

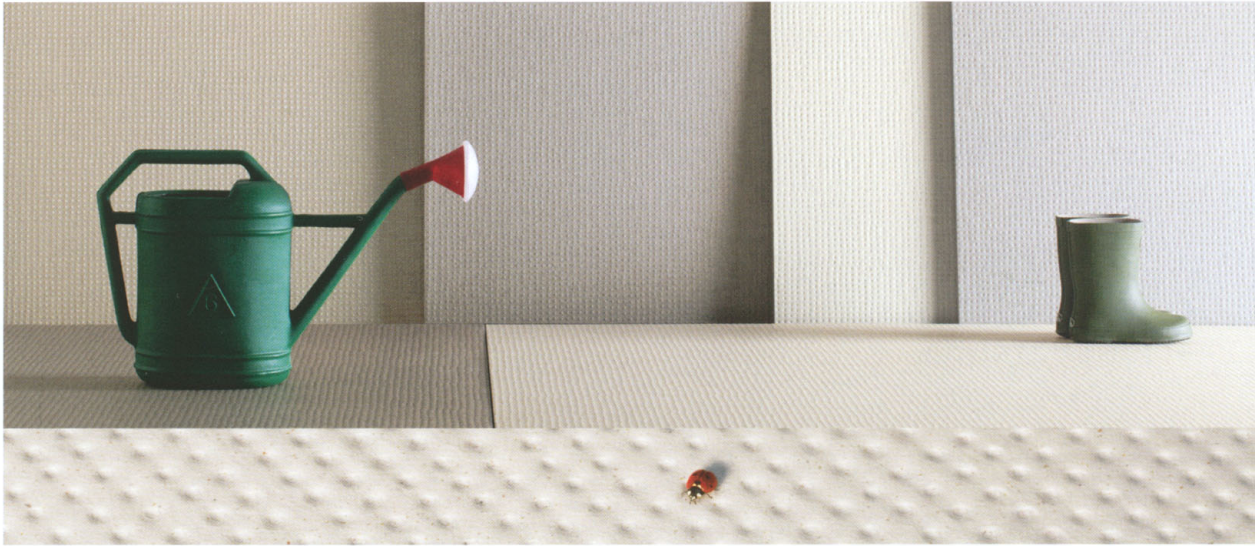
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Surfacing

surface design solutions







The discipline of design

Since 1992, brothers Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec have made significant waves in the design world. Blurring the creative philosophies of art with graphical, technical design, the pair have gained notoriety for their applied, elegant use of subtle colours and textures to create functional, and aesthetically minimalist, products. JoBeth Phillips spoke to Ronan Bouroullec about the duo's latest developments.

The eponymous design studio, Erwan & Ronan Bouroullec, has consistently been inundated with requests for designs from across all industries – a testament to the brothers' multidisciplinary design talents. But despite the numerous requests, very few are ever developed, as Ronan explains.

"90% of requests we say no to. We are a small design studio, and we don't want to pass on the work to other employees – we want to take responsibility for the design. We want to design for the company in question, not just use the studio name."

Another consideration when taking on product development and design for external parties is the reputation of the client, and the suitability of the products it offers. Moreover, the studio will only work with one type of material at a time – it won't, for instance, be employed by three separate companies each operating within one sector, preferring to only work with one type of product, and one company within that sector, at a time.

"The first consideration is that we try to work with only one type of company for one type of product. The second is passion. We are passionate, and we want to work with passionate companies, companies that we can call at midnight with an idea, that are receptive to our process," explains Ronan.

One of its latest projects has been for Italian ceramic tile producer, Mutina. The company, which has worked with a number of high profile designers in recent years, has augmented its tile collections to offer a more eco-conscious, but equally design-led, audience of architects and designers.

