

Across the Atlantic

Jonathon Kemnitzer, founder and owner of KEM Studio, speaks to **Alistair Welch** about his passion for design, detail, and skateboarding

Amongst his idols Jonathon Kemnitzer counts the Eames, the pre-eminent furniture designers of the mid-20th century, and Tony Hawk, the world-renowned professional skateboarder. True American heroes all, although it is tough to imagine Charles and Ray grinding the halfpipe.

A recent KEM Studio project, Skate Bench No.1, manages to combine these most diverse of influences, simultaneously paying homage to the clean lines of the Eames and the kickflip of the Birdman. The bench incorporates a custom skateboard ‘deck’ atop a continuously bent stainless steel or powder coated frame. The project was successfully funded on Kickstarter, the online crowd-funding facility, and attracted interest from professional skateboarders including Tony Hawk himself.

In its playful blending of skateboarding, a sub-



cultural pursuit, with the aesthetic of mid-century modernism, along with its use of new models of market and manufacture, the Skate Bench is a neat encapsulation of KEM Studio’s approach to design.

Based in Kansas City, USA, KEM Studio is a consultancy that seeks to fuse architecture and industrial design. Driven by the principle that life can be made better through design, the practice comprises trained architects and industrial designers tackling projects in both built environment and product development. The consultancy works in both residential and commercial architecture and across a broad ranging industrial design portfolio that takes in furniture, medical and consumer electronics.

KEM Studio principal Jonathon Kemnitzer explains that having both architects and industrial designers in-house means the consultancy is very collaborative. “Industrial designers manage all the industrial design projects and architects manage the architecture projects. But as a team we get together and work on all projects,” he says. “We have been working this way for eight years now and to me it seems normal, but I’m sure outsiders would be really interested to see our process because architects think about things differently to industrial designers.”

Kemnitzer explains that the two disciplines complement each other well in the work of

Top | Kem Studio CEO Jonathon Kemnitzer
Below left | Skate Bench No.1



the consultancy. “The real beauty of our way of working is in how industrial design can influence the small details of architecture, like how someone interacts with a surface,” he says. “Likewise, industrial design can benefit from some of the ‘big thinking’ of architecture.”

“Fundamentally, we want to make people’s lives better whether we’re dealing with a house, a building, or a piece of furniture – but it’s all through design and it’s all about approaching things differently.”

Kemnitzer, whose career in design began with a stint at Hallmark Cards and designing footwear for Guess, admits that he has a passion for detail, a desire to understand how the smallest changes can influence a user’s experience of a product. “I can’t stop watching people and how they interact with things – whether it’s getting into a car, or opening a door, or picking up a glass, or



Top | Kena - digital microscope for Ken-A-Vision



an elderly person interacting with a cane – they get mentally filed,” the KEM Studio owner says. “In approaching our work we are always thinking about the small things. How can we make it so it can be interacted with better? Can it be carried around more easily?”

The kena digital microscope was designed by KEM Studio specifically for use by children in kindergarten and elementary schools (to use the American terminology). The brief came from ken-a-vision, a manufacturer of speciality cameras and microscopes, which in its 60-year history had not used an industrial design consultancy.

Kemnitzer explains that the client’s previous junior microscopes had essentially been a normal microscope with a digital camera put inside the casing. KEM Studio wanted to develop a product that, through its look and usability, would encourage children to investigate the world around them in a way that was fun and familiarized them with the operation of a microscope.

“A lot of things that we do we try to make as simple as possible,” adds Kemnitzer. “That’s fun, but it’s also hard.” During development of this product, designers paid particular attention to the base of the microscope. “Usually a microscope has stage clips that hold down a slide, but those clips take away from that area where you can actually put something in. We removed those clips and simply introduced a silicone pad – you can still put a glass slide on the pad and it won’t

Having in-house industrial designers and architects means the consultancy is very collaborative

move, but it also gives you more surface area. It’s the small things like that that we like to think about when we are designing something.”

Following the success of the kena digital microscope, KEM Studio has worked with ken-a-vision on Flexcam 2. This product is another educational aid (it was intended for use in primary education but has been also adopted by users in high schools and universities), a USB classroom camera adaptable for a wide range of applications. KEM Studio ensured that the product offered intuitive functionality and reinforced the client’s brand. Beyond the classroom, KEM Studio, within its industrial design practice, has worked on projects ranging from a pneumatic conveying blower (Inovair) to a kiosk for use in hospital, clinic, and pharmacy applications (SP Kiosk). All of the consultancy’s work is typified by a simplicity in design language that, to a certain extent, belies the acute attention to detail in product development.

Returning to Skate Bench No.1 offers Kemnitzer an opportunity to discuss some of the ways in which industrial design is changing. The product started life as a quick, informal



investigation into the potential of CNC tube bending. Kemnitzer explains that everyone in the design studio really liked the results so he decided to put the product on Kickstarter, a website supporting ‘crowd funding’ for creative projects. His enthusiasm was matched by the online community as the bench not only reached (and exceeded) its funding target, but also attracted the attention of design and skateboarding bloggers.

“This is one of the things that is interesting about design now and the future of design,” he continues. “Design is starting to come back to a situation where it can be done locally and it can be done individually. Once Kickstarter started happening we saw an opportunity to bring down cost and try to do more local manufacturing. Skate Bench No.1 started off as a 15 minute project talking about the Eames and CNC – it ended up being a lot more involved. We went to Kickstarter, got funded, and two weeks after our Kickstarter campaign we’re meeting Tony Hawk – it’s actually been a pretty surreal ride.”

Kemnitzer is certain that direct funding mechanisms like Kickstarter are changing the face of professional design. “I think the beauty of it is that, in the past, design firms or individuals came up with ideas and then used those as a way to market their company – they existed on their websites or in their literature as examples of what they could do and how they thought,” he says. “The difference is now we can make those projects a reality – that’s really powerful as it allows design firms to take advantage of what they do for their clients day in day out.”

This, alongside rapid prototyping and global manufacturing, means, in Kemnitzer’s eyes, it

Direct funding mechanisms like Kickstarter are changing the face of professional design

Right | SP Datapoint for ScriptPro

is a uniquely exciting moment to be working in industrial design. "I'm really interested to see how these three things continue to converge together," he enthuses.

"I don't think it will be too long before people will be able to manufacture stuff at home or we will all have 3D printers. Even today, we have a small Makerbot at our office; it's fantastic, it liberates the design process in a lot of ways. Instead of getting your file and sending it off (and, yes, you could have a part in a day which was still great), you can have a part in 15 minutes. I'm excited about where it can go in the future, the possibilities of that are endless. You start thinking about getting these into the hands of schools or corporations, becomes a really interesting social experiment."

Despite this interest in emerging technologies and the frontiers of product design, Kemnitzer still cites the work of Charles and Ray Eames as his greatest inspiration. "When we are designing something we try to make it as simple as possible; I think the Eames did a really good job of that and as a result their designs became classic," he explains. "Especially in their early work they were investigating and experimenting with new materials and processes. Skate Bench No.1 is our attempt at one of those investigations."

Overall, it is the process of collaboration – between industrial design and architecture, and between studio and client – that gives Kemnitzer the greatest pleasure. He concludes: "Having that interaction and coming up with something new is pretty fascinating." |



Top | KEM Studio designers at work
Bottom | Inovair pneumatic conveying blower

