



ANDREW LAVERY

Hello and welcome to the first of our alumni series 'Art of Influence'. I'm Andrew Lavery, the Director of Sydney College of the Arts.

So the 'Art of Influence' series invites our alumni to reflect on their careers, artistic practice and broader cultural themes that inform their work.

The idea is to both celebrate world class alumni who have studied at SCA; with a view to gaining insight, knowledge and inspiration for the next generation of great talent here at SCA, and the university; and current creative practitioners of all descriptions, and the interested members of the general public.

Today, I'm delighted to be joined by Marc Newson, CBA. Mark has been described as one of the most influential designers of this generation.

He has worked across a wide range of disciplines and his clients include companies such as Apple, Louis Vuitton, Montblanc, Hermes, Nike and Dom Perignon.

Mark is the only designer represented by the Gagolian Gallery. And leading museums around the world have hosted solo retrospective exhibitions of his industrial design work.

He has recently been appointed the chair of the London Design Museum's International Design Council.

Mark was born in Sydney and graduated from the University of Sydney, Sydney College of the Arts in 1986. And I'm told by Mark that he studied in the jewellery studio there. It's my great pleasure to welcome him. And thanks for joining us, Marc.

MARC NEWSON

Yeah, hi everyone. Thanks for inviting me. It's a great pleasure to be here ish. Virtually, even if I am in Greece.

So what I studied I mean, I guess I'm not even sure if studied is the right word. Because I always think it's weird you know, studying. Going to an art school is one of those things you don't really study so much as learn.

I mean, obviously there's a bit of historical sort of studying, but to me the whole experience is really more of a practical one. It certainly, if I look back in retrospect' I spent most of my time in the jewellery department really where I, mostly was learning I suppose, the techniques that are taught to jewellers and silversmiths.

But it was really during that period that I developed an interest in making things and specifically making furniture oddly enough, in the jewellery department.

ANDREW LAVERY

So the combination of subjects within this, there were some theoretical subjects as well?



MARC NEWSON

There was I mean, during my first year, you know, obviously that was a sort of a general sort of foundation year, where, where I was doing a bit of everything. And there was certainly a lot of historical learning, specifically relating to art and the history of art.

And it's curious now, of course, that I, you know, I'm sort of, I suppose I'm considered more of a designer than anything. But I never studied design.

You know, I was at art school. So yeah, that's a kind of curious phenomenon really. And one that I'm very happy about.

I felt that, you know, during my time at, you know, art school, I really learned much more in a way that suited me, and my style of, of sort of assimilating information than I would have done at, you know, in a more formal industrial design driven forum.

ANDREW LAVERY

Yeah, that's, that's interesting to hear that sort of feedback about art school. Yeah. So in second and third year of your degree, what path did you think you'd be taking after graduation?

To be honest, I really had no idea. The one thing I did know, even though I was studying, you know, in the jewellery department, you know, it was a very it was, you know, we say jewellery, but it was a very esoteric course.

And I mean, that in a in a positive sense, that, you know, I'm not I'm not sure how many of the graduates actually went on to become jewellers in a sort of, you know, in the conventional sense of the word or the term.

You know, we were I think, taught to really explore a much wider range of things that related, it's more about sort of body related objects, I suppose, which is, you know, hence my, where my interest in sort of design, and furniture came from.

But as I sort of alluded to it was, you know, that that really suited my, my way of learning it was far less structured. And, of course, you know, the last thing I wanted to do, or the last thing I personally wanted to do, I can't say that of course for everyone, was to go back into, you know.

I just graduated from high school, absolutely hated doing exams, didn't excel in that in that sort of environment. So it really suited me to, be able to learn at my own pace in an environment in which I felt much more comfortable.

ANDREW LAVERY

What do you think you took away in terms of critical skills from the art school? And how do you think that's informed your career?

MARC NEWSON

Well, the really critical skills that I believe I learned and that I've taken with me, you know, throughout my life are very much practical ones. At least, you know, in an obvious sense, I suppose.



