



# Smart move

**Alistair Welch** visits the new London base of Smart Design to learn more about the consultancy's offering



Consider the last time you took a taxi journey in a new city. Chances are you spent a fair portion of the trip craning your neck to get a view of the rooftops and skyline. Now imagine your cab has a glass roof: you can sit back and take in the sights at your leisure. What about if in addition the cab's infotainment system synced to your personal devices to offer tailored content for the duration of the drive?

This is the concept of the 'taxi of the future'

proposed by Smart Design – an illustrative example of how the consultancy is using design across physical and digital touchpoints to improve experiences. Having worked with Nissan on the idea for the yellow cabs of New York City, Smart Design is now looking at re-imagining the iconic London black cab.

It's fitting as the consultancy recently opened a branch in London. The consultancy's European outpost in Barcelona has been relocated to the Shoreditch studio which,

with the additional influx of a handful of Smart Design personnel from New York, is home to 15 strategists, researchers and designers. Now based in a creative quarter at the heart of one of the world's most developed service economies, Smart Design hopes that East London will provide the perfect milieu for its particular design ethos.

To explain in more detail exactly what defines that ethos, Smart Design invited New Design to its recently opened London home where a wide-ranging discussion covered the consultancy's overarching philosophy and examples of work from a host of different sectors including consumer, financial, transport, aviation and medical.

Sean O'Connor is a Smart Design partner and the London studio lead. He explains that the company, since it was established by Davin Stowell in 1980, has always been about creating 'meaningful things' that make connections between people. Addressing the outlook of the London office he says: "Service design will be the umbrella that we are offering, but we have a long legacy of designing both physical and digital. One of the things we will do with clients is help them envisage what a service experience could look like and, to take it further, we will prototype how that service might come to life."

Opposite top | Heather Martin (left) and Sean O'Connor at Smart Design's London Studio  
Opposite bottom | Reception area of the Shoreditch studio



With her experience at industrial design consultancy Tangerine followed by an academic career focusing on interaction design, the studio's creative director Heather Martin is well placed to understand the relationship between the product and the digital. Indeed, understanding the notion that products do not exist in isolation, rather that they tend to sit within a digital ecosystem of some description, underpins much of Smart Design's contemporary output.

Below | Electronics workshop Left | Taxi of tomorrow concept with Nissan



O'Connor picks up the theme: "A large portion of our business has shifted as the industry has shifted to thinking more systemically," he says. "When I started working at Smart Design a decade ago questions tended to be about how you might design an ergonomic, intuitive device, a television remote for example, that is really great, meaningful and so forth. Some of those devices had screens on them – that's where our digital practice began – and questions evolved into: where does this sit within your ecosystem? What are the other devices it is connected to? How will it evolve?"

Smart Design's clients are interested in how addressing strategy and connections can help them to be more profitable. "The consulting industry that started out as industrial design has very quickly moved into a more consultative discipline," continues O'Connor. "Answering strategic questions through the line of design:

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thinking how products are connected to things." Increasingly Smart Design views itself as a multi-disciplinary consultancy working in service, interaction, visual, digital, and industrial design across several sectors. However at the heart of the consultancy's approach remains the notion of being people-centred. This stems from the priorities of founder Davin Stowell and the studio's early work with Oxo Good Grips (a client relationship that continues to the present day) looking at making kitchen accessories more inclusive and easier to use.

"The word co-creation is one we use a lot in relation to our work," comments O'Connor, "We co-create with our clients and we co-create with the consumers who will buy and use the product or service."

He continues: "Often companies will come to us with a problem that they might see as a design or aesthetic problem and when you unpack it you realize that there's something at a systemic level that needs to be solved."

When not working directly on client projects Smart Design staff will often be engaged on in-house point of view (PoV) exercises. These involve proactive work addressing



areas of opportunity in which design might be able to make an improvement to people's experiences. "It is internal work that we do based on living in the world and having our eyes open to technologies and behaviours," summarizes Martin.

Recently the consultancy has been working on a PoV around the flying experience motivated by the change in aviation regulations that has permitted the use of certain personal electronic devices on board. The idea was to think about ways that airlines might enhance brand loyalty in a market that, currently, is based predominantly around price.

"We started to look at creating a connected end-to-end experience that would enable people from the moment they book their



ticket all the way through their journey to have a much more personalized and curated experience based on the technology that's already around," continues Martin. "We built prototypes on iOS and Android as we wanted to feel what the experience might be like first hand."

Having presented some of their ideas at relevant aviation conferences, Smart Design has received commercial interest in taking the concept forward from a number of airlines. Whilst the PoVs do often lead to paid work with external clients this is not the sole motivation. "This work is not just a business development tool but is also an effort to keep our teams engaged," adds O'Connor. "The way we sell it internally is as [a way that] we can manifest our own destiny as a consultancy rather than just waiting for a brief to come in. There's something very powerful in putting together a perspective that is well thought through – you can connect with clients who have a shared view, so from the very beginning of starting work with them you have a shared purpose."

