Plotting a course

The RCA's Design Products course lets its first set of graduates loose this summer. Tag McLaren Audio's **Clive Grinyer** looks at output from the two product design courses; **Sara Manuelli** picks her favourites

FOR MANY this is the best of times for product design. The sector has been rejuvenated by the global success of companies such as Apple, Nokia and Ford: companies which have created innovative product solutions that have reached out and connected with the public. Large international design consultancies, individual design stars, and creative in-house groups have shown that excellent product design achieves commercial success.

But in conversation with the students and tutors of the product design courses at the Royal College of Art you perceive an uneasiness in the role of product design. Cheap interactive electronics dominate our world and designers find themselves looking for form and meaning when clothing liquid crystal with plastic. They ask the question: has technology emasculated designers, and disconnected us from the artefacts around us?

In the work of this year's Design Products students there is a sense of denial of electronics and the delivery of technology, a sense of resentment with the static flatness of products that incorporate state-of-the-art features.

The students' response is often to hark backwards and look to replace the soft and virtual with more relevant and tangible hard, physical metaphors. There is a nostalgic hankering for more natural impulses that predate even the earliest influence of electronics. A phone that knocks rather than rings, as ringing is artificial, an electronic voice outside our natural experience. The students have acknowledged that even the most basic products are not static, but respond and interact with us.

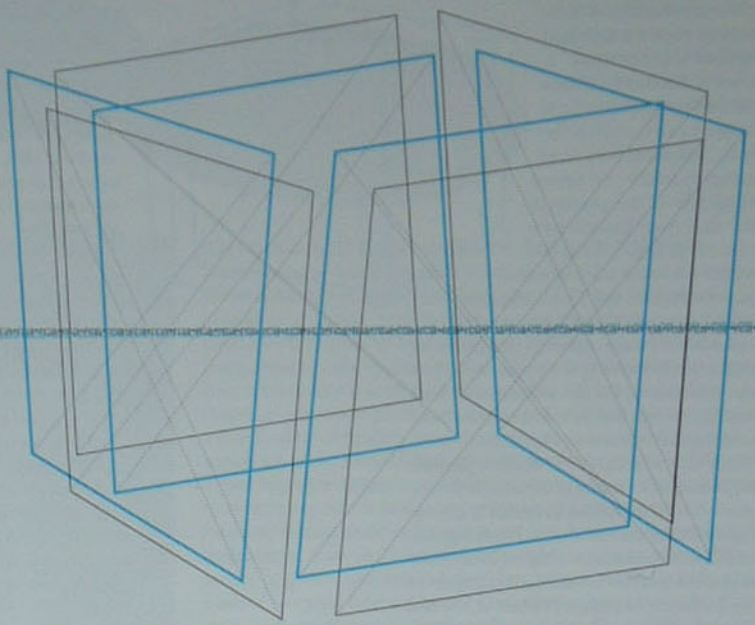
So while product designers enjoy the feel-good factor now, the RCA students are looking ahead and navigating through a cultural change as we pass from an age that is driven by the nature and format of technology to one where we try to re-discover more natural impulses and desires. When Apple designer Jonathan Ive questions why products have power buttons, making us conform to the machines requirements from the start, he is asking the same questions and looking for different and better solutions to those we have grown used to. Don't think of a laptop, for example. Think of a book.

Design Products course head Hilary French quotes Malcom Maclaren, saying that there is only the past and the future. When we look to the future in science fiction we find nostalgia, and so does the RCA in its attempts to find meaningful new metaphors for technology. A digital radio is no longer tuned, but a station picked by placing a card on the receiver, a direct physical interaction which reasserts the wishes of both user and the broadcaster over the machine. In designing domestic products, the students look at the way we use products to find opportunities for personality and surprise.

Very often this nostalgia refers to a previous mechanical age where mechanics and engineering reality, rather than technology, were our masters. Perhaps it is the ease and lack of spatial requirements when applying technology that has given designers so little to shape compared to the direct physicality of the mechanical age. So-called natural ways of using things are often based on industrial processes – we open and turn the pages of books because they were the media of the mechanical printing industry. What is the natural, pure, intuitive way of receiving information, now that pages are replaced by scrolled parcels of text? This is the challenge and reason we need the RCA Design Products course, unique in its remit to explore, culturally and geographically, the relationship between people and the objects that surround them. This is why furniture, products and interface have in the end merged together so well.

Judging from the evidence and spirit of the work exhibited at the Design Products course, Professor Ron Arad has already achieved a stimulating and successful realignment of the different elements of 3D object design.

In his first year as professor of the new



course that is the result of a union between product and furniture design courses, he has put in place a dream team of tutors to teach a broad range of design agendas, from domestic manufactured products, interaction to more traditional explorations of furniture design. In doing so he has not been tempted to stamp his methodology and philosophy on the course, but has enabled it to develop the intellectual freedom and creative support to confront and respond to difficult questions.

The students are absolutely engaged with the real world, responding to technology with human emotion and, with the connection and influence of the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre, responding to the needs of the widest range of society.

There were concerns 12 months ago that students would continue their obsession with static artefact, a furniture-based approach unconcerned with everyday objects. But these concerns can be cast away. The students are concerned with our lives, not just objects and ritual. The course connects life with physical matter to provide meaning and relevance.

