

ITERATIONS

Design Research & Practice Review

Issue 6 | February 2018



ISSN 2009-8243



9 772009 824000

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DESIGNERS
IRELAND**

A Word in his Eye:

An Interview with Ken Garland

Ken Garland is a British graphic designer, born in Southampton in 1929. He is a prominent leading figure in graphic design since the late 50s and is widely known for his political activist posters for CND and his contribution as Art Editor of *Design* magazine from 1956 to 1962. Garland studied graphic design at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London (now known as Central St Martins) in 1954 alongside Alan Fletcher and other highly regarded designers of that era. Amongst other things, he was famous for writing the *First Things First* manifesto in the ICA London in 1964. Backed by over 400 designers and published by *The Guardian* newspaper, it forced him into the spotlight as an activist for how designers work. His career took him into many interesting territories, including a 20-year stint as the Design Consultants for Galt Toys, not only directing their graphic campaigns but also becoming their main toy designer. He has worked as an art editor, design consultant, photographer, author and lecturer over his long career and continues to work tirelessly in his eighties. He currently lives in Camden, London.

Michelle Douglas has been a personal friend of Garland for over a decade and chats to him about his personal views on the evolution of graphic design, design education, pivotal points in his 60-year career while also uncovering insights into his passion for photography and Irish folk singing.

The design industry in general has embraced a digital age in the last twenty years. I'm curious to understand how you think graphic design has changed through the course of your own career?

Graphic designers have taken on larger, more inclusive tasks. Computers have made this more feasible, especially in respect of handling type directly, but also because there are many apps and programs to call on. Because of these, non-designers have been enabled to carry out some design tasks (say catalogue designs) by themselves.

The field of operations have expanded considerably so that designers will have to be prepared to take on tasks that earlier on they might have considered outside their frame of reference. This is OK for large design groups that take on people with different skills and apply those skills to the somewhat unrelated activities that they're called on to do. I think that big firms on the whole tend to dump large numbers of things on to design groups so they are as big as the firms themselves. It never really bothered me as I've only ever worked for small or medium firms, I've avoided big firms, partly for that reason, that they want you to do too many different things that you may not be interested in.

You have had a long and successful career, what piece of design work or era do you look back on as pivotal in your career?

My stint as an art editor, which gave me time to find out some things at my employer's expense.

*Early on in my career I was author of two journals, one was *Furnishing* and the other one was *Design*. And I learned hugely in both of them. If you imagine, where I got the first job, I didn't know how to square up a photograph, I didn't know how to brief a photographer, I didn't know how to have a phone conversation of any significance with a printer, so I had to learn all of these things. If I had been doing this on my own, if I had...like some of my colleagues, started a design practice immediately after I left the Art College, I would have been in huge difficulties. It would have cost me money, as I know it did then. In my case, I was able to make my mistakes at someone else's expense. I had the leisure (because I also had assistance, I had a production assistant and a design assistant), to take my time and work things out. I was very lucky especially on *Design Magazine* to have the time and opportunity to think things out.*



Design education has evolved a great deal since your time at Central School of Art in London. With an influx of emerging digital disciplines and a change in fees/loans structures, do you think contemporary design education has got better or worse? On the whole and with certain reservations, I think it's got better.

One very strong reservation, classes are in my view, on the whole, too large. Students don't have the benefit of being able to talk with the tutor privately one to one, or in small seminars like eight or nine (students). I am told by teachers that their seminars are often 18, 19 or 20 people and in my view, that is not a seminar. A seminar is where a teacher and a student both engage in examining a subject at greater depth. I think that is seriously affecting things. Institutions are expanding their student intakes for financial purposes. The truth of the matter is we are teaching too many people as graphic designers. We produce several thousand a year and we never employ that many. I just don't know what happens to those who don't get a job. And as graphic designers they have to do something else. I don't know what they do. That's the reason, the over-riding reason why the teaching of graphic design is not as good today as it was. In some areas, it has got better, for example, when I was studying, the idea of design history was very vague and very

poorly handled. Our complementary studies were elementary. Now, design history and complementary studies are a firm and well-rehearsed part of the study.

You are renowned for doing great lectures and workshops in education. What project brief or set of exercises would you give to a student today?

