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The purpose of the Interview is part of the One History EC1 in the making Oral History Interviews

E: If you don't mind me asking where and when were you born?

S: Where and when was I born? I was born in London and I was born in 1967.

E: Could you tell me a little bit about your background not so much where you grew up but how you came too work in this field in this area?

S: In this industry? Well slightly by default really, I mean I went through the usual channels of School and went and did A levels and this kind of thing and I didn't really have a leaning towards one particular area, I was always quite good at Art but not really in the fine Art sense a bit more in the slightly more technical side. I was doing an Art A level and then I was thinking, what do I do after this? Then I had a quite a good lecturer I got on with who suggested I looked at Graphic Design courses. So I did that I didn't even know what it was in those days it wasn't really promoted much as a particular course as it were and I think it was quite new in those days doing those kinds of things; I quite like the idea of the Commercial aspects sort of Art design for the commercial side of things I thought that was quite a good thing. So I went off and did a course in that, which was first of all a college in Hounslow which was South West London, that was heavily biased towards the advertising side of things, so I did a year there and then moved on, I decided to take the next step on and went to College in Colchester in Essex where I went for two years did a H.N.D. in design and bizarrely its where I meet Paul who co-owns the company with me although we didn't know we were going to setup a business in those days. Then graduated from that did the usual things got a work placement in a company in London literally just doing the bottom of the run stuff, I seem to remember being stuck in some – in those days they called them PMT- it's a long story but anyway you end up getting shut up in a dark cupboard for hours on end all day.

Did that for a couple of years then moved onto another company then another one after that, just generally furthering the design career then met Paul who I remembered from college he had got a job in the same place and I got back from holiday and he was sitting in my seat and I was like what are you doing here? He mentioned that he had been employed anyway we both worked there for about three years. Decided we wanted to do something on our own, this was 1995 so that's when we decided to setup Dogstar. We had opportunities presented themselves with clients that weren't particularly enamoured with the people we were working for but liked us and what we could bring to them. So they effectively said if you fancy going out and setting up your own thing then we can support you in terms of the work that we give the company you are working for already, I think that was the push that made us

think we could do this, so that's what we did. Did it fairly quickly came up with a name within about 10 minutes because we had to setup the company quickly, took two other members of staff from where we were working already we moved into the offices of one of the clients we had a room. So that was the beginning, fourteen years ago and since then we have grown in size, got smaller in size, and grown again- all that kind of thing.

E: Where was it you started out? Not in this area?

S: When we first setup Dogstar we were in a place called Jacob's Well Muse which was just behind Selfridges just off Marylebone High Street and that's where we spent the first five years. Then we moved further in this direction we were in a place called Doughty Street which runs parallel to Grey's Inn Road about 5 minutes walk back up that way. We moved there probably about 2000 and we were there for 6 years and moved here in 2006.

E: When the company kind of grew?

S: Yeh the company grew I mean as with a lot of companies our size you have to weather a few storms, I think the largest we have been we have employed 18 people we are down to about 12 now. We feel right for the economy in terms of us agile and flexible enough to react.

E: How come you moved to these premises?

S: Completely by default I didn't particularly know further east of where we were before hand having sort of graduated from the West End more over this way. We knew we had to move out of where we were before because the lease was up, we didn't really have any preconceived ideas of where we wanted to be although it suited us to be within the area that we were so we just spoke to a few agents and said what is there and saw quite a lot of places that weren't really that nice and then they showed us this place which sort of worked. So I mean there wasn't a conscious decision to say we want to be in Clerkenwell or EC1 or whatever do you know what I mean? But actually I think bizarrely it suits quite well, I think you would have known if it was wrong but we were very open minded in terms of where had to be, I think being central is definitely important. Mainly because it gives you much greater access to clients I mean being able to be close to train stations and all that kind of thing -we need to do a lot of work in Wales for example so that kind of thing. Plus also I think in terms of attracting staff I think you have a much better pick of the best people out there if you tend to be fairly central because they come from all over. I mean Paul for example lives out in Essex I live down in south west London, we are totally the opposite sides of London so it makes sense to be in the middle.

