



Interview: Piers Roberts, co-founder of designersblock and RISKIT

Piers dedicates his time to promoting young designers and helping them understand how they can move forward in their careers through the designersblock exhibitions around the world and the innovative RISKIT model that enables them to map their path.



What is it about designersblock that seems to attract new designers and the media alike?

I think we provide platforms that are more exciting for visitors and more appropriate for our exhibitors. We suggest designers sell creative intelligence at designersblock, whereas trade shows are all about selling the product. Careers progress by working on diverse projects in a market where buyers are looking for a variety of creative and practical skills. Selling products is just one option.

So you think that there is a gap there?

Yes, there is a gap there. It's a gap which, over time, we have tried to describe and at the same time provide solutions for. Our development's not been a case of recognising a gap, recognising a solution and doing it. We sort of got on with stuff and realised that there was this gap. That's allowed us to mature in terms of our understanding of what we do and what we can do for other people.

What do you notice about the skill sets of the new designers that come to you?

We get to meet many people straight out of university and you can see that they're struggling; I don't think they are provided with any clear description of how they can progress their careers apart from either by getting a job (which is not a bad thing) or by struggling away valiantly and without a clear direction on their own stuff. We try to provide a bit of clarity over that stage in their development. Though at one level this is just part of growing up as a designer.

Employers are generally looking for a mixture of competence and ideas. Those who leave college seeking to do their own thing do need to develop their competence. They will struggle if all they want is to be the big ideas person. The more successful graduates are generally older and have had more time to explore life, explore ideas and come up with spaces where their ideas can work.

So yes, in general new designers tend to lack the maturity to drive successful businesses, partly because they're too young and partly because nobody was able to tell them what's going on. That's what we try to do. The work we have done with RISKIT is very focused on providing that sort of description.

What could higher education institutions do to better prepare the designers for the next stage after graduating?

I think they have got to be able to paint a more real picture of what's going on out there. And to be fair to them this picture is a shifting picture. We shouldn't necessarily blame them for not understanding exactly how people are operating. I believe the work that we are doing in this area is very good and very novel so maybe they should be asking us. Everybody accepts, I think, that there is a responsibility to provide a better sense of the real world to students. Many self-employed creative people are having a go, with greater or lesser success. It would be good to provide a better explanation of why some do better than others. Sometimes, though, you just want to be able to tell kids to chill out. You know I kind of think, 'Go away for a year or two and don't worry about it so much.' I think that also needs to be put across. The reality of them leaving college and determining where they are going is a pretty scary concept. Creating space to wonder a bit more might be a good idea also.

The students leave college now with so much debt.

I don't know how they manage that financial position but it does seem that they are trapped into an income-requiring position very early on. It's a time when they still need to have a bit of space.

Do you think the education institutions should be accountable for the education and look at other businesses?

Not necessarily. I think that they need to be part of a chain of education, and that that educational path should be described through to a later stage than where they drop them off at present. Whether it is the colleges' role to do it or whether their role is to link in with other organisations that do it I am not entirely sure. Even while still at college there is definitely more that they could do and I think they know they need to. But frankly I don't think they've got the right understanding of what it is that they're being asked to do, seeking to do, need to do.

What do you recognise as the qualities that separate the designers who make a success from designersblock and those that may still not understand what they are doing?

Well partly there is this maturity gap. They've had more time to develop their competence; they do have a better understanding of what roles other people are playing that are critical for bringing their ideas to maturity. So they have probably got better relationships with people with other skills. They probably appreciate what those skills require from the relationship. For example, understanding what motivates a manufacturer or what drives somebody to go out and tell the world your ideas are great? Complex and simple things like that that they appreciate. Beyond that it's how they perceive their market options: how they structure their time and resources. I also look at where they see their work coming from, how they explore that further. I think that differs.

