



# INNER MEANING

## CLODAGH'S SOULFUL APPROACH TO THE DISCIPLINE OF DESIGN

**C**lodagh, Irish-born, European-educated, and American-influenced designer for over twenty-five years, embraced the spiritual and environmental aspects of interior and product design long before the marketplace. Since we are all only now catching up to her, HAND/EYE editor Keith Recker was fortunate to get her to pause and speak to us about what's happening in her work.

**Your work in architecture, interiors, product design, and elsewhere, shows every sign of being united by a particular philosophy. Can you put it into words? My relationship with my projects is more of an intense inner drive to make life better for people and all living things. If I take on any project, whether to cook a pot of lentils or design a million square foot hotel like the W Fort Lauderdale, I do not let up until I can make it as good as I can. Someone once asked about my work ethic. I answered "I am a sensitive army tank." My husband who was standing by ruefully added, "Not that sensitive."**

**Your work is not minimalist, but it does express an essentialism – a response to basic human needs in a highly distilled visual language.**

I want to explore all facets of living, sensual beings, so it is essential that we incorporate all the elements and address all the senses. Additionally, I work with chakra colors, Feng Shui, and esoteric modalities such as Biophilic design, bio geometry and color therapy. We often emulate Wabi Sabi, the celebration of the natural aging of things, by accelerating the process through needle scaling or acid washing on raw steel, and deep sandblasting and routing of wood. Even stone and concrete get metal patina burnishing or a hammering. This creates counterpoint to satiny resins and the other delicious materials uncovered through my long association with George Beylerian of the Material Connexion.

**Are the needs of the inhabitants of your designs constant, or will they evolve over time? How do you see these needs changing in the next 10 years or so?**

Needs are changing rapidly. There is no speed limit on the information highway. If you look at "modern" life today, you see that time-poverty is universal, and silence- and sleep-poverty affect more than two thirds of the public. Wellness, Service, and Time are the new great luxuries.

**Do you believe that design is a potentially ennobling pursuit for both designer and end-user? Do you think about the customer when you conceive of a space or a product or both?**

When I am working on the design of a space I feel like an actor. I have to change shoes with the end user and enter their lives or brand. I am an interpreter of a new language. Interior Design and Architecture enables the customer to work on some emotional archaeology because choice can be daunting. People are used to making business or restaurant decisions but there is a moment when they realize that their space reflects who they are. The process is enduring for both parties.

**As a design world veteran, what pleases you about today's marketplace? Does the mass democratization of design seem positive?**

What really floats my boat is the accessibility and democracy of good design. On any project I am likely to buy from Target, Crate and Barrel and Ikea, as well as wonderful upscale furniture, and stratospheric art objects. It is all about perception. Sir Terrence Conran is my hero in this. I used to fly from Dublin to London to visit his shop and load up with beautifully designed functional pieces for very

little money. He inspired me when I was a fashion designer to do collections for Montgomery Ward while my clothes were in the windows of Henri Bendel.

**Your work would suggest that you are inspired by artisans and the handmade. How did this become part of your outlook?**

Our house in Co. Mayo, Oscar Wilde's summer home in the West of Ireland, was set in an area of great knitters and weavers. When I started my fashion business I surrounded myself with artisans to interpret my work. The energy of their hands enriched my collection. Our early attempts ended with some funny stuff as our knitters only worked by the pound weight on trims and sleeves rather than entire garments. Our first order of sleeves for coats for Lord and Taylor were knitted to fit five foot long arms and the hoods would have fitted a baby elephant. We got them unraveled in time but it was a good lesson on communication. By the time I left Ireland I had a stable of amazing artisans whisking up feather light mohairs, embroidering, crocheting gossamer white dresses, dying ribbons in soft ombre and hand printing hand-woven tweeds. The trick was to create work that fitted in perfectly internationally.

**What advice would you give to artisans looking to enter the US and European marketplaces?**

Perfect the quality of the work and get ready for a dialogue with the marketplace they want to enter. Listen carefully and be prepared to adapt without losing integrity. Which is truly possible. Also the marketplace, once opened, must be fed with consistently good quality: quality control for handmade items is key.

**You are very consistent in incorporating charitable work into your business model. Why? Does it reward in proportion to the demands it makes?**

If one is doing charitable work one does not look for rewards other than the joy one feels from the efforts themselves. The world is changing and there are zero degrees of separation.

**What's your next big project? What about it excites you and why?**

My next project includes working with Miraval to enhance their Life in Balance resort in Tucson. As with everywhere we work we are looking for local artisans to create incredibly beautiful art and weaving. Then we plan to work further with our "African Queen," Jane Newman, to help with boarding schools, wells, food, and camels for the Samburu tribe in Kenya. She founded the Sereolipi Nomadic Educational Trust and the Thorntree foundation and currently eleven hundred children and their families are benefiting from her administration.

We are designing a carpet collection for Bentley Prince Street, the greenest carpet company in the world, and designing a tabletop collection with SUREvolution in Colombia that incorporates the work of over a hundred artisans.



**Left: Clodagh visits a school in Kenya organized by the Sereolipi Nomadic Educational Trust, one of the NGOs she supports. Right: A dramatic Clodagh-designed booth at the Landmarc Restaurant in New York's Time Warner Center creates drama and intimacy with its custom light fixture and embracing enclosure.**