You know, the ability to learn how to make things actually was really one of the things that most benefited me. And that I really enjoyed, you know,

I love learning how to do things, how to create things, how to make things, how to build things, and it was one of the most practically sort of oriented departments that I could have found myself in, you know, the sculpture department, or the painting department, we're not really necessarily in the business of teaching people you know, how to paint, which clearly isn't is a hard thing to do or make sculpture.

Whereas in the jewellery department, but, you know, it was a lot more practical in that sense.

But then I suppose, you know, looking back, I now realised that I also took with me, you know, a huge amount of knowledge.

So, historical knowledge, you know, especially during the first year and again, you know, I didn't really realise until much later on that, my interest in the art world per se was really defined through those early years at the Sydney College of the Arts. And the exposure that that gave me, you know, for the history of art, fundamentally.

ANDREW LAVERY

You studied at SCA when it was in Balmain, down at White Bay. And that was hailed as a very strong community. And I'm wondering how important that was to you?

MARC NEWSON

Yeah, it was, it was a really interesting place. I mean, it was a fantastic you know, sort of geographical location, of course.

It felt slightly isolated, which I suppose relatively speaking now, it probably was. Although I think that was a good thing in a way for us.

I mean, it gave, I think it gave the students a, you know, a real sort of sense of independence. But I think, you know, collectively the institution felt very intact and very whole and you know, it was a fun place.

You know, lots of really, really interesting people, most of whom actually, I'm not sure if that's the case now but compared to myself, many more mature age students; with a really great diversity of different people

You know, both young, old and in terms of gender, you know that, that that that was a really striking quality for me having come straight from high school because; I think I was probably in a minority of people at that stage.

ANDREW LAVERY

That's interesting. Yeah. And in terms of your materials; your style has a deep affinity with the understanding of the materials you use.



And you work across so many different types and forms from ceramic, carbon fibre; micarta to metal; wood to plastic and glass. How do you approach the materials, and do you experiment or gain an understanding of?

MARC NEWSON

Well, I've always thought that materials are really a means to an end, you know, materials are there to help us explore and to exploit ideas.

So, you know, I'm not really fixated with any particular material suffice to say, I'm interested, and I'm fascinated by all types of materials.

But of course, they need to be appropriate in terms of being able, well in terms of solving the problem that you're that you're sort of, you know, that you're faced with at the time.

And the other thing that I would say is that I think, you know, I personally would be very bored if I had to, you know, limit my repertoire of materials to say, you know, different types of wood or whatever else, you know.

I want to be able, in the same way that I, I like to jump from the different areas of industry, you know, I like to work with different materials because, you know, learning is such an important part of, of what I do and every new material, every new process, every new technique that you can expose yourself to, will make the next venture that much more. Not that much more easy, but that much more satisfying.

ANDREW LAVERY

Okay, now, I do have a question from the audience here. And it's not really on the topic of materials, but it's more on concepts of influences and this person's wondering what your favourite design is from another designer.

MARC NEWSON

Oh. That's a really, that's a tough question. I'd be very, very hard pressed to identify one thing object. I mean, there's just there's so many things out there that are both designed by, you know, by an individual that's acknowledged.

And there are so many wonderful things that are that are designed out there that that were created by an unknown individual or an entity of some description.

So yeah, it's a really, really tough one to sort of pinpoint one thing. Having said that, I think the things that I like, are vastly, vastly outnumbered by the things that I don't like.

ANDREW LAVERY

Just drilling down for a bit more for that person. If I was to ask you, what was the best use of materiality by a designer that you can think of?



MARC NEWSON

In a very, very, very contemporary sense, one would be sort of hard pressed to look beyond some of the developments that have, you know, driven materiality in, say, the aerospace industry or perhaps even the marine industry.

I mean, they're sort of heavily technical and heavily specific. The advent of sort of composites and materials, you know, at the risk of sounding a bit, you know, too sort of techie.

I think, have led some really sort of astounding, you know, material breakthroughs that have enabled us to, you know, to do things and I, you know, of course, I'm not talking about, I'm talking mostly about hardware and not software related.

ANDREW LAVERY

Yeah, so the aerospace space technology, race car technology, etc. Those sorts of designers who come up with those

MARC NEWSON

Yeah, and it's not just those, you know, aerospace or whatever, it's how that sort of filters down into sort of every day, you know, into our everyday lives, I guess.

