



Image: Luke White



IN CONVERSATION WITH
MIKE FISHER
ARCHITECT, CREATIVE DIRECTOR
AND RESTAURANTEUR

David Birley

DB I am sure you are pleased with the success of the Clockspire?

MF We are delighted at how well it has been received. It is a lovely old building that has played a major part in the village's life. We wanted to do something for the community and, bearing in mind my partner's knowledge of the catering business and my interests in architecture, to design the Clockspire was an obvious choice. Also, it has meant we have been able to employ local people and can seek to source local produce from local farmers and growers.

DB We seem to have started at the end! To go back to the beginning, what was your childhood like?

MF My father was in the army so we moved around a lot. Latterly, I was at school in Warminster which is why I know this area so well. I was very fortunate growing up as I always knew I wanted to be an architect. As a child, I was always building things, dens, go-karts, air-fix models or messing around with Lego and Meccano. After school, I went to university in Dundee to study architecture and then to Oxford Brookes to study Urban design.

DB How did you start your career?

MF When I graduated there was a recession and I had a big student loan to pay off. I started working for a big commercial architectural practice designing everything from houses to offices, theatres, superstores and hospitals. It was a great learning experience, but as a designer I never actually built anything.

DB How did your career evolve?

MF I started refurbishing my own house and enjoyed the process so much that I went on to do up other properties. This worked well and I formed my own company; at this stage I was working out of a garage at the back of my garden. I was then joined by a very talented New Zealand designer, Ngila Boyd. This helped transform the company because as an architect you don't have much training in interior design. We became very successful and caught the eye of estate agents. Since Ngila retired in 2005, we have grown into an office of fifty very talented architects and interior designers. Today we work all over the world from Auckland to Mumbai, >

to Moscow, to New York. Our work includes houses, hotels, restaurants, boats and planes. We are fairly new to boats where, of course, we are only involved with the interiors; basically, we are given a white box but can look at it with a fresh perspective and can add fun, colour and softness. We have also done some unusual projects such as snow rooms and an igloo with a jacuzzi which was for a London house. Perhaps the most unusual is a dog lift.

DB What have you learned along the way?

MF I realised that architects' training largely ignored the interiors and concentrated only on what something looked like from the outside. I think this is a big disconnect - the two aspects have to flow. Ngila taught me a huge amount about interior design and helped refine and define my taste.

DB What might you have done differently?

MF I started off working on large-scale projects but I now realise my passion is for something on a smaller scale like a house or a boat which you have greater control over and can really get into the detail.

DB What changes have you seen?

MF I am very passionate about the built environment. Unfortunately, our planning system has become more bureaucratic, costly and time-consuming. Yet I don't believe it has produced a better built environment - in fact the opposite. Our towns and cities have been ruined by planning and transport departments. So many modern buildings strike me as strident and aggressive. I hate the mayoral offices near Tower Bridge while, conversely, I love the HSBC building in Hong Kong. I am a huge fan of Prince Charles who was absolutely right when he referred to 'the carbuncle' in Trafalgar Square. I think he is much more in tune with what people want.

DB What one piece of advice would you give your younger self?

MF Although I enjoyed university immensely, the reality is that, even after seven years of study, you still know very little about the real world. Thus, if I was starting all over again, I would have gone straight to work and omitted my Masters. You learn so much in a real-life work environment.

DB What are you currently involved with?

MF My office is currently working on a variety of exciting projects: several large motor yachts, the new Mandarin hotel in London, a dacha outside Moscow, an apartment in New York and a large residential project in India which includes four seventy-storey skyscrapers.

DB What attracted you to West Dorset?

MF I was born in Devon and I went to school in Warminster, often playing sports against the local schools. And although life has given me the opportunity to travel to some amazing places around the world and live in many areas, I have always known that I wanted to come back to this beautiful part of the British countryside. The final choice was dictated by the purchase of Ven House in Milborne Port in 2015.

DB Do you have a personal wish and a wish for Sherborne?

MF I am passionate about the built and natural environment. At Ven, I am planting a lot of new trees and doing my best to encourage the wildlife. I wish more people would appreciate our natural world and help to protect it. The high street in Sherborne is like most towns across the country which are undergoing an enormous amount of change due to our spending habits. Sherborne is a beautiful and genteel town and I hope it finds a way to reinvent the High Street. I hope new developments such as the Clockspire in Milborne Port, Newell in Sherborne, The Newt and Hauser & Wirth in Bruton will help build the area into a leisure destination with speciality shops and restaurants all helping to invigorate Sherborne's high street. ●

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