E: Do you think being in this area, has affected the business greatly, does it matter that you are specifically here or could you be 5 minutes down the road?

S: I think we could be 5 minutes down the road, I think it's the environment of the office base that I think is more important to our kind of business I think if we went much further east or north or south not necessarily south, from here, I think we would be beginning to get out of the area that I think works in terms of getting people in and out, I am also very conscious that we don't suddenly become, move

into part of the city. There is something about that I don't really want to move into near Liverpool Street I think it's slightly soul less around there, that's just me. So from that perspective I think it works quite well, I think there are a lot of design agencies around here, actually more than I had anticipated when we moved around here, part of me sort of likes that part of me hates that do you know what I mean? You say we work in Clerkenwell and they are like it's a lot of designers around there and I am sort of like it's not the reason we moved here that's just by default, but there must be something about the area that attracts that kind of business maybe it's the kind of office space available, you wouldn't find a space like this in the West End that could be something to do with it.

E: You say the office space like this is an older style building, so because it's not new offices it's nicer?

S: Yeh, it's not new offices, it's got character, I mean actually I think this is a good point I think for us its character is really important we definitely wanted an open plan office space, before hand we were in an old town house and we were split up over lots of different floors in smaller rooms and that didn't really work for us. We knew we wanted it to be open plan, where we are now which is sort of loft house type feeling is quite a good one for us to have, we saw lots of other offices around here some further towards Farringdon Station and that kind of things which didn't have as much character basically and I think that that's one of the things that sold us on this. Plus the fact it was above a karaoke bar and you wouldn't realise what it was like from the front door and you get a surprise when you come in, I felt that when we looked around and I felt that was quite a good feeling.

E: So the character of the building is important to you as a company?

S: Yeh definitely, I think that first impressions do count when you get people round to the business and I have always been one to encourage clients to come around and not to put on a show we don't slick offices we don't want to look too expensive you know all that kind of thing. Then again something that shows off what the real people are and our game is a people game, so really encourage people to come around mingle with the crowd and see us warts and all that's what I think, I think that impressions do count.

E: So it's specifically this area but the location, it doesn't have to be this area but its where this area is?

S: That sounds slightly contradictory.

E: It's not the characteristics of this area it's where it is in London, that kind of suit, it's near central?

S: Its far more the location, but having said that, you know I think this area does have a lot more character to it than I would ever have anticipated than before we moved here, so it wasn't the draw for us to move here but once you are here you realise that its a bit of a, all the little cobble streets and cafes and all that kind of thing, I think it has an interesting feel one that the West End doesn't the city doesn't have, well the City does have but it's sort of hidden away and here I think its part of the whole culture of the place if that makes sense.

E: Is that what keeps you in this area?

S: Rent as well and a lease. At the moment we have to react to what the market is doing and get a place that's big enough and that we can afford. We have a lease here that is flexible enough to feel as though we are not 100% tied in; we managed to negotiate good terms on that kind of thing. I think we managed to get it at a fairly reasonable price and get that capped so I am not too worried about rents suddenly going sky high, rent review and that kind of thing. Its all been quite carefully planned so there is no real reason to move from this particular building now having said that when the lease is up and when they can increase the rent in 2012 and if it goes sky high then we will move. The other thing that we would consider doing and it may be the time when the lease runs out in this place is buying somewhere but again it depends on what the markets like at that time.

E: So you would just buy where would suit you? Not for the area?

S: The thing is then we would be looking for the investment opportunity as well as the location so you would be having to get that mix right and in that respect I certainly wouldn't see this area as a non possibility.

E: You said it's a good location for your staff to get to and from? Do most of them commute?

S: Yes most of them commute, a lot of them commute, all of them commute. There is Alex who works here she literally lives up near Kings Cross she is probably the closest she walks to work. We've got Kate who works as a Brand Strategist she lives in the Barbican so she walks to work. Then I am down by Hampton Court so I come into Waterloo get on the bus which stops just outside here so I don't have to go near a tube or I can walk in the summer, Paul lives in Essex, Chris lives in Northampton so he commutes down from there everyday comes into Euston and walks from there. We are all over the place, I think just being central or being near major commuter inlets to London is important, I have gone for jobs before, there seems to be other areas of where design companies work alot of them are right out West Holland Park I have some friends who have offices around there and they always have a bit of trouble recruiting people because its seen as right out the end of Central line. So being Central is really important to attracting good staff I would say.

