KINFOLK

THE DESIGN ISSUE

Solving problems, thinking creatively and enhancing quality of life: Design doesn't just cater to communities—it creates them.

A View From the Porch

Changes in our neighborhoods and social patterns are altering the architecture of our homes and the ways we live in them.

The Natural Perspective

Artist Michele Oka Doner has spent more than five decades refining her macro philosophy to find balance between the city and the sea.

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Profile Series: Design Committee

In one form or another, a good designer always has society's wishes at the opposite end of their pencil, paintbrush or stylus. Hailing from six countries, some of the designers in this feature are solo operators, others manage intercontinental teams and two are partners in both business and life. They design comfy couches, men's shirts, Moroccan hotels, non-profit logos and giant interactive ball pits: But most importantly, they design an experience that's shared by their community.

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Margaret Howell

By forgoing trends in favor of classic patterns with distinctive details, this London-based designer draws from her childhood memories to create simple pieces that defy eras.

Natural, unpretentious and definitively British: While sipping tea with designer Margaret Howell, it soon becomes clear that these adjectives can be applied to both the person as well as her designs. Few designers evoke a stronger sense of Britishness than Howell, who has quietly won a global following since launching her minimalist fashion label on her south-east London kitchen table in 1972. Today, there are six Margaret Howell stores in the UK, boutiques in Paris and Florence and more than 100 stores in Japan—her biggest market—including three cafés that serve English teas, cakes and a perfect winter shepherd's pie. Her understated clothing mixes modern tailoring with quality British heritage fabrics, and she also creates an equally popular line of household products and curates British design exhibitions at her London flagship store. One year shy of 70, Howell is modest and quietly spoken with an old-school charm—she doesn't even use email, so our pre-interview correspondence was suitably sent courtesy of Royal Mail. We asked her for advice about crafting timeless designs while staying focused purely in the moment.

How did your early years define your career path as a designer? — At school, I was always doing doodles of hairstyles, shoes, clothes and that sort of thing. Much later on, I found that some of the teachers' clothing came back to me when designing my collections. So I must have been sitting there looking like I was listening to the teacher, but I was really more interested in her pinstripe suit: I suppose that, even then, I had an intuitive feel for a sense of current fashion. Meanwhile, I had a simple life with my parents. They would grow vegetables in the garden and serve them at picnics; we always self-catered and we'd go to places off the beaten track. That's what they liked, and that's what I love now. The style of my designs and the feeling of the clothes has a similar sort of naturalness; it's not a tight-fitted smartness. Fabric is key—as is authenticity—over something purely decorative or created for effect.

How do you imbue your personal value system into a physical product? — I try to give life and authenticity to my designs. It all starts when you have an idea about something—it could be triggered by an item of clothing or maybe a fabric. For me, it's often tied up with memory and association. For instance, the way I've designed my shirts has always been tied up with memories of my dad's old cotton shirts being worn-in, soft and crumpled.

What elements of design do we not realize affect our quality of life? — School design can have a big impact. Schools are functional buildings and should be well designed. I attended an experimental school in Burgh Heath, Surrey, and it was so brilliant and well built. It was a brick building with a large assembly hall and windows along one side, playing fields and a wonderful new gym. I remember on our first day people were still up on ladders doing little sculptural reliefs set into the bricks.

Right: Having designed her own clothing line since 1972, Margaret Howell's influences include actor Katharine Hepburn, pilot Amy Johnson and memories of her dad's crumpled shirts. She is pictured here wearing her SS15 dense cotton poplin PJ shirt and a pair of twill chinos made in collaboration with Edwin.

PHOTOGRAPH: PHIL DUNLOP

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Unfortunately it was knocked down and the area was rebuilt during the Thatcher years, but it's interesting to think now about the influence it had on me.

How does the design of our homes influence our domestic lives? — A small house can appear to have a lot of space and light if it's well designed with the right proportions. It's incredible the effect a building has upon you without you realizing it—you don't have to be someone who appreciates aesthetics to be affected by it. And if you do appreciate aesthetics, it just fills you with more joy!

What is the difference between simplicity and minimalism? — In design, minimalism suggests the bare essentials. Editing out anything superfluous always makes it better; things become clearer. Minimalism can be very sophisticated, of course, but simplicity suggests something more basic and charming. In terms of objects, if you look at a Lucie Rie pot, for instance, there is so much skill involved that you could hardly say it's simple, yet its shape and form are minimal in essence.

Your designs have long been regarded as quintessentially British. How important is "Britishness" as an ingredient in your creations? — I used to like the European magazines—the Italian and the French—as they were more in tune with my style. I liked their styling and take on English fashion. I actually didn't relate very much to the whole 1960s pop culture thing that went on here—all the minis and things. Where I looked to Britain was in terms of the people I used to make things, such as the fabric sources. British fabrics that've been made here for a long time have a sort of depth to them. Rather than look at trends, I like to use real fabrics and then be innovative in the design or the type of clothing I'm making instead.

