

## People

Two of design's best-known brothers, Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, have built a worldwide reputation

## Places

From the trade shows to the design districts, don't miss our London Design Festival guide to what's on this month

## Products

We talk to the UK's leading emerging and established furniture makers about their careers and the future

## Projects

AR Design Studio's Black House was born out of a passion for design shared with its proactive clients

## Professional

Design professionals discuss how a host of new digital platforms is revolutionising product sourcing

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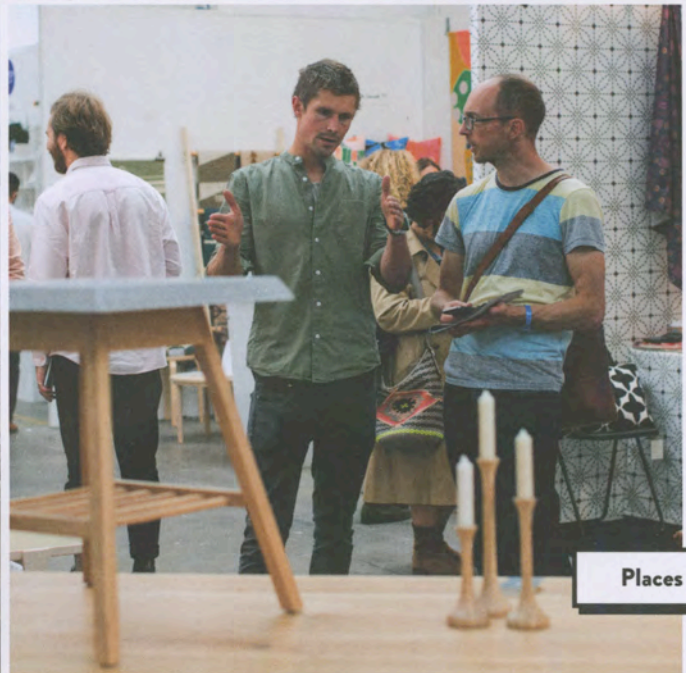
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### Project



### Professional



### Places

for residential design professionals



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British furniture continues to build on a long and distinguished pedigree. Jo Weaden speaks to two generations of British designers and makers about the challenges they face and the hopes for the future

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Our six-page London Design Festival preview tells you everything you need to know. We list the must-see events, talks, Design Districts and trade shows to help you make the most of this annual highpoint.

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AR Design Studio relished the experience of working with its design-focused clients. The resulting home is informed by local Kent architecture while also making a new and distinct design statement.

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Showrooms, trade fairs, the internet - there are many ways to source products. Kay Hill caught up with design professionals who reveal how they navigate the vast choices without jeopardising their schemes.

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# Collective intelligence

by Dominic Lutyens

Long-term working relationships with leading brands such as Vitra and Flos are a key part of the Bouroullec brothers' work. Dominic Lutyens speaks with the French duo about their rise to prominence, 'long-selling' pieces, and what makes good design.

08

**RONAN AND ERWAN** Bouroullec, more commonly (and catchily) referred to as the Bouroullec brothers, were little known when I first met them in Paris in 2002. They were based in a studio in the non-bourgeois, unglamorous suburb of Saint-Denis – a conscious decision on their part – which seemed to emphasise their leftfield credentials. “We like the fact that it’s multicultural, cheap,” the diffident, soft-spoken, Brittany-born brothers told me then.

Yet they were already gaining a reputation as *enfants terribles* on France’s design scene which at the time was overshadowed by Philippe Starck. Ironically, Ronan now wryly describes himself as an “old designer”.

Today, despite being globally successful, the brothers still operate on a small scale – they employ about six people – although their studio is in the cool, but less edgy, bobo (bourgeois bohemian) neighbourhood of Belleville in north-eastern Paris.

Ronan, who was born in 1971, studied design at EnsAD (the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs) in Paris; Erwan, five years his junior, read fine art at the École nationale supérieure d’arts de Paris-Cergy. Soon after graduating, Ronan undertook independent design work while Erwan, who was still at school, assisted him. In 1999, they co-founded their multidisciplinary studio.

