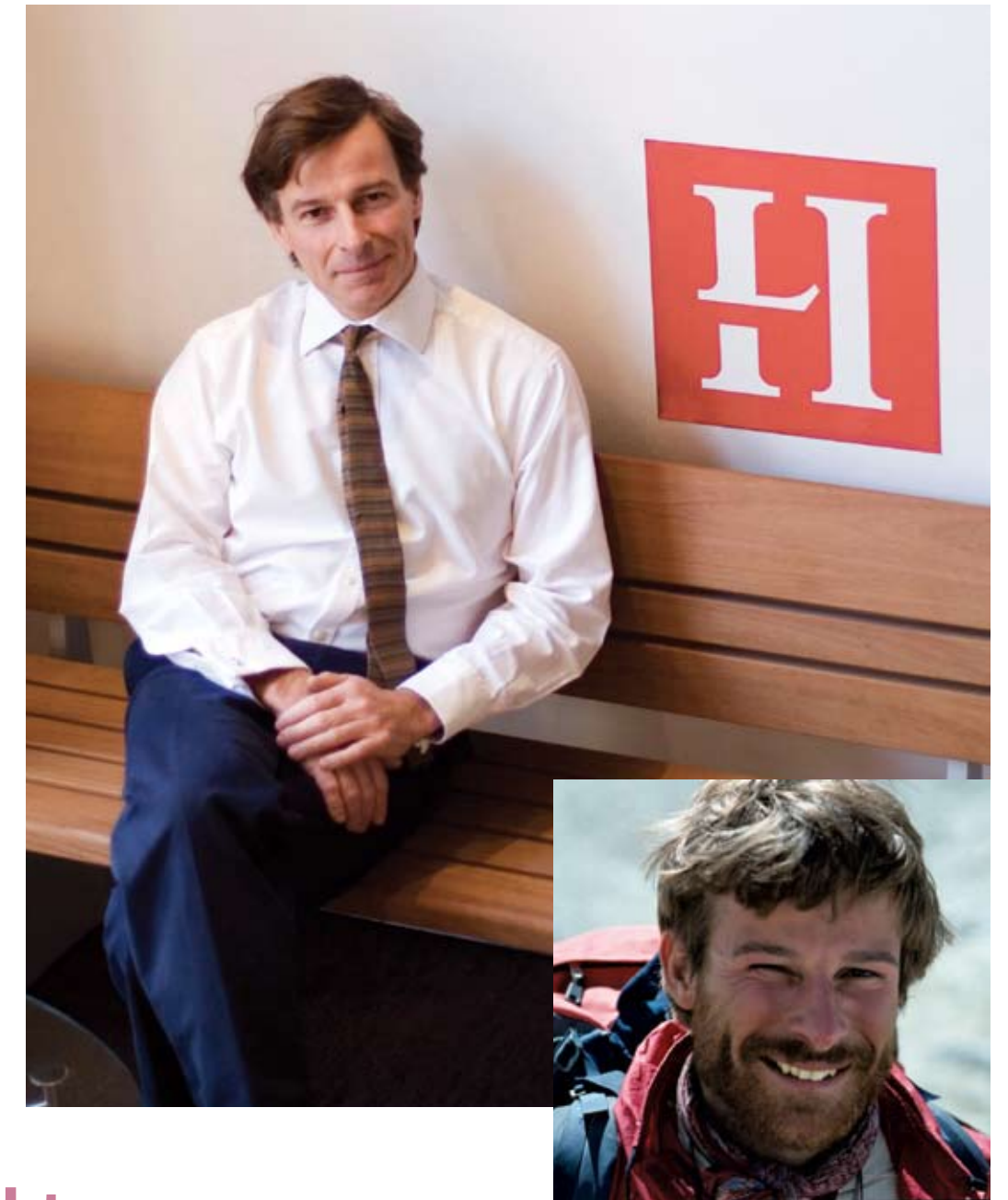




luke hughes: exquisite, apposite design

prominent uk furniture designer luke hughes has designed and made furniture for more than 50 oxbridge colleges, 81 churches and cathedrals, 5 royal palaces and more than 900 boardrooms for major international city corporations. . . when he's not climbing the himalayas



Brought up near Salisbury,

which he calls "breathtakingly beautiful", Luke Hughes went on to read history and the history of art, at Cambridge. He speaks fondly of his parents and their supportiveness, saying of his father, a judge, "He was as acutely intuitive as my mother was logical and analytical and always encouraged me to follow my instincts." He acquired cabinet-making skills in the 1970s while working with Michael Johnson, "a restorer of pianos and a maker of harpsichords; in the same studio was also a maker of lutes and guitars - all complicated wooden objects requiring a high degree of skill. From them, I realised early on I had an aptitude for making - and a love for doing so. He set up Bloomsbury Joinery, a small craft workshop in 1978, before purchasing the freehold of a former banana warehouse, which is still part

of the current studio premises in Covent Garden. Luke Hughes and Company was incorporated in 1986.

The company's design philosophy draws on the principles of the Arts & Crafts Movement, and importantly, the concept that in any quality building, the connection between architecture and furniture should be seamless and respectful of the space itself. Luke Hughes' recent work focuses on design for public spaces, particularly in the educational, ecclesiastical, corporate and leisure sectors, usually for buildings with significant architectural interiors. Clearly inspired by the historical, Hughes still lives in the house he grew up in, "The house itself is 400 years old, next to a ruined castle that is 750 years old, the preparatory school I attended is now

more than 920 years old, my secondary school celebrated its 500th anniversary last year, and my college at Cambridge was founded 725 years ago. Continuity of that kind is rare in secular institutions, nevertheless, longevity is not a great thing in its own right unless it can inform the present."