And all of those things do you know, they start in a certain place, you know, by the time we as consumers are exposed to them, you know, they're, they've had sort of profound, unseen influences on our lives. And, you know, the way we do things.

ANDREW LAVERY

So how does working with engineers and technologies in that design limitations inform or frustrate your design or creativity.

MARC NEWSON

Well, I don't think it frustrates really at all, you know, I think, you know, compromise is a word that, you know, has such negative connotations, but that's just a very, very intrinsic part of my job, you know, we've got to sort of work together with all manner of engineers.

And I would even suggest that that that a large portion of what I do what my studio does is engineering really, you know, we're not just doing or I'm not just in the head, never just done sort of thumbnail sketches and given it to, you know, an engineer in the commerce to try and interpret for me and to turn into reality.

You know, I like to deliver. I like to deliver concepts that are fully realisable, and that involves a huge degree of engineering at the outset. So I think, you know, what I do, is necessarily at least 50% engineering in itself.

And just because I don't have a degree in engineering, in the same way that I don't have a degree in Industrial Design, doesn't mean that that I can't or, you know, we can't you know, exploit all of that expertise exactly the way we want to.



ANDREW LAVERY

Do you follow a set of linear design process is each time you are solving a new problem, or do you ensure that you complete a few key steps?

MARC NEWSON

You know, I like to work, or at least I found myself working in a very methodical, what I believe to be a very methodical way.

And the process that I go through is, is pretty much always the same in order to arrive at a solution that I'm happy with.

And, you know, the process obviously starts in, you know, start with a brief of some description or at least, you know, a question and then, you know, requires quite a lot of thinking and then, in my case, a bit of sketching and then moving quickly to working with technicians and computers and things to try and visualise you know, what If you want to do.

So, in that sense, the process is very, you know, it's quite methodical and quite sort of regimented. But I find just, you know, given the volume of stuff that I'm working on, you know, that, that you've got to be quite disciplined about the way you work and the way that you allocate your time.

Not going, you know, going far enough, but not too far in a direction that may end up being so fruitless. So, you know, I have found that over the decades, you know, I've developed a very, you know, a very regimented way, oddly enough, a very regimented way of working.

I mean, there's nothing, there's nothing particularly that's left to chance, of course, apart from, you know, the assumption that you're going be able to solve the problem, which is not always a given.

ANDREW LAVERY

You must have to set limits on things, sometimes like how long am I going to spend on this particular part of the process?

MARC NEWSON

Yeah, I mean, interestingly, that's one of the few things that I don't know that I've been able to sort of manage, you know, you know, if you're not happy with something, then you're not happy.

And it's really not much you can do about that, you know, you've just got to sort of plodding along until you can arrive at an answer. And it's, it's very, very rarely that I'll abandon something because I, you know, but it does happen occasionally.

You know, you'll go so far down that path and then, you know, come to the realisation that it's just, it's something that's not possible to solve, but it's very rare.

It's a very rare situation. But I can find myself labouring over things for an inordinate amount of time, or forgetting about it or you know, leaving it for a while coming back to it.



ANDREW LAVERY

Now we should move on now to the next section which is concerned with your international career. So how do you think growing up in Australia has shaped your view of the world and your approach and your international career? If at all?

MARC NEWSON

Well, I think that it has influenced me, obviously very much on a subconscious level. But I suppose in a in a, you know, if I think about it, on a practical level, it's enabled me to, to work across a really wide range of a broad range of mediums and disciplines.

Because I'm not; I think because of where I grew up, and indeed, you know, where I where I studied, I, you know, I wasn't indoctrinated, you know. I felt that I didn't have a huge amount of historical baggage to deal with either growing up or in my teens. Or in my early, early career.

And I've witnessed that, that's really not the norm. In fact, if you look around, especially in Europe. I think things are now far more international and far more homogenised.

But certainly, you know, when I first started working internationally, I felt very different in the way that I felt far more liberated in a sense, in terms of my ability to better jump from one thing to another, without feeling that I was either unqualified or that I was insecure to do that.

