

## 2 French brothers reinvent convention

*The Bouroullecs  
aim for 'poetry'  
in flexibility  
and wry elegance*

By Alice Rawsthorn

**PARIS**

**T**he first thing you notice when you walk into Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec's design studio in Paris is a screen of multi-colored felt tiles. The tiles slot together, so you can replace ones that become damaged or dirty, and change the pattern by introducing new colors. The screen can be made as big or as small as you wish, and is so light that it can hang just about anywhere.

Like almost everything else the Bouroullecs have designed, those felt tiles are intended to be as flexible as possible. They can be used to "build" impromptu walls in open-plan spaces, and taken with you if you move to another place.

The tiles are more like works in progress, than finished products, because it's up to their owners to decide how they'd like to use them. "Our starting point is always what people need from each product," said Erwan Bouroullec. "We recognize that their needs are bound to change over time, and that the product has to be flexible enough to change too."

Whereas most "new" designs are variations (improvements, if we're lucky) on existing ones, the French brothers, both in their 30s, are among the handful of truly original designers who develop entirely new types of products.

They begin each project by imagining, not what that product's like already, but how it ought to be, and design a new one accordingly. "At its best, the Bouroullecs' work contains a balanced tension between absolute control of their medium and total disrespect for convention," observed Gareth Williams, curator of furniture at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

"Total disrespect" is paying off. The Swiss furniture company, Vitra, has sold over two million of their Algue pieces of seaweed-shaped plastic that slot together into another infinitely expandable screen. Their Joyn desk system, also for Vitra, has become the default choice for fashionable offices. The desks can be expanded or contracted as people come and go. You can add screens for privacy, or take them down to create a meeting space. "With Joyn, they've managed to change people's perceptions of what the work environment could be, a bit like Apple has done for computers," said the British designer Jasper Morrison. "It succeeds in making the idea of work more appealing."

The brothers have applied similar principles to sofas, lighting, carpet, kitchens and, even, vases. All of their designs are executed in the nonchalant, wryly elegant style of edgy French fashion. Everything seems to have been thrown together effortlessly, but only because of the steely discipline behind it. "Their design language is still very new and very fresh," said Morrison. "It's a bit like a color that nobody knew existed, but is now becoming familiar. It's a particular and sensitive kind of poetry."

They recreate that poetry on dramatically different scales: from ex-

perimental limited editions of objects — like the ones they are to exhibit at Galerie Kreo in Paris beginning Saturday — to arduous industrial projects for manufacturers, like Vitra, and the Italian companies, Kartell, Magis and Cappellini. It is these projects that demand all of the brothers' steeliness, because it takes so much skill, determination and chutzpah for designers to realize their vision, while satisfying the practical demands of price pressure and safety regulations imposed on them and the manufacturer.

As the Bouroullecs admit, it helps to be able to address those demands together, which is perhaps why there have been so many brothers in design: from the Castiglioni and Colombos in postwar Italy, to the Bouroullecs and the Brazilian duo, the Campanas, today. "Designing for a huge industrial machine like Vitra is rather like conducting a

symphony orchestra," said Ronan. "Pricing. Technology. Distribution. It's problem, after problem. There's so much pressure that it's difficult to keep things light, but that's our job. And of course it's easier if there are two of you."

The Bouroullecs look rather similar — both lean, with delicate features and dirty blonde cropped curls — but are different in character. It's tempting, and not entirely inaccurate, to cast them as classic siblings: Ronan as the diligent older brother; and Erwan, the playful, impetuous younger one. They were born in rural Brittany, and rarely left the region until Ronan moved to Paris to study design. A year after graduation, he was commissioned by Cappellini, and opened a small studio in Paris, where Erwan, who had studied art, joined him. At first they designed under their own names but soon realized that, as each was working on the other's projects, they might as well sign them jointly.

All of their projects start off as sketches in the black notebooks stashed in boxes beside their desks. They bicker openly — fraternal spats are popular features of the Bouroullecs' public talks — but, judging by their productivity, such disagreements don't impede the brothers' efficiency. "We develop ideas through discussion and dialogue," said Ronan. "Nothing leaves here unless both of us sign off on it, which can be frustrating if, say, I'm convinced that I've come up with a great idea, and Erwan doesn't agree."

