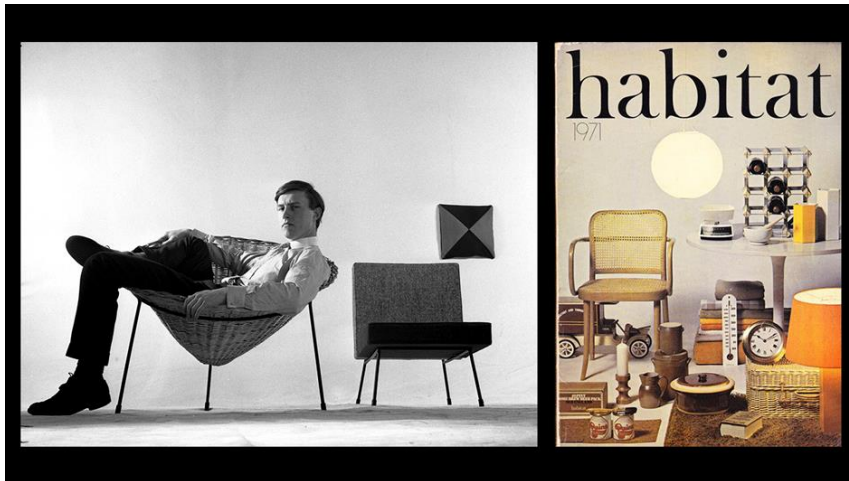


Terence Conran

Designer, retailer, and restaurateur. Born 1931.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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1. Introduction

This introductory chapter is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Wikipedia.

Sir Terence Orby Conran CH RDI FCSD (4 October 1931 – 12 September 2020) was an English designer, restaurateur, retailer, and writer. He founded the Design Museum in London. The British designer Thomas Heatherwick said that Conran "moved Britain forward to make it an influence around the world." Edward Barber, from the British design team Barber & Osgerby, described Conran as "the most passionate man in Britain when it comes to design, and his central idea has always been 'Design is there to improve your life.'" The satirist Craig Brown once joked that before Conran "there were no chairs and no France."

Early Life

Conran was born in Kingston upon Thames, the son of Christina Mabel Joan Conran (née Halstead, d.1968) and South African-born Gerard Rupert Conran (d.1986), a businessman who owned a rubber importation company in East London. Conran was educated at Highfield School in Liphook, Bryanston School in Dorset and the Central School of Art and Design (now incorporated into Central St Martin's, a part of the University of the Arts, London), where he studied textiles and other materials.

Work

Conran's first professional work came when he worked in the Festival of Britain (1951) on the main South Bank site. He left college to take up a job with Dennis Lennon's architectural company, which had been commissioned to make a 1/4-scale interior of a Princess Flying Boat. Conran started his own design practice in 1956 with the Summa furniture range and designing a shop for Mary Quant.

In 1964, he opened the first Habitat shop in Chelsea, London with his third wife Caroline Herbert, focusing on housewares and furniture in contemporary designs. Habitat grew into a large chain, the first retailer to bring such designs to a mass audience.

In the mid-1980s, Conran expanded Habitat into the Storehouse plc group of companies that included BhS, Mothercare and Heal's but in 1990 he lost control of the company. His later retail companies included the Conran Shop and FSC-certified (Forest Stewardship Council) wood furniture maker Benchmark Furniture, which he co-founded with Sean Sutcliffe in 1983.

He was also involved in architecture and interior design, including establishing the architecture and planning consultancy Conran Roche with Fred Roche in 1980. Their projects include Michelin House (which he turned

into the restaurant Bibendum) and the Bluebird Garage, both in Chelsea. Conran had a major role in the regeneration in the early 1990s of the Shad Thames area of London next to Tower Bridge that includes the Design Museum. His business, Conran and Partners, is a design company comprising product, brand and interior designers and architects, working on projects all over the world. Conran designed furniture for Marks & Spencer, J. C. Penney, Content by Conran, Benchmark, and The Conran Shop.

Conran's architecture and design practice also worked on projects in North America and Asia. In 2009, he licensed the Conran Shop to a partner in Japan. In September 2014, Cassina IXC Ltd acquired the entire business of The Conran Shop in Japan where it still thrives with four stores. In 2019, the Conran Shop opened in Seoul, South Korea.

Restaurants

Besides Bibendum, Conran created many other restaurants in London and elsewhere. In 2005, he was named as the most influential restaurateur in the UK by CatererSearch, the website of Caterer and Hotelkeeper magazine. In 2007, 49 percent of the restaurant business was sold to two former managers, who rebranded it as D&D London.

