



Tom has been design director for Habitat since 1998 & Creative Director since 2001
He was awarded the OBE for services to British Design in 2000.
Tom has long been recognised for his honest, utilitarian, even undersigned style.
He focuses on found objects and shapes that are recognisable.

Tom Dixon



The first Habitat shop - in Fulham, London 1964



Sir Terence Conran



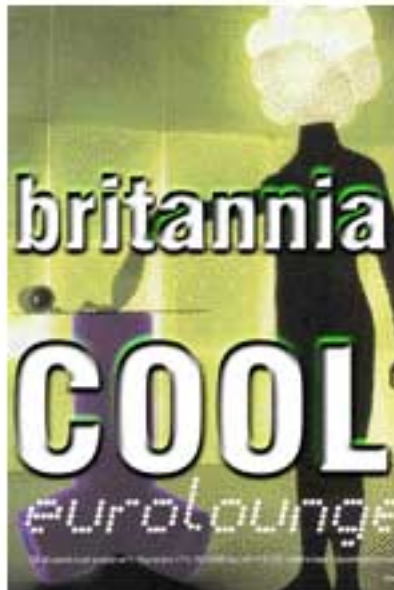
Habitat was the mastermind of Terrance Conran with his first store opening on the Fulham Road, London in 1964.

In the years since, Habitat has evolved into an organisation with outlets in various countries and in the 2000 year had a turnover of 417 million Euros.

The brand is very design-led and is aimed at customers who appreciate good design and something a little different from more traditional home furnishings.

Conran's vision was to create "a better salad bowl" in other words to take simple home furnishings and create products with contemporary elegance.

Products, that are at once simple, functional, beautiful and affordable.





Jaegger London High St - Xmas window display Dec 2003



Street display in a Glass Tank V & A Design Museum



Product Launch at Superstudio Milan April, 2003

This is how Tom Dixon responded to audience questions following a recent talk at the London Design Museum:

Q. You say that you don't define yourself as a designer. So how do you define a designer?

A. Actually I'm not anti-design at all. I think that some days I do work as a designer, but the bits that really interest me are the invention, the engineering and the marketing rather than the actual process of designing. I think that effective designers tend to be interested in the whole chain. What I've seen from looking at Habitat's history is that designers used to be much more interested in the democratic aspect of design. Terence Conran was always on about improving everybody's lives. Robin Day, Verner Panton and all those people really felt that they were going to change everything through design. It's a very humbling way to look at it. I think designers now are much more concerned about the shape of the object and their own personal evolution within it.

And I think a good designer is somebody who manages to put together all the elements - an understanding of materials and a belief in improving functionality - then puts the shape on last, if you like, as a result of all those experiments. I'm a designer very occasionally. I tend to be on the periphery, occasionally popping out a product which is designed mainly through an interest in materials and technologies.

Q. How does your time work out between your job (as head of design at Habitat) and your own work as a designer?

A. I've got a day job and a night job. In the end I depend on a lot of people to carry out my ideas. If you're ambitious in terms of the types of projects you address, then you depend on a huge series of people. You have to have a distance from all of those things to do them effectively as well. It's really delegation more than anything. If you think of a conductor, he's not doing anything. Or if you think of a film director, he's not doing anything either. He's just telling other people what to do. It's a bit of that.

I have to say even within the context of what I do I'm still astonished by the output of some fashion designers with the amount of seasons they deal with and the amount of productivity. I'm quite lazy. I look at heroes of mine like Buckminster Fuller or even Verner Panton and think: 'How did they manage to do it?'

Q. Q. Do you still actually make things?

A. I muck around when I get the opportunity, although I don't make things enough.

Q. What proportion of Habitat's products is manufactured in the UK?

A. The situation is disastrous in the UK. It's not impossible to manufacture here, but the English distaste of manufacturing is well-documented. There are still some things that make a lot of sense to manufacture in the country of origin because of shipping charges. So some of Habitat's larger furniture - the upholstered furniture, for instance - is made in the UK.



Tom presenting at "Design Days" Milan (2003)



A spin off from the extrusion machine was the Extendable Screen, an all purpose infinitely extendable screen which slats together and can be rolled up for storage. Used at home or in the office, it can both break up a space and hide the mess.



