



Interview: Neville Brody, graphic designer and typographer

Neville was the face behind the renowned *The Face* and *Arena* magazines that challenged all conventional ideas about visual communication at the time. He is also the creator of a number of typefaces and now teaches when he can at the London College of Communication.



It seems that early on in your career you had an eye for something a bit different, like working with independent record labels. What was it about that work back then that attracted you to it?

Well, you have to go back a bit further than that. You have to think about the whole reason I went to college. When I was on my foundation course, I had to make a decision between going into fine art, and going into graphics. I thought at the time that there were a number of aspects to my work, which I wanted to explore. One was of the course the creative line, but what was equally important for me was to understand how visual communication manipulates the way people think. I wanted to explore that and through exploring it, reveal it.

I thought about going into painting, that was my main work on my foundation course, much more than graphics, but I realised that the world of fine art was far more false than the world of advertising. There was an elitist fallacy, a lie that everyone believed in. It was far more subject to market forces than advertising was and suddenly because fine art was elitist it only reached a very limited amount of people. So I went into graphics purely because I wanted to understand how advertising and graphics manipulated the way people thought. I wanted to learn that side, and then turn it upside down, as a way of openly making people more aware of what was going on in their environment. Most of this is quite invisible and I felt it was my role, because I'd become aware of it, to help highlight its manipulative power. So that kind of underscored most of my college work. The other, third thing was the understanding that the purpose of visual communication is to alert people, to engage with them consciously, not unconsciously. In order to do that, there needs to be a constant process of wall-breaking. There's a process by which you first have to become aware of the wall, and then to consciously break it. As long as the context is understood, as long as people also realise that you've turned something upside down ... Most of my college work was very intense. I was working twenty-hour days, seven days a week, just on

the college work. I just figured if you want to challenge something, you have to do it better than the work that you're challenging, otherwise people take it as a gesture. I also realised very early on that you couldn't just go and break a window. You maybe have to break every other window; you have to be systematic. Breaking one window is an empty gesture and is easily dismissable, but creating a system out of breaking windows becomes much more disturbing to the thing that you are challenging, to society. In the end, I realised that it has to be rebellion coupled with a highly systematic process, so that means that your thinking has to go very deep within whatever thing you're working on. This means ultimately that you are creating a language all the way down to the core construction, the foundation. That kind of informed the whole way I thought of college and everything I've done since.

Were you strongly influenced by the music? Because that had a similar aspect to it, of challenging society ...

Well, punk, thank god. The period I was at college was the middle of the punk era. It was hugely influential, not only was it great music, it said that anything is possible. For me punk wasn't so much about 'fuck off', it was more about exploring why we have to follow rules to see what else is possible. Then I started to realise quite clearly that social rules, specifically graphic design rules, were irrelevant. They were created by different people for different societies at a different time to solve different problems. We were still being taught that this was the way we had to do it. It led me to thinking that anything was fair game, anything was challengeable.

Why accept it?

You have to set up criteria. The criteria is, what are you intending to achieve? – and then the way you approach it will be, ‘OK, do any of these rules serve me?’ If they serve me practically, then I think that’s something we have to maintain, we have to consider. If they simply serve me by way of tradition and fear, then we’ll reject those elements and process it. So that allows you to re-think anything. This is from a magazine point of view: you want to let people know where you are in a magazine or book, so you have to bring a system. That system usually is something of differing value within a scale that you understand. Traditionally we use page numbers, but page numbers are just the tradition: we don’t have to use page numbers; we can use anything that has a relationship and an evolution. For instance, you could use a shape that gradually forms, instead of a page number, or you could use a colour, which flows into another colour. There are so many different things you can do; it doesn’t have to be page numbers. That, for me, is a real clear example: once you start thinking like that, you can tear everything apart, and most of us walk down the street and 99% of our brain isn’t thinking because we’re encouraged to take most of it for granted. Which means we accept most of it traditionally, and generic thinking has almost overtaken, right now. We say every high street is the same identikit of traditional icons. You will rarely find a corner grocer shop or an independent coffee bar or, like this restaurant here, something that’s not part of a chain and has unique values. It’s rare and that’s why I chose here.

What’s this place called?

Gallipoli, it’s unique and they’ve not tried to emulate a chain, their ambition here is analogue and human, not mass and cloned reproduction.

It seems quite logical, then, that you would be attracted by record covers?

Well, the truth is, when I left the London College of Printing, my tutors failed me: I was given a zero. I was failed. The tutors that had been there three years, had seen me work round the clock producing a huge quantity of thoughtful work, said that they failed me because a) I hadn’t answered the course and b) I had no commercial potential. Those were the specifically stated reasons. Now I always understood that going to college was something that you did for yourself. You didn’t go there so that the tutors would feel better: you’d go there because you wanted to develop and evolve as a human being. But that wasn’t their criteria, their criteria was: what did they want, did I serve the college?

