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Why Beauty is the Key to Design

Guest was Alan Moore

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Transcription of Interview

Alan Moore: What seems really obvious to you and it makes utter sense, because in a sense you just kind of look to all of these sorts of things that are happening and actually what you're then saying to companies is if go down that road but speed up a bit, you could really create something that would be useful, valuable, distinctive, it can make you lots of money, and they'd kind of look at you going, what's he talking about?

In a sense, the frustrating thing for me is that because I spent a lot of my life working very operationally, I was only interested in if we're going to be operational, we might as well just operate at the most effective plain we possibly can. Why would we want to be operating in a space which is 10 years behind the times? I didn't quite realize that that wasn't the way that the vast majority thinks.

Joe: *I think you need a little bit of each section. I mean what I've come to realize, you have to have a certain percentage of standard work because that's what puts groceries on the table. You have to have a certain portion of continuous improvement going on so that you can drive and create more standard work and keep your standard work up to date, so you have that side of it. But then you also have to have that component of exploration, of*

design in there too, and those percentages of the three differ with every company. It's how much risk, how much comfortability and the culture you have to withstand it all.

Alan: That's right. No, I completely agree with that. I mean I've been in that place and space, and I have a great empathy now with a little bit of age for organizations which are designed and built and at one point were innovative. If you become a repeat company, it normally means that you are producing something at a scale that people really want. Whether you do that in a kind way or an unkind way is a different point, but at some point, you've delivered a product or service at a value, at a price point that universally people go to that really works for me.

Of course, what you're then really doing is, unless you have the exception to the norm is maintaining that status quo for as long as you possibly can. That's where the culture comes in which is, are you creating a culture which really just wants to things to kind of be in the status quo. Which is why actually in the book, I am actually really interested in Pixar as a company because I think they have a very interesting culture in terms of how they approach the way that they produce, and design, and develop their films. It's very interesting.

This little book really touches people in terms of this whole idea around craftsmanship and design, living or creating a restorative life. We go back to creating things that have value and meaning. I sat down and wrote this book in a very short space of time. It's a little bit unfair because you could say it's taken me 25 years to write this book. The approach was very different in 'No Straight Lines.' You can see that the response is incredible in terms of how it touches people. So you'd never know.

South by Southwest. That was a packed audience. We sold out our books. I'm off to speak

at the Hay on Wye Festival, which is like the biggest literature festival in England. It's like a Boy Scout badge. That's a serious Boy Scout badge for a writer in this country, although it's internationally recognized. There are other things that are springing up, so I'm thankful and grateful for the fact that you came to me and said can we have a chat and can we do a talk because you're right, you just don't know what works. But what I can see is there are winds in the sail of this in a very interesting way.

Joe: *Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager. The host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Alan Moore. Alan is an entrepreneur, author, and speaker. Working at the intersection between design, technology and business, he possesses a unique grasp on the changes that are reshaping our world and insight and passion on how to transform them. Alan is in essence devoted to crafting beautiful businesses. A big fan of yours Alan from my past books, most noticeably 'No Straight Lines,' and I'd like to welcome you. Besides being an author, what else are you up to?*

Alan: Well Joe, first of all, thanks very much for inviting me on to the podcast. It's a pleasure to be in a distinguished company that you have here. What are the other things? Actually, as I live a multi-disciplinary life, I do a lot of gardening, serious gardening. I have a 2-acre plot that I love, and tend, and care for. I tend to write poetry, and I've done a lot of poetry writing over the whole of my life. I do a lot of jewelry. I'm a big motorcycle fan. I've got a Honda Fire blade. If anyone's into motorcycling, then it's a big, very fast machine and on this particular bike, I've probably done about 160,000 miles which is rather unusual actually for such a fast sports bike. But I also love walking, so I did a lot of walking where I live. I would say that I am endlessly curious which is a bit of an addiction actually because you find yourself suddenly going, oh that's really interesting, and you're down a path and down a road, and you've kind of forgotten maybe the other things you do. And these days, I do kind of a yoga actually. That's my kind of attempt to be more

restorative to my body shall we say, than the past things I would have done in the past. So they're the sorts that keep me busy.