In 2008, he returned to the restaurant business on a personal basis by opening Boundary, a restaurant, bar, café, and meeting room complex in Shoreditch, East London. This was followed in 2009 by Lutyens, a restaurant and private club within the former Reuters building in Fleet Street London. In 2018, Lutyens, together with two other related restaurants, closed as Conran's hospitality venture with Peter Prescott went into administration.

Books

He wrote over 50 books which broadly reflect his design philosophy, selling over 25 million copies worldwide. The majority of these books were published by Conran Octopus, a division of Octopus Publishing Group, a cross-platform illustrated-book publisher founded by Conran and Paul Hamlyn.

Honours and awards

Conran was appointed Knight Bachelor in the 1983 New Year Honours and Companion of Honour (CH) in the 2017 Birthday Honours for services to design. He was a winner of the Chartered Society of Designers Minerva Medal, the society's highest award.

Between 2003 and 2011, Conran was provost of the Royal College of Art. In 2003, he received the Prince Philip Designers Prize in recognition of his lifetime achievements in design. In 2010, Conran was appointed a Royal Designer for Industry by the Royal Society of Arts. He won the Lifetime

Achievement Award at The Catey Awards in 2017. In 2019, Conran was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award by The Furniture Makers' Company, the City of London livery company and charity for the furnishing industry.

Academic honours

In 2007, he received an honorary degree from London South Bank University and, in August 2012, an honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria. In May 2012, he received an honorary professorship from the University for the Creative Arts.

Family

Conran married architect Brenda Davison in 1952 at the age of 19; the marriage lasted six months. Conran married his second wife, journalist Shirley Pearce, in 1955 with whom he had two sons – Sebastian and Jasper – before they divorced in 1962. Conran married his third wife, cookery writer Caroline Herbert, the following year. The marriage lasted for 33 years and produced three children – Tom, Sophie, and Edmund – before ending in divorce in 1996.

Terence Conran died in September 2020, at the age of 88.

2. The World's Most Comfortable Chair

The following chapters, 2 to 14, have been extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the May 2019 issue of Vanity Fair.



Every morning at Barton Court, his retreat in the English countryside, Sir Terence Conran settles himself into his favorite perch, the Karuselli chair, developed in 1964 by the Finnish designer Yrjö Kukkapuro. It is known as “the world’s most comfortable chair,” a Space Age-looking specimen in tan leather and white fiberglass, worthy of a starship captain. To make the world’s most comfortable chair more comfortable, or at least easier to get in and out of, Conran—who is 87 and for whom comfort has become an issue due to chronic back problems—decided to add an elegant plinth that raises up the Karuselli a couple of inches. Count it among the many examples of Conran’s having improved life quality with a decisive and nearly invisible gesture.

It’s in this hot-rodded lounge chair that Conran designs the way he always has, going back to his days as an upstart textile designer in the early 1950s: with a 2B pencil, on paper—preferring a lap desk to a laptop. “I begin drawing with my first cup of coffee and my first cigar,” he said one morning not long ago, sitting in the Karuselli. “I feel relaxed then.” Conran, however, hasn’t built his career on relaxation. When asked about the design award bestowed upon him in Hong Kong last winter, intended to mark his nearly seven decades in practice, Conran groaned. “I hate the idea of ‘lifetime achievement,’” he said. “Because it sounds like a full stop.”

3. What Conran has Done

So what has Sir Terence Conran done? Considering his impact on modern design, his mission to popularize good food, his transformation of the retail-store experience, and his overall edifying influence on daily life,

Conran has been part Charles and Ray Eames and part Martha Stewart, with a dash of the Galloping Gourmet. As a design practitioner, restaurateur, entrepreneur, author, mentor, bon vivant, and global taste-maker,

Conran has been a cultural and aesthetic force ever since 1964, when he opened his original Habitat shop in London. The era-defining design-and-housewares emporium—which, along with such revolutionary phenomena as the Beatles, Mary Quant, Vidal Sassoon, and the Pill, blew the cobwebs off of postwar Britain—grew into a retail chain that, some have argued, revolutionized shopping as thoroughly as department stores did in the 19th century.



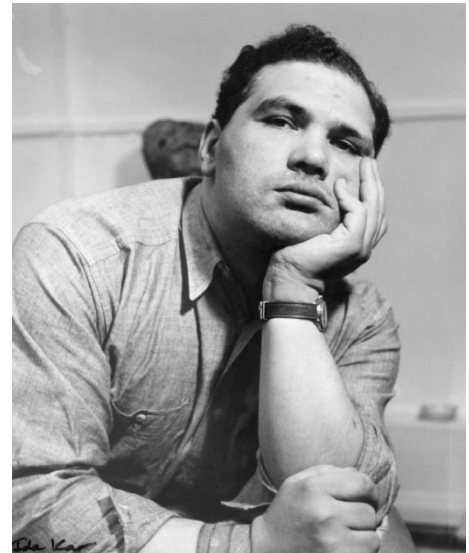
That might be a stretch. And yet Habitat (and its tonier cousin, the Conran Shop, which Sir Terence founded in 1973) did make thoughtful design accessible to the masses. What's more, he did it decades before Design Within Reach or Room & Board or even Ikea, which acquired, then sold, the Habitat chain.

