

HELEN KONTOURIS

Greek – Australian among 200 top designers in the world

Helen Kontouris (foto), a Greek fashion designer who lives and works in Melbourne, has been shortlisted among the 100 best designers of the world, for the third Brit Insurance Designs of the Year, 2010 Awards which will be held in London. Helen Kontouris has been nominated for her series of outdoor furniture, entitled Breathe. The creations of Helen Kontouri have been featured in more than 100 magazines world-wide, receiving nothing but praise and positive comments. She has exhibited her work in countries such as Italy, America, Spain, Germany, England and many other countries around the world, drawing the admiration of experts. Her creations are an expression of “organic femininity” and environmental sensitivity as she stated herself to “Neos Kosmos” a while ago. Among the companies which have promoted her creations worldwide are, Ceda from Spain, Ritzenhoff from Germany, Kundalini from Italy, the Multinational Company Schiavello and more.

Can you describe the work of your studio – what does Helen Kontouris Design do?

Helen Kontouris: I am moving in a multitude of directions but I am mainly focused on product and industrial design, working on interior and exterior related type products such as lighting, furniture and homewares. Over the last few months I have also been working in other areas as well like electronics.

Can you tell me what the motivation was to starting your own studio?

I trained and started my career in interior design and had a couple of failed starts. I started my first interior design business at 19 and that failed. Then I started another business in interior design at about 22, I didn't learn any mistakes from my previous business – so it failed. The whole premise behind me starting my business was that I had this beautiful ideology that as long as I had great ideas I'll somehow find clients. I didn't really understand the core ideas of business. So after the second business failed I had a break, went traveling and then started another interior design business with a good friend of mine who was also in the industry.

We worked really really hard on a number of interior-based projects but within those projects I found I was predominantly working on or developing on a series of product designs within the design of any given space.

So two years into that business I realised product design was my real interest and I progressed into that. Eventu-

ally we wound up the third interior practice and since 2005 my practice has been focused on products.

You said you didn't learn from your key mistakes in your other businesses, what did you want to do right the third time around with the interior design business, and then in your fourth and current business?

The third time around, I actually had a book of contacts and some business skills behind me such as process, understanding and researching and studying, how business works etcetera.

How steep a learning curve has it been for you to run your own business?

I guess when you have had a couple of failures in business and the realisation that you didn't learn from previous mistakes sets in... That was I think the best learning curve I could have had. In the past I might have read something or tried something but not really understood it, without actually seeing what results were gained. It's a completely different approach now.

Did you have a business plan when you began your current product design business – Helen Kontouris Design?

When I started the product design arm of things my goal was to be able to get a product that would be good enough to get to Milan. So I guess I had a set of goals that I wanted to achieve and that it was about achieving those, then getting to that

stage and then reevaluating before aiming for my next set of goals which was to get signed

by an international manufacturer.

When that happened I reevaluated and my next aim was that I wanted more international clients. Then when that happened I reevaluated again. I am constantly from week to week and month to month, reevaluating what I want to achieve and what the next steps are. It has worked for me as a business plan – a continual organic evolution, it is quite reactive to what is going on and being able to achieve these things in the shortest amount of time.

What kind of key business skills do you think are necessary to run a successful design business?

The major one I have discovered is to do with building relationships with clients. I think it is important that clients realise that you wholeheartedly understand their business and that you are not there being purely self-indulgent and designing things to get press coverage. Those relationships can't be based on a self-indulgent process – there is a two-party negotiation there.

How much market research do you do – if you were going to launch a new product to market how much do you research its potential use and market before you go to pitch it to a potential manufacturer?

A lot. What I usually do is first of all I research the company that I am working with quite thoroughly to understand them. I always try to understand where the client is presently and to understand their goals and to essentially, not only ensure that I can take the client where there vision was to be but also to take them into areas that perhaps they had never thought of. That has worked really well for me.

I also discuss with them their future plans and directions and then I go and set out to understand the product they are



looking for me to design. Researching what is available presently and seeing that obviously if I am going to create a product I have to create a product that I feel will surpass predecessors beforehand. Otherwise there is no sense in creating another product to replace something else if there are already very good products on the market.

Can you give me an outline of what is going on in your studio on an average day?

I am quite disciplined and start with the most difficult or mundane things required to complete for the day, I then write mini lists and number them in importance so that I don't get distracted by the easiest things first. The other main thing I try to do is be really efficient with my time. If I realise that I am not progressing with a concept I switch to another project with fresh eyes so that I am not deliberating for too long. I then come back to it again.

It is a difficult thing when you are working for yourself in a studio environment you have the opportunity to slack off or whatever. But the reality for me is that I have always had this embedded thing that I start with the hard stuff for the day and then finish with the easy stuff.

How much time would you spend on a day-to-day basis on design and how much on business administration etc.?

I would say three quarters of my time these days would be

spent designing.

That's amazing!

I know and sometimes a day is spent that is 100% designing. I loathe having to do the banal things you have to do when running a business – obviously no designer wants to be working on the other elements of the business. But that is the thing about working on the things you don't want to do first for the day which is what I do, working on the stuff I don't want to be doing, the design stuff is the fun stuff.

Running an Australian design business, what particular challenges do you face that are perhaps unique to the Australian situation?

The distance is somewhat an obstacle. I have had conversations with manufacturers that have said 'Look, if you can't be in Europe and come and see us one to two times a week, we just can't work with you.' I know that I am never going to get that client because I don't live in Europe! But then I work with other companies in Europe that are fine for that not to occur and we can discuss and work together in other ways.

I feel as an Australian designer I have needed to be more resilient than many international designers. It has meant that my approach with clients has had to be more unique so that they don't see the distance as being an obstacle and that has helped shaped the way I work as a result.

Interview by Madeleine Hinchy. Images courtesy Helen Kontouris Design.