Two or three years later I went back and my tutors said to me they knew that if they gave me a hard time, I’d do well. Which is complete bullshit, they tried to throw me out in the second year, purely because I turned the Queen’s head sideways on the stamp. I mean it was just pathetic.

Then they wanted to put me on the prospectus. I didn’t allow them. I might get involved with them in the future, because they’re talking to me in a way that might allow me to have some influence on the course. This experience left me with two extremely strong convictions – one, you’re at college for yourself, but you have to work fucking hard to make it work; two, being at college should be the time that you experiment because when you step out into industry, you will rarely get that chance. You can’t just experiment in avoidance; you have to be as aware of the context as possible, because it’s still the real world. You can’t go into a course and spend three years making designs out of alphabetical spaghetti.

You've just hit the nail on the head, as that's the core message we are trying to get across: let's bring in some relevance.

But there is a danger – these days, people seem to think that you go to college in order to get a job, and they treat it as career training, and that's a mistake, a huge mistake. I think they should be developing their creative ability, developing themselves as human beings, developing their eye, but making sure they're completely aware of the context of what's going on in the real world. Because 'designers are wankers'; because they think they don't matter in a way, they think that they can just do shit, and it doesn't bother anyone. Actually people live with this shit. What you and I do, even if it affects one person, it affects one person and there is a certain responsibility with that. Generally designers are wankers, I completely agree, and it's a very self-referential world. Students should be as conscious as possible of what is going on and as clear as possible in defining their own relationship to it. What it doesn't mean is looking out there and going, 'That looks like a successful formula, I'll do that.' That's not what I'm saying, I might go, 'OK, these are the successful formulas – how can I assess these intelligently, what do I want to state in relationship to this, so how do I focus my course towards that?' It might just be three years of pure exploration, because you just don't know. I don't think you can forgive not being aware of the context, because graphics, by its very nature, does not exist in a vacuum. Product design doesn't exist in a vacuum – it's a social product. Fine art can, I think, to an extent, because in many ways fine art is like fashion, it's a very fickle thing. I think graphics has a much more specific role to play, as does product design.

When I left college, I got a job the first day. Another word of advice: I think the whole point of doing a thesis is to interview the people you are going to work for. I don't see much other point to it than that. I did my thesis on Dadaism and its relevance today, which allowed me to go and interview all the designers I was looking at, and look at their work in context. At the same time I used it as an opportunity of introducing myself. So I'd already got a position before I'd left college, as soon as my show came down I started work and it was for a company called Rocking Russian, which was a small record cover agency, that had been created out of money from the Sex Pistols. Actually, the rich kids that grew out of the Sex Pistols at the time, the guy who ran it, Alex McDowell, he did all the 'fuck art let's dance and destroy' T-shirts. He was doing all the T-shirt printing for Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood and he was an ex-fine art student from Chelsea. He's gone onto great things. He art directed *Minority Report*. He did *The Crow*. He's done some phenomenal work.

At the time Independent records were the only place in Britain where there was a support mechanism for designers like myself, or Peter Saville, or Malcolm Garrett. All the kind of free-thinking creative designers in this country could only be supported by the record industry – the independent one. Now there's no support industry, it doesn't exist any more. Even club flyers are so awful, generally speaking. There are a few I like – one's for Fabric. Generally speaking it's a much harder situation, on the other hand it's much easier to self-publish, with the web and cheap printing. That didn't exist for us at the time – we needed clients, we needed these independent bands and record labels. The music industry was fantastic, there were so many people – including Oliver and Designers Republic – and it was just like a melting pot of all this creative thinking, that had a knock-on effect in other parts of design.

How were you able to move from record covers into art directing for *The Face* magazine?

I just want to preface this by saying I realise that one of my goals was to prove to students that you can go out there and do experimental work and succeed, so that was a real driving force behind a lot of the stuff that I was doing. I wanted to say to students, 'It's OK, you don't have to listen to your tutors, you can go out and do radical work and it will succeed.' Not for people to copy what I did, but for people just to be inspired by the fact that it's possible to do it, that you can challenge stuff and have it published. *The Face* was kind of accidental. I went to see Nick Logan, who was publishing *The Face*. He was the editor of *Smash Hits*, and I'd worked up, after college for the first four years. I was in a state of abject poverty, because I was working for like £100 album budgets and stuff, and signing on whenever I could. I mean literally it was poverty for four years.

I remember my father saying to me at one point that I should go and get a job in an ad agency and I just thought if you believe strongly enough in what you do, that will see you through. So I refused, absolutely refused to compromise, which is another message for students that they don't need to compromise. They may experience a little hardship but so fucking what?

