



Sir Terence Conran,
atop an iconic Eames
RAR rocking chair

A creator deity

What makes Sir Terence Conran such a combusive blend of creativity and entrepreneurialism? In an exclusive interview, *Robb Report UK* climbs inside the mind of a man who has redefined how his nation looks, eats and – arguably – thinks

by Nick Scott

It's richly ironic, given that he has personified the word 'productive' for most of his 86 years on the planet so far, but one of Sir Terence Conran's key formative experiences involved a petulant act of destruction. "When I was around 10 years old I grew frustrated making a bookcase and hurled it down the stairs where it completely disintegrated, sending my mother into a fury," he says. "She said: 'Pick up all the pieces, go back upstairs and don't come down until it's finished.' That is exactly what I did, and the joy of actually finishing this bloody bookcase made me feel ecstatic. It was the start of me as a furniture maker."

In the three-quarters of a century since that incident, Sir Terence Orby Conran, CH, FGSd – to give him his full title – has founded two major retail outlets (the Habitat chain and its more upmarket sibling The Conran Shop) as well as the Design Museum and his architectural practice. He has opened more than 50 restaurants, authored or co-authored more than 50 books, applied his Midas touch to hotels the world over, and amassed a personal fortune – much of it donated to the arts – estimated to be something close to around £1 million for each year of his life.

To this day, Conran sees maternal influence as the fiercest wind in the sails of his ongoing voyage. "My mother, Christina, definitely set me off on the path as a designer and ignited the creative fuse in me," he says. "We were a fairly middle-class family and she taught us very early on that simple things – the quality of light in a room, the use of colour, the objects you have around you – can make a big difference to the quality of people's lives. She shaped the way I looked at the world around me and I shall always be grateful for that."

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Christina even set up a workshop in an outbuilding of the farmhouse in which the family lived, having fled London when his South African-born father's Thameside rubber importation company was flattened by the Luftwaffe. Conran recalls, during these halcyon years, making a potter's wheel from a discarded car crankshaft, and losing the sight in his left eye to a metal splinter while making doll's house accessories. "From an early age I was making furniture, throwing pots and welding bits of metal, so I was a designer right from the very word go," he says. He was also, another anecdote hints, a precocious entrepreneur: "I remember exchanging a wooden battleship I had made for a metal turning lathe and being extremely proud of myself with my side of the deal."

At Bryanston School in Dorset, which Conran attended from the age of 13 having been removed from a strict church school in Hampshire by Christina, his interest in craft went into overdrive under the tutelage of sculptor Donald Potter, who had been Eric Gill's apprentice and collaborator in the '30s ("He was truly inspirational - I became somewhat of a demented potter during my time at Bryanston"). Next came a period studying Textile Design at the Central School of Art and Design, where Conran whetted a sharp interest in Byzantine textiles thanks to twice-weekly behind-the-scenes visits to the Victoria and Albert museum: "Colour, pattern and texture have always been important to my enjoyment of life," he says, "perhaps because they appeal to our sensual natures".

It was here that his next metamorphic human encounter occurred: "Eduardo Paolozzi became a dear friend and a life-changing influence," says Conran of the Scottish sculptor and Pop Art pioneer. "He inspired and influenced me constantly, teaching me so much about work, art, craftsmanship, food, humour and life along the way. In return, I taught him how to weld, so I think I got the best side of the bargain. He was a wonderfully rugged man who oozed creativity and became a great inspiration in everything I did."

