

# the market

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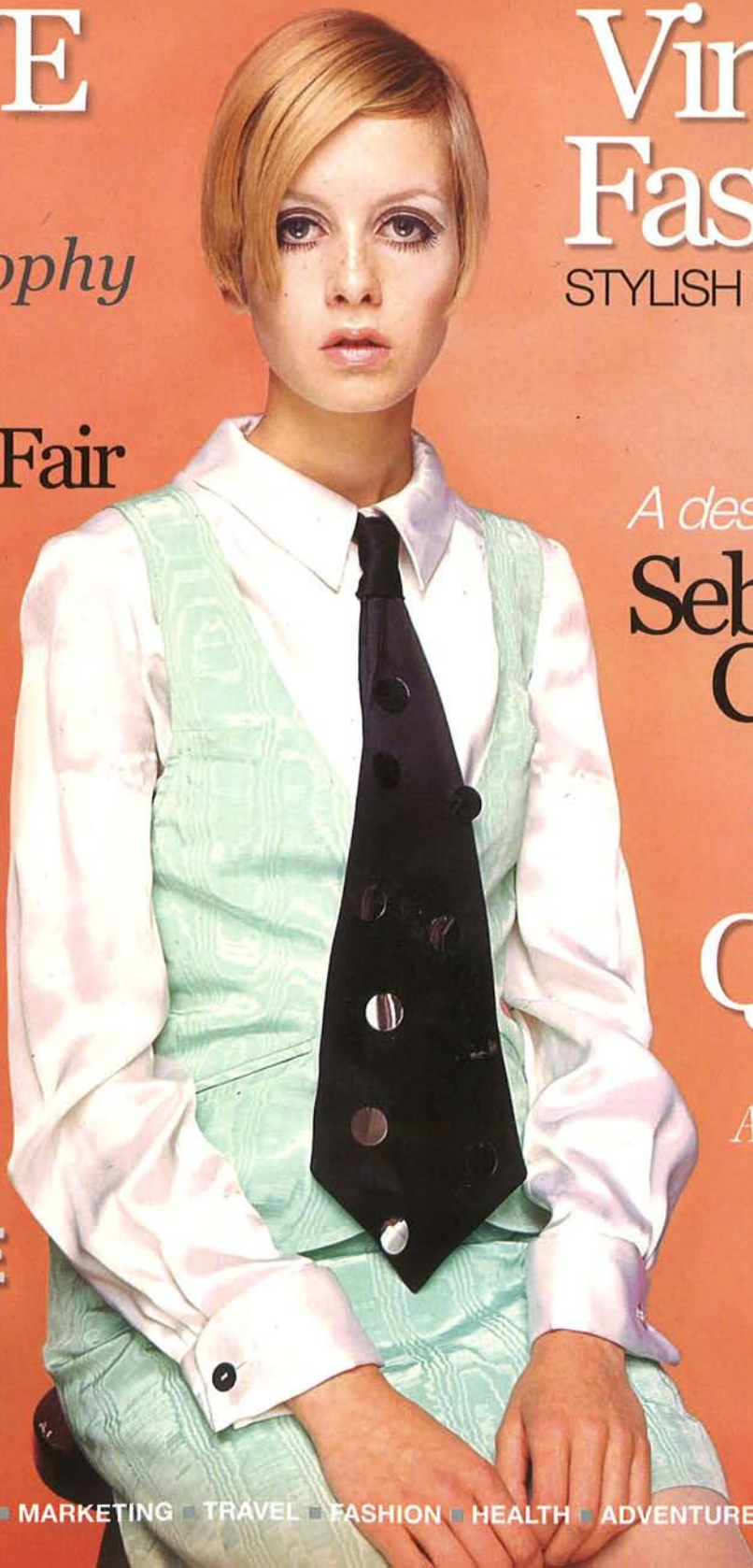
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*"I like to design products that people enjoy using"*

# Sebastian Conran

*From punk rock to cook wear*

Sebastian Conran is one of Britain's top industrial and product designers. He has designed everything from pushchairs to car interiors and bathtubs to coffee machines. His client list reads like a who's who of British industry and includes Rolls-Royce, Mothercare, British Airways, Tesco and John Lewis

Sebastian grew up in a creative family, with his father Sir Terence Conran, a designer and founder of Habitat and the Conran Group and his mother Shirley Conran, the successful author and journalist.

"My parents were a huge influence on me. They are interesting people, very open-minded. I got exposed to a lot of ideas at an early age. I don't think I had a particularly conventional upbringing, but I certainly benefitted from it."

