



## **Redesigning Manufacturing- Rebalancing the UK Economy through Making | Case Studies**

By **Beverley Nielsen**, Corporate Affairs Director, Birmingham City University

### **James Plant**

#### **Introduction**

In 2008 James graduated from Buckinghamshire Chilterns University with First Class Honours in Contemporary Furniture and Product Design. On graduating James was awarded the prestigious 100% Design New Designer of the Year Award. He was selected by Thorsten Van Elten for the New Designers One Year On programme and came second in the Channel 4 Top New Designers award 2009. James has gone on to develop a reputation for original British design with personality, receiving recognition for his work with his iconic Clamp Lamp being described as a "Future Classic".

James is co-founder of luxury-contemporary homeware brand Plant & Moss. This British brand focuses on contemporary interior furnishings, and has consistently attracted the attention of the press working with leading retailers including Heals and Next. Plant & Moss has been a national ambassador for UK, with their Arco Rod being selected to represent British design during the London 2012 Olympics at Lancaster House. In 2013 their Odd Couples bench was chosen as part of Best of British at Vivienne Westwood in Milan Design Week.

#### **James Plant Design Collaboration with Hille**

Plant & Moss exhibited at the Birmingham Made Me Design Expos in 2012 and 2013. Through the visibility gained James met with Nigel Punshon, Sales Director and Brian Foster, Managing Director at Hille, whom were also exhibiting.

Nigel started talking with James about working on a license-based design collaboration with Hille to develop a new chair. Now, one year on from that introduction Nigel Punshon says, "Working with James Plant has been very good. He's incredibly professional with a great depth of information and research producing detailed written reports in presenting his ideas, having a thorough understanding and ability to use CAD which has really helped the design process."

James worked up some design concepts applicable to Hille. These focussed on a few key variables –

- reducing time in production
- improving 'green' or sustainable credentials
- filling a gap in the Hille range, in particular looking at market offers made by competitors not currently produced by Hille.

James was aware that this commission was very different from anything he had worked on before. In his business he had produced contemporary craft products on limited runs and did not have experience of producing 'everyday designs' made through mass production. Hille

would be looking to produce 10k chairs a week. To fulfil this commission he recognised he would need to combine quality in design with quality in production.

Hille were impressed by his ideas and even though the first concepts did not represent the final product they opened up the dialogue leading to further refinements and a clearer design specification. James researched this putting together a more realistic proposal with both a distinctive aesthetic combined with the required structural integrity.

"I knew the basics of injection moulding and on my first visit to the Hille factory I walked through their production process so I could get a better idea of the detail. I refined my concepts further on the basis of the research and the production process and Hille worked with the tool makers to ensure that this would work given the technical constraints involving the moulding and tool making. This enabled us to finalise the functionality, ergonomics, aesthetics and stackability of the proposed design.

We tested the different materials which had greener credentials, the final design process was created with feedback from the tool maker who was able to advise on how certain refinements and tweaks might improve efficiency and reduce costs during production." - this doesn't quite make sense but looks OK to me for you to complete this..

"This design has been created to meet all the current postural requirements in the EU for school chairs. It has been developed to work with the business model and to meet their margin expectations as well as target retail price. These factors were affected by the quantity of plastic which can go into each chair and again was a target set in developing the design. The whole process from concept to sale and distribution into schools will take around two years.

### **Learning**

"Having run my own business for five years but not having embarked on a project of this type before I learnt a great deal. The process has been more time-consuming than I would have expected.

"The practical constraints have been as I would have expected, and can be useful tools in narrowing down the design process. Sometimes if you have a design brief which is too open then it is more challenging.

"Working with Hille as a big brand has been great. They have been very personable, more so than I might have expected and it has been great to get feedback from key decision makers.

"The skills I have gained from this are highly transferable to other design projects, especially any large batch or mass produced project.

### **Value Production**

"I think Britain can compete on value production. All products should be innovative and so add a lot of value for the user. Attention to detail and to quality of materials is essential, even with plastic there is so much that can be done.

"Branding and marketing is also something that we do well here to enhance products at all ends of the value spectrum. British brands stand for something – like Pashley, Morgan, JLR –

they all have heritage and are highly regarded so people want to associate with them and have a relationship with them. Building relationships with people through brands does not have to only relate to premium brands.

"I sell our Plant & Moss products in China because that market's view of British products is one of quality and aspiration. They are happy to pay for the shipping because they want to impress their friends with their taste and ability to buy British products.

"I think we know we can do it, it's just needs companies reminding themselves that we can!

### **Design Education**

"Having studied for my own design degree not so long ago I do feel with the benefit of the experience I have now that this could have been expanded in some further aspects of business and design. I was fortunate as my degree at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University was a good course and covered a lot of ground. I went on to do a course at University of Birmingham on entrepreneurship and innovation which looked at setting up your own business and I do think my degree course could have incorporated more of a focus on this, especially as most students would go on to work as freelancers, set up their own consultancies or work in smaller agencies and businesses."

### **Manufacturing in the UK**

"We didn't get any support at all when we were located in Burnley," says Nigel Punshon, "which is a real shame. The government really needs to think about how it can incentivise production to drive new jobs and employment. Of course when you launch a new range you not only have new tooling and machinery costs but the marketing and launch promotion costs which can pretty soon rack up £50-100k and without any support this is a big stretch for SMEs like ours.

### **Skills**

"In the UK there is a complete lack of skills around practical making requirements – tool making, skills engineers and so on. It's very hard to find anyone who has these specific skills and when you do they tend to have specific skills focussed around one machine, rather than general machine skills. Upskilling is going on all the time here as we hone people to meet the needs of our production line. Of course we are looking to develop more of our own apprentices in future too given the growth we have been experiencing, but we would like to see a more coordinated approach."

### Contact and Social Media Information

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