A regular lecturer on sustainability and member of several important professional associations, Luke Hughes was shortlisted in 2010 for the prestigious Walpole Award for British Luxury Design Talent. Apart from his notable skills in furniture crafting, Hughes is an accomplished mountaineer, has climbed several challenging peaks as well as made over a dozen trips to the Himalayas, and has explored much of the unmapped, unexplored areas of central Tibet.



The Nepalese government believe they have more than 3000 mountains higher than 6000m, of which only 270 have actually been climbed. 90% of trekkers go to the National Parks around Annapurna or Everest with all the crowds and litter. Why does everyone want to be the same as everyone else when there is so much to do in the unmapped regions? Why be a sheep when one could be a tiger?

IFJ had the pleasure of a detailed Q n A with the designer who describes himself as having “a strong maverick tendency” and a love of “getting to unconventional solutions.”

ifj : Your work for churches is fascinating. What special sensitivities or skills does creating furniture for churches involve ?

LH : It is one of the most fascinating areas of my work and one of the most challenging. Sacred spaces really matter to the communities who use them, regardless of the religion or denomination. The design of the furnishings can have a profound effect on the life of the building, sometimes for generations to come. Poor design can destroy the sense of the sacred; the challenge is to enhance it. The greatest commissions come from creative collaborations between artists, designers, craftsmen, priests, congregations and committees, which at best, can be intoxicating, especially if the buildings are outstanding

In Britain, we have some of the most spectacular ecclesiastical buildings in the world; it is not possible to change the fabric but you can do a lot by changing the furniture. It is my good fortune to be asked to keep them relevant in the 21st century.

ifj : You've worked in several different environments, from the ecclesiastical to spa and corporate, what are the particular demands of these spaces ? in terms of design considerations.

LH : Designing furniture well demands a knowledge of social anthropology - you have to be an observer of how people inhabit spaces, far more than merely being a good product designer. What an object looks like is less important than the influence that object can have on the space in which it resides; furniture should embellish the space, not embarrass it. Most buildings cannot function without furniture, yet inappropriate pieces grossly undermine great architecture. The challenge lies in meshing the two. This is as true in Windsor Castle or Westminster Abbey, as it is in the luxury spa of Number One Hyde Park.

ifj : Quite often, the space is the setting which throws the furniture and artefacts into relief, but one gets the feeling that in the case of church furniture, this might well be quite the reverse given the scale and grandeur of church spaces. How do you tackle this ?

LH : The rule of thumb, in our studio, is to let the architecture do the work, so strive to make the furniture subservient. Most great buildings are conceived with meticulous care - clutter diminishes them. So the furniture should be the minimum needed to allow the building to work for those who inhabit it. In medieval monasteries, the main buildings are really just beautiful stone barns, until an altar is placed at one end, even unadorned - then they begin to feel like sacred spaces. How can placing simple table at one end of a stone barn make such a difference? It's a mystery!

ifj : How do you see your offerings change with the times ? Have you noticed that you have changed your thinking, in some way ?

LH : More sophistication; constant learning; constant striving; harsher self-criticism. Better understanding of materials and how to work them. Better understanding of what it takes to produce something well designed for its purpose and context, something distilled down to its essence. If it looks easy, you know it has taken a lot of sweat and tears.



ifj : One of the key concerns of our time is sustainability and eco respect. How do you factor this into your work. How do your buyers respond ?

LH : It's not just our work - the thinking should be part of one's life, informing all decisions. There has, nevertheless, to be a balance between idealism and the practicalities. The salient factors are: the impact the business has on the environment; the choice of the materials and the source of those materials and the costs of moving them around. The first addresses such issues as the consumption of energy, the means of transport, the dealing with waste, the support to local charities etc.

The choice and source is easy for us: 80% of what we design is in timber, (only European and American hardwoods, mostly from forests with 'continuous cover' policies) 10% is recycled steel, and 10% in stone. Fortunately, timber is permanently sustainable if the forestry management regime is rigorous. The good news is that, especially over the last 100 years, forest cover has markedly improved in Europe (averaging 47% per country) and in the United States. It is possible, within two generations, to reverse an incipient ecological catastrophe. One recent authoritative study believes that afforestation and reforestation programmes could reverse the global decline in woodlands within 30 years. One longs for the same to be true in Indonesia, Brazil and China.

ifj : How do you feel we can encourage designers to incorporate eco-sensibility into their work . . . from the very start of their thought process ?

LH : We should all start thinking about life expectancy and abandoning the throw-away culture. Many of our institutional and ecclesiastical clients are taking a 50-100 year view - you can grow a lot of trees in that time. Others, especially in the hotel and corporate world, refit their buildings once every 5 or 10 years. The waste of materials or craftsmanship, is simply staggering. Better to do less to a higher standard, and take the long view, than throwing a heap of banal regulations in attempts to influence what designers should be doing anyway - using common sense.

ifj : Do you bring something back to your work from the mountains ? Have your travels to the Far East left a mark ?

LH : Time to reflect. Intense memories. A counterpoint to the frenzy of professional life. A fresh view. Such influences are less about style then approach. All journeys are didactic, especially those in the wilderness. Although I am not a Buddhist, I have learned that Tibetan Buddhism, has much to teach the modern world about how to balance a fragile existence with a harsh environment. ifj

NOTE : IFJ supports sustainability initiatives worldwide. Connect with AHEC at rod@americanhardwood.org

