

DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS

BY JOHN THOMSON

Scott Gibson President, Gibson Product Design

The German designer Dieter Rams, who worked for Braun in the 1960s, once said, “Good design is as little design as possible. Good design is what makes a product useful. And great design, is making something memorable and meaningful.” Steve Jobs used to explain design like this: “Some people think design means how a product looks. But if you dig deeper, design is about how it works. It’s about the experience.” Each of us has a sense of what good design means. For Rams, a product either worked or it didn’t. It either sold or it didn’t.

To get a better idea of the importance of design and what makes a product successful, we turned to Scott Gibson, President of Gibson Product Design. From his atelier in Ottawa, Gibson has helped some of the biggest names in consumer electronics come to market.



L-r: Mark Boycott, Scott Gibson, Colin Roberts, and Scott Gales head up the award-winning, Ottawa-based industrial design company Gibson Product Design, which has worked with some of the biggest names in consumer electronics.

While a large part of your business focuses on consumer technology, you have designed everything from military combat helmets to music-stand lighting. You have worked with large multi-nationals as well as start-ups. Where would you say the sweet spot is for Gibson? What are you happiest designing?

That’s a tough question. Every project is a challenge, like a puzzle. So every project is fun in its own way. And I tell people we’ll do anything for a buck. But I do love working in consumer audio. There are some really passionate people taking on some very sophisticated technical challenges, and they understand the importance of good design in the development mix. Large projects allow more scope for our work. We did the industrial design, for instance, on Ciena’s largest digital switch, the 5430, working with engineering teams in Canada and the U.S. At the small end, we helped boutique Toronto company Matrix Audio with a pocket-sized Bluetooth speaker that went on to win Red Dot and IF design awards in Europe.

How do you define great (or successful) design?

All good design finds the right balance of utility, manufacturability, elegant appearance, and affordability. Great design goes further, creating new and compelling solutions that become reference points in our culture. The ‘66 Mustang, the Eames Lounge Chair, and the original Macintosh computer are examples. The new FormLabs 3D Printer is a classic already.

Each of these examples holds universal and timeless appeal. Is that when you know you’ve been successful creating something special? Is the goal to create a product that is timeless? Or is there value in building for the time?

It’s certainly gratifying to look back and find an old design still in use and still appreciated. But good design isn’t always primarily about appeal. We once designed a base and stand for Nikon Metrology, a co-ordinate measuring machine. We were focused on utility almost completely. It turns out it did look great, but utility was prime all the way. What’s important is to design intelligently and creatively, while avoiding superficial trendiness. That way, a design can retain respect and even become an icon, even though its style is identified with another time. The Fender Stratocaster is a perfect example. Its appeal drew on car and airplane fashion cues of the ‘50s, but they were interpreted and blended brilliantly with ergonomic and manufacturing insights. The Strat became timeless while retaining its ‘50s credentials.



The **iControl PIPER** perfectly exemplifies Gibson’s work; the product design company was responsible for everything from the industrial design of the home security camera right down to manufacturing of the device.

Scott, tell us about your background. How did Gibson Product Design come to life, and what were you doing before you started the company?

Gibson Product Design was born over 30 years ago after I’d worked a while in the telecom industry. I’d also earned a Master’s degree in industrial design from the Royal College of Art in London, England, and was itching to try my luck as an independent designer. I’d completed some interesting projects, including furniture, electronics, and set design for the movie *Superman 2*. Now, all this time later, I work with a small “dream team” that seems to be able to nail any challenge that comes our way.

What exactly is ‘industrial design?’

If I had to boil it down, industrial design is to products what architecture is to buildings. Like buildings, products that are used by people need to be designed from the point-of-view of the end users. That’s what industrial designers do.

Twenty years ago, "12:00" was perpetually flashing on most VCRs because no one could figure out how to set the time. Bad design, right? We have come a long way.

Yes. Back in the day, the science of user interface design hadn't progressed much, and the job was often left to those whose experience was with programming for technical people. These days, we have a better understanding of what users can be expected to know and do, and we have much better tools to design, program and operate user interfaces. Thank heavens for touch screens, full-colour graphical displays, and sensors of all descriptions. Anyone who's used a Nest thermostat can appreciate just how far we've come in UI innovation and design!