E: Do you find that also helps with clients, if you have client base that is spread?

S: Yes they are really spread, the ones that are very far out most of the time we end up going to them we do a lot of work in Wales and all this kind of thing in which case we will travel, we have a few clients in the City, some in the West End some over in Southwark. I think Farringdon Station is pretty good you can get to a lot places from there so that's a bit of a bonus. I discovered that you can get straight into here from Gatwick the other day which I didn't even realise you could do, I thought I was going to have to go into Victoria and slog across London then realised you could get a train straight here so that was great.

E: Do you get many local clients coming from within this vicinity?

S: Yeh we do, again I mean I think touting for business around here you are in a fairly crowded market place for what we do to be honest with you. So I think that alot of the business around here are

probably competition rather than clients. I think from us having worked with Islington Council and all that kind of thing, has given us access to a lot of different organisations that are setup in this area, hence EC1 and you guys and all this kind of thing, you know you wouldn't really do that, I think certainly working with the Local Authority they certainly favour the businesses in there Borough quite rightly. That's not to say we don't go out and pitch for business from Camden and Southwark and all that kind of thing, but you end up having a more intimate relationship I would say.

E: Do you find you get much support? Is there business community support in the area? Like Council support for businesses?

S: I think I am probably more aware of it because of the arenas we operate it like working within the local authority it would be interesting to know how much is available if you don't go looking for it. I think there is quite a lot available it's whether it's easy to find if you are not working those circles anyway, it would be interesting to know.

E: You notice it because you are dealing with it directly so it may be there but other people don't know?

S: Yes there is also quite a lot of what I would call 'our industry bodies' so things like the Design Business Association which most of the design companies certainly in London are members of the DBA and they promote the good practice in design and they are literally just up the road in Old Street, they hold a lot of seminars, there are other networking events, there is another series of talks which are called designer breakfasts, which are organised by local business and the DBA and design week and things like that. They tend to meet around here and get a speaker, quite a lot they do in a place just near to here The Zetter and we will go in there so that's really close so there is a lot of networking thing that seems to be quite concentrated in this area unsurprising because there are loads of businesses here.

E: So you have done work with the Council have you worked with any other further education universities within this area? Do you have links out to the community in this area as a business? Or do you operate as a business so you are just providing a service?

S: Probably the latter, more just providing business as a service having said that it's not the kind of thing we are adverse to doing, when opportunity arising as it were, we take a lot of work placement people on and things like that.

E: Are they from in the area?

S: Well this is the difficult thing, we do have a policy of getting people in for work placement and all that kind of thing, to be honest with you I have never been approached by, because normally people approach us, I have never been approached by a local college or University saying do you want to take some people area you interested in doing that but I have been from further afield. I don't think we would really have the kind of mandate where we can say we will only accept someone who lives within 4 miles of here or something like that I don't think that is particularly realistic as far as we are concerned.

E: So it's more that people don't approach you from this area?

S: I would say that it is. It was interesting actually I did a talk the other day, with EC1, around the new community centre that's being built Three Corners Centre up the road; they were doing a lot of consultation with the local residents and anyone who fancied turning up. They asked me to go along to talk about branding and the importance of branding and creating an identity of this place. There was no agenda and no job in it for us because it's all been decided and all this kind of thing, but actually it was quite interesting to just get out there and tell people what you do and have a bit of a captive audience I thought that was quite interesting what comes from that you never know, people have got my name and they'll have my business card and they have heard me speak whether they want to get in get in contact they will do you know what I mean, again it's not a hard sell thing for us it's talking to people who have an interest along whatever line whether their kids are going to the centre or they are just being nosy who knows so that's quite interesting that kind of forum is quite good.

E: So you are getting your name to new people. How do people find you?