Earlier this year, I flew to England to pay Conran a visit. He divides his week between a London apartment in a Richard Rogers-designed glass tower on the South Bank of the Thames, and Barton Court, the Georgian pile that was a near ruin when he bought it in 1971.

Even though Conran has lived there for almost a half-century, the 145-acre property is his latest major project—one that, given his age, takes on added meaning and urgency. It's an ambitious overhaul intended to create a thoroughly modern, sustainable estate for the 21st century. As Conran told me, "We're trying to make Barton Court economically viable."

An admirer of Conran's intimated that the ambitious plan may well be "barmy," but that Conran didn't come to be Conran by modest planning or half-measures. It was ever thus. After launching his career in textiles, Conran made the bold move of establishing a furniture studio with his mentor, the artist Eduardo Paolozzi (below).

Things just cascaded from there. Over the years, Conran helped introduce London to espresso, pioneered flat-pack furniture, designed Quant's boutique (an epicenter of 60s London; Quant, in fact, created uniforms for Habitat's staff), opened more than 50 restaurants that helped recast British food as something the world no longer snickers at, wrote a raft of books (*The House Book*, *The Essential Garden Book*, *Plain Simple Useful*) that adorn innumerable coffee tables, and more recently set up the Boundary Project, a complex in East London's booming Shoreditch that combines food, retail, and hospitality. Two and a half years ago, London's Design Museum—which Conran conceived and erected in the 80s—reopened in a new John Pawson-designed space, its third home.



Art dealer John Kasmin once joked, “The problem with Terence is that he wants the whole world to have a better salad bowl.”

If you were to argue that no other design personality has shaped *The Way We Live Now* quite as much as Sir Terence Conran, you would not be alone. As Craig Brown, the British satirist (and *VANITY FAIR* contributor), put it: before Conran “there were no chairs and no France.” The art dealer John Kasmin, a friend of Conran's, once joked, “The problem with Terence is that he wants the whole world to have a better salad bowl.” The hotelier and Studio 54 impresario Ian Schrager compared Conran's cultural influence to Andy Warhol's: he's made design fun and accessible. “Is he a designer or a businessman?” has been the perennial question. In 2019 it seems irrelevant. Conran has always approached design as a business proposition and business as a design problem: there is no point in making and curating good products without devising the means to bring them to the general population.



Terence Conran and Mary Quant.

Even so, Conran—with his reputation as a perfectionist and a hard-ass—has had his share of dustups and detractors. “Ambitious, mean, kind, greedy, frustrated, emotional, tiresome, intolerant, shy, fat”—those descriptors are courtesy of Conran himself. Sir Roy Strong, the former director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, has made him out to be a bullying egomaniac with one good idea: Habitat. (“He’s a really absurd fellow,” Conran cracks back.) The Design Museum’s first director, Stephen Bayley, a perpetual sparring partner, has called Conran a “self-mythologizing bastard.” The track record, however, suggests there is much worth mythologizing.

“He is the most passionate man in Britain when it comes to design, and his central idea has always been ‘Design is there to improve your life,’” the British designer Edward Barber told me. Thomas Heatherwick, the U.K. designer who created the hive-like, multi-tiered Vessel, in Manhattan’s Hudson Yards, said he considered Conran one of the handful of visionaries “who moved Britain forward to make it an influence around the world.” Ruth Rogers, the American-born chef and restaurateur who co-founded London’s River Café, said, “I have an allergy towards the word ‘legend.’ Everyone is a ‘legend’ these days. But if you want to say ‘legend,’ well, Terence is that.”

At a dinner celebrating the legend’s 80th birthday, a guest asked Conran if he had any resolutions or goals left to fulfill. Conran didn’t hesitate. “To stop fucking around and do more,” he said.

4. Michelin House



On a wintry London afternoon, Conran invited me along to his flagship Conran Shop, which occupies the circa-1911 landmark known as the Michelin House, a structure he first admired 55 years ago, when he opened the original Habitat directly across Sloane Avenue, in Chelsea. It is a fanciful bauble of a building, sheathed in playful, decorative tiles and stained-glass windows depicting the Michelin Man—otherwise known as Bibendum—in sporting poses. Like the French tire company’s mascot, Conran is mischievous, portly, highly recognizable, and seemingly indestructible. He has encountered nails and broken glass in his path—mergers and sell-offs and occasional lawsuits, tabloid sniping and professional rivalries and family feuds—and has kept bouncing along.

