

The Backstory of The Northwest Industrial Design Archive (NWIDA)

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Appreciating the present by researching the past.

It all began when I purchased a home my wife and I fell in love with, designed in 1977 by an architect named Ralph Anderson, that was in need of some TLC. Being a designer myself, I always found more value in our built environment when I could better understand the ideas and intent behind a structure or artifact so I could appreciate it in use. What were the design influences and philosophies that led to what was created? What was the rationale for the house's plan on site and how did he think occupants would use the spaces and negotiate both "private" and "public" areas? Where did the home's aesthetic come from?

This led me on a search through the UW architecture archives, Arcade Magazine, and the Peter Miller book store to find every book on the history of NW architecture and the protagonists who were defining the ethos of the city's residential structures. Through that, I learned about a small set of individuals who practiced in the 1940s - 1970s that some call the "Puget Sound School." It turns out Anderson was a prolific architect who was influential to the careers of many pioneering architects still practicing today like George Suyama and Jim Olson whose works have put Seattle on the map of architectural significance.

A key influence of Anderson were both Paul Kirk and Gene Zema. Zema studied and practiced in Japan and is largely credited for bringing the Japanese sensibilities to NW architecture. I learned that the long awnings of my house, which allow us to keep windows open for natural ventilation in spite of the rain, and the interior use of cedar surfaces that reflect the wooded surroundings, are examples of the regional aesthetic that combined the simplicity of modernism (Paul Kirk) with the unique weather patterns of this part of the planet.

It struck me that through my research about Ralph Anderson, I was trying to create a personal relationship with him that increased my appreciation for what I now inhabit with my family.

It made me wonder how much of a missed opportunity it is to not be able to hear about the stories behind so many of the **products** we live with today, many of which are saving lives or that we take for granted.

Lunches with the NW ID Legends



For the past 3 years, I've participated in discussions about the state of the ID profession at twice-yearly lunches at Cactus in Madison Park with four of the region's original group of Industrial Designers, who I like to consider both mentors and friends. The men studied ID at the UW between 1956 and 1972 under the tutelage of then visiting professor, Frank Del Guidice, who also established the NW office of Walter Dorwin Teague to design the interiors for the Boeing 1956 Stratocruiser after the war.

The four men (in the picture from left to right) were Harold Kawaguchi, George McCain, David Smith and Dell King, all of whom are retired and passionate about the future of the profession they helped pioneer.

During some small talk, Harold once mentioned he used to have scotch on Fridays at Paul Kirk's studio in Seattle, and it struck me that he and others were contemporaries of the architects I had been researching (*and worshipping*), whose work and stories have been well-documented.

I asked them if there was a place where I could find their collective stories and work products with others in the Industrial Design profession who have made more of a lasting worldwide impact with their pioneering designs that were engineered and fabricated here in the NW. This was met with mostly silence. The MOHAI is the only single place where the origins of these great companies have been captured, but there is no nuanced capture of the design narratives that would accompany them.

As I was driving home I got to thinking... What a privilege it is to hear about the moment they decided to study Industrial Design and about their challenges to prove the profession's value. I wished others could be comforted knowing they too were unsure they could make a living with an Art degree and had to prove their worth and overcome situations of limited resources and support for their ideas. I wish they could hear how they lament how Industrial Design education lacks the physicality of the past, and is being softened to accommodate many of the jobs today

that call first for “experience design” more than the craft and technical execution required to make something physically perfect.

World Class Industrial Design + Business Success

Like what was happening in silicon valley in the early 60’s at the start of computing, these designers were practicing what is often referred to as “Product Design,” that today expands on the notion that Industrial Design was first and foremost about styling and aesthetics made popular by the likes of national design icons like Raymond Loewy. Beauty was important, but when designing the world’s first heart defibrillators and handheld electronic measurement equipment, or at home exercise equipment, safety of use could not be compromised. Design was then, as it is now, an act of composition. A composition that integrated technology constraints, business objectives, and the ease of use by customers using a rigorous process of prototyping, testing and refinement to get right. Design was an act of humility and hard work, not conceit and showmanship.

It may be that the regional temperament of introversion and humility that stems from its Asian and Scandinavian roots that was well-suited for designers and engineers for the types of products being produced in the area, including what would be a heavy dose of computer technology.

Although often treated like “artists in residence” amongst heavily engineering focused cultures, the individual skill and personal influence of these designers resulted in world-class products associated with companies like Physio Control (now Stryker), The Fluke Corporation, and Precor Fitness. There are similar stories that could be told about similar design contributions that were made to local company successes at places like Boeing, ATL, Kenworth, and Jansport. These stories connect to those by today’s designers at Microsoft, Meta, Amazon, and Google, all of which make worldwide products that are both digital AND physical.

Personal Influences

I truly don’t know if these men know how much each of them has been an inspiration and mentor to many like me who did not have many examples to follow early on when we were also having to push for professional relevancy in new product categories that insisted we learn new skills—not taught in school—to accommodate the new problems facing us.

I can describe how they inspired me, taught me something useful, and showed me how to carry myself as a professional. After almost 40 years practicing design I find myself wondering if I too have made others better and how I can be a part of connecting the work and people of the past with those of the now and future.

I wondered, would it be possible to document their stories as professionals using their own words in such a way that could be viewed across mediums (i.e. mixed reality) that might trigger unexpected connections between people and ideas?

Questions that got me (us) thinking...

Do the Industrial (Product) designers practicing today know the stories of these men and how they not just paved the way as examples of business return on design investment, but helped to establish Industrial Design as a profession?

Do Designers today realize how similar their experiences are to what these men went through as part of being a “minority” discipline, amongst a heavily engineering focused business climate of the area?

How can Designers today learn from the past and each other at a time when they are faced with so many new questions being presented by the blurring boundaries between physical and digital products?

How can we replicate the value of a lunch discussion that I was privy to, so every designer can gain from their insights, personal stories of overcoming challenges and their hopeful views for the new generation?

What if we leveraged state-of-the-art technology and created an enduring resource that could be built on by generations of designers and professionals to better appreciate the history and lessons of the post war industrial revolution and computer and information age at a time when there is so much uncertainty in the moment being undertaken coined, the “4th Industrial Revolution?”

The NWIDA

The following is a draft of an idea that would establish the “mechanics” of an interactive and participatory Industrial Design archive that would act as a reference tool for professional designers today and in the future. It intentionally starts small to test its design and feature set but will be architected to scale to be experienced using future forward mediums.

It starts with a baseline set of transcripts from in depth 1 on 1 interviews with each of the 4 individuals about their personal pasts, stories of how they got into Design, and the key product moments that helped define their places at Fluke Corporation, Physio Control and Precor Fitness.

In parallel, we will prototype how to best archive corporate product lines so the data can be organized and coded to flow between products, companies, and people over a time-filtered user interface. We will start with the companies closest to the above individuals where they have vested interests in documenting how Industrial Design became so essential to business success.