



PUNKY

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Over his 35-year career, acclaimed British designer Tom Dixon has intentionally married art and design with commerce – if a “thing” doesn’t sell it means no one likes it.

FUNKY

Facing page: Tom Dixon with his Melt lights from 2015 at his Coal Office headquarters.
This page: The Coal Office furniture shop has a collection of old and new, including the S-Chair, Pylon Chair and Bird Chaise, lined up beyond the table.



Top Dixon classics up close: (from left) Bird chaise longue, 1990; Pylon Chair, 1991; S Chair for Cappellini, 1988; Jack light, 1996.

“EVERYONE KNOWS I DIDN’T WANT TO BE a designer,” said Tom Dixon to an audience of his peers in the House of Commons as he was awarded the London Design Medal in September. At the time, Parliament had been prorogued by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a move that would be declared illegal by the end of the month. In the meantime, Westminster was up for grabs and the award’s organisers had leapt into the breach. “But it’s kind of nice to be adopted by the design profession,” Dixon continued, trademark impish grin suggesting that while very aware of his stature, he sees it all as a bit of a game.

Dixon wasn’t addressing politicians that night, but in design terms he was acknowledging the approbation of a very powerful room. Acclaimed architects Amanda Levete and John Pawson were in the house, as were industrial designers Paul Cockledge, Edward Barber and Michael Anastassiades. Multimedia artist Es Devlin was there, as was the curator of the Design Museum and the director of the V&A. In all, some 150 guests had assembled to celebrate Dixon’s illustrious 35-year career.

During the course of those three-and-a-half decades, Dixon – a designer despite himself – has launched spectacularly successful products, including the iconic S Chair for Cappellini in 1988 and the equally famous Jack light under the eponymous brand he established in 2002. He’s the man behind the eternally hip Shoreditch House and the no-less hyped Sea Containers House on the banks of the Thames – the first UK project of US hospitality operator Morgans Hotel Group. As creative director of furniture chain Habitat for the decade to 2008, Dixon proved himself the heir apparent to Sir Terence Conran who established the brand in 1964, effectively introducing British households to modern design.

Indeed, few designers have achieved the same level of name recognition. Swedish giant IKEA late last year deployed him for a range of gardening products and tools to encourage city-dwellers to grow food locally. Then in May IKEA released a Tom Dixon line of furniture accompanied by a line-up of “authorised hacks” to incite consumers to customise his designs. When Virgin Voyages’ Scarlet Lady cruise ship sets sail next year, the latest addition to Richard Branson’s arsenal,

it will feature 78 RockStar suites designed by Dixon in eight variations including Massive, Fab and Posh configurations.

Tom Dixon didn’t want to be a designer because in the early 1980s he was happy playing bass in what he now calls “punk, funky disco band”, Funkapolitan. In their Top of the Pops performance of the 1981 dancefloor hit *As Time Goes By* a floppy-fringed Dixon shuffles about looking askance, slightly bored; an affectation he retains to this day. Back then, he was also running a nightclub in Kings Cross, working in an animation studio in Soho, restoring classic cars and welding in a friend’s garage in Vauxhall – at the time three gritty neighbourhoods, all very gentrified today.

“I became kind of captivated by welding,” Dixon recalls, seated in his Kings Cross studio in a newly vibrant design district a few weeks before the House of Commons ceremony. “Welding allows you to make a wide variety of things very quickly but with relatively sturdy outcomes. You’re able to realise your ideas yourself, and all of a sudden it’s a lamp, it’s a chair, it’s a table.”

Those early pieces were of a style perhaps best described as “steampunk postmodern”. Dixon welded the precursor to the S Chair from steel sheeting and wrapped the sinuous frame in black gaffer tape. (“It was a bad idea and ended up as a spectacularly ugly object,” he admits.)

His Plumbing Chair of 1989 was just that – a seat constructed entirely of copper piping and elbow joints scavenged from loose-parts bins at builders’ suppliers. He sold a set of six to shoe designer Patrick Cox, only to have them fall apart during a dinner party. The prototype S Chair went to a hairdressing salon in Soho. “For some reason hairdressers always liked my work,” says Dixon. “They were early adopters.”

“Tom’s a polymath,” says Ben Evans, director of the London Design Festival and the man who negotiated for the awards dinner to be hosted in the House of Commons dining room. When asked how one books Parliament for an awards night, Evans responds: “Connections”. As the son of politician

Baroness Tessa Vosper Blackstone and a recipient of a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to the creative industries, connections is something he surely has.