It is Paolozzi we have to thank for Conran's interest in food, and thus his endeavours as a restaurateur that - it really is no exaggeration to say - redefined Britain's collective palate. "We were all very poor students and constantly hungry," recalls Conran. "There was still rationing in place in Britain and we pretty much survived on Spam sandwiches, which is no way to live. But Eduardo used to invite me to his flat because he got these wonderful parcels of food sent over from Italy. One night he cooked me a squid risotto with black ink and it was like nothing I'd ever tasted. I miss him dearly." A subsequent spell in France, despite working as a dishwasher in



The Sir Terence Conran suite in the Boundary Hotel in London's Shoreditch; (below) the Design Museum in Kensington



Photo: (bottom) Gravity Road

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Content by Terence Conran
Matador Armchair

PROFILE

“I knew there was an opportunity for a revolution in the way things were sold – to create something that was more than just a shop selling furniture”

Sir Terence is the proud owner of a collection of Bugatti go-carts



The opening night of the very first Habitat store on 11 May 1964 – this shot was taken by Terence Donovan for *The Times*

the fetid basement of a Paris restaurant, only served – thankfully – to enhance his love of all things culinary.

The finer brushstrokes of Conran's work ethic really began to appear on the canvas when, having left Central School of Art and Design at the age of 19 to work for architect Dennis Lennon, he set up a furniture design, ceramics and fabric workshop in the East End of London. “I think the moment you begin taking on staff and, with that, the responsibility for finding work to keep your team busy, paying wages and paying tax, is a milestone in itself. It sharpens the senses and forces you to make serious considerations. I now had to define my objectives and target the sort of customers I was aiming to sell my furniture to, which meant creating the sort of furniture they might buy. It was a coming of age, of sorts.”

By the time his company's offices were moved to Hanway Place, just behind the corner of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road, in the early '60s – “quite a pivotal moment for me” – some of Conran's more maverick tendencies were coming to fruition. In the mid-'50s he'd been ejected from the Society of Industrial Artists for distributing a marketing newsletter, which was considered a breach of rules concerning members competing with one another (“Can you imagine a company today not being allowed to promote themselves commercially in the marketplace? They would be out of business before they even began,” he says).

Perhaps the most prominent landmark event in Conran's career to date, though, is his founding of Habitat in 1964 with his third wife, Caroline Herbert. Now in his 30s, and thus still a relatively young designer with fire in his belly, he had by this point fully honed the trait that has since made him so potent a force as an entrepreneur and innovator: a profound understanding of consumer psychology.

“I acted on a powerful instinct that people can only buy what they're offered, and often they do not know what they want before it is put right in front of their noses,” he explains. “Britain

was a particularly grey and austere country in the years after the war – the seeds of a better life were being sewn in the Fifties, but they wouldn't bloom until a decade later. Anything that was good in England at that time was out of reach for ordinary people.”

Conran implies that he and his professional partners at this time could almost smell opportunities burning away, unexploited. “I knew there was an opportunity for a revolution in the way things were sold – to create something that was more than just a shop selling furniture – and if the powers that be wouldn't sell our ideas, then we would sell them ourselves. And so began my Habitat experiment, partly out of that sense of frustration, but also out of a passionate conviction that a better style of life should be more widely available.”

The high points of Conran's career between his being knighted in 1983 and being made a member of the Order of Companions of Honour by the Queen in February just gone are too numerous to list. His role in the regeneration of the Shad Thames area of East London in the early '90s, including the opening of the Design Museum (which he founded, tellingly, “to encourage this country to become a workshop again”), would be up there; so might the building of a restaurant portfolio including Soup Kitchen, Mezzo, Le Pont de la Tour, Blueprint Café and Butler's Wharf Chop House. Then there are all the awards and accolades plus honorary degrees, professorships and doctorates: enough to paper the walls of Barton Court, the 32-room Berkshire home he shares with his fourth wife, Vicki, although the collection of Bugatti pedal-cars seen on the cover of this publication – purchased from a director of the Ford motor company in France, who still visits once a year to look at them – would have to make way.

Besides the innate design nous, nurtured from such a tender age, does he put his success down to any other factors? “I could perhaps attribute most of my success to having a keen and discerning eye – a visual certainty and a strong conviction in my

Photos: (opposite) Julian Broad; (this page) Terence Donovan



The Conran Shop, Marylebone

instincts. I can see something and say immediately, ‘that’s good’, ‘that will work’ or ‘that will sell’. But perhaps best of all, ‘that’s really beautiful.’

