

JOHANNES TORRE.

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"I like to disrupt the design process. People get really pissed off. But then they learn how to accept the challenge and move it in new directions."

Johannes Torpe, creative director and self-described 'design activist'.

IN FAMOUS

## Just Do It

Words Ashley Tucker Photography Philip Ørneborg

As a self-taught designer now returning to do his PhD, Johannes Torpe tells us his opinion on the value of formal design education versus practical skills and learning on the job.

An efficacious self-taught Danish designer, Johannes Torpe is what some would describe as a jack of all trades. From a musician, lighting designer and club owner to furniture designer, restaurant owner and interior designer, he has proven that formal training isn't a necessary prerequisite to success in the design industry. As the founder of his eponymous global design firm Johannes Torpe Studios, he has worked with an impressive line-up of clients including Hay, Roberto Cavalli, Dolce & Gabbana and Skype, and – up until his exit last year – Bang & Olufsen as creative director.

Torpe's unique childhood has helped to inform his own trajectory, which has seen him carve out parallel careers straddling every aspect of the creative industries. The 43-year-old designer was raised by bohemian parents on a hippy commune in Denmark and taught to think freely, which saw him leave home at age 12 to play the drums. After teaching himself how to curate sound and light, Torpe started his own business at just 17, becoming one of the most sought-after lighting designers in Denmark. After finding success in the design world, in 1997 he went on to establish his own studio in Copenhagen. Along the way he and his brother even recorded a number one pop hit, Calabria, which sold over 10 million copies.

His compelling background has helped shape Torpe into a character that challenges the way things have always been done. Last year he embarked on a fellowship with the Architectural Department of the University of Westminster, London to begin a PhD. With minimal to no schooling, formal study or qualifications to his name, Torpe isn't fazed. "I'm extremely comfortable being uncomfortable," he quips. He's even writing a book about it all.

The tremendous scale of this undertaking is met with determination to create something that leaves a lasting impact. "I'm very clear about what I want to accomplish," Torpe explains. "I don't want it to just be a piece of paper and put it on a shelf at a university where only five people will read it. That doesn't contribute to knowledge or give people something in any way. It's important to me to give everything I can."

Like many designers who have simply learnt on the job or through self-developed practice, Torpe questions the value of formal design education. While he may be dedicated to delivering something of his own that adds to design discourse, he maintains that a practice-based approach to learning is key.

"It's very easy to be negative," Torpe admits. "I believe design education is not theory, it is action. Everything is action-based. You don't learn design. You learn the skills to use the tools, just like if you're a carpenter. You need to learn the skills of communication, the skills of business, the skills of understanding and reading people. I don't think these institutions are really teaching that way because they don't know how to do it."

A self-described 'design activist', Torpe's passion lies in progress and challenging old ways of thinking. "Without the design-thinking, without the activism – somebody coming and shaking stuff up, stirring it around – it becomes totally mediocre. Mediocrity is the biggest enemy of anything."

While Torpe laments that design institutions are slow to get up to speed, he remains enthusiastic about the current period of disruption the design industry is facing. "What digital media has done is completely change the way that we absorb things, and now we don't look at our backyard any more, we look at the world when we search for design," he continues. "Everything's accessible, and that's why many institutions are way behind because the younger generations are way ahead."

It is disruption that fuels Torpe's boundless energy, the joy he finds in his work, his readiness to try new things, and his innate refusal to accept things as they are. Today, he seems as much driven by the desire to disrupt as by a newfound mission to pass on his design activism through what may be his biggest challenge yet, a PhD.

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