ANDREW LAVERY

And I now have that a related question from the audience. It's come through; do you think there is such a thing as Australian design

MARC NEWSON

I mean, that's a good question. I've been asked that one before it. I think maybe there was beginning to be. But I can honestly say at this moment in time, I don't necessarily see it.

And I don't necessarily see it for positive reasons, and I don't see it for you know, practical reasons. Because, you know, the world is just a much, much smaller place than it was.

I mean, everything is just so interconnected now, you know, I personally would struggle with you if you present me with 10 different designs and challenged me to identify which one was more Australian than the next.

You know, in the same way that I've struggled to identify that an idea was executed by a Japanese designer, as opposed to a sort of Brazilian designer.

I think one of the really positive aspects of the world that I work in is that it is truly international by definition, there's not one country.

It would be very, very difficult for me to be able to work in one place, as it is for many, many other designers, you know it's a really, truly international industry.

And unlike so many other creative industries, there's nothing geographically specific about what I do.



ANDREW LAVERY

What your experience was, and challenge; in the early part of your career of taking your product from Australia, to the international sphere?

MARC LAVERY

The simple challenge, the simple biggest challenge, greatest challenge was presenting convincing and resolved concept; and the only way I could do that was by making it.

It was quite sort of, it's quite a rudimentary problem in a way, you know, I didn't have the means to engage other people to prototype or manufacture ideas that I had, I was really left to be able to, through necessity, to do it myself.

And that ended up being a really great skill to develop and it meant that I could then present fully formed, real ideas to people, you know, rather than sketches and designs; because I think, you know, the world has really, really changed in terms of our ability to build three dimensional objects or prototype things.

But, you know, 30 or 40, you know, well, 30 years ago, the world was very different place. And you know, if you wanted to be taken seriously, you kind of had to show people that what you were, you know, that the idea you were championing was realisable,

ANDREW LAVERY

We're just wondering where you draw your inspiration from your designs.

MARC NEWSON

Yes well, you know, because of the way that my and I hesitate to call it an industry or my, you know, my metier, whatever you want to call it; the way that it works, you know, it's the sort of self-perpetuating situation.

I'm simultaneously inspired by all of the other projects that I've done in the past. And they influence me heavily in terms of the materials, the technologies, the techniques that I use.

Of course, as you said, you alluded to, the brief or the challenge that you've been set in the first place; But for me it's largely about establishing a set of sort of as concrete as possible, or parameters you can work within.

So as you're sort of defining the boundaries of the, of the challenges that you face, and trying to present it to yourself in as digestive way as possible

ANDREW LAVERY

I think drilling down with that one, just in terms of audience questions, they're always looking to see what sort of historical design work or contemporary design you might look at for inspiration.

MARC NEWSON

The sad reality is I probably spent far too little time looking at what's going on in the world of contemporary design.



But it also has to be said that, you know, designers like myself, you know, can't really often can't see the wood for the trees, you know, our primary, you know, I'm a trouble-shooter, I'm a kind of a gun for hire.

I spent pretty much all of my time, sort of searching for solutions to the problems that I'm presented with. And I like to identify the answers from within my own sort of repertoire, not you know, from the kind of the catalogue of, of responses that I've that I've built up over the last decades.

You know, call that my style or whatever, but that it's almost as if I've sort of defined a rulebook for myself and it's not that I can't stray from that, but it just helps me to, to maintain a level of consistency and I find the more that I look, you know, it's not that I don't look at what's going on in the outside world. But I'm acutely aware that I don't necessarily want to be influenced by contemporary trends either.

ANDREW LAVERY

So I have a question here from the audience. It's this: I work from New Zealand for almost 10 years. And an MA and PhD student at SCA. My question is regarding how he has managed to navigate both Fine Arts and the commercial sectors while still maintaining a level of creative personal integrity.

MARC NEWSON

Well, I'm glad to hear I've maintained some personal integrity Thank you. It's, for me, I think all of those worlds you know, whether it be the fine art world or the world, let's say at the other end of the extreme, the very, very industrial design world.