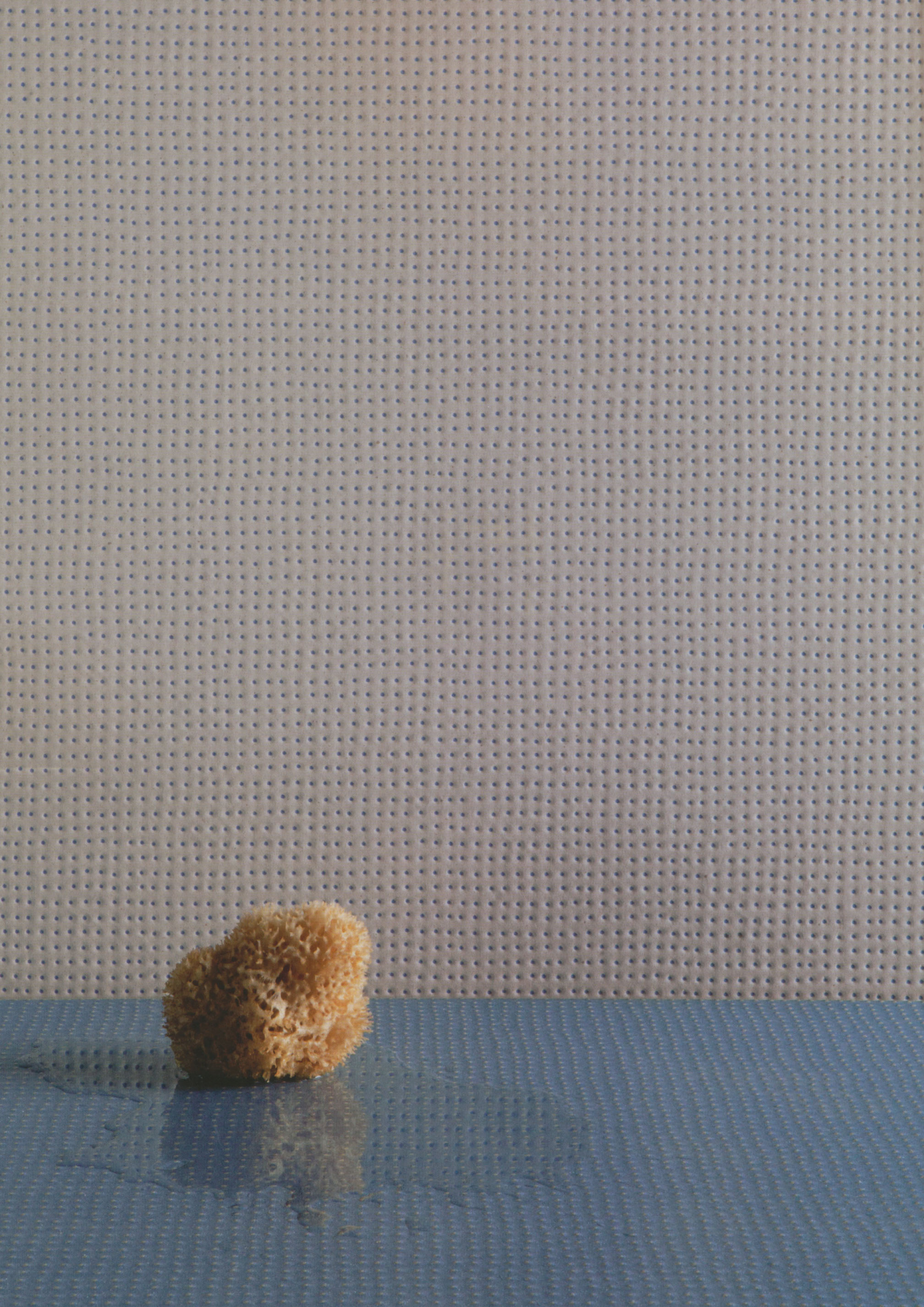
"With our collaboration for Mutina, we had never done flooring before, and Mutina is a passionate company. Also, with Mutina, we visited the factory to see its capabilities – that our design could be translated well, and that all through the chain, from design to manufacture, it was all perfectly done," says Ronan.

