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Dr. Adam de Eyto / University of Limerick

Perch Design

Reflections on a journey from design research to design practice and business

Simon Dennehy is the founder and CEO of Perch; he graduated from the National College of Art and Design in 2003. After working in industry with many progressive Irish companies, he chose to return to his alma mater to commence a two year research Masters, through Industrial Design.

He subsequently grew the successful Perch studios which now employs five designers who commercialise their ongoing design research in to Applied Human Movement. In an interview with Adam de Eyto of ITERATIONS and Design Factors, Simon reflects on his journey through design research and the world of design consultancy.

Q.: What is the history of Perch and their design activities in Ireland and Internationally?

I started Perch in 2009 in the Genesis incubation unit in Cork. Before that I had just finished my research Masters in Industrial Design from NCAD, having graduated from there originally in 2003. I spent a few years of working in industry and built up my own business, before deciding that the jobs I was working in weren't allowing me to explore my passions for meaningful product design.

Projects were too short and unfocused and I was passionate about evolving a research train of thought. Coming from a competitive cycling background, I was passionate about human dynamic, form and movement. When I talked to my tutor Gearóid O'Conchubhair, who had just completed his PhD in orchestral musician's seating, I saw that he had accomplished incredible developments from his research into posture and this opened the doors for my Masters - which became 'The Design of School Furniture for Primary School Children'. Gearoid had found lots of interesting, unanswered questions in the area of school furniture. Basically, there was an entire sector that no one was considering and he believed that it would be an interesting Masters for me to do. When I delved into the research, it became immediately evident that there was a huge problem with exposing school children to what are terrible working conditions, from an early age.

Q. Can you speak about how Perch developed as a small start-up in to a design studio?

There was a lot of work done in the 60's and 70's

in Scandinavia by AC Mandal. He identified the ill-effects of poor working postures for school children and created a whole new market of solutions. He inclined a school seat forward, so people were perching more upright on a seat. Students sat much higher at their desks sloping toward them also, which presented the work in a much more accessible and ergonomic way. I saw some emerging technologies and companies, who were embracing upright and/or standing postures. Most of these ideas at the time were and still are, pretty crude in aesthetic terms. In 2006, big companies had not fully embraced the idea at market level, so there were a lot of small niche companies leading the way.

I tested so many ideas in the studio and also in schools. I was looking for the simplest possible way to enable students to 'Perch' at a higher desk, while moving continuously, as they needed to.

Through iterating and testing, I discovered an idea, which I patented. It's a flexible seat pan, which looks like any normal seat, until you sit on it; then it deforms into a saddle like shape, where the corner front wings of the seat flex downward. This encourages and facilitates you to sit much higher, and with the flexible corners, encourages you to move your legs more frequently. When you sit like this, it's akin to sitting on horseback, where you have a rigid pommel in front – so you can't slip off. Also, there is no need for a backrest in this position because your body is able to maintain a neutral balance.

From reading Mandal, Gearoid and Galen Cranz, it became easier to identify the core

problems with poor work postures and a take home message that everybody should know is, when you lose control of your pelvis, on a reclined work seat, you lose control of your upper body and ability to control balance. This puts untold stresses and strains on students' necks, backs, shoulders, as they try to work on a horizontal table.

I put up a website www.perch.ie, with my designs, which attracted some attention from designers, architects, furniture manufacturers, parents and teachers. I wrote some papers, gave a lot of talks and presentations about the work and decided that there was a unique opportunity to grow a business from working in this area. I was invited to pitch the idea to some large US based office furniture producers in 2009, through a great Physical Therapist contact who found my work. After this trip, I came back with a real hunger to commercialise my work and continue developing workplace solutions.

I met with a very exciting Danish designer Hans Thyge Raunkjaer (HT&Co). Hans is a hugely respected international name in design and at the time, was building a portfolio of projects for a really exciting company called Labofa. After some months of discussion, we partnered to commercialise this concept together. We launched the RAY chair and desk system, at the 2012 Orgatec furniture fair in Germany. We got a great response from the launch and it's really becoming the furniture of choice in Scandinavian schools ever since.

In the past ten years, I've built an incredible team here, in Perch and after I partnered with an old college pal, Philip Hamilton, we set about really refining how and what we design. Now, we specialise in research-led design for Applied Human Movement.