So I was approached by *The Face*. I was really just trying to get any kind of work, as long as I wasn't compromising again. I'd worked at Stiff Records for a year, because I just wanted to see what the other side of the fence looked like and it was corporate. It was like working for any other corporation. It was very disappointing, so when I left there, I decided that was it, I was never going to work for a company ever again. So I went freelance, this was like the second year after leaving college and so in looking for work I met Nick Logan. Then he started *The Face* magazine and a few months in, he asked me if I wanted to come round and help him, with some layouts. I did one spread, which was a Kraftwerk spread. He was doing everything, publishing, editing, commissioning, he took four or five thousand pounds out of his building society and launched it, it was a completely independent thing. He had someone help him a bit with some of the layout, but he was doing everything, so I came in and started doing some layouts for him. He realised there were skill sets that he didn't have, so he asked me to start doing it. I hated type. I still hate type. Everything I'd done up until then was image-based, with virtually no type involved in it, but I approached type as image, right from the beginning, so that I was approaching it as image-making. I was approaching the magazine from the basis of again challenging convention, wondering what constitutes a magazine, what you need in order for it to be negotiable and navigable, yet free culturally. There's real live opportunity to be involved in something incredibly successful.

It was fantastic. I was so lucky; I had the most amazing support in Nick, the publishing editor, who just gave me the space to do what I wanted. It was like, 'OK, you have a free role, go and do your best.' Nick himself is a maverick – he's obviously gone against big publishing to set this up. He was looking for a voice that echoed that and the youth culture at the time. I was interested in challenging concepts about visual language, and our preconceptions of how things are supposed to be.

It worked. It was just a big experiment, and each month it was like saying, 'Here's the latest white paper report from our laboratory.' That was it, no issue was ever intended as a final product: it was just another part of the process towards the next month, which was part of the process towards the month after. It was an organic, flowing thing. Because of the time angle, we were able to re-challenge stuff we'd done ourselves, constantly.

Is it similar today, do you think?

No, nothing's like that today. Nothing will challenge itself to that extent any more, be it a student or a magazine. No-one's willing to take the ultimate risk of self-destruction.

Can you describe to me your characteristics that have enabled you to do what you do?

I think a driving desire to question everything through creativity would be the heart of it, but one thing I might have added there was, I always felt as though I had some key things to say. I realise like the gestural thing, you can't say that from a fringe position; you can't be on the fringe of culture and influence it. I realise that I had to become famous, effectively. For me it was simply a tool to have what I had to say being announced and heard. The problem was people confuse that with celebrity, and people confused the work I was doing with a style statement. I was never trying to make a style statement, as I can't think of anything more abhorrent and I never craved celebrity, that's completely against everything I believe in. But if you can use it as a tool, to bring people to your words, then it's important. People kind of missed what was going on behind the scenes, and just saw the faces of style magazine. Who was creating styles for people to copy? I wasn't. I was saying, 'I can challenge this, then challenge me.' In a way *The Face* was my biggest success and my biggest failure, because within a very short time there were so many bad imitations of the work. For me that was failure, what I wanted to see was nothing looking like *The Face*. In fact if someone had said, '*The Face* is so old-fashioned or dead, and this is much more interesting,' and challenged it, I would have cheered. So that's when we

did *Arena*. I decided to do a magazine that never changed, and used the most boring typeface possible, as a sort of sign to stop and take stock of stuff, stop racing to just find new ideas for the sake of new ideas without any kind of reasoning behind it. It became fashion so quickly.

How quickly?

Well, the same month, *The Face* was coming out and stuff was appearing the same month, they were ripping off that issue that was just out. It was so fast. Advertising campaigns looked just like it, so that's when we had real problems because the adverts looked so much like some of the work we were doing at *The Face* itself. We got lost, I got lost, people associated me with all the bad rip-off work in this country; and people were going, 'I'm so sick of Brody,' when what they meant was, 'I'm so sick of all these fonts being used everywhere.' I mean so many people ripped off the fonts, the look, and to me that was a failure, not because of any business failure, but because I was trying to inspire a sense of challenge, not of copy. Anyway, next question ...

If you could go back to LCP and shake up the course, what would you most like to tell the young designers there now?

Well, that's an interesting question because I was saying I might start to get involved with them somehow, but I don't know in what capacity yet. To be honest I think that there's not enough soul-searching going on. You have to know yourself before you can speak to other people, and there's not enough of that sense of self, that sense of personal journey. I think that if anything I would like to create situations which were much more revealing of people's own nature.

You must see a constant stream of young graphic designers coming in contact with you. What qualities do you see that they have in general, that might be holding them back?