“I love this building so much,” Conran said, casting his blue eyes around the showroom. “I put so much time into it.” He lowered himself onto a Conran couch, his clasped hands resting atop the handle of his cane. Conran was dressed in customary shades of blue: blue flannel sport coat, blue cashmere polo shirt, blue cords, and blue suede Tod’s driving mocs, all offset by burgundy socks. Shoppers buzzed around the showroom amid the Eames shell chairs, Castiglioni floor lamps, and Terence Conran-designed this and that while the white-haired panjandrum watched them, circulating. I sat down next to Conran and saw one customer after another do double takes upon seeing the Man Himself, at the center of a universe he created.

He bought Michelin House with the late publisher Paul Hamlyn in 1985, when, according to Conran, “it was a shambles.” (The two men founded the Conran Octopus imprint, which has published many of Conran’s books, and the Hamlyn family remains co-owner of the property.) After a \$15 million restoration, Michelin House reopened in 1987, hosting the Conran Shop as well as Bibendum, a French brasserie that, along with such Conran establishments as Quaglino’s and Bluebird, spearheaded London’s restaurant renaissance. Thirty-two years later, the store is still humming and Bibendum is still considered one of the town’s best dining spots. (Appropriately enough, under the guidance of French-born chef Claude Bosi, it was awarded two stars in the 2018 Michelin Guide.)

That sense of buzz extended to the staff as well. At one point, a star-struck clerk answered Conran's questions about the enormous Moon Pendant light by the Italian designer Davide Groppi; it retails for \$4,200. The Conran Shop's energetic C.E.O., Hugh Wahla, with round Philip Johnson spectacles, came over to chat. "He totally democratized design," Wahla said of Conran, telling how, in his undergrad days, Wahla would visit the Conran Shop every Saturday, which set him on his career path. (Jonathan Ive, the visionary designer of Apple's product line, was likewise galvanized by visiting Habitat in his youth; Heatherwick and Barber tell similar stories.) When Conran and I moved over to Bibendum's mosaic-tiled oyster bar, an exuberant Chef Bosi swung by to check on Conran's bivalves and smoked salmon (both excellent).

The effusive reception at Michelin House did nothing to cloud Conran's exacting vision. Back downstairs in the showroom, Conran summoned Wahla over. "You have a problem with your staff," he proclaimed. Wahla looked vaguely doomstruck but game to weather whatever blow the master was about to deliver. In his younger days, the sticklerish Conran was notorious for upbraiding employees who put insufficiently used paper in their wastebaskets. Now Conran pointed out that a gaggle of staffers had congregated behind a pillar while shoppers roamed, unattended. He wanted the clerks out there on the floor, offering help, making sales. The man who once lorded over combined retail concerns that generated \$2.3 billion annually was essentially directing his C.E.O. to adopt the role of hawkish floor manager. Wahla went off to stir up the troops.

5. Memorabilia

When Conran isn't making his rounds in London, he can be found in his Karuselli chair, in a sun-drenched study off the kitchen at Barton Court, near the tiny Berkshire village of Kintbury. "It's a bit of a junk heap in here," Conran said by way of welcome. That may have been vaguely true, but the comfort, harmony, and visual interest on display were a refutation of everything Marie Kondo stands for.

On a windowsill rests various medals, including the British Companion of Honour, which Conran, along with Paul McCartney and J. K. Rowling, received from the Queen in 2017. Past honorees include Winston Churchill, Stephen Hawking, and David Hockney, who, in the early 70s, designed the menu for Conran's Neal Street Restaurant. Arrayed next to the medals are four metal numerals that were once affixed to Barton Court to denote the year of its construction. They spell out "1727," which might be an accidental reordering of the year most commonly given: 1772. (Other sources say 1680.) There's a nifty model aeroplane in one corner and a lavender-blue coffee table of Conran's own design, whose asymmetry was inspired by an antique ashtray from Byrrh, the French aperitif company. The room is dominated by a hanging paper Ingo Maurer lamp, whose biomorphic shape is reminiscent of the shredded remains of a cocoon or chrysalis.

6. Childhood

For much of his life, Conran was an avid collector of butterflies and moths, a hobby begun during his war-years boyhood in Hampshire. He grew up “nouveau poor,” his father an importer of gum copal, a substance used to make paint and varnish. His mother, Conran said, “would have been a designer had women been trained for that before the war. She had much to do with my education, choosing Bryanston”—an English public school with an arty bent—“after I had been at a school uninterested in visual matters.” (Conran’s younger sister, Priscilla, also pursued a design career and has held important positions in the Conran empire.)

