



Ron Dennis interview

Formula 1 boss on how he is mentoring a lighting firm and his passion for architecture and design

Live consultation

We bring a lighting designer and architect together for a live lighting consultation

Lighting Design Awards

Project and Product Innovation shortlists announced

Lighting controls

Energy saving innovations and the latest LED dimming technology

Race the lights

Ron Dennis is famously the most successful Formula 1 team boss in the history of the sport but he is less well known for being a business mentor and shareholder in a celebrated lighting company. Here he talks to **Ben Cronin** about the support he gives to Cinimod Studio, his legendary perfectionism and his passion for architecture and design



Driven McLaren executive chairman Ron Dennis cuts a heroic figure in British business as a performance-focused, self-made entrepreneur. He stepped back from Formula 1 in 2009 to concentrate on the McLaren road car business

When lighting design practice Cinimod Studio recently staged one of its celebrated lighting events by sending an illuminated UFO into the London night sky to promote a computer game, there was a famous figure standing at the shoulder of director and founder Dominic Harris at the launch party. The figure in question, Ron Dennis, is perhaps better known as principal of the McLaren Formula 1 racing team but, as he revealed at the event, he also invests in and mentors companies like Cinimod, which share his almost pathological passion for innovative design.

Dennis is recognised as the most successful team boss in the history of Formula 1, and his track record in business, where he also runs a diversified engineering and supercar business, make him the sort of mentor that anyone would want in their corner. Harris was lucky enough to secure his backing after a meeting at an art fair.

"I met Dominic at the Kinetics show," explains Dennis as I speak to him at the Foster + Partners-designed McLaren headquarters a few weeks later. "We started to talk about the impact that would be achieved if a lot of the artworks were better engineered once the conceptual work and the aesthetic targets had been achieved," he says. "If you could make sure that

what you had was high-quality and robust, that in itself would enhance the artwork. While the piece of work I was looking at, which was Dominic's *Flutter* (see page opposite), was great, I could see how it could be even better."

Battle scars

The McLaren boss is on the record as saying he would prefer to be remembered as a successful entrepreneur rather than for his achievements in Formula 1 and explains that his relationship with Cinimod is also about providing financial backing and business advice.

"The lower-profile side of my life is about beautiful buildings, beautiful interiors and art," he says. "But I also have the battle scars that you receive as you grow in business and there's no necessity for Dominic to go down the trial and error route if I can provide the right guidance."

The plan now is for Cinimod to continue to produce a beautiful collection of chandeliers and interactive OLED and LED artwork, but to manufacture them to more robust tolerances. "We want to be taken for the serious company that we are," says Dennis. "We want to work with architects directly, with nobody in between. And the architect needs to feel that, if

we make a commitment and we give them a proposition for a piece of art or a particularly large complex interactive chandelier for the reception of an office building, they can categorically know that we'll deliver it on time and that it will work. And it's a lot easier for those architects to know that when the company has depth. I'm giving the company that depth."

The client from hell

The last time Dennis had this much to do with architects, the boss was on the other foot. The famous perfectionist admits that he was 'the client from hell' when he worked with Foster + Partners on the designs for the McLaren Technology Centre, where we conduct the interview. "That was three years of my life. I spent a day a week for three years on this project," he says. "I wanted to be involved in everything. I think it was well recognised by people like Norman Foster and David Nelson [the lead architect on the project] that I wanted the way the company works to be captured in the architecture."

"To get an idea of what Dennis would have been like to work with, there's a revealing insight in a recent BBC documentary about the company. In it he points to a cracked tile in the McLaren building and explains how much it frustrates him. "The reality is, when it's changed, it will be imperfect because tiles come in batches and the colour won't match," he says, before adding: "That bugs me, big time." When I put it to him that the clued-up lighting specifier has to be aware of a similar issue with colour matching in lamp technology, he gives a knowing smile.

