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Ron Arad, architect and designer – portrait of the artist

The designer of the Bookworm bookshelf and the Rover chair on pencils, his Pompidou Centre retrospective – and why he's not proud of anything he's ever done

Interview by **Laura Barnett**
The Guardian, Tuesday 23 July 2013 13.26 EDT



'I'm not a methodical person – I'm restless and lazy, and I jump from one thing to the other' ... Ron Arad. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

What first drew you to design?

I always drew things, since I was a boy. My mother was a painter, but every time I did a drawing, she'd say, "Be an architect", to make sure I didn't start wanting to become an

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artist. My pencil was always my tool. A lifetime later, it's still all about the pencil in the hand.

What was your big breakthrough?

Choosing, one lunchtime, not to go back to the architecture practice in London that I worked for. Instead, I went to a scrapyard and picked up a Rover car seat to make the Rover chair. The rest is history: 28 years later, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris where I had my retrospective, I was told off for touching the very same chair without wearing white gloves. I wonder what they'd do if they saw my cat going to sleep in it every night.

Which of your designs are you most proud of?

I don't understand this word "pride". It's nice to see pieces I did 30 years ago changing hands for obscene amounts of money, or to walk home from work and see my Bookworm bookshelf in people's living rooms – but I'm not really proud of any of it.

Which artists do you most admire?

We all owe a lot to Duchamp. But I am also a big admirer of Man Ray: he was brilliant on the BBC programme Great Artists in Their Own Words.

Who or what inspires you?

Everything that I've seen until yesterday at four o'clock in the afternoon. Everything can trigger something: good, bad, beautiful, not so beautiful. I'm not a methodical person – I'm restless and lazy, and I jump from one thing to the other.

Have new technologies changed the way you work?

As I said, the pencil is still my main tool, but now it's not a soft 6B Caran d'Ache, it's a light-pen on a tablet. And the studio looks different: where once we were welding steel and bending and polishing, we now have computers.

How has the recession affected architecture in Britain?

I think it might take us back to the way it was in London in the 80s, when I studied architecture. No one was building anything; it was all about architecture on paper. If an architect happened to build something, he had to apologise to his mates. But it did mean we were able to think about architecture without the burden of having clients.

What's the biggest myth about architecture?

That behind every good building you find an amazing client. There's a lot of talented, idealistic, hardworking architects, and not enough good clients. Most choose you for the wrong reasons: they don't want to take risks.

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What's the worst thing anyone ever said about you?

Designers accuse me of being an artist, artists accuse me of being an architect, and architects accuse me of being a designer. But it doesn't bother me too much; that's just the way the fragmented world works.

Do you suffer for your art?

Not really. I quite enjoy it.

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