Early on, two influential, risk-taking talent spotters recognised the brothers’ original, informal take on design which was often

flexible, modular, interactive, and elegantly pared-down. After admiring their slimline Disintegrated Kitchen of 1999 – a free-standing model owners could disassemble and take with them when moving house – Giulio Cappellini commissioned the brothers to create their modular Clouds shelving system punctured by Polo Mint-like holes. In 2001, fashion legend Issey Miyake enlisted them to design his avant-garde Paris boutique A-Poc. At the time, micro-architecture was one of the brothers’ pet themes and that same year, for Paris’s Galerie Kreo, they dreamt up Lit Clos. This bedroom raised off the ground on legs surely appealed for its associations with cosy children’s hidey-holes. Other designs evoking a childhood sense of protection and cocooning became a hallmark of their work. This persisted with designs such as their 2007 Slow chair for Vitra, with its enveloping, innovative textile upholstery. Or 2011’s Textile Field, an immersive installation in the V&A’s Raphael Court encouraging the informal contemplation of the Raphael Cartoons.

For Vitra, the brothers developed such idiosyncratic products as 2004’s *Algue*, a stylised representation of seaweed, and paying homage to one of another major Bouroullec theme – abstracted natural forms – it serves as a room divider or diaphanous curtains. Also for Vitra, they created the 2006 high-backed Alcove sofa. “It’s one of our long-sellers,” Ronan says proudly. “I prefer the term longseller to bestseller.”

By the same token, the brothers also value long-term working relationships: they have been collaborating for years with Kvadrat, Vitra, and Galerie Kreo. They designed Kvadrat’s Ready Made curtains as well as its new Copenhagen showroom which opens in November. The brothers also created Samsung’s slender Serif TV, which is topped by a shelf, as well as cast-glass vessels for Wonderglass. They are carefully selective however, as Ronan states, in a matter-of-fact rather than boastful way: “We turn down 90% of requests by companies to work with us. It’s a luxurious position to be in.”

Well-known as the duo’s mouthpiece, Ronan is articulate and voluble – particularly when you press certain buttons. But raise a topic he is not interested in and he practically clams up. Asked what he thinks of design in France today, he is blithely indifferent; perhaps to this co-founder of a now internationally successful brand, this line of questioning is parochial. “I’m distant from French design,” he avers laconically, before adding he prefers to “keep a naïveté”. “I like to concentrate on our work. I never go to exhibitions.” Perhaps Ronan’s desire to isolate himself from culture – or maybe high culture – partly explains the duo’s simple aesthetic.

This made me doubt he would answer another question: are they influenced by the 1960s/1970s pop aesthetic, which clearly influenced their more cartoony designs such as the wall-hung, modular



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## People



Clouds piece for Kvadrat? Yet Ronan acknowledges he's a fan of the era's 'radical Italians', notably Ettore Sottsass, citing his "passionate research for Olivetti and love of India's colours".