The more successful designers are identifying their own contract. They are saying, 'You work on my terms, this is what I want you to do, do you want to do it?' – rather than going out there and saying, 'Please can I do something for you and please will you pay me something?' I think the creative's contract is generally pretty shit. There are designers successfully designing ranges of furniture for a whole series of companies but still really struggling. It's not as though they've got a very good contract. Again I think designersblock will help people to see that there are other contracts that they can form. If they are competent enough they have the chance to demand different contracts on different terms.

Why do you think it is important to create designersblock on an international platform?

I think the exchange is excellent. I do believe cultural exchange is one of the roots of developing creativity so I think it's important to be able to do that. It's also because all over the world people are trying to do the same thing. They are trying to generate reward out of their ideas, skills and position. They are saying, 'For what do I want to make an effort and can I achieve the reward I want out of making this effort?' – that's consistent across the world and I think it's a good thing. As well as being a fantastic opportunity to exchange ideas we are also raising the bar for them, setting them higher standards. I think we can get too complacent, stuck within national boundaries. If somebody comes along from Finland or Korea and blows your arse away with the quality of what they're doing, you've kind of got to take note. I think it's a big challenge for people as well.

What personal characteristics do you believe enable you to go from running your design shop 'same' to developing designersblock as such a large platform for new designers?

Real bloody-mindedness and desperation. It's true that you want to give up when you have fucked up but you can't really. Otherwise you are just going to be miserable and of course there are a lot of people who are forced out of the game. It was the relationship that I had with Rory Dodd that allowed us to be able to do it because you can pick each other up and I certainly needed that, all the period that this has been going on. So the fact there is such a good relationship between myself and Rory is fundamental to us being able to carry on and also to talk through all the ideas.

It has been around for seven years now, hasn't it?

Well I guess Rory and I started working together in about '97, so yeah, about seven years.

What advice would you give to young designers who want to create their own products?

I was trying to think about this and I guess it depends on what stage you are talking. On one level I think they can go out and they can learn specific skills. They can develop specific relationships and they can consider what it is that they have to gain from the accumulation of that knowledge, those skills, that set of relationships. I think they also need to be investigating more ideas. I think they ought to be asking more fundamental questions about what design is about; creating a space for solutions that make better sense, wherever applied. I think they could be thinking much more broadly in terms of who, what and where might benefit from more thought and therefore what contributory skills and perspectives they have to offer or consider. So I think they can use their creative skills within a wider range of environments than they are probably aware of and I think they need to appreciate that that is what they are doing.

From your experience of working with so many young designers, you have been in a perfect position to understand their needs as they leave university. From that you have developed a model of thinking to help them which I believe is RISKIT; what is RISKIT?

At its start, RISKIT is simply a chart, a model that allows you to map the relationships consistent in delivering any idea, however produced, to any market. One simple visual model allows you to consider the given maturity of any project. Things like have you resolved how you are going to make it, with whom you are going to make it? Can they actually deliver it? Have you considered where your market might be? How do you tell that market what it is you are doing? How might you respond to the market response? In short, what you instigate in order to provide that market with the information relevant for telling the story that you need to tell it.

One of the nice things about RISKIT is how very quickly you can work out the given maturity within any project and see what gap exists between 'now' and a more mature potential state. RISKIT allows you to appreciate what options you have to change your situation. What roles will you play yourself and how can you write the job description for somebody else to work alongside you?

RISKIT – as a tool for modelling creative career development strategies – is like looking at non-linear science, the chaos theory patterns that mathematicians and others started exploring in the late '60s and early '70s. The thing about creative industries – indeed probably most industries – and developing your career is that there isn't a straight linear path to define in advance what it is that you are going to do or how things will turn out. You must set about developing projects, responding to market response; it might say, 'We like what you've done there but we want you to do something else,' and you end up doing something else. There are strange things that push careers in different directions, there's not a describable outcome in terms of, 'if you do this, then this will necessarily happen'. So it's non-linear. You start with self-similar positions but quickly discover very different outcomes coming about.