At age 12 or 13, Conran suffered a burst appendix, which forced him to stay home for six months. “It was then that I got my workshop going,” he said, elaborating that his mother encouraged him to build things—dollhouse furniture and the like. It was while he was working on one such project that a metal splinter shot off a lathe, embedding itself in Conran’s left eye and impairing his vision for life.

After Bryanston came the Central School of Art and Design, in London, which Conran left in 1949, only to emerge into a postwar England that was all Spam sandwiches, clunky furniture, and doilies. When he was 21, a sojourn to France, including a Paris dishwashing stint in the kitchens of La Méditerranée, made Conran wonder why life in Britain couldn’t be as colorful, stylish, generous, and well-designed as what he found on the Continent. By 1953, he’d opened his first restaurant, Soup Kitchen, near Charing Cross.

7. Benchmark Furniture



The

Camberwell Desk, by Benchmark Furniture.

Here, Conran paused in his reminiscence and turned his attention back to the butterfly and moth specimens lining the study's shelves. "It's evil to collect them now," he said, noting that he gave up the practice in light of plunging lepidopteran populations. One thing Conran has refused to give up is his cigar. He cut and lit a Hoyo de Monterrey and explained that the results of his ritual morning sketches sometimes go into production at the Conran Shop, or at one of the many firms that hire Conran, or at Benchmark, the bespoke-furniture company he founded in 1984 with Sean Sutcliffe.

The Benchmark workshops occupy a cluster of outbuildings just steps away from Conran's study. There, amid the planers and sawdust, 46 craftsmen create custom-built pieces for private clients and for such redoubtable institutions as 10 Downing Street, Westminster Abbey, and even Hogwarts.

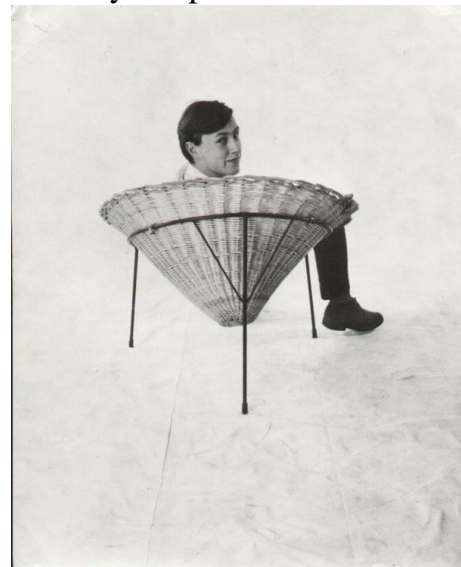
8. An Active Octogenarian



For an octogenarian, Conran has plenty on his lap desk. He talked about ramping up the current exhibition “Swinging London: A Lifestyle Revolution” at London’s Fashion and Textile Museum, celebrating him and Mary Quant. (It’s on through June 2.) He mentioned the prospect of re-introducing his 60s-era Cone chair (below) which looks like an outside, inverted Asian rice hat propped on three spindly metal legs. Conran and Partners, the architectural firm he founded in 1989, has a full slate of projects, concentrating on social housing. Later this year, a new Conran Shop will open in Seoul. It will be the 10th such store currently in operation.

Conran has had mixed success Stateside. While he began his U.S. retail presence at Macy’s, in 1968, and opened his first Conran’s—an American version of Habitat—in Manhattan’s Citicorp tower, in 1977, today all of the Conran’s outlets have been shuttered, supplanted by legions of design shops that are, in effect, the offspring of Conran.

What most excites Conran these days is an inward-looking endeavor: reimagining Barton Court and ensuring its future, one to be overseen by the Conran family. “This place was in such a state,” he recalled of his first visit, in 1971. “The roof had caved in. There was mold everywhere.” For centuries, Barton Court had been the seat of the Dundas family—admirals and such. When Conran bought it, the house had most recently been a boys’ school called Purton Stoke. “And because it had been a school,” Conran said, “someone said to me, ‘Why do you want this house? It’s still got the



smell of smacked bottoms!’ I don’t know if we’ve removed the smell entirely. It’s up to you to judge!”

The smell is long gone. In its place are sunny hallways and rooms (27 in all) painted bright white and filled with art by Hockney and Richard Smith.



A collection of 19 pedal-car Bugattis hangs along one wall, every vehicle painted Conran blue (a rich cobalt). The south-facing living room, running the length of the building, was created by knocking out walls, a Conran design signature that dates to the Regents Park town house he shared in the 1950s with his second wife, the best-selling author Shirley Conran (Superwoman, Lace). Throughout Barton Court, there’s that Conranian mix of modern (a profusion of Vico Magistretti Eclisse lamps) and vintage (a life-size wooden horse used for saddle-making). In the renovated kitchen, where Conran’s wife (No. 4), Vicki, prepared a fortifying lunch of osso-buco ragu with pappardelle and free-flowing Châteauneuf-du-Pape, a battery of copper pots, reminiscent of those in the kitchen department at the original Habitat, hangs over the Aga.