Overall, we probably buy 20 % in the UK and 15 % in France: something like that. We still buy extensively from Europe but obviously the proportion coming in from China, Vietnam, India and so on is growing because of the impossibility of actually producing the quantities that we need in Europe.

Q. The profile of your designers has noticeably risen in the last couple of years. What % of your product range is designed for Habitat and what percentage is bought in?

A. Again it's a balance that changes all the time. Habitat has gone from probably having 5 % of its range designed by Terence Conran with the rest brought in, to a point when I arrived when 100 % was so-called designed in house.

That was a fallacy. A lot of it was bought exclusively from the manufacturer. I reckon the proportion is now 60 % designed in-house, 20 % picked off the market and 20 % that is available elsewhere.

Q. Do you use market research in your work?

A. Market research, customer profiling and all of those types of investigations are a bit of a mirage for brands like Habitat. I'd much rather see us having a point of view and attracting people to that point of view. That's the way Habitat was set up. When the French store opened in 1973, they didn't advertise, they didn't do anything. People got to know by word of mouth that there was something going on. It wasn't like they'd done a customer profile, it was just a question of timing and a retail heart judging a situation which Terence Conran still does to this day. Everybody tells Terence Conran all the time: "Do not open another restaurant because there's nobody who wants to go to a 300-seater." But he still does it and it's still full. That's a judgment which comes from the point of view and an opinion is much more interesting than market research. Are you a market researcher?

Q. To what degree is your personal vision realised in Habitat?

A. In the end my view is very different from other people's view in the company. Habitat isn't my company like it was Terence Conran's company. I think because we operate in so many countries and we've got 83 shops, we have to take account of the customer and you have to judge whether different customers in different countries are going to come and buy the same range and so on. It's something we spend a lot of time discussing and arguing about just like anybody would in that kind of company.

Q. Have you had any management training?

A. No. I did one half day of public speaking. That was it. I was brought in as a different type of resource than the way that Habitat uses now. Essentially there were two design teams at the time - one in France, one in England. I was in charge of six people in England. What was interesting was the reaction of probably the press. They just loved the idea that, because it was happening in fashion, an English independent designer was going into a high street firm.



The Mirror Ball – functional as a pendant, standing, table or floor lamp. It is made from injection blow moulded PMMA which is metalised internally to give a mirror finish.



Q. How difficult did you find it to join Habitat in a senior role as your first “proper job”?

A. I found it much less difficult than I thought I would. It would probably be more difficult to climb your way up from the bottom of a company to the position I was in. I was charmed in being able to come in with a reputation of sorts and having had an amount of success in my field, so I didn't have to get involved in company politics. That came later. Four years in, I'm deeply involved in the politics.

Q. Do you ever see a time when you might become disillusioned with Habitat?

A. I could keep on learning every day because it gives me the chance to work with any amount of materials: from wood, to plastic, to aluminium, to steel, to extrusion. It's a bottomless pit of exciting possibilities but it really depends on what they let me do.

Q. How big is your team?

A. I've got maybe ten designers that I've recruited to the design department. I leave them quite alone actually. I mostly talk to other people who need me to bring a design opinion. My biggest battle at the moment is in the shops that's a portion of the business that I've not really been involved with until now. I'll be speaking to 20 or 30 people, head office has got 190 people and the whole company has got 2,000 people worldwide. I'll speak to any, all or some of them from time to time.

Q. Did you bring in special products for the World Cup?

A. During World Cup time, you sell less because people stay at home. The problem is that it's very difficult to judge what will happen. If England lose we could find ourselves having stocked up massively on glasses believing that Beckham would be fit enough to play and then find that the glasses are stockpiled and there's nothing you can do. Look at what happened in France.

We've got 30 shops in France and we could have been stocking up thinking that they would be the champions. It would be really difficult to pre-judge the World Cup. We've got a sweepstake going. What's your prediction? See, I rest my case

Q. Is design becoming more international?

A. Increasingly you find that design is becoming, sadly, very international. One of my projects has really been trying to find a little bit of Indianness or Britishness left. There's a few countries that still do it. Holland, for instance, has still got its own identity.