For me, they all feed a sort of a singular interest that I have, but they do it in in very, very different ways. Also, what I enjoy very much is the different cadences that all of these industries work at.

I mean when I'm working say, towards an exhibition at the gallery that I work with, well, the galleries that I work with, I guess, specifically Gagosian and you know, I'm pretty much left to my own devices to do what I want when I want how I want, within the budgetary constraints that I defined.

And in many ways, that's an even harder to break than then than working in the, sort of the vanilla world of industrial design where you know, the parameters are largely defined for you.

Nevertheless, they all they all feed and inspire different ways of solving the same problems, and they all influence each other.

So I don't think I'd be as effective in you know, doing a show at Gagosian successfully, or I'd like to think successfully if I hadn't gained, you know, the experience that I have, you know, from, you know, having worked, say, you know, in the commercial aviation sector or something as, you know, seemingly as mundane as that. And vice versa.

You know, I remember, you know, I've done quite a lot of work with Nike over the years and then I went on to design, you know, various bits of the luggage for different companies, like, you know, Vuitton and in the early days, Samsonite.

But I can remember being heavily when I first designed my, you know, a range of luggage for Samsonite, I was mostly influenced by what I've been exposed to at Nikes working on sneakers.



And for some reason, they seemed to have a lot in common, those two industries, which is not a, you know, a not an obvious, you know, parallel that one would draw, I

'm thinking I'm sort of digressing a bit here, but I think, you know, but basically, I find all of those things are necessary for me to both, you know, to sort of inspire myself and to, you know, so I don't get bored, quite frankly.

ANDREW LAVERY

So we're just wondering how much of your work is actually influenced by what's going on in the world around you?

MARC NEWSON

I think that would be...well it's all influenced by everything that's going on. I mean, I, I think one of you know, and I've always said this, that, you know, I'm hugely inspired and influenced by contemporary culture in general, you know, whether it be film, whether it be music, whether it be fashion, whether it be architects.

And I'm not sure that the you know, having an interest in all of those things is something that that is necessarily, you know, promoted in, in, you know, the, you know, institutions,

But I find that it's really critical to have an interest in all of those things because, you know, how else could can you even hope to appeal to, you know, the greatest sort of public?

You know, I was having this conversation the other day with someone in the automotive industry and just, you know, I was lamenting how myopic that that industry is. And, and I know why. And I think it largely has to do. well one of the reasons is because there seems to be so little reference to anything else that's going on in the wider world of sort of contemporary culture.

ANDREW LAVERY

We're moving to the final stages now. So I might just finish it up with one question. And it's from an audience member. And they're wondering what advice you would give to designers who want to become design leaders like yourself?

What were the pivotal moments of your career? And what advice would you give to them to sustain their career or accelerated?

MARC LAVERY

Well, probably, yeah. accelerating, sustaining, I guess, you know, depends on the ability to sort of generate a livelihood through what you're, you know, through what you're doing, which, you know, is presumably wanting to be a designer.

I again, I keep coming back to what I feel is the importance of being able to do things yourself. And I wouldn't necessarily look to, you know, your horizon was sort of limited by your ability to go and work with a with a with a, you know, a design firm.



TRANSCRIPT

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I mean, if you couldn't do that, I've always been a big believer in doing things yourself. And, you know, attempt, you know, why not try to you know, make a company, you know, build your own things, market your own things, create your own thing.

I mean, there's so many ways of doing that now, that didn't exist when I was, you know, learning to become a designer, you know, getting something going on Kickstarter or whatever.

I mean, yes, I think it's always important to have professional experience and you know, perhaps whether that be working with a design agency, a design firm or whatever. But I think you know, developing a bit of independence, that can help you in so many ways.

ANDREW LAVERY

Marc, that's very, very good advice. And so that actually brings us to the end of the webinar. And I'd just like to extend my gratitude to you, Marc for joining us and also the audience.

And we wish you all the best for the rest of your rest of your break in Greece

MARC NEWSON

Thank you very much.

ANDREW LAVERY

Thank you, Mark.

ANNA BURNS

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Finally, we want to acknowledge that this podcast was made in Sydney which sits on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. It is upon their ancestral lands that the University of Sydney is built.