9. The Grounds of Barton Court

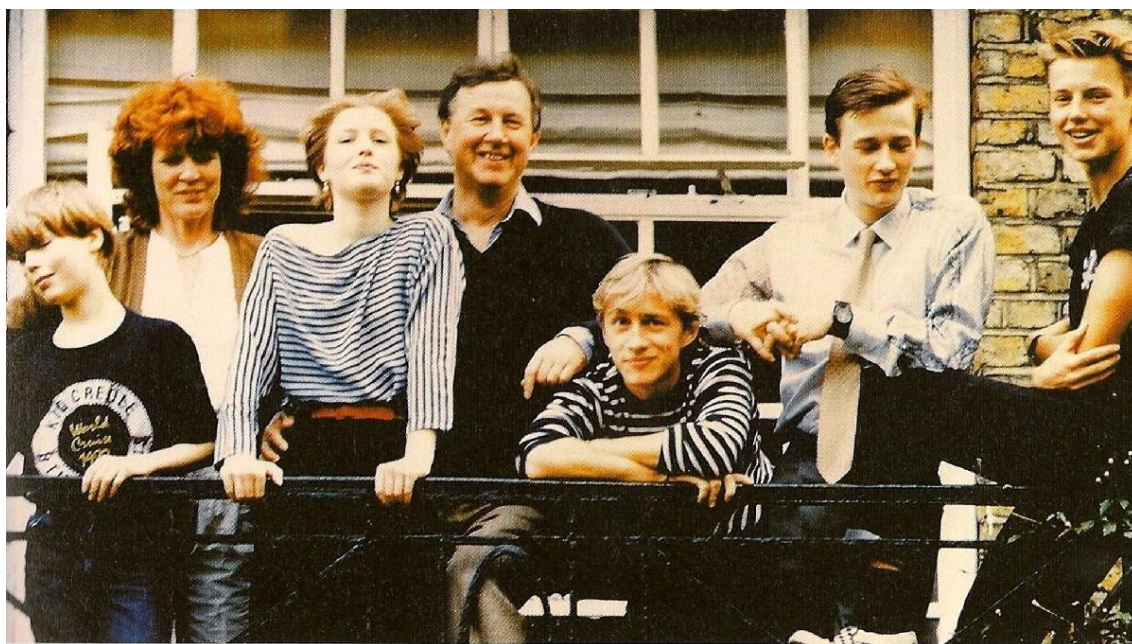


The grounds of Barton Court drift down to the streamlike, glinting River Kennet. The focal point is a thoroughly modern folly: a towering, pavilion-like bench done in stacked plywood that rises in a sweeping double helix. Its name is Gazebo, and it was Heatherwick’s student-thesis project, which Conran invited the young designer to complete at Barton Court. “He ended up buying that from me,” Heatherwick said, “and that’s how I started my studio.” Several years ago, the product designer Sir James Dyson (as in vacuums and hand dryers) landed a helicopter a bit too close to Gazebo, damaging the structure. The Conrans, and Heatherwick, laugh about it—another afternoon chez Conran.

Conran’s goal is to transform the place into a self-sufficient entity. “Most estates have to rely on E.U. subsidies,” he said. “Most of those won’t be available in the future.” British country houses are notoriously difficult to keep up. The trick, Conran explained, is for Barton Court to provide revenue beyond the lucrative Benchmark furniture operation. In 2017, he bought an additional 120 acres, opening further access to the Kennet. He has hired a riverkeeper, who has been narrowing the channel and reforming the banks.

The plan is to attract the trout-fishing crowd, who would pay a nominal fee to spend the day casting in the Kennet, which at one time was renowned for its fishing. While much of the surrounding acreage had been ravaged by gravel extraction, that land has been revived and hundreds of trees have been planted. Sheep graze in pasturage, and other animals may soon arrive to generate income from sustainable husbandry. For decades, the massive walled garden and greenhouses have been used for growing fruits and vegetables. Conran aims to amp up cultivation and sell the goods to restaurants. (Barton Court supplies produce to Bibendum’s kitchen.)