Evans recalls meeting Dixon at club nights and warehouse parties in the 1980s. “Which, in those days, meant you literally broke into a warehouse and threw an illegal party,” he points out. “The scene was very small then and involved people from all different worlds coming together, so we all got to know one another.”

Together with his associate Sir John Sorrell, Evans founded the London Design Festival in 2003 as an umbrella organisation to unite the city’s design districts, which now number 11 and stretch from gritty Shoreditch to very polished Brompton via Clerkenwell, Bankside and Pimlico. They inaugurated the Design Medal program in 2007, the year it was awarded to architect Zaha Hadid, and it has since honoured talents as varied as fashion designer Paul Smith, hairstylist Vidal Sassoon and industrial designer Marc Newson.

As a policy adviser to Tony Blair when he was prime minister, Evans was responsible for the creative industries being recognised as an economic sector. The London Design Festival, then, is much more than a celebration: it’s a marketing and communications operation aimed

at promoting an economy which, according to Evans, employs one in six people in the UK.

“The location of the awards ceremony is a sleepless night task,” says Evans. “We’re determined to find ever more ambitious places that speak to the very specific design credentials of London.” Previous venues have included St Paul’s Cathedral and Lancaster House, the former home of the Duke of York and Albany, which is so grand it stands in for Buckingham Palace in Netflix series, *The Crown*.

The choice of Westminster wasn’t just opportune, it was inspired: for all its evident gestural complexity, the building, and everything in it, is the expression of a very pure architectural intent. Following the destruction by fire of the old palace in 1834, architect Charles Barry was engaged to design the new Houses of Parliament, assisted by Augustus Pugin who is responsible for the Gothic Revival interiors.

In all, Pugin designed more than 1000 interior elements, from the enormous stained glass windows to the deeply coffered timber ceilings, ornate blood-red wallpapers and intricate brass doorknobs. He even designed ceramics and glassware especially for the House. “The House of Commons is a complete design entity,” says Evans. “Pugin came up with a distinctive aesthetic for our number-one building based on a very particular idea of

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Englishness.”

Like Pugin, Dixon incarnates a very particular sense of Englishness, a complete design entity – though his style is more groovy than gothic.

If you’ve noticed a revival of spun copper lighting and table accessories, you can thank Dixon. Detected an uptake in globular glass light fittings? That’s Dixon. (You can dine beneath his overblown Melt pendants at the Bennelong restaurant in the city-facing shell of the Sydney Opera House.) Swirl bookends made from marble residue mixed with pigment, Fat noodle-like armchairs, Bump glass teacups at £85 (\$155) a pair? All Dixon (beware of the very many imitations, however).



there's an incredible mix of tenants, from small retailers to creative schools, to big tech companies, so it's good for networking beyond just transport."

The designer was an experiential retailer before that was even a thing, and bricks-and-mortar is an opportunity to turn shopping into an event. For the London Design Festival he curated a week-long happening called *Touchy Smelly Feely Noisy Tasty*, which ran the gamut of sensual experiences. It went from a razor bar with customisable shaving devices (feely) and bespoke salon versions of his iconic Bird recliner (touchy) to a champagne terrace and carrot degustation station (tasty), and two new fragrances called *Underground* and *Alchemy* (smelly). The noisy component was a series of talks facilitated by Swedish synthesiser company Teenage Engineering, which created a totemic sculpture from its state-of-the-art speakers.

For the opening party, the speaker installation turned into a nightclub which some 1400 invited guests attended. Those who completed the full Touchy Feely course and got their program stamped at each station were rewarded with a limited-edition Tom Dixon tote bag. Highly collectible, over the years these have become something of a badge of honour for the design insider.

"You've got to sweat your assets," says Dixon. "Real estate in city centres has to be multiple use. You need to make something that's open early for breakfast and closes at midnight after dinner. In my dreams I'd also be running a 24-hour service centre here, for customers in Australia or deliveries to China. And then suddenly it becomes a cheap building because you're doing three shifts. It's no longer effective to just have a shop."