Whose design philosophies do you most respect? — The designers I was most influenced by in the 1960s and 1970s were Yves Saint Laurent and Jean Muir: There is a pared-down plainness to the make and quality of Jean Muir that I've always appreciated. As for Yves Saint Laurent, it was all about the tailoring and the trouser suit. I remember buying a Yves Saint Laurent pattern for a jacket when I was at art school—I learned a lot from it.

What else inspires your creative process? — I'm most inspired by things I see around me. I remember doing a drawing I called

the Lewisham Girl: It was a picture of a girl I spotted on the street who was wearing a kilt, and I thought she looked great. I'm also inspired by photographs in old social history books and by film stars, such as Katharine Hepburn's style in trousers or women like Amy Johnson, the pilot; I was often inspired by modern independent women in this new world of equality with men, wearing the trousers. In terms of men's clothing (which I started out with) it was all about softening and relaxing the shirt. I loved the quality of shirts, but I didn't love the shirts that you'd get in Jermyn Street with those stiff collars. I think that's what men responded to: the relaxed quality of the make and fabric, and the little details that made it feel different.

What makes a design timeless? — Well-designed products tend to endure. They become our classics, like the Anglepoise light or Braun clocks. It's important that pieces consider form, function and being made with the right materials for the job.

How many different artisan communities do you currently work with? — I work with quite a few. There's Mackintosh, who make the rubberized raincoats that I love so much and are still a bestseller after all these years. We also work with a half-dozen small Scottish knitwear companies, many on the borders in Hawick. Then there is Whitehouse Cox, who started off as saddle makers, whose leatherwork we use on bags and belts, and we also work with London Tradition for duffle coats and Tricker's for shoes.

Many of these are generations-old companies. What are the biggest challenges they face? — Many older companies could benefit from doing more to attract young people to learn the trade. Some companies in Scotland are housed in very old Victorian buildings and others have renovated newer factories to make them more efficient and attractive to work in. One of the biggest challenges they face is trying to get younger employees in. If they were offering the right pay and the right conditions, I think many young people would enjoy being taught these crafts and would get the same satisfaction and pride that older people have with their work. The older generation needs to pass on these skills, but they also need to stay updated.

How do you create products that delicately balance modern innovation with being rooted in tradition? — I think it's all to do with the choice of fabric: the lightness, the construction, the cut, the color. Color is quite far down the list, but it's still important. These days it's difficult to use Harris tweeds in those lovely natural colors because it feels a bit too country, whereas in black or dark gray, they're still delicious.

How have your design values changed over time? — I used to love going into charity shops, but they're now so stuffed with clothes that I don't enjoy it as much. That's the result of chain stores selling cheap products from China and people being seduced into buying far more than they need. I'm sure that leads to a lack of good values in terms of respecting and looking after things, which were the post-war values my parents raised me with. You really don't need masses of things when perhaps one or two things will do—I'll always prefer having one thing that cost more money but is something I really like and will live with for a long time.

Why is it important to make consumers aware of the stories behind products and to tell them where these pieces have come from? — Sometimes people have no idea how much really goes into production—how many hands and processes it goes through—so we made a series of brochures showing our products being made. I think it's important that the consumers are aware of this and that these stories explain the value of the products.

How can design help the cultivation of local communities? — I think design in general—our street design, our buildings, our schools—can have a big influence on community. Design can also help communities. For example, the Maggie's Centres are drop-in centers for cancer patients across the UK: They've brought in well-known designers to build these beautiful spaces with lovely gardens, and they've found it really does make a difference. Another example is the Royal Festival Hall in London: It was built for the 1951 Festival of Britain to uplift the people's spirits. The building itself is timeless and has lasted because it's beautifully designed and they put value on the materials used. It's still a thriving community building.

How do timely consumer trends influence product design? — Trends can be exciting, but I don't think that way; trend-based thinking doesn't affect me. I create in the present, and I'd never profess to know what the future will be! But I might have thoughts back to the past. The way I work is more a response to seeing something and interpreting it; it's a very intuitive response. I don't really think of what I do as fashion—I see it as designing clothes that have the right feel for that day or for that particular lifestyle. Everything I do stems from a lifestyle approach.

It's not just about clothes: Your stores are also filled with kitchenware and furniture in addition to British design exhibitions. How did this evolution come about? — When we moved to Wigmore Street in 2002, I'd been designing clothes for 30 years. I thought it'd be an opportunity to create a nice setting for the clothes by putting things I liked around them—the same aesthetic but in different forms. So I decided to create the challenge of putting on small exhibitions of other British designers who interested me. The Wigmore Street shop space is very long, like a gallery, so it worked very well. It was simply a case of increasing and diversifying what we were already doing in a very natural way. It's about creating an entire lifestyle, and it's also a good way to bring like-minded people together. DD