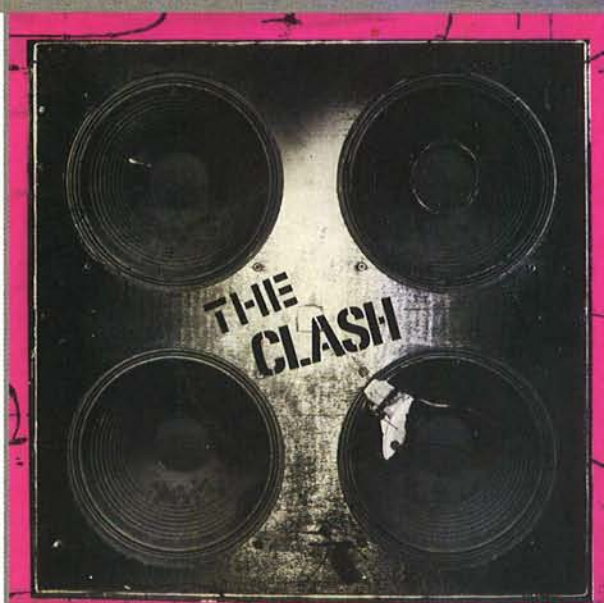


At the height of the swinging 60s, Terence Conran opened the first Habitat shop on the Fulham Road in Chelsea. Over the years the stylish, open-plan stores became largely responsible for bringing good design to British consumers. At the time shops sold furniture that was staid and dated, but shoppers were ready to go mod and Habitat brought chic and

pared down European design to British consumers.

"You have to remember that Britain was quite a dull place until the 1960s – it was still suffering from post-war austerity. My Dad wanted to bring some colour to the high street, and Habitat sold a mix of modern and classic designs, including well-designed products imported from France and Germany."

Habitat went on to be one of Britain's best-known retailers, with stores across the UK and Europe. In 1992, amid a difficult retail-trading backdrop, Habitat was sold to Swedish furniture giant Ikea. Competition on the high-street was stiff and despite head of design Tom Dixon's attempt to resurrect Habitat's cool 60s vibe in the early 'noughties' by re-introducing original design favourites, sales continued to decline and in 2009



Limited-edition Nissan Cube, 2003; Concept for bus shelter, 2007; The Clash, record sleeve, 1976; Limited edition Nissan Cube, 2003; Tchibo Bathroom, soap dispenser, 2006; Cook-shop for John Lewis, saucepan stack, 2009



Ikea sold the company to Hilco, a turnaround specialist that recently put Habitat into administration.

We asked Sebastian how he felt about this.

“Habitat has gone through several phases in its lifetime, and its design ethos will live on. I expect we shall see Habitat continue in some form well into the future.”

Sebastian was involved in both retail and design from an early age, working at Habitat stocking shelves and on the tills, then later helping out in the design studios. Given his family background, it was always likely that he would go into design. “By the time I got to college, I already had quite a good idea of what a designer does,” he said.

He studied Industrial Design Engineering at the Central College of Art & Design in London, where he was

treasurer of the Student Union, and famously booked the Sex Pistols for their first gig.

After college, he worked for the punk rock band The Clash, designing clothes, posters, promotional material, record sleeves, and stage sets. He was then employed by the brand identity agency Wolff Olins, before being persuaded by his father to come and work for the Conran Group.

Sebastian became head of product design at Mothercare, which was owned by Conran, and then went on to become managing director of Studio Conran.

During his time as head of design at Mothercare, in the 1980s, Sebastian was responsible for many of the innovative designs produced by the company.

He designed the world’s first all-plastic pushchair, and the Anywayup toddler cup, that sold 25 million units

worldwide. Of his time at Mothercare, he said: “I really enjoyed my time at Mothercare. I felt I was designing products that helped people, that made their lives a bit easier.”

In 1986 he founded Sebastian Conran Associates (SCA), a product and design consultancy that he still heads today. SCA has worked on projects in architecture, interiors, industrial and product design. Today the primary focus is on designing home products, furniture, and consumer electronics.

Sebastian’s design career has been extremely varied, and he has had the opportunity to work on a vast range of products.

The chances are you have some of his products at home, even if they don’t have his name on them, as he’s designed ranges for John Lewis, Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury’s, Tchibo and Villeroy & Boch.



Sebastian's signature style is clean lines, tactile materials and sensual curves. His big design influences are the Bauhaus and the German rationalist designers, such as Dieter Rams, the legendary designer for Braun. He also likes the American designers Charles Eames and Raymond Loewy for their sensuous lines and technological innovation.

When it comes to British designers, Sebastian admires Josiah Wedgwood, the 18th century potter and industrialist, for his entrepreneurial creativity, and Brunel, the 19th century designer and engineer for his rational creativity.