Dixon's HQ since mid-2018 is in a handsome 1850s brick building situated on Regents Canal as it approaches Kings Cross station. A former coal distribution centre, the three-storey structure with its sprawling dependencies and seven vaulted archways houses Dixon's product design studio, interior design studio, global logistics centre and retail outlets. There's also a restaurant, called Coal Office, helmed by acclaimed Israeli chef Assaf Granit, who is popularly known as Buffalo. Eating there is a total immersion in Dixon's world since it is totally kitted out with his product.

The retail offering, grouped by category and displayed within the interlinked archways, goes from big-ticket items such as sofas and chandeliers to razors, chopping boards and room scents.

In fact, Tom Dixon is more than a designer: he's a brand, the purveyor of a total lifestyle. His name is his logo, spelt out in a chunky font punctuated by a prominent full-stop – the last word in contemporary chic.

Collectively known as the Coal Office, the complex anchors the new Coal Drops Yard development with its landmark brick "kissing" building by Thomas Heatherwick, a 5000-student annexe of arts and design college Central Saint Martins, as well as the UK headquarters of Facebook, United Artists and soon Google, which has commissioned a new building designed by Heatherwick in partnership with Danish architect Bjarke Ingels of BIG.

When that £1 billion "landscaper" (so named because it occupies horizontally the space a skyscraper would vertically) finally opens and the 4000 employees move in, it will cement London's reputation as the creative capital of Europe. Still, even given the high-octane talent pool in the precinct, "Dixon is the flagship tenant," reckons Evans.

Dixon calls Coal Drops Yard a proper hub. "There are six tube lines and (major overland rail stations) Euston, St Pancras and Kings Cross are all adjacent. So we're connected to Europe via Eurostar as well as to all of London and regional Britain. It's a very networked precinct. And

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Tom Dixon, above.

TOM DIXON WAS BORN IN SFAX, THE SECOND CITY of Tunisia, in 1959, to an English father and a French-Latvian mother. When he was four the family moved to northern England, but by high school he was in London and enrolled at Holland Park comprehensive, renowned as an experimental school in a rough end of town. "Kids were going wild and there wasn't a great deal of teaching," recalls Dixon, "but there was a fantastic art department and that's where I took refuge."

He graduated with only one A-Level, in pottery. "That was my first encounter with shape making, and being able to move a shitty piece of mud into a pot of some value is probably still the kind of alchemy that I'm interested in."

"You can have an idea and turn a piece of matter into something valuable just with an idea."

He enrolled at the Chelsea School of Art, until six months in he broke his leg in a motorbike accident and took it as a sign to quit. "I didn't like it anyway," he recalls. "I wanted a real job." He worked in a print shop, did a stint in an animation studio ("colouring-in boring ads, it wasn't Disney"), began playing music in his spare time. That segued into a gig as bass guitarist in dance band Funkapolitan. They signed a record deal and were successful enough to support Simple Minds, The Clash, Ziggy Marley. When he broke an arm in a second motorbike accident, the band left him behind when it went on tour.

"But in the meantime I'd started club nights, kind of illegal warehouse parties that we moved to a regular venue that we rented for a couple of years. It was very entrepreneurial, the music experience and the club experience were all mini-businesses where your own creativity could convert very

quickly into a living. You learn your own instrument, you write your own tunes, you do your own record cover, you do your own posters, you go get your own gigs, and you make a living from it."

Dixon's entrepreneurial nature meant that his first forays into furniture design happened organically. He'd begun welding as a hobby, "making things for fun", but soon enough club contacts – all those hairdressers and fashion designers and musicians – began to buy the stuff.

"So the idea of making and selling was never separate in my mind in the way it is for people who studied design," says Dixon. "Or, rather, the inspirational nature of somebody actually getting their wallet out and paying you money for something that you've just conceived of, or made the week before, is something that's never left me."

"I think for a lot of designers the commercial act seems like prostitution. It's not the thing they're interested in. But for me it is the thing. If you can't sell the thing, that means nobody likes it and it has no value."

With outlets for his products in 68 countries and a burgeoning interior design business, it's safe to say Tom Dixon is widely liked and highly valued.

His secret? Stay agile, keep learning, constantly reinvent the narrative as much as the products themselves. "I like putting myself in vaguely uncomfortable situations," he says. "It rejuvenates me. It's not scary once you've done it a few times. It's more scary to be static."

As he put it while accepting his accolade at the House of Commons: "I should have received the Emerging Designer award since I always feel like a beginner." ●



From top: The Coal Office is the hub for Tom Dixon's design studios, retail outlet and restaurant.