10. A Dynasty



The Conran family, c 1983, from left: Ned, Lady Caroline, Sophie, Sir Terence, Jasper, Sebastian and Tom

“That garden was our playground!” said Sophie Conran, the daughter of Terence and his third wife, the food writer Caroline Conran. (The couple divorced in 1996 after 33 years of marriage, with a headline-generating settlement in the area of \$18 million.) “In the 70s the culinary landscape was bleak in the U.K. and they”—her parents—“were growing all these exotic things that we don’t consider exotic anymore,” such as tomatoes that didn’t taste like cardboard, years before anyone thought of calling them “heirloom.” Sophie, a director of the Conran Shop and a successful name-brand designer herself, recalled that to be a kid at Barton Court was to be surrounded by a virtual salon of “artists from every walk of life.” She remembered the day Francis Bacon visited, got “very drunk,” and ate what she estimated to be an entire pound of cheddar cheese. (The artist handed her brother Tom a £50 note, thinking he was a waiter.) By his own admission, Conran wasn’t the most attentive father, but Sophie told me that the Barton Court patriarch was unfailingly “enthusiastic and excited and engaged. He brought that into our lives.”

The Conrans, for half a century now, have been a dynasty whose every move plays out in the pages of England’s tabloids and glossies. Sophie’s older half-brothers (by Shirley) are product designer Sebastian Conran and fashion designer Jasper Conran—stars themselves. Jasper had a brief reign as chairman of Conran Holdings, resigning in 2015 after his father complained in an interview about not being consulted enough. Jasper once said, “In our family you don’t so much swim as drown.” Yet recent Instagram posts show the two of them, and pretty much the entire family, being chummy. The ups and downs—divorces, silent treatments, perceived slights—are perhaps to be expected with a complex modern clan living under a media microscope. The biggest moment of family anguish came when Ned, the youngest Conran son and Sophie’s younger brother, was found guilty of indecent assault in 2001, the culmination of a struggle with mental-health and

substance issues. He has long since re-emerged and, like his older brother Tom, is a successful restaurateur.

Conran spoke with buoyant pride of the many accomplishments of his offspring. He noted that he is now a great-grandfather and that even some of his 13 grandchildren (plus one from Vicki's side) are carrying on the family tradition. Sophie's daughter, Coco Conran, for instance, unveiled her first fashion collection in March, and her son, Felix Conran, is becoming established as a product designer. "It all sort of rubbed off," the elder Conran said.

11. A Socialist Passion

For a man who lives like a peer on a country estate (one recent estimate placed his personal fortune at \$113 million), Conran's lifelong quest has been to demonstrate that it isn't just the posh who can have good taste. This was embedded in Habitat's mission, given Conran's passion for humble, well-constructed, utilitarian goods—kitchen towels, Brown Betty teapots, the clay Chicken Brick casserole that Habitat turned into a British institution (right). Conran has historically been a Labour man and once called Margaret Thatcher “one of the most odious people who's ever walked the face of the earth.” As Heatherwick put it, “His socialist passion is something that runs deep. Business follows belief for him.”



Brexit makes Conran positively apoplectic. Earlier this year, he was a high-profile signatory, along with other U.K. business leaders, of a public letter in *The Times* urging a second referendum. It's easy to see why he despises the idea of a divorce from Europe. When it comes to design and living and eating, Conran has been a Matthew Arnold of our day—a moral conscience and avowed multiculturalist looking to the Continent and beyond for inspiration and sustenance, while providing Britain with a steady, Arnoldian stream of “the best that is known and thought in the world.” Conran, in essence, helped introduce Britons to the concept of modernity. “It was all about trying to strip out the constraints of how people were living,” Sophie Conran told me, “and giving them freedom and choice and light and expansion.”

12. Wasteful Consumerism

While Conran is viewed as one of the godfathers of “lifestyle,” it’s a concept he loathes. In his view, when one’s avocado toast, perfect Negroni, or bench-made shoes become humble-brag Instagram fodder, the culture has lapsed into a state of all sensibility and no sense.

Lifestylification has extended to design itself, in which the smallest detail is fetishized. “There are design shops everywhere, to the point where it’s almost gone crazy,” Heatherwick said. “Useful, everyday design”—a concept synonymous with Conran—“has gone a bit comedy.”

For his part, Conran calls “wasteful consumerism” a “contemporary evil.” It was not what he had in mind in 1964, when various Beatles trooped into Habitat to buy Dieter Rams hi-fi equipment, or when novelists Kingsley Amis and Elizabeth Jane Howard flirted among the garlic presses and woks (two more items Conran popularized).