Mapping potential outcomes and contingencies has never been high on his priority list. “I wouldn’t say there was ever a grand masterplan – but neither would I say I took things as they came: perhaps ‘grabbing opportunities by the throat’ would be more apt. I’ve always been an impatient man, which some have said has been my Achilles’ heel down the years. There has just seemed like so many things I’ve wanted to do, so you grab at the opportunity while it’s there. If I’d stepped back and looked at certain things in my life, perhaps I’d have done them differently, but impatience is in my nature and there are very few things I regret. Even the darkest periods of my life in the 1980s, losing control of Habitat and Butler’s Wharf, led to a glorious new chapter opening restaurants around the world throughout the 1990s.”

Can he attribute such impatience to any life triggers? “When you’ve suffered extreme frustration in your youth, you don’t believe that success, when it finally arrives, is permanent so you keep grabbing your good fortune while it’s still around. I think that’s true for many people who build a career in a creative industry because you’re always being judged. There has always seemed to be something better just around the corner and whilst some of my critics might point to this as a weakness, I happen to think it is a pretty exciting Achilles’ heel to have. Life has never been dull.”

Well into his 87th year, Conran has had some tricky obstacles to contend with: not least a £3m legal dispute with restaurateur and former colleague Des Gunewardena and reported ...and reported feuds with a family whose distinguished members include leading designer Jasper and restaurateur Tom. But Conran’s energy, his *bon viveur*, remain boundless, and that mischievous smile – pursed lips, notwithstanding the oversized stogie invariably wedged between them – still shines at 1000 watts: especially, no doubt, when he’s whiling away hours sipping wine in his vegetable garden.

That hunger for craft and retail – one which, when he left

Bryanston, almost drew him towards making 12-bore sporting guns for a living – is undiminished by the changes enforced upon that realm by a revolution arguably more profound than that associated with steam engines and spinning jennies.

“Digitalisation and online retailing fascinate me, partly because I don’t completely understand it [Conran famously abhors mobile phones], but I certainly feel its power, potency and influence,” he says. “But still, at the heart of our business is that relationship between the hand and the eye: the sleeves-rolled-up, get-your-hands-dirty mentality of a craftsman – that’s where you really see the quality of a designer. This is where creative ideas are generated, and where you’ll find the magic ingredient.”