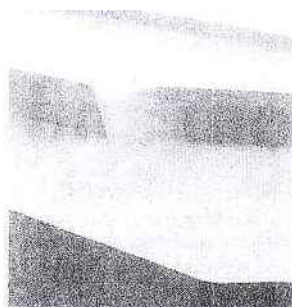
Right now they're developing a new chair for Vitra — "super-simple, and super-comfortable," as Erwan put it — and a collection of tables and shelving units to go with the Steelwood chair they unveiled for Magis last year, as well as a project for Kartell. They've just completed the new collection for Galerie Kreo. Despite the freedom that limited editions allow, the Bouroullecs have stuck to their favorite themes of function and flexibility.

The Paravents day bed is encased in a wooden box that doubles as a room-within-a-room; and the Rizière is a low table with layered surfaces sculpted into abstract slabs.

"Designing limited editions is a form of research for us because we can try out ideas that can't be used in industry — not yet," said Erwan. "But we never treat them as purely formal experiments. There's a logic to everything we do. Look at the Rizière, all the surfaces are functional. None of them are wasted."

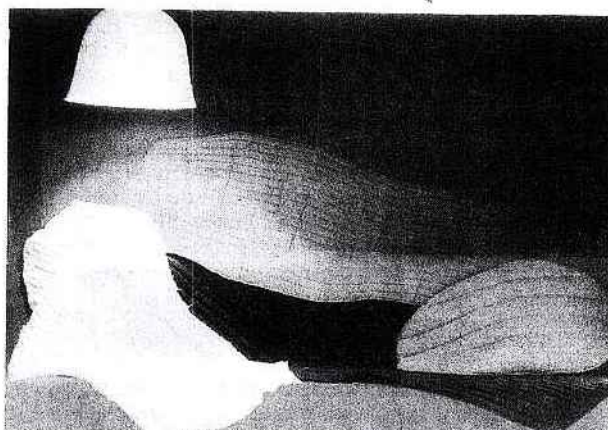
[iht.com/design](http://iht.com/design)

*A slide show of designs from Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.*

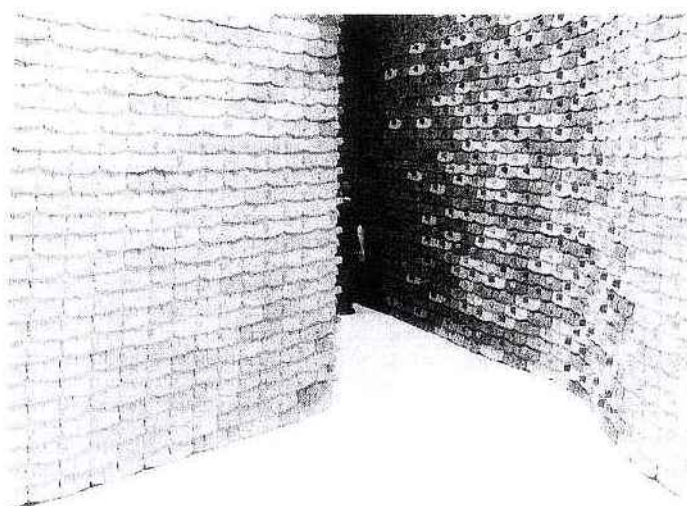


R & E Bouroullec

*Above, the North Tiles that slot together to create a screen. Colors can be changed and moved, and the screen is portable. Below, the Rizière, a low table; at right, the Paravents daybed.*