Walk us through the Gibson Product Design process. I am an entrepreneur who has this super idea for a wireless Bluetooth headset, but I have no clue how to get it to market. I contact you and tell you my idea, and then what?

We need more pages to give that question its due, but essentially we'll start by sitting down with the client. We'll receive a technical brief and learn as much as we can about what the product will be and who will use it. We learn about the market, the competition, the parameters we need to facilitate, and so on. After our own research, we work on a number of concepts that are driven by technical requirements and our own perceptions of what would stand out as an innovation. Once we have fine-tuned our direction, we develop very detailed CAD files and drawings that are then used directly in the manufacturing process.

Concept to prototype to market, is there a typical timeline? Has the pressure of getting to market fast changed in the last decade?

These days, everything moves faster in our part of the development process. Thanks to excellent CAD tools and 3D printing, we can get the technical part of designing done more quickly. But we still need to think and refine, and I fight to protect the time we need.

I remember back in the day when speakers, in fact most audio gear, was pretty ugly. You could either seek great sound or pleasing aesthetics, but rarely both. Obviously there were exceptions – Dieter Rams and his work with Braun, B&O, et cetera. What was the tipping point, when consumers no longer had to choose between performance or aesthetics?

I remember that time too. Interestingly, the exceptions – hi-fi designs from Rams, Jacob Jensen, David Lewis and Hartmut Esslinger – all fit the "timeless" character you mentioned earlier. All show a refined orderliness and all have become collectible. For me, the tipping point came with

digital audio, especially with DSP. In our work with Definitive Technology and later with Paradigm, we were freed up to design speakers that have clean, sculptural qualities as well as terrific sound. Component audio design has benefited as well, of course, with size and weight reduction along with an overdue de-cluttering of the user interface. Compare the Naim Mu-so with a '70s era receiver to see the progress!

You are based in Ottawa, yet you are working on a global stage. How do clients find you?

Our best friend is word-of-mouth, aided by the Internet. We're a small team, without the promotion resources of California, so we have to be strategic. CES has provided fantastic exposure for us – we seem to be the top I.D. [Industrial Design] firm for Innovation Awards, with one every year for the past 10, with a total of 13 since 2003. Small Canadian companies have been our life-blood, but we've worked for clients from Long Island to Silicon Valley as well. So we rely heavily on happy customers to spread the word! Incidentally, being based in Ottawa makes sense when you realize we have a world-class technology community, and Carleton University's School of Industrial Design to support us.

Do you facilitate the project from beginning to end? Do you participate in the manufacturing or do you hand off drawings to the client and they take it from there?

It all depends on the project. Our team is very good at mechanical design, so many of our clients ask us to carry the design effort from concept right through to manufacturing. This way, we help to control quality at every stage. For larger projects with clients who have their own engineering capability, we play a more integrated role, focusing on product strategy, appearance and ergonomics.

Are there any projects of which you are most proud?

There are a lot. A telephone vending machine for Bell Canada, the Mythos loudspeakers for Definitive Technology, the Safety Turtle child's water safety alarm, Paradigm's new Premium Wireless series, Mass Fidelity's CORE, and a VR product I'm not allowed to talk about yet. But I'd have to pick iControl's PIPER as the one that demonstrates the best of what we can do, and the ideal client match-up for us. A groundbreaking product idea, a small team of exceptional engineers, a focused marketing vision, and full responsibility for us to deliver I.D. and physical design right through to manufacturing. PIPER was fast, lean, and, of course, hugely successful. Best of all, we continue to work on new products for iControl. It's tremendously gratifying all around. [wh](#)

A sampling of some of Gibson's most recent work in the consumer technology field.



**Mass Fidelity Core
Wireless Audio System**



**Matrix Audio Qube2
Portable Bluetooth Speaker**



**Paradigm PW
Wireless Speakers**



**Pacific Safety
Twin-Shell Combat Helmet**