

The best design does not need to shout about itself



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SURROUNDINGS

Only a few years ago the status of designers in Britain was negligible, barely registering outside a close community of aficionados. Now designers are being touted as superstars, names to match their creative counterparts in fashion and film. Elevated to sacred status, their shrines are on display at London's Design Museum in the run-up to this year's Designer of the Year prize, to be awarded on May 22. The curatorial choice is the last gasp of departing director Alice Rawsthorn.

Last year's £25,000 prize was won not by a designer but by a bureaucrat, a quango queen named Hilary Cottam who had "enabled" a programme of school design including the radical refurbishment of Kingsdale School in Dulwich by the actual (and superb) designers De Rijke Marsh Morgan, who weren't mentioned or thanked at all. The aura of design now spreads far beyond people who actually design and everyone wants to bathe in its luxuriant light. The awarding of the prize to Cottam was equivalent to the producer and not the director receiving the Best Film Oscar. It caused ripples in a profession that has for decades struggled to be taken seriously but, now that it is, suffers from an increasingly loose definition of its role.

This year's choice comprises the team that redesigned the Guardian, Jamie Hewlett, the anime artist behind the corporate identity of Damon Albarn's cartoon alter egos Gorillaz, and Cameron Sinclair, whose outfit Architecture for Humanity encourages architects to engage with reconstruction projects in the wake of disasters. It also, almost surprisingly, features

a product designer, Tom Dixon, who was once revered for designing chairs with attitude but who then became better known as creative director of Habitat.

Rawsthorn has been criticised by the design establishment for embracing anything and everything as design. The Designer of the Year list is the epitaph to her reign, with barely a conventional product in sight.

Sir Terence Conran, when he founded the museum, intended it as a vehicle for promoting product design, the idea that a mundane piece of equipment, when well-designed, could transform at least a small part of your life. But product design became sidelined as other

Conran intended the Design Museum to promote product design. But other stuff has muscled in

stuff muscled in. Last year there was Ms Cottam. This year Gorillaz seem to me more marketing than design, while the Guardian redesign seems a little too smug and self-congratulatory, another extraordinary marketing coup. Sinclair gets the Geldof prize for worthiness, but isn't really a designer, leaving Dixon, a fine designer and engaging individual but one who is showing retro copper lampshades and plastic macramé chairs that would have both looked very fine in one of Conran's 1960s Chelsea trattorias.

This is supposed to be design for the masses without dumbing down. All the key indicators are there: the new tabloid for the intelligentsia; post-Britpop, art-school, just-hip-enough-music; a green and healthy option; a token designer. Yet with the exception of Sinclair's estimable

project, which does have a real impact, albeit one remote from product design, none of this really improves our lives.

In complete contrast, Paola Antonelli, the curator of design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, has written a book (following up an exhibition), *Humble Masterpieces: 100 Marvels of Everyday Design*, which reveals not in the self-congratulatory superstar system of designer design but in the more everyday world, things that have become the background to the little rituals of our lives, things we take for granted.

These are not the expensive chairs, ridiculous coffee pots and dysfunctional kitchenware that we have come to expect under the umbrella of design but rather the anonymous, generic stuff that fills our office drawers, our bathroom cabinets and glove compartments: Bic bios, paperclips, bubble-wrap, zippers, Tarn-pax, Post-Its, Elastoplasts and so on. They have become so ubiquitous that they can seem to have emerged as fully formed products - but of course everything is designed and it is these brilliant, functional and often anonymous inventions that demonstrate how design can transform simple but formerly arduous tasks.

In the Design Museum, objects are placed on plinths, spotlighted in darkened rooms. With the ambient electronica of Gorillaz droning on in the background, they are presented as somehow magical. Visitors are charged £7 (\$12) to see already ubiquitous things, pop videos, newspapers, things that are hardly inaccessible. This smug preciousness is not what the most successful design is about. Design is not art. Designers are usually paid to do a job and, if the product is successful, they have the pleasure of seeing their design become generic, omnipresent, of seeing it making peoples' lives better. What more reward could you want?