Joe: *A very, very busy man it seems like and enjoying the simple things in life and I say that in all due respect because all of us should.*

Alan: Exactly. They are the best things I think. To be honest with you, you know if you can't enjoy those things, then we should look again and think maybe aren't we enjoying those very simple things in life.

Joe: *Well, I want to jump into your new book. But before we do, tell me about the Do Book Company. I mean what is that? That's kind of something different in the publisher. Tell me about that.*

Alan: I've spent a long time talking to lots of book agents and lots of publishers and of course, we know that publishing like every other industry on this planet has been disrupted, transformed, and changed over the last 10 to 20 years. The Do Book just is a runoff I think of the Do Lectures and that was set up by a guy called Dave Hiatt and his wife and a number of other guys who essentially give talks that are about inspiring people to go and do stuff in this world. So the idea is that by listening to these people, talking about things, that will help people give them the energy, the motivation, the positivity to go I can get up from this floor, from this room, from this space and I can go and do something, and it's all about very practical and positive change. Now whether that's a mastery of new skills or a craft or perhaps like with my book, a shift in mindset in terms of how we see the world and how we see the world with great potential. That's where the Do books come in.

I was very happy actually to work with Miranda West, who's the publisher of the Do Book Company because they marry for me a purpose to their work. Actually creatively, she was brilliant in working with me on the book, but equally, they understand distribution is still key and important in this world, and they make those things happen.

Joe: *The book is part of a series. Are they all connected? I mean they're all about design or are they all different things?*

Alan: No, I mean they're wildly different. In fact, there's a lady that's just published a book called Do Preserve, which is about preserving food stuff, fruits. There's someone who just wrote something about Bee Keeping. But then there're things about brands, there're things about purpose, and there're things about disruption. I think for me, it's about not working from a very high level. It's about creating a language and a way of talking to anyone that can pick up these books and go; this has something in it for me that makes sense, that I can do something today to change my life. And, that was very important to me.

Joe: *Even your book then is that when we think about design, it can be just simply designing a garden, of getting inspired, it's something at that level, to find beauty in that.*

Alan: Absolutely. No, I think that the principle that I take is everything in this world that is touched by the hand of man is designed. So there comes a point where it doesn't exist, but we're faced with what I would call a challenge. How do I solve that problem? It's like how do I build the first bridge? How do I create an instrument that can help me cut something? We can go on and on about this. So if everything is designed, then for me, we have the potential and the possibility to actually create it in such a way that it can be restorative, it can be beautiful, it can give value, and it can uplift us as human beings. And

in many ways, these stories and examples that I give in the book which is from Doug Engelbart who invented the mouse, and hyper-texting, and video conferencing, to the shakers are examples of people which have really gone about it in that way.

Joe: *You have a lot of case studies in the book. Which one do you think incorporates that overall message more?*

Alan: That's a really good question. I mean in some respects, of course, my answer to you is there aren't that many case studies. It's not like there're a hundred case studies. There's a few, and I would say each and everyone brings its own unique message. However, I think that Yeo Valley Farms' is interesting. It's the largest organic dairy farm in the UK. They deliver or create 8 out of every 10 organic yogurts sold in the UK. You know we have a very big market here. But essentially, it's a story of transformation. It's the story of a farm that was going out of business. It was about the owner of the company, Tim Mead, who looked far down the road and could see that if he continued to operate in the way that he did, his farm would go out of business. He has built a very successful business. It's highly commercial. Their products are sold at all of the major supermarkets in the UK and all of the smaller ones. But they have created a business which is good for the environment; it's good for business, and it's good for the people that work there. I think that you could apply that as a principle to many other businesses, whether they are in an organic farming environment, agriculture environment, or whether actually you're thinking about it digitally. What is it that we can create that can create exponential value in the market place because actually the funny thing is those things sell?

