



# where there's a wills...

It's strange how the destination of an interview can tell so much about the person we are due to interview. Often we are directed to showrooms, sometimes to the pristine environments of leading practices and, occasionally, to the pub!

From the moment we reach today's East London destination, we know we are about to talk to a 'real' designer. This is old school stuff. We are here to talk about product design. To talk about the intricacies of producing designs on a commercial level. To talk about applied geometry. Applied geometry? Read on.

We are chatting with Wills Watson Design Associates' Partner Tony Wills in the practice's Greenwood Road home. This is the kind of space where you cannot stop your eyes from wandering around. This is a real working space. There are books and magazines and blueprints and prototypes and a workshop space. In fact, if this space were a man, he'd most definitely have his sleeves rolled up.

We were inspired to talk with Tony the moment we saw HK's Omega desking system. One of our favourite products from Design Prima, Omega is a beautifully engineered, immaculately detailed product that could only be the vision of a true product designer. From the moment we sit with Tony, we are talking about what we most like talking to designers about – the process. 'When we're working on anything, we cross-check every aspect with each other,' Tony tells us. 'I don't like the idea of a designer being stand alone, it's out of context with the idea of smart people working together. A really good brainstorming session, for me, is when you've had a good rambunctious argument – normally around five o'clock – and something then just clicks. You can't even remember the really good brainstorming sessions, but there is this great idea at the end of them. And you have no idea who came up with the idea – in fact it's never just one person, it's a combination of team thinking and context.'

Tony Wills originally hails from the Watford area, where he attended Bushey Grammar School. Even in these early days, Tony was turned on to the idea of rolling those sleeves up. 'I said that I wanted to do engineering,' he recalls. 'They said that they'd never done engineering at the school. But they said that they would get me an engineering teacher – so I had one-to-one tuition. It was like private education.'





## profile



»»»»»I was Managing Director of T3 and did very little design work – although we did inherit the graphics department, and that was a complete revelation. What I did learn there was to make sure that expectations were understood and met.

After another seven years with DEGW Tony had something of a revelation. 'I suddenly realised that I wanted to get back to the raw creative designing process. It took me over a year to recover really. I suddenly found myself having to do everything by myself again and there was no security anymore – but I'm so glad I did it.

'Brian Watson, my senior designer at T3, and I then decided to operate as independents, adopting the old fashioned working model of 'you win a job and I'll work on it with you, I win a job and you'll work on it with me'. We've got no juniors here, which is a little sad, but that's the way we work.'

And so Wills Watson + Associates was born with senior designer Philip Hall joining a few years later. The small, yet skill-rich practice works in a number of diverse sectors, but we'll let Tony explain. 'Wills Watson's first big client was Kinnarps – and we're still working with them 12 years later. We first met through lectures we used to hold at DEGW and they asked us to work with them when we started the new practice. We have done a lot of products for them – and not all of them have gone into production, but I like them a lot. I respect the way they work. Of course we have recently started working with HK. We had spoken with them some time ago but the project was never completed. Then recently they asked us back in and, rather than finish off a piece of work we weren't entirely sure about, we said we'd write a brief for the project and we'd do it from scratch. It's been a lot of work, but now we have this fully-fledged table system and there's soon to be a storage system as well. The edge detail for the table comes from the D-Forms I was talking about earlier. I really enjoyed working on the Omega range.

'On the other end of the scale we have designed nano-technology equipment for Melles Griot, which has nothing to do with furniture – although, funnily enough, our first product was an isolation table which stayed absolutely still while they did all their experiments.

'We then got introduced to Nortel by Melles, although they introduced us as ergonomists because designers sounded a bit soft to the scientists! So they asked us to do their ergonomics work for them – and we did!

'We do a lot of work on laboratory and washroom products for Grant Westfield who are very good clients and we are currently expanding into the medical products sector.

'The way that we come at it now is as product designers. A craftsman inherits a mindset – to make a piece. We are not interested in that any more. We have done that and we can. But the good thing now is that, as a product designer, I know the processes, I understand what the people on the shop floor are going to go through before it even gets there. I have a real handle on that.

'I've met manufacturers who have blatantly said that their aim is to de-skill people. That does worry me – that skills may vaporise. But they do seem to have re-appeared again. I did fear for British manufacturing. I really like the idea that designers have a handle on the myriad of processes. I think of it as an art or a science – I think of it as maths and sculpture, as form and logic. That's why we work the way we do – as a small intimate team with a mutual understanding of the overall process.

'If you can describe a problem well, it can be solved well. It is about the description of the problem and that sudden light bulb going on in your head and realising what the answer is. That's why I love working with smart people.'

And that's why we love talking with smart people ●