoretically but not in their products. It’s a dead end for many of them.”

#### CONSUMERS VS COMPANIES

The designer’s role, she believes, is to figure out the true values of the brand, beyond what the brand manual says. “Often the designer is asked to take the brand somewhere. That ‘somewhere’ has not always been mapped out so it leaves a lot of space for creativity.”



## KIM COLIN

**Nationality:** American by birth, a Londoner by choice.

**Background:** Studied art history at UCLA; Master of Architecture degree from the Southern California Institute of Architecture (Sci-Arc); worked in architecture and publishing before founding the Industrial Facility with Sam Hecht in 2002.

**Favourite designers:** "Achille Castiglioni (Italian) because of his creativity and lack of fear; Egon Eiermann (German) for his technically savvy but simple solutions."

**Favourite design classic:** "Dieter Rams' Braun calculator. It was one of the first things I noticed growing up that took a stand, had a point of view and its design made it better to use."

**Inspiring places:** "My favourite retreats are Hawaii as it's just paradise, the north coast of Spain, which is very dramatic, and the drought of the Californian desert, especially after wet London. I do love London, which is a very stimulating place."



Dieter Rams'  
Braun calculator

According to Colin, it's not rocket science. "Consumers want things that work well and don't demand a lot of their time. Many designers are told to design products that grab consumers' attention at the point of sale. But I think consumers want things that don't shout at them. They want a nice friendly relationship with their products but don't want a needy friend; it's just like in a human relationship. It would be nice if designers truly thought about what we need and not just about what companies want to make," she says.

And that's one of the best parts of her job: "The diversity. All projects you work on make you think. I enjoy the perspectives from different industries, the variety from fashion to white goods. We learn a lot from working on medical devices, for example, which might influence something we're working on for Herman Miller, even though they are both operating in totally different industries."

Having been in the design world for over 20 years, Colin has some words of wisdom to share with upcoming designers. "It's really important to learn the craft of making something but you also need to understand technology. A lot of design programmes give you an education in one or the other but the integration of both is key. Also, be wise and take your position, don't waffle and compromise what you can do." ■