

MALCOLM GARRETT – MAKING THE FUTURE



Conversations in Creativity

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Malcolm Garrett is an internationally recognised designer who has played a key role in the development of British contemporary graphic design. From art school days in Manchester, to designing iconic record labels for 80s cult bands, to helping found **Design Manchester**, Malcolm's connections to the North and its culture are strong.

Creative Lancashire (CL) interviewed Malcolm (MG) about his views on creativity and diversity in design.

CL: In a recent conversation with Ed (Matthews-Gentle) of Creative Lancashire, you said *If I knew where creativity came from, I'd bottle it and sell it*. Why is creativity so important to you?

MG: It's what I do. Every creative you ask will say they don't know where creativity comes from, but they just do it, because it's instinctive. Right from primary school, I've kind of known that I was interested in making things and doing creative things, drawing things, looking at things. That's what my life is about.

Everybody is innately creative. Not everybody can make art in a particular way, I certainly can't draw like Leonardo, but everybody can think creatively and come up with creative solutions.



CL: How do you face the challenge of a blank page or empty screen – where do you start?

MG: With fear and trepidation (laughs). When I'm faced with a blank page, it's quite likely to stay blank, because I only put marks on the page if I think somebody else needs to see or be connected to something. I'm driven by things I see, questions that people ask me, ideas that prompt something in my head. *The piece of paper or the canvas isn't blank, it's a starting point.*

MB: You've commented that your creativity seems to come from “being naturally contrary, and always thinking I know better than anyone what’s interesting what is right.”

There's a playfulness and braveness to this statement, which are qualities that many employers see as vital in young talent. If that's true, are we over exaggerating the importance of degrees and qualifications?

MG: I don't think we over-emphasize the importance of degrees. A degree shows that you have spent time evolving and thinking. It doesn't necessarily mean that you need a degree to have done that, but there is certainly evidence that some level of thinking, looking at process, and developing skills and expertise, occurs as part of obtaining your degree. But it doesn't necessarily tell you exactly what type of designer, or what calibre of designer, you might be.

As a designer, you are only as good as the questions you are asked to respond to. It's the designer's job to find out what it is that is being asked, in essence.

My creativity comes from my contrariness, which means that every time anybody says anything to me, my instinct with anything is to say the opposite. “Why are you asking that? Why are you doing that? Is there a better way?” Contrariness leads to a natural way of not taking things at face value and instead looking at things from different perspectives. Try to put yourself in the position of the audience, what they are looking for and what they need, rather than what you want to give them.

What qualities do you think are important to be a good designer?

Listening, paying attention, asking questions, working hard. To a degree, not settling on the first idea or the first thought. To move things forward, but also to be prepared to move or reposition again, once you have more information in front of you. So, it's knowing when to listen and be open to other people's input, and when to say 'no', this is fine. It's a delicate balance and *there is no definitive 'yes' or 'no', which is why there are as many design solutions as there are designers*

As a designer, you can't discount that input from other places and other sources. You need to take it onboard. If anything, my skill is how to harness that and curate it and embody all of the things that need to be embodied. So that's something that you go to college to learn how to do, to learn about process and thinking creatively.

CL: You're outspoken about education and design education pathways, especially from primary upwards. Is the current education system or approach fit for purpose?

MG: So that's certainly broken. I'd always known instinctively, from a young age, that the endeavours I enjoyed doing had a creative component to them. I didn't know how to define that as a child, but I knew there was something inherent in me that I enjoyed. I recognised that in myself, and for a full ten years of education afterwards, I was not really given any encouragement by the education system to see that as a real career and life pathway.

The system seems to be to educate creativity out of children, rather than educate them to think creatively.



MG: The whole exam system is all about ticking boxes and getting marks, when creativity is about learning how to think, ask questions and engage in conversation with people. That was something that really wasn't emphasized when I was at school. Nor were the possible courses that I could pursue in order to become the designer I would eventually become. I don't think it's better now. In fact, I think it's getting worse.

CL: So what needs to change?

MG: The (previous) government is actively discouraging students from taking creative subjects, in favour of other (as they see it) more academic and rigorous or disciplined subjects, when in reality those subjects are just easier to mark, rather than subjects which make you a better person or pupil. I think there is a complete disconnect in the creative industries.

The creative industries are growing exponentially year on year, and there is a shortage of new creatives coming in to fill jobs that exist. It's terrible for the education system to discourage students from following those careers. It's a problem at higher education level, but really the problem starts at primary school.

When you are at primary school, every single kid in the class is a painter. There's paint and brushes and every kid is an artist and enjoys it. Five years later, nobody in the class is a painter, because they've been told, oh you're not good enough, you can't draw, you can't paint, there no jobs, etc. It's just insanity. *Creativity, creative thinking, and creative approaches to learning should be encouraged in every single subject.*

CL: Gender and cultural diversity in design and design education is important too?

MG: It's a bit of platitude to say "more women, more diversity", yes please. Just living in a man's world, or a boy's world, has never been something that has interested me. Football and beer, I'm not interested. The world is bigger and more exciting than constricting yourself to silos. Just because I'm a male of a certain colour and age, actively means that I don't want to be gridlocked with lots of other people who are the same as me. I'd rather be with people who bring something else, something unexpected and exciting. Something that is going to make my brain work.

Malcolm Garrett is the Creative Director of Images & Co and Joint Artistic Director of Design Manchester. The Making The Future exhibition and related Conversations in Creativity talk was part of a collaboration for National Festival of Making at Blackburn Cathedral (June 2019).

About Conversations in Creativity

Conversations in Creativity is a series of talks, publications, and design-led interventions where practitioners from around the world and across disciplines explore how creative inspiration informs process. It was co-founded in 2011 by Ed Matthews-Gentle for Creative Lancashire.

Previous collaborations include Lemn Sissay, Jeanette Winterson Nick Park, Pete Fowler, Donna Wilson, Gus Casely-Hayford, Alice Rawsthorn, Cherry Ghost, Harris Elliot, Halima Cassel, Alice Kettle, I am Kloot, The Lovely Eggs, Keith Brymer Jones, Patrick Grant Hemingway Design, Blueprint Magazine, British Textile Biennial, National Festival of Making, British Council & Crafts Council to name a few.

Creative Lancashire is dedicated to helping raise the profile of creative talent and to harnessing the economic potential of individuals and organisations working in the creative sector.

Creative Lancashire and Conversations in Creativity are both services provided by Lancashire County Council.

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