The in-house designer: agent of social change?

A new book, Own Label: Sainsbury’s Design Studio 1962–1977 highlights the role played by the supermarket’s design team in modernising British attitudes to food and how its work reflected underlying social upheaval. The following is an exclusive extract from Emily King’s essay that opens the book, published by FUEL next month.

Domestic life in the UK changed enormously over the 1960s and 1970s. More than simply keeping up, supermarket chain Sainsbury’s had a role in driving these developments. Selling convenience foods to working mothers and Mediterranean ingredients to those who had just taken their first foreign holiday, the supermarket was integral to the social change of the period.

Perhaps it is not too much to claim that Sainsbury’s incubated the contemporary foody. Aware of the influence of writers such as Elizabeth David, in the 1960s the supermarket began to stock olive oil, which until then could only be found in medicinal quantities on the shelves of Boots the Chemist. A decade later it took an even more active role in promoting new ways of eating by publishing books of recipes from around the world. For the first time Britain’s home cooks could knock up curries from raw ingredients bought at their local high street supermarket.

Sainsbury’s and post-war design

Entering the firm in 1950 and taking over as Chairman in 1969 (the company’s centenary year), John Sainsbury – Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover, known and referred to as Mr JD – was interested in the development of own brand products from the start. Before the war, there had been a range of ‘own label’ grocery lines under the Selsa label, and an own label margarine under the Crellos label, which competed with the strongly advertised Unilever margarines. In the mid-1950s it became possible for Sainsbury’s to purchase products that matched the quality of the brand leaders, at more competitive prices.

Mr JD recognised that this clutch of apparently unconnected names was a problem. “I was very keen from the start that we used [the name] Sainsbury’s rather than some invention,” he says. “I wanted the style to be so distinct that customers need not look over the door to see whose shop they were in.”

Working with Leonard Beaumont, a designer employed as a consultant to the supermarket from 1950 until the in-house studio led by Peter Dixon was established, Mr JD set about introducing own label using the company name.

Ongoing post-war rationing meant that Sainsbury’s was unable to launch many new products, so apart from a few exquisitely simple boxes for goods such as eggs, Beaumont’s contribution was restricted to house style and point of sale. Yet in using only the typefaces Albertus and Trajan, he set a precedent for the restrained look that held sway in the company for the next 20-odd years. “We were trying to be modern,” says Mr JD. Comparing their approach to that of the 1951 Festival of Britain, he characterises it as part of
the “post World War II change of scene”.

According to Mr JD, the company’s approach to advertising was “very restrained” in the 1950s and 1960s. “We thought it was rather disreputable to spend money on heavy advertising,” he says. The advertising agency Coleman, Prentis and Varley’s memorable slogan “Good Food Costs Less at Sainsbury’s” was in use for 30 years between 1959 and 1989, proof of the company’s determination to get good value out of every promotional penny.

In line with its principles, in the early 1960s Sainsbury’s put their efforts into creating a network of skilled food buyers to deliver better quality and value for the company. Naturally they were also a boost to its own label business. “We had far more buyers than was general in the food trade in those days, so they really had a chance of learning about their product area,” says Mr JD, “and we were also unusual in having a laboratory for quality control.”

Equally uncommon was the in-house design studio, based at the company’s headquarters in Blackfriars. From its launch in 1963 with Dixon and an assistant, it expanded rapidly to a staff of five. Dixon remembers feeling that the work load grew considerably. “Obviously there must have been a proper plan from the company point of view,” he says, “but from our side, you suddenly realised that there was a waiting list of design to be done.”
"For all the limitations imposed by the manufacturers and the printers, there were very few restrictions on Dixon and his team in terms of graphic form"

Each of Dixon’s designers was expected to produce an average of two and a half packs a week, but, even at that rate, they could only just be keeping up with the work.

Born in 1929 and 1927 respectively, Dixon and Mr JD are close contemporaries. Taking up an apprenticeship in a commercial artists’ company on Fleet Street soon after the war, Dixon also attended night school at the London College of Printing in nearby Bolt Court, where he learnt basic art skills. In the years that followed, his most important post in creative terms was at the paper manufacturer, Wiggins Teape, where he took over from the renowned stamp designer George Knipe. “That was where I had my first taste of success. I was becoming very interested in typography and I was learning how to get the best out of print techniques,” he remembers.

**Design characterised by restraint**

By the end of the 1960s Dixon was working with a vast network of food manufacturers and printers. Drawing on and extending his knowledge of print processes, he found various methods of getting the best from situations. “One thing we could do was to add a varnish,” he recalls. “You had to be careful that the product could take it without spoiling the goods inside or anything like that, but, a varnish onto poor quality paper, sometimes we got away with it.”

He also explored a number of low-cost, high-visual-yield techniques such as overprinting. Discussing the package for Puffed Wheat, he says, “Just printing a transparent colour over a photograph was something I had started doing at Wiggins Teape.” Looking at the package over 40 years later he is inspired to think afresh. “It might have been nice to put a yellow strip in the other way and get a third colour in the corner,” he muses.