Fear – if anything, it's fear. It's a lack of confidence in themselves. They think, because of the way culture is and society is right now, that students have to perform, like performing monkeys. There is a certain code, a certain way of doing stuff, and they have to somehow please the person they are going to see, and their work gets so watered down, their selves get so lost because of that. In the end it's vacuous. It's empty. What I look for in people, before anything else, is personality and a strong conviction of their own nature. I'm not looking for people who have managed to capture the latest styles or are only technically proficient. Often I look at people's work and employ them despite their portfolio, not because of it ...

I wonder if they realise that ...

Oh, I tell them. A couple of people specifically, I thought their portfolios were terrible, but I really felt they had the capacity to challenge me to believe in themselves and to be committed to exploring ideas and visual communication.

Have you ever had any ideas on how you might help someone be aware of that, or teach it?

There are certain workshop ideas that you can do and they would need to revolve around removing props, because we tend to solve things using what we know.

Psychological props?

Not only psychological but also conventions. When people approach product design or any kind of visual communication they tend to form it out of a set of props that exist – references, styles, ways of doing things, manufacturing limitations that they're not prepared to question. Everything is formed out of ready-mades, so the way to do it is to set specific projects and not allow people to use any ready-made references. It's tough. Thinking and struggling with it, how do you communicate in print without using words?

It's simple, you know, rethinking the table, like in this restaurant, basically at the end of the day it's a surface at an approximate height, that you can put things on, but beyond that it can be anything, as we can see here...

The upturned tray style?

Yeah, exactly. I like the idea of re-purposing stuff for a use it was never intended for. That's always very inspiring. I mean in *The Face* we used a lot of things like road signs and stuff, but completely out of context, as a way of revealing how controlling our society is.

What is the greatest personal transformation you've had to go through – in your career, in adulthood, as you were growing up?

I don't know if there was any specific one. College was a huge transformation. I was really thrown back on my own devices, and my own strengths, and I had to work so hard for it to work. Because as I said you can't just go in and break something, you have to offer an alternative. That took far more thinking than just accepting conventions, doing it normally. It was a huge transformation.

So you've kept that?

As far as I can. I don't think I have the same strengths or passion as I used to. I have a child now, which was my second great transformation. It's transformed my life in so many brilliant ways. Steve Jobs, the head of Apple, I met with him and we were talking about this and he said it brilliantly. He said, 'Having a child was like discovering the colour blue.' You are consciously aware, and then suddenly it's like another reality. It's brilliant, so yeah that's my other transformation.

How did you manage to turn your success from
The Face into an international career?

I mean *The Face* was part of my work: it was part of all the other stuff I was doing. It was one thing that happened to be in the public eye. I was still doing tons of record covers and stuff at the time, tons of other work, but it is rare for someone to have total commitment to what they are doing. This is kind of what I had, total commitment. I spent all my time seven days a week, twenty hours a day. *The Face* was one part of that. This was only about one week in a month, and the rest of the month I was doing record covers and exhibition posters and book designs. *The Face* was kind of one part. It was only a quarter of my output at the time.

It was just a phenomenal amount of work at the time. The other thing is, I was very very lucky, to be in the right place at the right time. There was a growing consciousness of visual communication in this country, and the consciousness that things had changed. It was post-punk and originally Thames & Hudson were interested in doing a broad graphic book and Neil Spencer, who was previously editor of *NME*, then working on *The Face*, started *Straight No Chaser* which was the underground jazz, world music magazine. He championed the idea of me doing a solo book. Thames & Hudson agreed to do the book and we went to the V&A and said can we have a show? They agreed and it was amazing – 40,000 people came to the show. It was phenomenal, and the book sold like 100,000. But it didn't feel like an unnatural step for me. It was just the next step in publishing these experimental ideas, that was all.

When times get tough, as they invariably do, what
personal resources in yourself do you feel you tap into
to get through that?

I'd like to be encouraging to students and say a deep resolve, a belief in my own self. But it's not like that. Sometimes you go through years of real shit, lack of self-belief, and you think, 'What the fuck am I doing, why am I doing this? Is this what I want to do?' It's a continuous self-questioning. Sometimes you are depressed. You've got a bad job or a bad client, money's run out, just all your normal human stuff, but at the end of the day, I keep coming back round to the belief that you can change things creatively. At the end of the day, it's all to do with a personal journey.

What would you most like to say to designers starting
their careers now?

Well, don't listen to anyone, but they just have to trust, trust. Trust is the biggest thing, and it's a kind of trust in risk, a trust in possibility, a trust in their inner strengths. They should not be in a place where they seek approval through others, because in the end that becomes everything. We've all been through that stuff. You can turn on a dime. Someone says they like something, you feel brilliant; if a client says, 'I don't like this, change it,' you just crash. For a long time after college it was like that, but actually it doesn't matter. You kind of have to develop this inner strength as a way of looking at stuff.

What, an amount of detachment?

Yeah, in a way, definitely, and also be willing to challenge your own work. As soon as you settle into a pattern, change it.