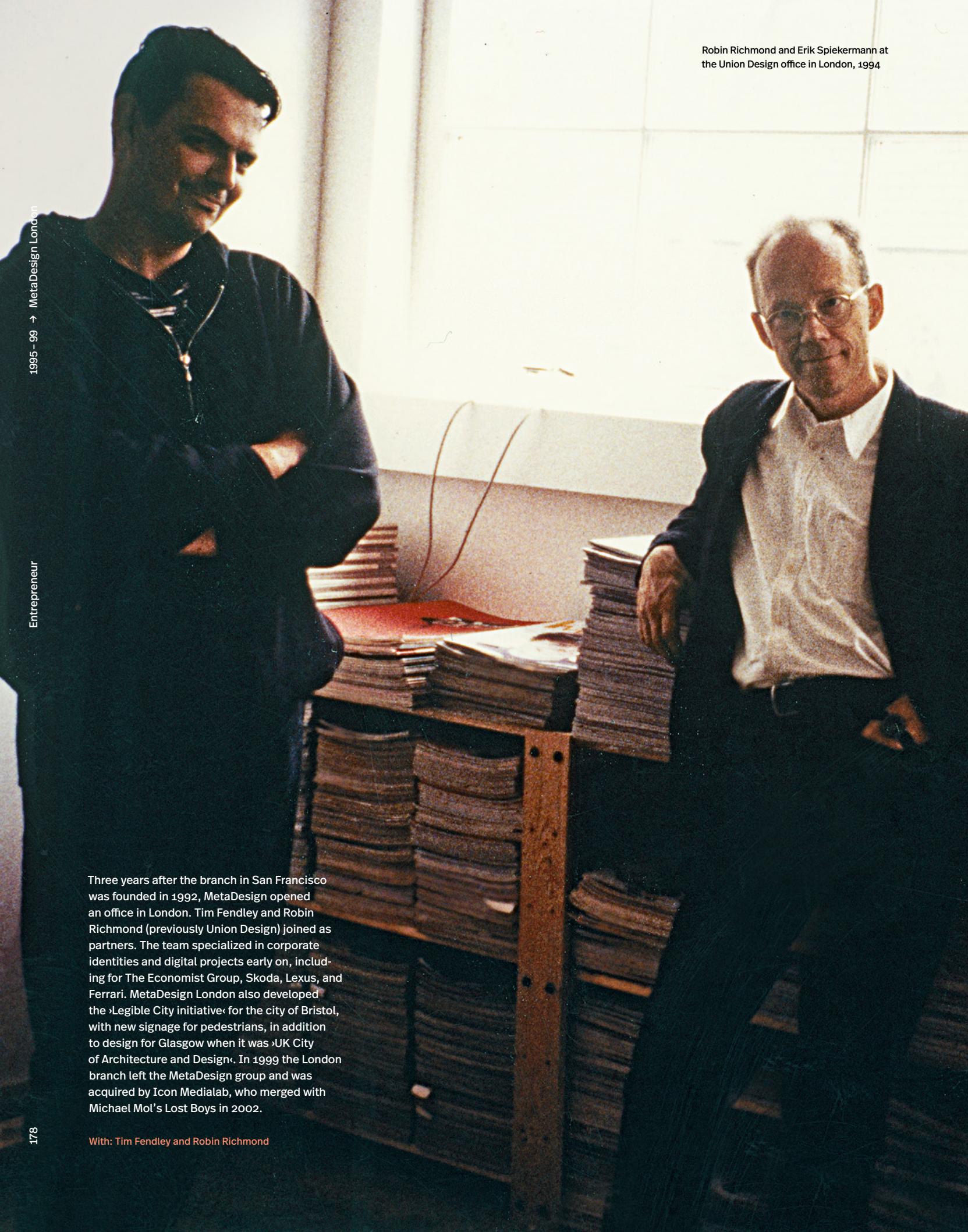


Robin Richmond and Erik Spiekermann at the Union Design office in London, 1994



Three years after the branch in San Francisco was founded in 1992, MetaDesign opened an office in London. Tim Fendley and Robin Richmond (previously Union Design) joined as partners. The team specialized in corporate identities and digital projects early on, including for The Economist Group, Skoda, Lexus, and Ferrari. MetaDesign London also developed the ›Legible City initiative‹ for the city of Bristol, with new signage for pedestrians, in addition to design for Glasgow when it was ›UK City of Architecture and Design‹. In 1999 the London branch left the MetaDesign group and was acquired by Icon Medialab, who merged with Michael Mol's Lost Boys in 2002.

With: Tim Fendley and Robin Richmond

Robin on Erik

The Spiekermann, Erik Spieksalot, The Kaiser, »Guv«. Mostly informal, hugely engaging, and never neutral, Erik always leaves an impression. It's hard to put a context on a person who is as fêted as Erik. He is a breath of fresh air in the often-stuffy confines of a small pond industry that can get lost in its own value. He's therefore not everyone's cup of tea, deliberately gauche and irreverent at the altar of high design. He is undoubtedly an important figure – his companies and typefaces have defined the way a global industry developed, reshaping the way German agencies approached design and putting a visual mark on the way his home city was re-organized at the end of the Cold War.

Erik is both big picture and in the details. A contrarian (he reasons his birth date is responsible), who is one minute this, the next that, but a force for good, and above all, for the art of communicating well. For Erik this starts with words. The true mark of a bi-linguist is the ability to find humor in a second language. Erik loves word play and wit. A favorite text by Mark Twain berates the »awful German language«, which despite its author's many prejudices proves that a culture can only be appreciated through its language. Some of his love of British English was colored by his time working on the shop floor, teaching at the London College of Printing and contracting as a proof reader and comp at one of London's best typesetters, rubbing shoulders with an array of characters with links as varied as connections to Jan Tschichold and the London underworld, while also designing typefaces for Wolff Olins. This leads me to suspect that

Erik is better equipped in his second language than I am in my first. He has after all, mastered three languages, cultures and humors: German, English, and American. This fascination with communication and the use of words is clearly manifest in his day jobs, which must be somewhere in the back of his mind when shaping the bowl of a non-aligning numeral or the x-height of a new transitional humanist typeface.

Erik stands as a German design icon, somewhere in the mix between a Weltempfänger T.1000 and Ro 80. But when I think of him, I think of spontaneous laughter, word play, a collection of pompous oxymoronic phrases (think »military intelligence«), a love of dialect and local slang terms (»bap, barm, or cob«). I think of his diatribes against mannerist and cliquy adherence to design norms, his dislike of the ›Rotis‹ typeface as a text, the cult of ›Helvetica‹ and the spacing of lower case typography.

I also think of the warmth of Erik's hospitality, weekends in his Wilmersdorf gaff and buying wurst at the Winterfeldt Markt, »brown German food«, and book hunting in Savignyplatz. I remember with a smirk his palpable relief at escaping from a faux-spiritual management brand values workshop set deep on the German-Polish border, using the excuse of having to drive the »Brits« back to Berlin, and the spontaneous outcry of British football terrace invective fuelled chanting and Derek and Clive monologs as we drove back along Karl-Marx-Allee. Professor Erik Spiekermann, acknowledged intelligent typographic raconteur and cunning linguist, you made the work fun.



Robin Richmond works as a design consultant on bespoke projects, mostly in London, sometimes in America, and lately in Japan. He teaches as a visiting lecturer at undergraduate level and has organized and curated the odd design conference. Robin worked with Erik, officially between 1995 and 1999, as a fellow founding director of MetaDesign London.