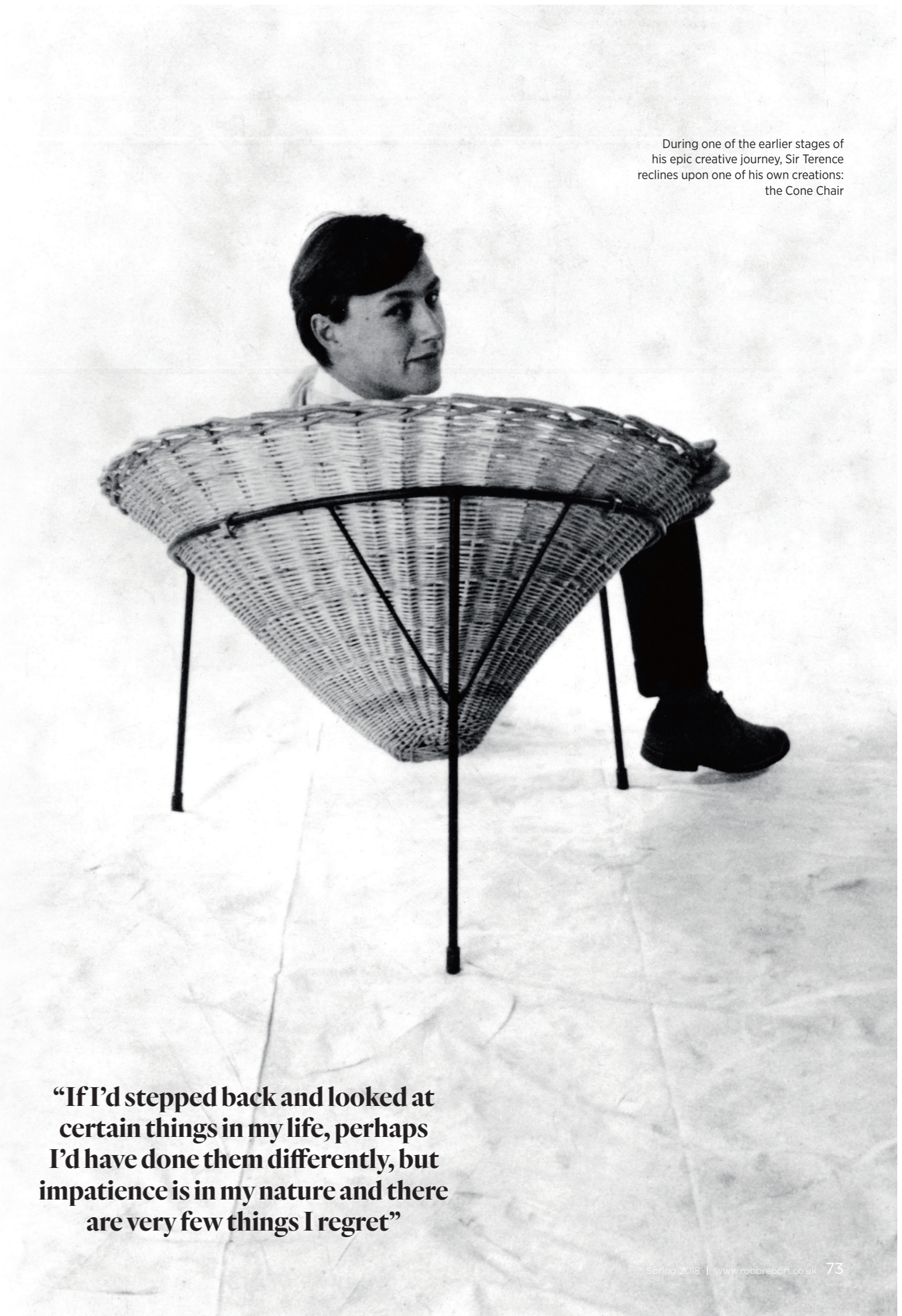
Might he be set for a very different life path if he had been born in, say, 2000? “In some respects yes, because the world we live in today is practically a different galaxy from the grim and austere world I found myself trying to make my way in back in the early 1950s. I suppose it was to my great advantage that things were so bleak – we certainly had a blank canvas to work with – but it also gave us a mental toughness and grim, bloody-minded tenacity to create a more enjoyable world to live in.”

He’s optimistic – markedly so – about the future development of the domestic design milieu he has done so much to shape. “Today, opportunity buzzes and pulses around every corner,” he says. “Communication is instantaneous and global and the world is much more accepting of new ideas – it’s a far less stuffy environment than the one we grew up in. It’s a great world for someone with passion, creativity, curiosity and a fierce belief in their ideas to make their mark.”

A mild concern seems to plague him about what he calls “short termism” – people wanting to achieve immediate success “stifles the creative spark”, he says, and “makes people plump for tried and trusted, safety-first options”. The key for Conran is that the young, creative and hungry “put humans and relationships at the centre of the world” (he cites Johnathan Ive as a clear example).

“I hope that the future of design makes the world a less complicated but more harmonious place,” he concludes. “A world with human beings at the heart of it.”

Photo: (opposite) Ray Williams



During one of the earlier stages of his epic creative journey, Sir Terence reclines upon one of his own creations: the Cone Chair

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