S: We get an amazing amount of people who come through our website and apart from the word of mouth, and in this game you are only as good as the last job that you did, you are not contracted for the last 5 years to provide design. You do a job you get paid for it and then you hope for the next one to come along if you do a bad job then you certainly are not going to get another job from that client and you are not going to get referred on. Mainly we get a lot of new business calls through our website because we have invested quite a lot of money in making it very accessible so if you type in design company London we are going to come up on the first page and things like that and I think that's quite good. Then trying to portray yourself as being a grounded company helps. They are not going to find us from outside they think we are a karaoke bar from outside but there you go!

E: In the current financial climate, where do you see businesses of your size in this area? Is it affecting you? Is it really noticeable?

S: Yes, really noticeable I would say. There are a lot of businesses that are really suffering in this climate definitely and I think design companies are quite a victim of that. Marketing budgets are always the ones that get cut first, so our think in our experience it's almost getting on a short list to get a job virtually every job you do have to pitch for so you are in competition and I think that is the main thing that you have really noticed. Every piece of work you have 5 or 6 competitors going after the same piece of work so you have to come in cheap and you have to be really good, gone are the days of being able to rely on reputation how much is it going to cost what's it going to do. I think there are a lot of companies our size that realistically won't survive- well we might not survive. It's a tough climate out there, I think as far as being business owner is concerned I think the most important thing is absolutely keeping your finger on the pulse of what the company is doing financially and where the ?work is coming from. It's the age old thing that has been drummed into me right from the beginning which is however good your sales book looks if you haven't gone any money in the bank, cash is king, and I think that's what's getting people they talk about the credit crunch everything is just the money is not flowing so it's taking longer to get paid so you are paying people later and it has a negative effect on the whole thing, having said that, that is doom and gloom but I think if you are aware of it and you manage it properly I think that companies our size if they can manage it will come out stronger the other side and there are bigger

companies I mean Landor who are next door are one of the biggest design groups in the world, they are shedding people like you would not believe. Not on the scale of the city but in relation to the office next door it's sort of, you know there are 25 going a week, which is quite scary I mean they do the same thing as us I mean the fact that we are 12 at the moment.

E: Do you think you having your business at this size will help you?

S: It definitely helps, because we have very tightly controlled costs, I know exactly what our overheads are going to be going into the future and you just have to manage that aspect, I think if you can control that and don't have any surprises on that level then you can manage through and it's trying to be one step ahead and not get tripped up the trouble is business are getting tripped up I think they are running out of money because they are not chasing debts effectively I don't know it's a bit of a crazy world out there but you have to feel confident but hey who knows.

E: You see yourself in a good situation for the longer term?

S: Yeh I do bizarrely I think that if we have survived this far I think we will be alright I mean who knows what's around the corner and you can never say never, I think that we are very carefully controlling our costs which is the main thing and I think we will be stronger for coming out the other side and I think there will be opportunities as a result of the current market and I think if companies like us can survive then we will be in a good position to grow the company when the world becomes normal again.

E: Do you notice in this area much businesses being affected?

S: The whole design business is a bit of a incestuous world everybody knows what everyone else is doing, there are people out here who had boyfriends who work for design companies around the back, the rumour mill goes on about who is making people redundant this week and I'm sure it's no different to any other industry it's that sort of slightly gossip culture, I mean in a way I think it's quite, for people that we have, I think its quite unifying, do you know what I mean, because everybody realises that it's a fragile world out there, and actually if you have a job and you are playing a good part in that job then that is quite valuable and everybody pulls together and I think we have certainly found that, we've had to make tough decisions and cut costs here and there and that kind of thing and if you can engender that spirit of openness- it's talking to your staff and keeping them in loop it's not terrifying them that they are going be losing there job tomorrow but its being realistic do you know what I mean, I think if you can get communication on that level I think that you can get a lot of respect. Everybody works harder, you know they work harder because they see all there mates and they do tend to be the bigger companies they are just shedding them, they cut off a whole load, proportion wise what Landor do next door is probably the equivalent to us getting rid of one having the same kind of affect. Be positive as much as you can be.

E: That's really good thanks, I don't know if there is anything else you want to talk about?

S: No I think it's an interesting project. I hope that whatever I have said has been valuable and of interest. Shove it into the mix and see what happens.