As usual, students push the boundaries of materials and processes and there is much evidence of real innovation, forming materials in new ways, finding structure and form in the unexpected, which is perhaps the most obvious connection with Arad's own work.

This theme is repeated in the other side of the RCA's product design output. Playing to a different gallery, the Industrial Design Engineering course stays true to its aims of providing mechanical and engineering graduates with product design skills. This has always been a unique and unusual venture, the output is compared both with the more esoteric work of Design Products students and the best of the country's BA courses, given that for most of the students this is their first experience of aesthetic design. The added reality of the finished working prototypes students build is impressive and often catches the eye of the media, but there is less emphasis on conceptual vision. The course enjoys a high employment rate (James Dyson, among many other well known manufacturers, has been a prodigious employer in the past) and provides one of the RCA's most direct and well broadcast links to industry.

On one level you can see this course as a corrective for the predominance of engineering in our education system and the lack of connection with industrial design. Students talk of an ignorance of design when choosing their degree, or received wisdom that engineering was a more valuable, and somewhat less competitive first degree. With applications up by 80 per cent, the course is creating a bridge between design and engineering and rightly compares itself with California's Stanford University. But, it is better able to draw on the mechanical and creative resources of the RCA and its partner, Imperial College.

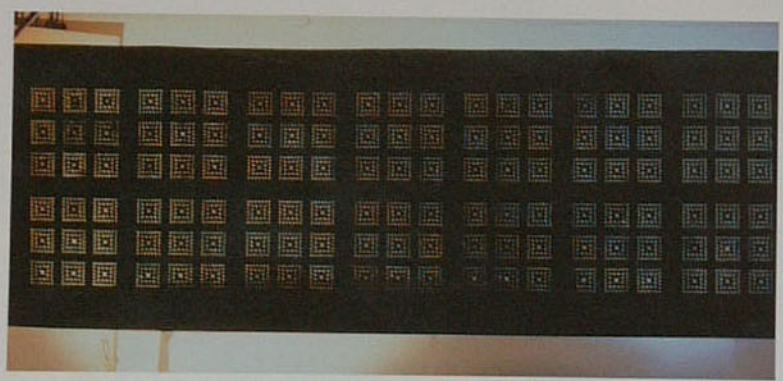
What it loses in conceptual exploration the course gains as it exploits the deeper relationship with materials and processes that its students have from their engineering backgrounds. One example is Rosemary Wallin's shoe. By exploiting 3D CAD and advanced manufacturing techniques, she has circumnavigated ▶

Above left: Ergoplug, by Stephen Waldron; Left: Hybrid footwear by Rosemary Wallin

Left: Lamp 'Top Secret'; Far left: Superpatata, both by Hector Serrano

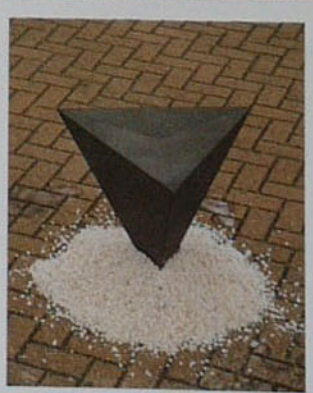
HECTOR SERRANO

Spanish born Serrano has already exhibited for two years running at the Milan furniture fair and was a finalist at this year's Oxo/ Peugeot Design Awards. His main show project is the Superpatata lamp, a salt-filled latex balloon containing a compact fluorescent bulb which can be manipulated, squashed and squeezed into different forms and intensities of light. Superpatata acts as a lamp, but can function as a pillow or, when squeezed, as an anti-stress device. A low budget production means the Superpatata could be manufactured at a modest price, and it will be interesting to follow its future shelf life since Droog Design has snapped up the design, included it in its Milan show this year and will be producing it in the near future. Serrano's other project is the Top Secret lamp, a bare neon stick twirled in a cloud of acetate strips that have been passed through a shredding machine. Serrano claims he is interested in taking materials such as polyester film, industrial lights and even the humble coarse quality of salt and 'placing it in another context'. Another future project includes a drinking bottle made from Spanish white terracotta, which he has designed with his Spanish course peers Alberto Martinez and Eduardo Martinez-Escolano. From the course Serrano has learnt 'to believe in yourself. To stop and question: is this interesting, does it add something?'



HEERI SONG

Song is Korean, but has adopted a multicultural approach to her designs. The Japanese art of Origami, whose geometric patterns she applies both to waterproof paper and stainless steel screens, is one of her main inspirations. But her dissertation on Arab motifs displays a wider interest in the grid as a sign, a sort of contemporary calligraphy to be applied to the shapes and forms of furniture. Her screens are about 3m long and can be customised as window blinds, ventilation grids or simply as beautiful decoration. Her fascination with MC Escher's geometric designs can be detected in her outdoor seating system, a set of ten modular square slate seats which can be arranged into infinite variations. At the show she also displays a set of lights, with stainless steel grids softly illuminated by a pastel tone colour wheel. Song also came to the RCA to study furniture, but mentions how 'Arad allowed us to do what we wanted. Everyone drifted in different directions since this is not a set course and you can explore. As a consequence, it has opened up my career choices.' With a background in packaging in New York and product design at London's Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, Song sees her future as working with interior architects, 'designing furniture within an environment'. ▶



Above left: Screens; Left: Slate outdoor seating; Above:Modular slate stool/ table