Sebastian designs products that meet both the consumers' practical needs and their emotional desires, combining the functional with the beautiful. His design philosophy is "elegance through simplicity". He explained to us some of the complex factors that go into developing and marketing a product for a client, using his value equation.

The value of the product to the consumer is determined by groups of factors relating to the brand, the design, the quality and the cost.

Brand-related elements that shape the design are emotional and include things like a brand's reputation with the consumer, the marketing of the brand, and the consumers' previous experience with it.

*"Britain is great at design, and we have a terrific manufacturing base"*

Design-related factors influencing the design include both emotional elements, such as the aesthetics and tactile quality of the product, and rational factors such as its functionality and usability. Quality-related factors include the material and finish, dependability and integrity of

the design. Cost issues include price, convenience, and ethical or 'guilt'. Some cost-related factors such as price are rational, and some, such as 'guilt', are emotional.

It is clear that there is a lot of thought and development behind even the simplest designs that Sebastian is involved in.

He is very serious about design, but clearly enjoys it as well.

He said: "I like to design products that people enjoy using."

Sebastian designs for top manufacturers in the UK, Europe and Asia. We asked him about his work with Nissan.

"Nissan asked me to design a version of the Cube car for the Tokyo Motor Show, so I set about restyling the interiors and exterior of the car, stretched the body, added a translucent skylight and

Villeroy & Boch Aveo, bathroom range, 2003; Mothercare Anywayup toddler cup, 1999; Sainsbury's Cook Shop range, corkscrew, 2003; Yamaguchi - Stern Ray, rechargeable LED desklight, 2010; Nigella Lawson's Living Kitchen, bowls and utensils, 2003; Sainsbury's Cook Shop, salt & pepper grinders, 2003



NTT Docomo, mobile phones, 2010; Cook Shop for John Lewis, stockpot, steamer, 2009; Photos courtesy of Sebastian Conran Associates.

simplified the interiors, used nicer finishes and made it less plastic-looking.”

Even though it was only intended as a concept car, Nissan liked it so much it put it into limited-edition production. The quirky box-like design of the car has gained a following with design fans in Japan and the UK.

“They are very sensible cars for cities, I drive one myself,” said Sebastian. “It has got masses of space, loads of head room, it is very practical. It takes five comfortably. The seats fold down into a bed, which the kids love. The asymmetric rear door is beautiful, and gives the car real character.”

The Nissan Cube was not Sebastian’s first foray into automotive design, as he also worked on interiors and styling for a version of the Renault 4 in the late 70s. He also has designed interiors for aircraft, including the very last interior for Concorde.

Sebastian is a keen cook and has designed ranges of dishes and kitchen utensils for various manufacturers and retailers.

He designed The Cook Shop range for John Lewis. It has contemporary shapes, and consists of the full range of equipment needed by a cook – pots and pans, bowls and utensils – in bamboo, ceramic and hard-anodised aluminium.

Sebastian is also responsible for the more than 100 items that make up the award-winning Nigella Lawson’s Living Kitchen range, which has a more traditional feel, sensuous curves and brighter colours.

When we asked him what he thought of British design and manufacturing he said: “Britain is great at design, and we have a terrific manufacturing base. We do need to do more to exploit our scientific research, to develop it into successful products. We need to get scientists and designers to collaborate more on projects.”

*“It is essential that we design for the future, that we design products that don’t use a lot of resources in their manufacture, use and disposal”*

Asked if he was worried about British manufacturing moving abroad, he said: “Obviously getting products manufactured in the UK is the ideal, but even if a British design company gets its products made in China and sells them in the US, it is still bringing wealth into the UK through tax revenue.”

When asked what countries he thinks produce the best design, he replied:

“I think the best designs come from London, but all countries produce interesting designs in their own way. However, I do think it is sad that the world is becoming more homogenised in that respect.”

The environmental impact of his designs is important to Sebastian.

“It is essential that we design for the future, that we design products that don’t use a lot of resources in their manufacture, use and disposal. We try to design products that last a long time, so they don’t constantly need replacing.”

Sitting in his studio surrounded by the other designers at SCA, we ask him what he’s working on at the moment.

“We are working on a new range of Cook Shop kitchen electricals for John Lewis, which include a blender, a coffee maker and a food processor. We’ve designed them to be satisfying to use, simple to clean, easy to store, and stylish. I’m also working on a new china range for Tesco.”

There are very few designers in Britain today who have worked in as many different areas as Sebastian Conran. With his skillful blend of function and aesthetics, it is not surprising that he is in such demand. Who knows what he will be designing next?

By Gordon Ross  
www.sebastianconran.com