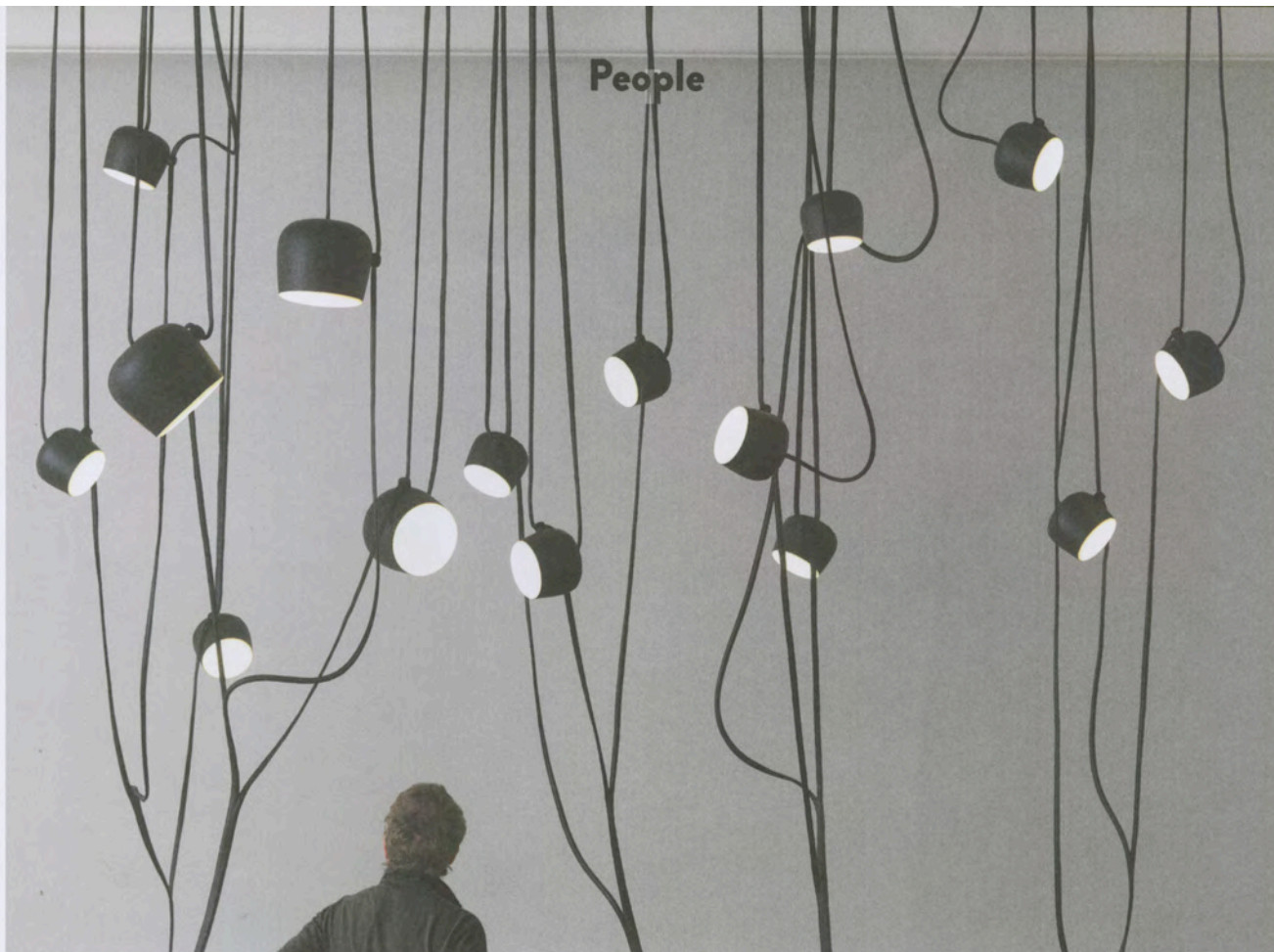
Asked if he believes the contemporary design market is tougher than when the brothers started out, Ronan replies: "It's difficult for me to say. I've never been able to understand the market. If an idea is good, it sells well." One surprising aspect of the brothers' success is their intuitive approach, which you'd think would be commercially risky. Their creative process begins by drawing in a very free fashion. Ronan points out how one brand, which he won't name, approached the brothers to work on a concept it believed was commercially foolproof. It bombed. ▶



Studio.



## People



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What qualities do young designers need today? "Humility, empathy," says Ronan. "Good design is about collective intelligence, working with other specialists. You can't arrive at a new job with an arrogant approach."

He humorously describes the dynamic between himself and Erwan as that of an "old couple" and volunteers what their different strengths are: "Erwan concentrates more on electronics, I prefer physically making things." Could he imagine working separately from his brother? "No, we like working together," Ronan states adamantly. "This is not a discussion for us."

Although known for high-end products, the Bouroullec brothers currently seem particularly concerned with seeing design in Utopian, democratic terms. Ronan is excited about fountains they recently created for the Champs Elysées. "Fountains are enjoyed by a big audience," he says. "Our work is increasingly linked to creating a good atmosphere that can reduce tension, bring harmony. People are less interested in spending lots of money on a chair."

Yet he defends the cost of high-end furniture. "There's often a reason why a sofa costs €5,000," Ronan says. "Expensive design is linked to ideas, techniques, good workers' conditions, the time spent developing it. A €5,000 jacket is different, more about marketing."

This ambivalence suggests the duo could be at a crossroads in their career. And, while professing to be elder statesmen on the design scene, they still have many years to continue creating their surprising, experimental work. ⑤

**Opening page** Erwin and Ronan Bouroullec with the Aim lamp for Flos / Philippe Jarrigeon

**Previous page, top** For furniture company Vitra, the brothers designed a range of pieces. Shown here is a loveseat from the Alcova collection.

**Previous page, middle** The Alcova range for Wonderglass consisted of hand-created geometric objects

**Previous page, bottom** For Danish company Hay, the brothers designed a collection of outdoor furniture called Palissade.

**Above** The Bouroullec Brothers' Aim pendant, in aluminium and photo-etched optical polycarbonate designed for Flos in 2013

**Right** For Danish company Kvadrat, the brothers created Clouds - an interlocking fabric tile concept



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