Maybe that's not a very clear description; maybe I could explain it slightly differently. If you look at my career over the last eight to ten years then you could draw a straight line between all the things that I've done, you know this led to this, led to this, led to this. The reality is that I never set out to achieve what I am doing now. The reason I am doing it is because other things went wrong and because given the position that I found myself in when they did go wrong, I made the best of the situation and I continued to explore the things I was interested in and that we were interested in. That has now led to doing what I now do.

So the shows were initially a means of promoting the shop, and you see the shop was the means by which we would have an income and define ourselves, if you like. But when the shop failed we felt there was still a value in the shows.

People were saying, 'What's consistent within this shop?' and we were saying, 'It's not the aesthetic, it's more the way people are working now.' We were looking at consistencies in the business models of people that were successfully delivering good ideas to market. How has that changed? What are people doing successfully? What are folk doing wrong? That's what led us to do the RISKIT stuff, to do the modelling of how creative businesses grow. Now we find ourselves in a position where those models are of great relevance to a very ripe market. From where we started that's a complete surprise to us.

So there is this element of – you set off down the path, you try as hard as possible to retain your integrity, explore ideas, develop relationships, and communicate what you are doing. To an extent you see where you might end up, to an extent you define where you go. It takes quite a time to reach a point where you may clearly define your business. Before that, there is an in-between stage where you're best off thinking quite differently; do smart projects, develop smart thinking, get yourself in the right streams and be more responsive to where the wind blows you.

How can RISKIT be incorporated into the design process at an earlier stage? Do you believe that it is right to do so?

Yes, I do, we've discovered that people at university level find it very easy to understand the RISKIT concept. It's probable that RISKIT can serve as an introduction to roles and the relationships between roles that exist within the sector for younger students.

Going into self-employment, whether post-college, part-time or as a mature designer with plans to explore new options, RISKIT has proven to be very useful for people – a very practical tool. It allows people very quickly and clearly to recognise what skills they have to offer – to projects, to businesses, to markets; it allows them to communicate where they can contribute value to ideas. It allows them to understand the different roles that people play in the maturing of ideas – both within a business and through their own projects. It allows them to appreciate themselves from the point of view of ‘What assets do I have?’ rather than ‘Oh my god, there’s loads that I don’t know how to do’. RISKIT is coming at things from different angles. I think it’s much better for people to feel confident of their assets and then they’re more likely to use them. Much better than stumbling around going, ‘Oh my god, I am in the dark and I haven’t got a clue what’s out there.’

What message would you give to students who are just starting university and have a few years to develop their skills before graduating?

Well, I think it would be useful to have a clearer description of how creative careers develop and to appreciate that their education stretches out for longer than three years. At present I think there is this scary sense of, ‘You’ve got three years to prove yourself in order to get a job or you’re out of the door.’ There is maturity in creative industries that comes about at a later stage, so I would suggest that they chill out. They still work bloody hard. They recognise the difference between what people are doing who are managing to be successful and the others.

There are more people like you, Lee, who *are* managing the responsibilities of delivering good ideas to markets competently. There’s an element of osmosis going on where people learn from the good experiences of others. More people are doing really well, so I think they can feel hopeful about that. Why I think the RISKIT stuff contributes is that it gives them a much better sense of the range of options open to them and a clearer understanding of what someone like you is doing.

So, at the same time we want to challenge them more and give them a clearer description of where they are heading. We’re going to say, ‘Look, the bar is higher than you think, do you want to try and reach it?’ Design remains a meritocratic environment – but we are going to say, ‘If you jump over this barrier, this is what you are doing, this is where you are going, this is what you might expect to achieve. This is how other people have done it.’

We are going to be much more open about the experience of others – and that’s more honest. Honesty is a weird thing – I think people try to be honest with students but they haven’t known how to describe their condition, honestly, with any precision. We just think we’ve been contributing to that, and allowing people to feel much more confident about what they are doing, why they are doing it and what’s available for them to achieve.