This idea of a shared purpose underlies Smart Design's relationships with clients and informs the design process. It is evident from recent work that the consultancy is interested in taking a client brief and moving beyond its parameters to consider how design might improve broader systems.

One of Smart Design's most significant projects in recent years has been the consultancy's work with HSBC Private Bank on the harmonization of the client's software suite. This work is a good example of how Smart designers use certain techniques developed in

product and service design in a predominantly digital application.

Before Smart's intervention HSBC Private Bank's relationship managers were using six separate software programmes for different aspects of their job. Legacy software and inconsistent user experience frameworks were causing delays and frustration. The brief was to harmonize the software but Smart Design wanted to take the solution a stage further. "We reframed the brief and delivered a semi-working prototype of a system working across mobile, tablet and laptop," explains Martin. "We use these devices in our personal life but at work might have to deal with clunky legacy systems. In our proposal we said we can harmonize, but we think we need to redesign the whole experience."

HSBC were impressed with Smart Design's proposal and the consultancy won the project. After spending time with HSBC's relationship managers, designers endeavoured to unpack and understand every aspect of the six applications in order to redesign the whole suite with a common user experience. Furthermore, Smart has worked alongside internal HSBC teams on not only how to use the software but also how to develop it in the future.

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Staying with user interface work, Smart Design collaborated with Ford on the design of the driving display for the Ford Fusion Hybrid. Designers developed the Smart Gauge with Eco Guide, a hybrid-specific instrument panel display that gives the driver information in an accessible way to enable him or her to make more efficient driving decisions.

A cluster of leaves animated on the side of the panel grows more lush and more green as the driver achieves better fuel economy. "We wanted something quick that would tell you how your behaviour was influencing the vehicle," says O'Connor. "Rather than giving a complex display, [the leaves] are a subtle way to show the impact of your driving on fuel economy. It was extremely popular with drivers and became the cornerstone of how Ford marketed the vehicle."

Smart Design helped sporting apparel brand Under Armour to broaden its appeal by entering a new market. Under Armour is a well-respected athletic brand yet despite its popularity with male users it was struggling to connect with female consumers. The brand approached Smart Design looking for a strategy to attract female athletes to the brand.

Smart Design decided to create a 'halo' product, in this case a sports bra, that would head the women's product line. Research revealed that around 70 per cent of female

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**Opposite** | Smart Gauge for the Ford Fusion Hybrid  
**Below and centre** | Packaging concept for the Cimzia syringe, The device is easy to remove from the packaging  
**Bottom** | Home injection system for UCB



athletes wear the wrong size of sports bra; this problem offered Under Armour a great opportunity to create a product that met the functional and emotional needs of the wearer, winning trust and brand loyalty in the process.

In a new approach for sports bras the Armour Bra is sized for ribcage and cup size with design and construction changing for each particular size. In addition, a clear communications strategy ensured that users understood the importance of correct sizing. The product has dramatically increased Under Armour's sales to female consumers and the

bra won an IDEA Bronze Award in 2013. In the inclusive design space Smart Design worked with pharmaceutical company UCB on a syringe for sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis. However, this project entails more than a product, as is common to much of Smart's work what is truly important is experience, in this case the experience of home injection.

Self-injection can be challenging at the best of times but here there were two particular complicating factors. Firstly, the medication that the syringe must deliver, Cimzia, is thick, similar in viscosity to olive oil. Secondly,



arthritis patients are likely to have problems with dexterity and, possibly, pain issues on top of that.

Smart Design wanted to keep patients in control of their own medication and so designed a syringe product and communications package that would make the injection experience as trouble free as possible for the

patient. Having followed the daily routines of six rheumatoid arthritis patients, Smart Design looked at ergonomic improvements that might be made to the standard syringe. The product includes a pull-ring cap that is easier to remove and replace than the conventional caps that can be fiddly – this feature reduces the amount of accidental ‘stabbing’ patients experience as they attempt to replace the cap. Meanwhile, a flange on the handle allows the patient to more comfortably push down with the force required to deliver the medication.

The designers also took care to ensure that the packaging was designed with the patient in mind: there are no pinched corners, rather curved edges which are easier to grasp, and the box unfolds like a pamphlet making opening and closing more straightforward. Even the design of the instruction booklet and

the copy therein was addressed to improve the overall experience.

Heather Martin explains that a Smart Design designer is typified by his or her ability to be thoughtful and empathetic. Furthermore, the ideal Smart designer has a portfolio of capabilities. “We are encouraging designers to be more hybrid in their approach,” she says. “For example, I have interviewed more and more designers that might be trained in industrial design but are already starting to think about

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interaction design. We don't need designers who are too egotistical – work ought to be grounded in the needs of the people rather than something that particularly pleases you.”

It is exciting to have such a highly-regarded

and innovative design consultancy now with a base in London. It will certainly be interesting to follow Smart Design's work over the coming years as the business attempts to consolidate its position in the European market. |



Opposite | Sports bra for Under Armour, Colour coding for fit  
Below top and centre | New York taxi limousine commission  
Bottom | Harmonized software suite for HSBC Private Bank