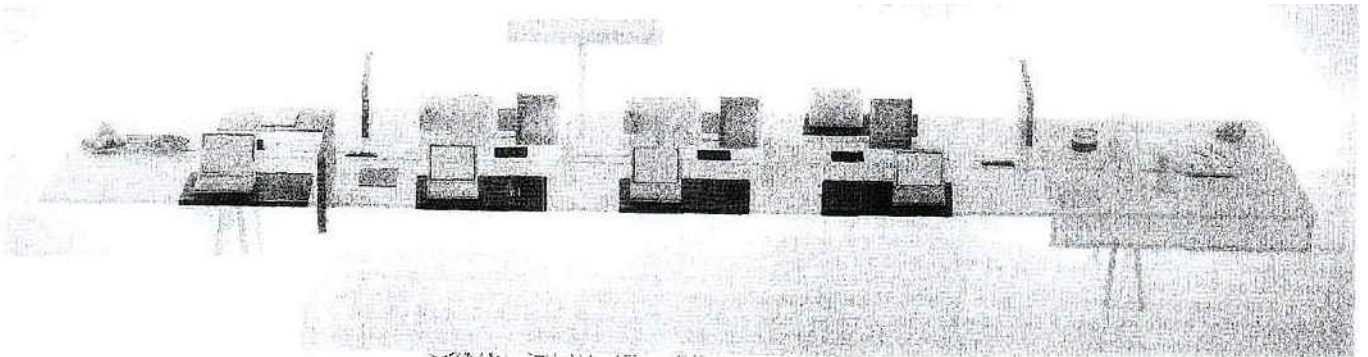
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec



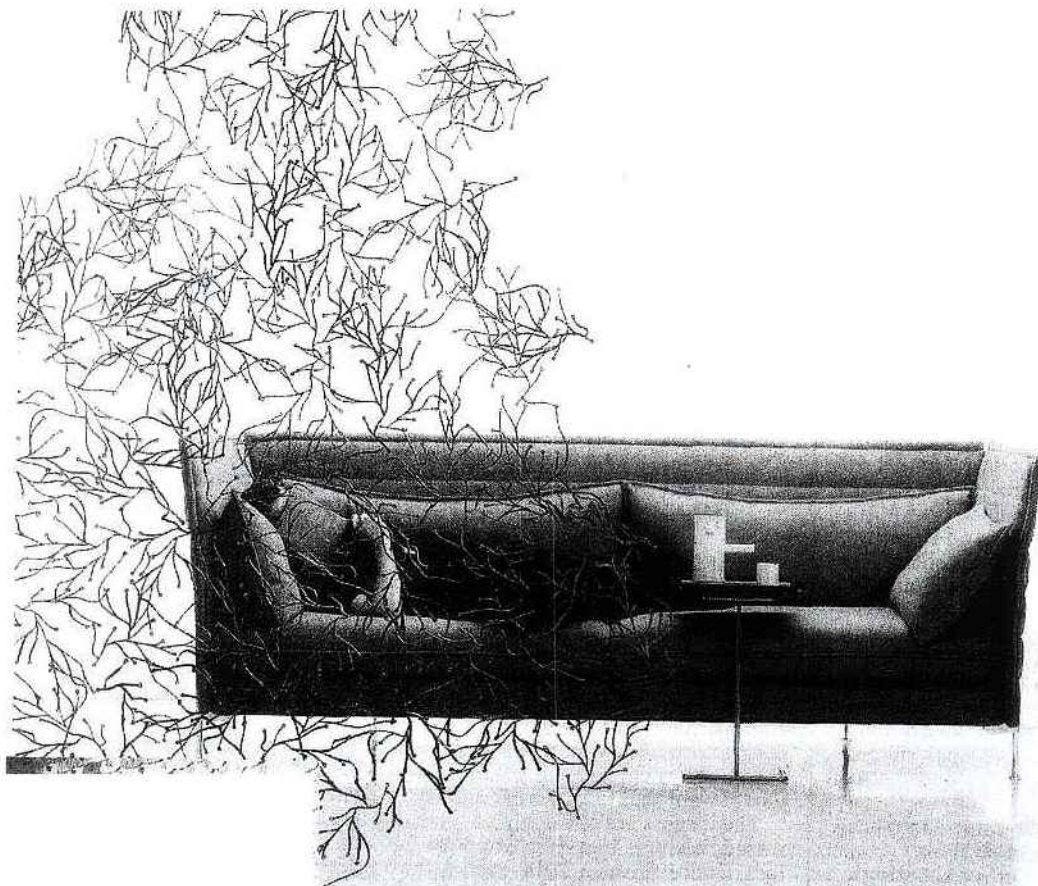
Paul Tahn and R & E Bouroullec



Yorgane Le Gall



*Above, the Joyn desk system, expandable depending on the number of people, was designed for Vitra by the brothers, far left, Ronan and Erwan (at right) Bouroullec; below, the 2006 Alcove sofa, draped with the Algue plastic screen that slots together to become expandable; it is manufactured by Vitra.*



vitra