Q. What do you plan to do next?

A. From the attempts I've been making in recent products, it looks as if I'm going to end up as an architect when I grow up. I've been making lots of stacking things - modular things, like bricks of some sort – and now I'm doing flexible walls, so I only need to make a roof then that's it. Architect.

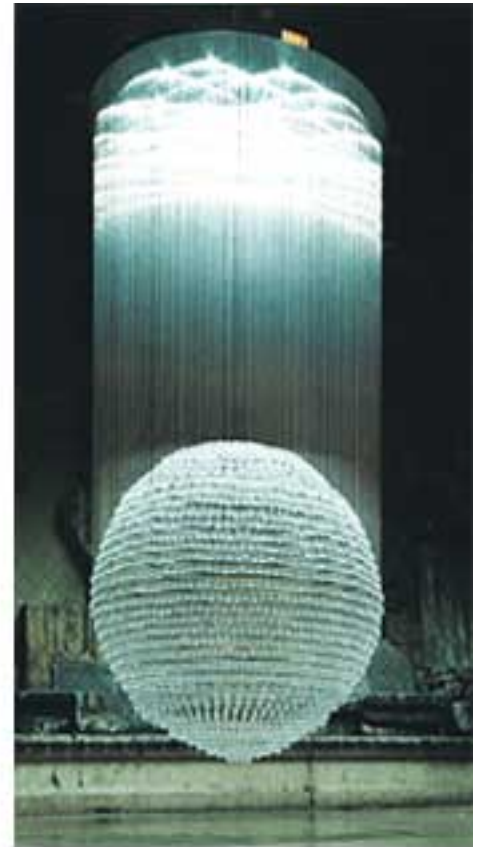
Done



Pylon chair for Cappellini



Star Light - rotational moulded light for Eurolounge



Ball Chandelier for Swarovski



"S" chair for Cappellini

Biography

1959 Born in Sfax, Tunisia to an English father and a French-Latvian mother.

1963 The family moves to Huddersfield in England after living in Egypt and Morocco settling in London in 1964.

1979 Starts a foundation course at Chelsea School of Art, but drops out after six months.

1980 Ekes out a living as a graphic designer and colourist for animated films.

1981 Joins Funkapolitan as bass guitarist.

1982 Works as a nightclub promoter and warehouse party organiser.

1983 Teaches himself how to weld and starts to make welded furniture initially as part of the Creative Salvage collective.

1985 Cappellini puts Dixon's S chair and Bird Lounger into production.

1989 Opens Space studio to batch-produce metal furniture and to execute stage and retail design projects.

1992 Opens Space shop on All Saints Road, Notting Hill to sell his own work and that of other designers.

1994 Co-founds Euro lounge as a company to manufacture plastic products including his own Jack Light.

1998 Appointed head of design UK by the Habitat retail chain.

2001 Becomes creative director of Habitat and develops a mobile machine to make Fresh Fat Plastic products.

Materialism

Not a call to conspicuous consumerism, but an attitude to design that centres on raw materials and the processes that convert stuff into the objects that we use.

Too often design is used as a tool to add complexity, the work contained within these pages is an attempt at reductionism, where the wish is to strip away any superfluity and reveal the underlying characteristics of the production process and expose the intrinsic nature of the object.

Materials! We want to know everything about them - where they come from, how you work them, how far you can push them, what else you can make from them and we like them fatter, more generous and simpler than most. The ductility and tensile strength of steel, the hardness and clarity of glass, the flexibility and raw complexity of wood or the versatility and plasticity of polymers are the departure point from which all designers work, and the exploration of which are the inspiration for this work.

FRESH FAT PLASTIC

Dixon visited **dedece** Australia in 2001 accompanied by his plastic extrusion machine - like a big hot glue gun .

He put the extruder in the hands of designers and artists to hand-form objects, allowing the maker to take charge and create one off pieces.

This led to the first series of Tom's autonomous range, Fresh Fat plastic. Unique and precious, it challenged the preconceptions of plastic as a throw away object. The production of plastic artefacts is now almost exclusively the domain of big industry.

Striving for consistency and economy, products are manufactured in immense quantities at the lowest price. The material has become disrespected and plastic has become a term of insult.

Fresh Fat glistens and shines like fresh wet glass. It has made plastic precious.

