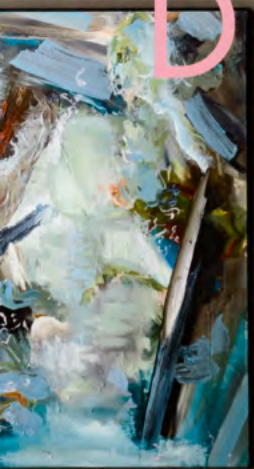


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ELLE DECORATION

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NIGHT'S SLEEP





Editor Ben Spriggs
with Ilse Crawford at
her Bermondsey studio

IN CONVERSATION WITH ILSE CRAWFORD

As our 30th anniversary year closes, Editor Ben Spriggs meets with ELLE Decoration's founder to discuss its influence – past, present and future...

Photography ANNA BATCHELOR

The term 'creative polymath' is an overused cliché with few actually living up to the moniker. Ilse Crawford is an exception. She's a product creator and interior designer, anthropological academic and author. Her concepts and intuitive approach have influenced modern living more powerfully than almost anyone else working in the field today. She is also the founding editor of this magazine – the British edition of ELLE Decoration – which burst vibrantly onto a stuffy and staid interiors market during the summer of 1989 and, ever since, has fundamentally shaped how we consider and interact with our homes.

After studying history, Crawford worked briefly in an architect's office and went on to become a journalist at *The Architects' Journal*, before being approached to set up ELLE Decoration magazine as an offshoot of the fashion title ELLE. Her ten-year tenure as Editor-in-Chief cemented everything that the magazine stands for and continues to champion today.

Crawford left the magazine to pursue other projects, including editing the beauty and wellbeing magazine *Bare* and writing her first book, *The Sensual Home*, which developed the holistic approach to living she had conceived at ELLE Decoration. A stint at fashion house Donna Karan in New York helped her segue into product and interior design. In 1999, she founded the 'Man and Wellbeing' department at the renowned Design Academy Eindhoven, where she's helped students to prioritise human experience as a way to improve life.

Setting up her own practice Studioilse in 2003, Crawford conceived the interiors for members' club Soho House New York, Swedish hotel Ett Hem and community kitchen Refettorio Felix in London. She has also created accessories for Georg Jensen, lighting for Swedish brand Wästberg, upholstery for George Smith and rugs for Kasthall, as well as an environmentally sound collection for Ikea. She has published two further books outlining her ethos of how to support and enhance everyday life and was awarded an MBE in 2014.

At the end of the summer, I met with Crawford at her studio, situated just south of the River Thames in a 19th-century warehouse in Bermondsey. Unlike most modern workspaces, it's a tranquil and subtly stylish environment, with a communal kitchen and serene rooms painted a soothing shade of moss green, filled with neatly ordered samples and project moodboards. It's not the sort of place you imagine anyone raising their voice. Crawford's creations, which are dotted around, have the familiarity of design classics rethought for contemporary living in terms of function and scale. It's the perfect embodiment of what she represents and, as we sit down over coffee, she exudes a similar sense of stylish calm mixed with poise and passion. It's a potent combination.

In a world where interiors magazines were serious, uptight and packed with chintzy country homes, when you launched ELLE Decoration in 1989, it really shook up the scene. Tell me about those early days...

You're right! I think it's really important to realise the context that we were launching into. I remember being pulled into my managing director's office and told that, you know, I should be creating a magazine that was a cross between *House & Garden* and *Country*—something-or-other. We were so far from that. As always, it was about finding the right people to do the things you really wanted to do and to sustain that over a period of time. Photographers, stylists, finding the right hands – it was a challenge, but once we started, we were off. It tended to be a little more sporadic than it is today, but you have to start from somewhere. The one thing we all had in common was a consciousness for making better spaces.

Looking back at those first issues, the magazine felt very different. There was an energy, lightness and modernity, covering subjects that didn't seem to have been featured elsewhere at the time.

The early shoots that I love are the ones where we started trying to push the envelope photography-wise. They were expressive and atmospheric. It was about featuring non-standard people like model Jibby Beane, who's an amazing character, and French stylist Ermanuelle Alt. We ►

'THE ONE THING WE ALL HAD IN COMMON WAS A CONSCIOUSNESS FOR MAKING BETTER SPACES'

'A MASSIVE GROUP OF PEOPLE WANTED SOMETHING DIFFERENT'



produced a guest-edited issue with retailer and designer Joseph Ettedgui, who was very much on our side, and that helped because in the end you needed the feeling that people in the industry supported the magazine. It wasn't about being modern with a capital M. Up to that point interiors titles were so often just focused on people arranging stuff in immaculate ways which was uninteresting. I wanted to think more about things, how they were made and designed. It was about individuals and how they made their own world – their own ideas, ideals and values – which was revolutionary at the time. And obviously it's very much, I think, what ELLE Decoration still stands for today, in a different era. It's about expression and creating.