"I have had that experience colour matching different big screen technologies. If there's any screen that's constructed, I want to see it white. I don't want to see it in mixed colours, I want to see it white," he says.

Dennis admits it is in his nature to zoom in on any subject and start trying to confront some of the challenges involved. I

"There's no necessity for Dominic [Cinimod founder Dominic Harris] to go down the trial and error route"



Connecting with government politicians are keen to be seen with Dennis and it has been suggested he might work for David Cameron as a car tsar



'The client from hell' Dennis became closely involved with the details of Foster + Partners' design for the McLaren Technology Centre in Woking



Flutter, the Cinimod installation for the Kinetics Art Fair, where Dennis met the studio's director and founder, Dominic Harris



Ahead of the curve The winding glass elevation and cantilevered shading soffits of the Foster + Partners-designed Technology Centre at McLaren's kidney-shaped corporate headquarters in Woking. After its completion in 2004 the building was shortlisted for the prestigious Royal Institute of British Architects Stirling Prize

suggest that he sounds like a lighting designer when he explains how he became personally involved in creating the lighting for the McLaren sign that sits at the entrance to the Technology Centre. Like many a specifier, he did not want the joins between the fluorescent tubes to be visible and designed a diffusing strip to create an even light. On the day I visit, the sign is glowing red to proclaim McLaren's victory in the Brazilian Grand Prix.

"What's interesting is the light intensity and how our signage



Champagne moment Dennis celebrates another Grand Prix victory with Lewis Hamilton

increases in intensity when it gets sunny. What we want is to stand out. In its day our sign was pretty cutting edge. I was proud of the outcome because it was something that I took under my wing and developed a lot of technology for," he says.

Realising that he is dealing with one of the few journalists who would rather talk about lighting technology than racing drivers, he adds: "If you really want me to start, whoever designed the old-fashioned xenon rope light may have had a eureka moment [when they came up with it] but what a piece of rubbish." At one stage some had been installed at the front and look back and see a mixture of yellow and white light. "It once again got involved, designing aluminium extrusions to compensate for the expansion and contraction issues with the old technology."

LED fan

Dennis is a fan of LEDs because they have allowed him to overcome these sorts of problems but also because they have helped reduce the cost of cooling the McLaren facility, and also played a part in helping the company to be the first Grand Prix team to be declared carbon neutral. He also likes the way the



Technology showcase A view inside the Foster + Partners-designed McLaren Technology Centre, where Dennis took a close interest in all aspects of its design details

technology allows for greater design flexibility in the headlights on the McLaren supercar, the MP4-12C.

Form factors

"When we started designing cars using carbon fibre, the initial thought process of the designer was to think of it as an alternative to metal, so it would still effectively have sharp corners. They didn't understand that compound curves could be easily achieved using carbon fibre and you'd get a lot of structural properties by understanding curvature."

"It was a bit the same with modern lighting systems. What it allowed you to do was design headlights that were completely different. It gave you a phenomenal ability to look at complex shapes which aren't just to do with the light source but also relate to what you can do with glass now."

With this level of design intuition you can see that Cinimod Studio will enjoy working with Dennis. And, luckily for them, the feeling appears to be mutual.

"The world has moved on with lighting and controls and integrating lighting with sound and movement is just a huge box of opportunity," he says. "And that's why I just love the pioneering spirit of Cinimod."

DENNIS ON:

MANUFACTURING AND THE ECONOMY
"My other passion has been to create a stimulus for attracting young people into the Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics disciplines. We should all strive for excellence; that's what this country should be about."

THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ENERGY CRISIS
"As long as there is an awareness about the environment and the energy crisis, I think there's hope. Whatever the solutions are, they will all be driven by technology."

ORDER AND CHAOS
"If you want to drive me mad, just stand me in the middle of New Delhi. The fix is incomprehensible. The only way you'd go about it is to build a new city and systematically move the people from the old one to the new one. The problem is you just don't have the infrastructure there."