Q. Does Perch have a core design philosophy and how is it expressed?

I really wanted to move the company away from a traditional product design business, where each client has a short window of exposure to design development and the core ideas have been formed months before we get involved. We now work primarily on a royalty basis with our clients, where we share the risk, co-promote ideas and develop long standing relationships, vision documents and long term strategies for product and implementation. We very much think about the system first, before delving into product development.



Our designs are always centred around the User, all stakeholders in a system and their respective interactions with one another, their environment and work and we pay a lot of attention to the physiological and psychological requirements of the end user.

We specialise in 'Research-led Design, for Applied Human Movement'. We are interested to borrow research from the sciences and special interest collectives, to inform a testable hypothesis, then we build prototypes, test and validate. Design should make an emotional and functional statement, so balancing the aesthetic with the functional language of a development, is absolutely crucial.

Q.: What benefits are there to having the Perch based here in Ireland?

We've got a lot of UX design companies in Ireland now and they're doing fantastically well. In our building now we've got Each and Other, Silver Cloud, we've got Drop and us. A large five storey building packed with

Float



Ray

innovative design-led businesses, all doing great work and all specialising in different areas of design. It's becoming harder and harder to be a product designer and I think that's a good thing. I think traditional product design is dying in Ireland; we don't have the industry.

We should approach design from a more empathetic, user-experience and systems design perspective. Identifying the knock-on effects of your designs is important, whether you develop spaces, services, products or digital designs. For us it's all about building on a spine of knowledge, which has grown from our need to understand behaviour, technical detail, movement, pedagogies, etc. Irish businesses should learn to work alongside designers more fluidly, opening up discussions at the critical thinking phase, rather than at the end of a process.

Q. What made you want to become a designer?

I grew up competitive cycling and I hated the confines of school so much. I went to a Tech in Kanturk (which is actually an incredible school), where design was never really heard of and certainly when I stumbled on this amazing course called Industrial Design, I remember being advised to stick with engineering.

Sports Science was my first choice and I went to the University of Limerick open day, which

blew my mind. After that, I promised that I would study there and when I searched the courses, sports science, followed by everything engineering went onto my application form. A while later, I received the leaflet from this weird Dublin college called NCAD inviting me to interview for Industrial Design. To me, it was like getting a wake-up call. I had never known how to articulate what I felt I wanted to do until I read up on this course. Of course, at the time, UL hosted Industrial Designers for the first year, before we all moved to Dublin for the next three.

Design for me, seemed like the link between sports science, engineering and art, of which I had a passion for each. I found it frustrating in school to have to pick one discipline and walk away from others. I absolutely have to be passionate about something, if I have to commit to it, so this was a way to keep interested in lots of different areas and keep inquisitive.

Q. Who or what has been the biggest single influence on your way of thinking?

Gearóid O'Conchubhair, I don't think I would have done the Masters without his influence and we have become great friends in the last few years we meet up quite regularly. The reasons I went back to doing my Masters was because I needed to reconnect with design as a passion.. When I did my fourth year project Gearóid actually took a sabbatical for 6

months to finish off his own PhD so we had known about his PhD and applied research but it was still foreign to me. When I came back in to investigate the idea of it, I think if it was any other tutor I wouldn't have bothered, I would have stuck with the day job. His work and way of teaching is truly unique and inspirational, as I'm sure many other designers will echo.

Q. What would you say is the skill you have honed most over the years?

It's circulation and observation. I mean I'm not a very good aesthetic designer; there are way better sketchers out there, there are way better people with a visual acumen. Relaxed observation is something I particularly enjoy. I sit, watch and build monster system designs in my head, then struggle to define and articulate them. But I love it and I love the big picture and the big long debates and discussions we get to have in-house, with Phil, Donal and Paudie, as ideas slowly come to life. I try to adopt a 'Yes – and...' approach rather than a 'Yes – But...?',

which means that ideas are never killed off too early, but rather built on, until they find their grounding.

Q. What's your personal motto?

It's cheesy as hell, it's almost like we want to do good before we make money and that comes at a cost; like it's years before we see our product on the market.

I try to commit to this by working with the European Standards for school furniture and by teaching or speaking to anybody on the up. We always keep a portion of our office free for new emerging talent and never charge for use of the space. It's always amazing to see the drive and enthusiasm of new start-ups and how they think. If we can help with this in anyway, or if they can help us, through coffee chats, pre-presentation advice etc., then it's only helping the design sector.

Ray