And how did the interiors industry in the UK and abroad react? As editors, we're always caught between searching out the new, unknown and relevant, while, at the same time, maintaining integrity and making a product that's financially viable.

Of course, then as now, magazines survived based on the volume and quality of the advertising, rather than sales. And although we could prove ELLE Decoration magazines sold, it definitely took a while to persuade advertisers to come on board, because they were pretty conservative, especially in this country. It took getting European companies involved to persuade some people that there was even a market for contemporary furniture in the UK, because historically there hadn't been. It was a very different context to now. Apart from The Conran Shop and Aram, there wasn't even much distribution

in the UK. The market was relatively tiny and most of it was run by one man and a fax machine somewhere... But we knew the audience – the readership, and potential readership – was there. It's a classic case of the system being one way, while there was a massive group of people who wanted something different.

How did you speak to that very different crowd? One of the things that appeals to me about ELLE Decoration is the way it's always represented and entered into a dialogue with a broad and interesting group of individuals, people who seemed underserved by other homes magazines.

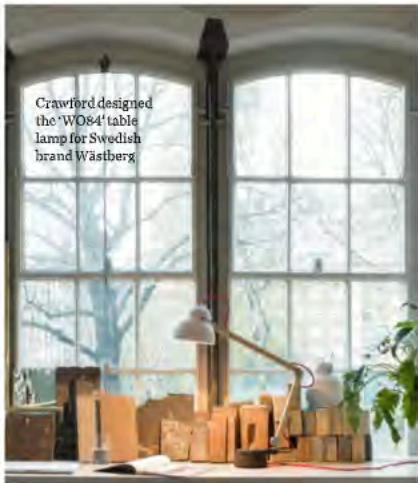
One thing that was interesting about ELLE Decoration at the time was how multicultural it was. It was open to the world partly because I think magazines had been quite introverted at the time. It was diverse in terms >



Above 'Seating for Eating' by Studioilse for De La Espada
Below 'Brass Cabinet' by Studioilse



PICTURES: REIS OREI



Crawford designed the 'W084' table lamp for Swedish brand Wästberg.

of age, aesthetic, culture, background and class. We were interested more in self-expression and sharing ideas around the world. It was a rush of creativity. It reflected an era that was becoming very open-minded. And you know, the gang that I'd grown up with were people who travelled a lot. We were curious rather than snobby. We were happy to stay somewhere inexpensive and eat somewhere cheap, then go on for drinks to somewhere fancy!

Over time editing became more than coming up with features ideas and putting pictures and words on paper? What was it about the role that you feel shaped your career and influenced your approach to design?

For me, it became centred around seeing beauty in things that weren't necessarily considered in the box design-wise. I didn't want to edit just any magazine. What I loved was that we did everything – we styled, we wrote, we designed the sets, and it was about telling stories. It was the best practice in how to build complete worlds. This helped shape a sense of what I wanted to do next. Magazines shouldn't be about measurables. They are about talking with your reader and hoping that the conversation will spread. That's how, at Studioilse, I feel we approach any project we do – whether a commercial space or a piece of furniture. It's all a conversation that you have with the user. It's not that you write a list of elements and then it automatically happens. It's not an algorithm in that sense. Editing ELLE Decoration was a great

schooling, no question. It taught me how to work with people and how to have a nose for the wind of change. How to understand what is happening out there, to observe, diagnose and figure out the most important ideas – the ones that will last a long time, that are cultural and more than ephemeral. You know, through practice you get a sense for that and how to translate it.

And what would you say is the lasting memory of the brand and your time at ELLE Decoration?

Without sounding too grandiose, I think in many ways ELLE Decoration was one of the things that really educated the taste of a generation. It was all about the sort of philosophy that really appeals to me. It was about mixing the affordable with the special; finding beauty in everyday things and, equally, celebrating the value in the special things. studioilse.com



'MAGAZINES ARE ABOUT TALKING WITH YOUR READER AND HOPING THAT THE CONVERSATION WILL SPREAD'