My last project for students (at University of Brighton) was to make lettering on pavements on subjects that matter to them. They did very well and I may set this project to other students.

I did this brief because I had seen, over the last two or three years, quite important statements about politics or society scrawled on pavements. It's usually during demonstrations that they choose to use the pavements or the walls. And I thought that students might have something to say if they could say it more effectively on pavements than they could on paper and it proved to be so. I have a book put together by the students and the tutor, for whom I set the project and the results delighted me.

What sort of medium were the students working in?

Chalk mainly, sometimes spray gun, sometimes paint. I wanted them to go back to basics, to think of what they did as children.



Hopscotch is one of the things I show them in my lecture.

In your opinion, what are the key skills that young graduate designers need to consider for their future careers?

Acquisition of skills related to our subject, even though they may become, or are already, obsolete. The ability to master skills is a skill in itself, which they will surely need.

For example, letterpress printing. No one prints on letterpress these days, but it's a wonderful medium, where students learn to print themselves. I know a number of Art Colleges who have restored Letterpress Printing and the students love it. One thing is that it enables them to do things by hand. And we need to remind ourselves that so much good work has been done, and may still be done by hand and not by computer. The skills, even the quick contemporary skills, using a computer, may well become obsolete, even by the time the student gets out in to the field. It doesn't matter, the

point about learning these skills is to learn about 'learning skills'. If you learn one or two skills, you can learn the others. What are the essentials in any particular skill, what must I first grasp, then how must I develop it, then how may I modify it for my own use?

When I taught at Reading University, I was always keen for students (even if they were in their third year), to revert to some work by hand, but I don't insist on it. I have seen courses where students don't do that, where they have been able to acquire skills through computers which they can then translate to new objectives.

Your 'First things First' Manifesto was written and proclaimed in the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1964. It condemned the fast-paced and petty productions of mainstream advertising, calling them trivial and time-consuming. Do you still stand by it?

Yes.



I know you have a fond regard for Irish traditional music. Do you have any relationship to design in Ireland?

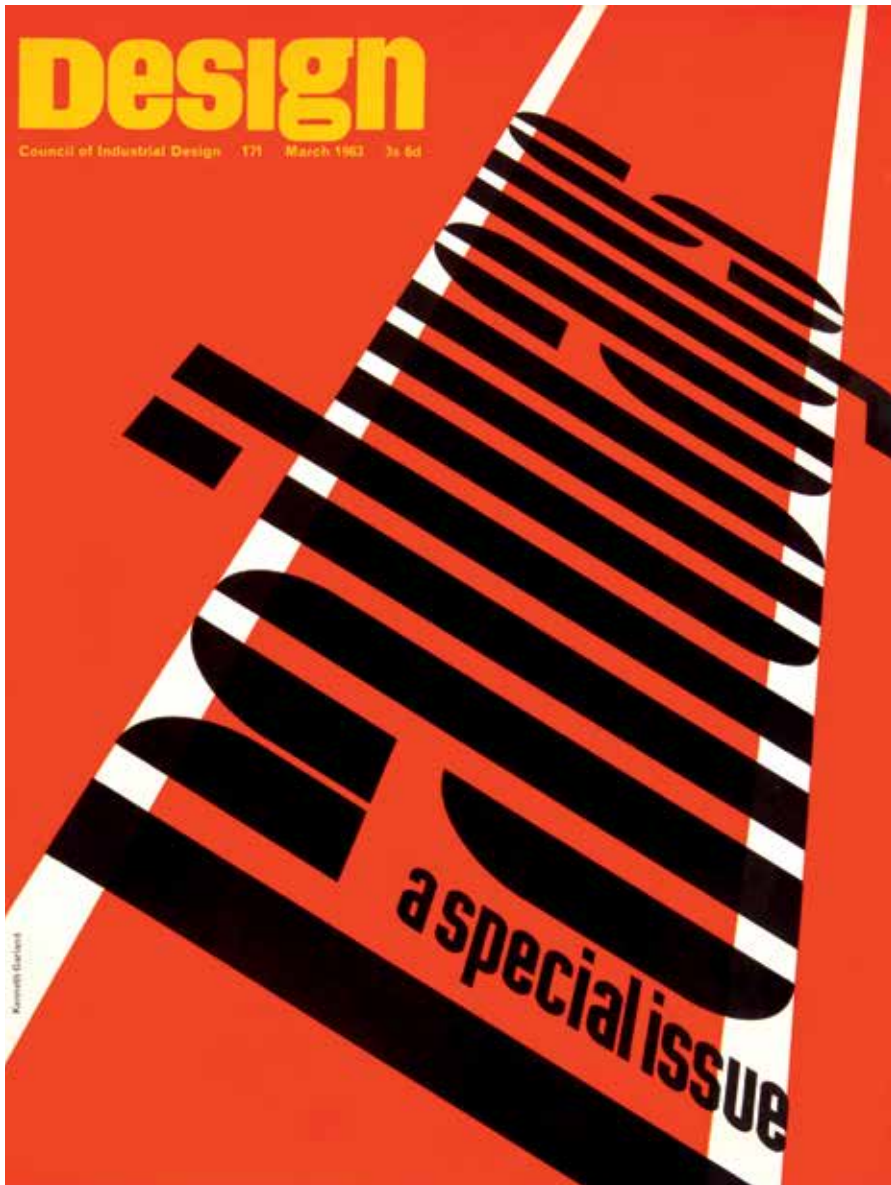
In a way, my connection with Irish music is also a connection with photography. I wasn't a good singer of folksongs. At these folksong gatherings I went to in Ireland, I became, by accident really, their photographer. I took many, many photographs. I only go to hear folk singing in Ireland. I have always taken photographs so it was natural for me to take my camera along with me and I found that the kind of photography I liked most, which is natural light, in difficult lighting circumstances, is really suited to folksongs as the singers usually sing in the dark corners of pubs. I never used a flash and the singers appreciated this because it didn't disturb their singing. My photographs are in an archive in the ITMA in Dublin.