Erwan & Ronan Bouroullec's collection for Mutina, Pico, is characterised by its subtle style. Featuring a unique, matte velvet-like texture, it is atypical of traditional tiles – and is a prime draw for specifiers who require a hardwearing surface solution where design cannot be compromised. Indeed, the gentle, matte colours of Pico – available in a variety of neutral hues – allows for designers to plan interior decors around the tile, where it is complementary, but not the main focus, of an interior.

"It's different from other tiles," Ronan emphasises. "The reaction seems to be positive. The quality is very high, and the texture makes it stand out. It is matte, unlike most other tiles, and there is a deepness to its design. It feels soft, earthy," he continues.

Working with ceramic as a medium was a first for the pair, and with an open-ended brief from Mutina, the duo was able to experiment and explore with different textures and ideas as they pleased. Exploring the material and its capabilities was a particularly enjoyable process, says Ronan, who describes ceramic as a sensual.

"We really like ceramic as a material," he says. "We enjoyed working with it. Through the design, it was important that it kept its sensuality – that, unlike most tiles, where you can just see the gloss glaze, or a surface





colour, Pico is tactile and earthy.

“Ceramic is organic, and was interesting to work with – from our design to the manufacture, it is a very sensual product. Pico’s little dots are not organised, representing the earth and the pressure used during creation, and feels and looks like textile. It is the small detail that makes its quality,” Ronan enthuses.

As with all of the studio’s external project designs, the brothers worked together to create Pico. And, like many family relationships, the design process caused some friction between the pair.

“We argue all the time. We both try to find good solutions, and we are very direct with each other. We constantly critique one another, like how could it be better? It is a very aggressive process, but we try to better each other; but we share it, we share the experience. Our relationship can be full of tensions, but it is only to be better, to push each other, for the best possible result,” Ronan explains.

“We aim for simplicity – not boring simplicity – we try to make a good object, to create simple-looking things, with a sense of delicacy, intrigue, sensuality. We’re most interested in making the product functional, and although it may look simple, there is a lot of design and thought behind it.”

Throughout the design process, the pair closely collaborated with Mutina to ensure their designs would stand up to mass production without losing any of their intrinsic, textured qualities.

“We enjoyed working with Mutina – there is good research and they are very good at working with designers,” says Ronan. “Mutina is very disciplined, very Italian, and we enjoyed that very much. Mutina collaborated with us with lots of research and development to ensure we could create Pico to how we envisioned it. As with all of our design, we made prototypes in our Paris studio, and took them to the company to find a mass-scale solution,” he explains.

Although a new material to experiment with, ultimately the brothers applied the same approach to Pico’s design as they have for other projects. “In some ways, we have the same approach, in others, it differs,” explains Ronan.

“Whatever the product, we are constantly looking for solutions to problems. We always search for an answer – we like to express our ideas in a problem-solving way, so the product has functionality,” says Ronan.

As a rule of thumb, Erwan & Ronan Bouroullec’s designs are characterised by their subtleties, and functionality – properties which make their designs exceptionally popular with the wider architecture and design community. But despite the duo’s successes – and there have been many – the brothers prefer to keep out of the limelight and to focus on design, keeping it as pure as possible.

“We keep our distance, we don’t read the reviews. It’s an interesting position. Designers are like actors – we have empathy for the different situations, the objectives, and we want to know if there is a problem so we can fix it, we will work with the manufacturer to fix problems, but have limited outside influences,” says Ronan.

“Design is artistic, and there are no rules – but when you listen to reviews, or hear too much outside influence, it can be worse. It can jade you. So we prefer not to look.”

This extends so far to not even look at other trends in the design world, which Ronan asserts is not an ignorant measure on their part, but more to keep their own design separate and pure. “We could spend all day trawling for trends, or what people think of us – but it dilutes our process. We are designers, we don’t want to know so much of what people think. We prefer to stand back and just design. I don’t want to sound ignorant, but we just prefer to design without looking at external influences.

“I’m passionate about our design, and I would rather dedicate my time to think about new projects, new solutions, than dissect what other people are doing, or think of us.”

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