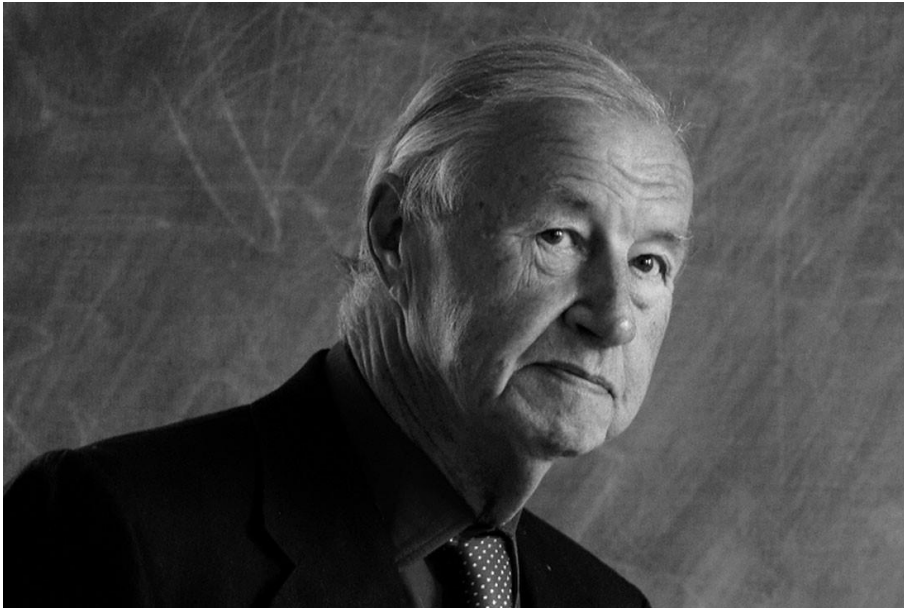
Other current design trends alarm him. The collecting mania for Memphis, the 80s postmodern-furniture fad sparked by the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass, leaves Conran in a frost: “Sottsass meant it as a joke! It’s joke junk.

I’m a Bauhaus-educated chap.” The proliferation of “limited editions” by design stars that go for hundreds of thousands of dollars at design fairs: “Astronomical amounts of money! I’m so much against it.” By contrast, when I asked him what guides his present design sense, his answer was one he could have given at any point over the past 70 years: “Economic, plain, simple, and useful. I hope very much in the Shaker tradition. They were my inspiration.” Conran admitted he’s never visited a New England Shaker village. It’s on the bucket list.

Above: Room Divider by Emilio Sottsass, 1981. Below: Bauhaus Wardrobe by Robert Clezk Bystrice, 1930.



13. Ashes in Rockets



“When I die I’ll be cremated,” Conran told me one morning at his London apartment, sitting in an Eames lounge and watching barges lazily making their way down the Thames. “In my will, I’ve left money so that my ashes will be left in rockets for a party to celebrate my demise. I like the idea of being flung into the sky.”

He intends this to happen at Barton Court. “I’ve always loved pyrotechnics,” he said, recounting a boyhood memory of a fireworks party in which an errant rocket ignited a box of recreational ordnance, to great alarm and amusement. Conran wasn’t interested in offering further insights into mortality or his legacy. When asked about his lasting influence, he barely shrugged. “I don’t think about it,” he said. “I just try and get on with the multiple things that I’ve going on at the moment.”

14. The Design Museum



The first Design Museum, near Tower Bridge, London.

Perhaps the clearest embodiment of Conran’s impact on the culture will be the \$103 million Design Museum, which now resides in a modernist landmark building in Kensington, with a distinctive vaulted roof (restored by the Dutch firm OMA) and elegantly minimal interiors (by John Pawson). “I’m absolutely thrilled with it!” Conran exclaimed when we toured the space.

He has called the complex, which opened in 2016, his “single most rewarding achievement.” The upward trajectory of the museum, as it has relocated over the years from a basement at the Victoria and Albert Museum to a derelict banana warehouse, to its current spiffy digs, suggests something about the rising status of design in contemporary culture—and about Conran’s role in making it so.

“For Terence, the Design Museum is all about giving something back to Britain,” Deyan Sudjic, the Design Museum’s director, told me as we spun through the airy galleries. Ambra Medda, a museum trustee and co-founder of Design Miami, said, “Terence cares about longevity and quality. He’s looking way beyond his own empire.” Through its exhibitions and educational outreach, the museum will continue Conran’s mentorship into perpetuity.

At the building’s entrance, Conran paused under a white sign that read, “The Design Museum was founded by Sir Terence Conran in 1989 in the belief that design has a vital part to play in shaping and understanding the world.” A tan leather briefcase, which looked very full, rested at his feet. I was about to remark on this tableau—the man, the museum, and the mission—when Conran pre-emptively offered a handshake and a farewell. “I’m afraid I must go now,” he said, leaning into his cane and turning toward the waiting car that would speed him back to Barton Court. “I really have a hell of a lot of work to do.”



Exterior of the Design Museum, South Kensington, London.



Interior of the Design Museum, South Kensington.



An exhibition area at the Design Museum, South Kensington.