For all the limitations imposed by the manufacturers and the printers, there were very few restrictions on Dixon and his team in terms of graphic form. The only element of the design that was sacrosanct was the presentation of the company name. “The company logo had to be prominent and later on we had to set it in Venus Bold Extended. When we started putting the typeface on the fascias of big buildings, we kept it as standard,” explains Dixon.

Beyond that, he and his team were free to work as they wished. “You had three colours of your choice to play with and as many typefaces as you wanted to use,” he says. “If you wanted a pictorial and the product was photogenic you could use a photograph.” Otherwise he commissioned illustrators to provide an image, including an old friend.
from the LCP, Sid Day, who drew the sun on Sainsbury’s corn flakes package.

In spite of the freedom of choice, the studio generally stuck to simple sans serif typefaces. The few exceptions include letterforms reminiscent of Victorian wood types, for example on the package for cornflour (shown, facing page), which fell in line with the late 1960s taste for the style of the Arts and Crafts movement, and the odd jaunty script face, such as that on the Easy dessert range, which suggests Doris Day Americana.

Overall, however, the design of Sainsbury’s own label is characterised by restraint. In the 1960s, contemporary commentators described Dixon’s work as “non design”, “clinical” and on one occasion “Bauhaus”. “I wasn’t even aware of the Bauhaus until it was used in the article,” says Dixon, “then I pursued it, found out who they were and what they were producing. I took it as a compliment.”

Commercial modernism

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s the style of the Sainsbury’s studio evolved in line with the times. Responding to a changing visual climate in Britain, prompted by the introduction of Sunday colour supplements and the like, Dixon and his designers began to be bolder in their choice of colour and use of photographs. Yet the collective direction of the work remained graphically minimalist until the very end of Dixon’s tenure. Asked about a package he is particularly proud of, the designer mentions Snax crackers (shown over page). With its photographic repeat forming a simple geometric pattern, the layout is a perfect example of Dixon’s tendency to echo the abstract forms of the early modernists in a robustly commercial fashion.

“Most of the buyers had some marketing experience, and invariably their view towards design was different,” he says. “They would think ‘we’re buying Heinz and Heinz soup is red and has a spoon on it, so we want a red label with a spoon’, which was absolutely contrary to everything I was trying to do. If you have a big batch of red labels one side and a big batch of green the other, then it’s best to design a white label, stark with interesting typography, which would then stand out from the other brands. When a design was drawing a lot of debate John would get

Facing page, from top:
Puffed wheat breakfast cereal box, 1971; corn flakes box, 1976; cornflour label, 1969; ‘Easy’ range desserts, date uncredited.

This page, from top:
Frozen cod label, 1964;
“the buyer in,” Dixon recalls. “That’s when it would start to get sticky, because I would say, ‘You’re designing by committee, that’s what we said we would never do!’”

More rarely there were differences of opinion between Dixon and Mr JD. Dixon remembers that the company’s advertising manager Jim Woods’s role, “was often that of go-between, between the guv’nor and myself, to stop us having a falling out”. Asked about specific disagreements, Dixon says, “John was always difficult to persuade that typography could run uphill. He always thought it was bad design because it wasn’t readable straight on. He was so logical that it was hard to persuade him to accept something. The two of us sometimes argued our points. I walked out of there a few times thinking, ‘I can’t see me coming back tomorrow.’” Diagonal type that Dixon did manage to squeeze past Mr JD include the gloriously Piet Zwart-esque biscuit assortment (below, right) and the cola can with its suggestion of a typographic straw (above, right).

Inside and outside the box
Dixon is modest about what he achieved at Sainsbury’s. Going into shops on a weekly basis to photograph his designs on the shelves and harangue managers if they were not being properly displayed, he was not after some abstract formal gratification, but instead ensuring that “customers were being informed simply and efficiently”. Summing up the impact of his role, he says, “Whether they came back for a product or not is little to do with packaging in my estimation, it’s what’s inside the can or box. I always said that you can put the most beautiful piece of packaging on the shelf and it can go once, but if the product inside is rubbish, it will never go again.”

Having worked out his career at Sainsbury’s, retiring in 1989, he says, “People ask me why I stayed so long, and I tell them it was because the company had a moral code that I agreed with.” Dixon also continued to enjoy working at his drawing board until the very end of his career. “As much as I could, I would pick off the jobs I fancied doing myself,” he remembers.

Since Dixon and Mr JD retired from the company, the latter in 1992, most own label design has been contracted out. Regarding this change of policy, Mr JD questions the wisdom of hiring “a designer who has no background knowledge and understanding of Sainsbury’s”, compared to someone like Dixon who “knew the line that JS would take in trading, believed it and reflected it in his design”. “Peter,” he says, “knew Sainsbury’s to the end of his fingertips.”

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This extract is taken from Emily King’s essay in Own Label: Sainsbury’s Design Studio 1962-1977, edited by Damon Murray, Stephen Sorrell and Jonny Trunk, published by FUEL; £16.95. fuel-design.com. Reproduced with permission