Joe: *Well, I think it's interesting because we've talked about gardening, we're talking about this organic stuff, but one of your favorite subjects I think is about Pixar.*

Alan: Pixar is there because it's about leadership and it's about culture. The story about Pixar is essentially that Ed Catmull realizing after they had floated the company, Toy Story 1 had been a blockbuster success, billion dollars, but 30% of his company had gone down with repetitive strain problems because there had been a lot of clicking as you could imagine. The first time he makes a movie on the planet, right? So he realized that they did something exceptional there. Great story telling and it's one of the things that Pixar... It's not really just its animation. It's the storytelling. And what he realized was is that, in his own words, he says, 'Every movie we start with sucks, but we have to find a mind to the truth of this story.' And there are times when they will spend a lot of money, and we're talking tens and tens of millions of dollars where they decide actually this story is not good enough to continue.

But Pixar is interesting because they talk about what they call the mind trust. People together in the company that represent the entire operational capacity of Pixar, where they investigate and look at, and test, and push, and think about the particular story in the movie that they're making. What I love about this story is he talks about having to speak with candor, to speak candidly, where trust is beheld within the group. Nobody will have this in Hollywood is a film shown to the investors or to the studio, they will then make some points of view known to the director, which are called director's notes, and the director has to actually follow those notes. Whether he thinks they're right or not, because they think that's how it works.

This is not how it works with Pixar. You can only talk positively. You can't speak with negative criticism. You can say like; there's something about this character that I feel that we're missing something, how can we do that? The director can decide whether he wants to take that on board or not. But what is amazing that by creating that level of honesty and it obviously is intense, it can be difficult, it's challenging, but it's held in trust, and it's

held with the only one objective in that company which is how can we make another billion pound film?

Joe: *They socially connect everyone, and they're functional, probably have certain functions that they carry out, but what they really try to go to maybe a higher level and expand emotionally and that's where the design connection is made.*

Alan: Exactly. I think the design of culture is very important. We actually in this book, although it's a very little book, there's a saying in the book which comes from Emerson, the poet, and philosopher, the American poet, and philosopher that says 'Beauty gets us out of surfaces and into the foundations of things.' I think that for me, there is truth in beauty, and that's where immortality can lie, with products and services, the cultural things we make. If we really pursue and that's in a sense really what Ed has got Pixar to do which is pursue the truth of this movie, in each storytelling, at some point it's going to reveal something universally which is actually going to really touch people fundamentally human level.

That is where I think that company is so interesting and you could then take that as a design principle for any company around the world and say if you could operate a company that was essentially flatter, could operate with that candid honesty that could only work in a way where constructive feedback is only accepted within the company, what you see is a phenomenal effectiveness at a commercial level that changes the way that company can perform. So to me, it's about performance in the same way that we were talking about Yeo Valley, it's about performance, commercial performance, cultural performance. Looking at the utility in the things that you design and create fundamentally change the way that that company can compete in the marketplace.

Joe: *Simplicity, utilities, sustainability – that's what you're challenging to develop those traits and start with that mindset. Is that what the book is about and can you tell me more along that line? Is that what I'm going to get out of the book is that higher level of simplicity?*

Alan: To be commercially successful in this world, if you're looking at really becoming a premium in what you do, then you have to supply utility which is fundamentally different to any of your competitors. It can be a very small thing. It can be a bigger thing. Making that and simplifying that to a level where people can intuit it and can understand it, where it's a fantastic experience, a joyful experience, and that could be again it could be a small thing, or it could be a big thing, right? But in a sense, to me, that's where really understanding designing for the human senses and in a way that's where the beauty comes in, for me it's about elegance. It's about being graceful. It's a bit like actually the first time for example, I haven't touched a touch screen device where I know I had grown up in an industry, in a mobile industry where everything was buttons, you're pressing buttons, buttons, buttons, and then somebody came along and said, what if we just have a screen that you can stroke? Because actually these things are incredibly skillful tools at the ends of our fingers. Designing utility and a beautiful experience, and of course, we now have a world which is completely transformed by touch screen technology. That's in a sense a great example of designing those things. If you were looking again if we go back to Yeo Valley, the best tasting milk in the country, in my opinion, but that utility, it's great at what it delivers, and it never, ever, ever lets you down on what it promises it can do for you.