When you were Art Editor of Design magazine, what were the most important philosophies that you were fostering?

Ergonomics, or human factors design; it still is.

When I was applying for the job, the editor of Design magazine, Michael Farr said to me, "Do you know what Cybernetics is and do you know what Ergonomics is?" It so happened, by pure accident, a few weeks before my interview, I had read something about both these subjects. So, I was able to say what I knew. It was enough for him. And I believe it was an important feature and him thinking I was the right person for the job. When I took the job, I became even more interested in human factors design. I was particularly keen on how it applied to graphic design. No-one at that time had talked about the use of ergonomics in graphic design so I was able (through articles and through encouraging the editor to employ people) to talk about graphics, through the medium of ergonomics. Studying in what way did they take into account human reactions, to get things done.

During your time at Galt Toys, you went from graphic design consultant to toy designer: can you expand upon your time at Galt Toys and the benefits of this association?



We were designing for a firm who made products I highly approved of and our clients were most appreciative of our work for them. We had many other splendid clients during the 29 years we worked with them but they were probably our favourites.

To expand on this, I had been working for Galt for a number of years and their Sales Director called Mervyn Middleton-Evans was having lunch with me one day and he said, "What do you think of our products?"

"Well I think they're OK"

"What...all of them?"

"No, not all of them"

"Well what do you think is wrong with some of them? Are there any products you would like to see that you could design?"

I said "Yes I could."

"Well why don't you. The way we do it is this. You think of a design. You produce the beginnings of it, the essence of it. You submit it to us and we say yes or no. If we say yes, you complete it and we produce it and pay you a royalty. And that's the way it works."

What he meant was, from their point of view, it cost them nothing to have me spend hours working away on a design. If they didn't like it they could say no. Well, as it happened, for every design we did they said yes. We knew their field; we knew the things that they produced and we knew how to produce some that were more considered than the ones they were doing already. Some of them were wooden toys. The first thing we did was wooden toys, we produced something called the marble run, for example. It was extremely popular, they made hundreds of them. After



a while they ceased making wooden toys as they were too expensive to make. And they started to concentrate on card games, which of course included Connect which was their most successful game.

And we continued on that fashion, I was quite happy that we should spend hours in the studio on a prospect which may or may not have been taken up by them and then offer it to them. I knew what they wanted, I knew what they needed, because I was their designer.

A special thanks to Adrian Shaughnessy (United Editions) for supplying the images in this article.