Joe: *When I'm listening to you describe design, it's like you're actually I'm not in the process of designing, but I'm somehow sitting outside of it, watching it evolve. That customer experience side of it, I guess. I think that's interesting to me, and I think you say something along that line in the book that you should be designing the experience while*

you're designing the product.

Alan: Absolutely. I think so. Again, well all of the examples in the book actually, whether it's the guys that hand built these custom motorcycles which were recycled from bikes that had seen better days into these fabulous machines, what's that all about. That's about the experience. Going to see a Pixar movie is an incredible experience. Drinking Yeo Valley milk is a great experience. Using the Gransfors Bruks Axes is a great experience. If you practice Aikido, it's an incredible experience that does spiritual things to you as a human being. And to me, design has always been, and I feel, actually I have to say this because I was trained as a typographer, book designer, I've been an art director, I've made furniture, I've designed many things so for me, I'm not someone that is on the outside without having put my hands on stuff and physically made things. I ask the question, if I'm going to pick up a pen or if I'm going to put pixels together or put a business together, the first question I want to ask is what world are we trying to create? What purpose and what utility can we bring that is going to be transformational?

To your point, what outcome, what's the best possible outcome that we could create? I can't really understand why it is that anyone would want to invest time, energy, and effort and actually ask other people to do the same if you won't engage in that same aspiration. That is the way that I've always conducted my life and worked towards. As I got older, of course, I've understood that one might see that as ambitious and too innocent in its process. On the other hand, I believe that if you keep that wind in your sail, as all of the examples I've got in the book will demonstrate the value that comes back to you is long lasting; sometimes even after you've left this planet as a human being yourself. And I find that endearingly satisfying to want to work in that way.

Joe: *It's sort of watching a flower bloom, right?*

Alan: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely.

Joe: *What would you hope someone would take from your book?*

Alan: I would hope it's worth the effort to really think about the potential and opportunity of what you could be doing in this world. And I think that it doesn't matter whether you are the CEO of a billion dollar company or whether you're a craftsman... I had a very interesting exchange with a CEO the other day. He says, "Design and beauty, do you really think that could help us rethink what we do and how we make more money?" I said yes. And then the next thing, I found myself on a plane going off to have a conversation with his board. On the other hand, I had a conversation with a potter the other day who said I've just read your book, and it has really helped me think about the work I do and how I do it. I suppose in a sense that we have a choice. The choice is this way maybe sometimes or seems to be a little more difficult, but the rewards are so much greater as a consequence of doing that. Actually, if you really commit to doing those things, then making money is never very far behind.

Joe: *I would say that the best compliment I can give to the book is it made me think different.*

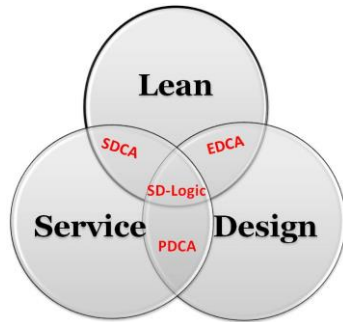
Alan: Thank you very much. I find that a great compliment and I'm very grateful for it. Thank you Joe.

Joe: *Where can someone find out more about the book and the best way to connect with you?*

Alan: There is the opportunity to go to Amazon, whether that's Amazon.com or Amazon.uk. Just put in Alan Moore and Do Design. Or you can go to the Do Book Company. They have all of their books listed there. You can in fact on the Do Book Co. website, buy a bundle, which is you can buy the electronic version and the analog version at the same time for a slightly higher price than just buying the analog book. So you kind of get 2 for 1. You can find me on Twitter @alansmlxl or alan@alansmlxl, small, medium, large, extra large. And I'm very happy to talk to people about the potential and possibilities of what design can do in this world and how we can make it a bit more beautiful.

Joe: *Well I would like to thank you very much, Alan. This podcast would be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 website. Thanks everyone for listening.*

Alan: Thank you.



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Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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