



head space

Hot young designers *Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec* talk about fighting, learning on the job, and dealing with success.
Text by Julia Nekich.



They're the most prolific and talented industrial designers to come out of France since Philippe Starck. They were still in their 20s when they began creating furniture for Cappellini and Vitra, exhibited their works in New York, London and Paris, and won international awards. This year, brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec were guests of honour at the Stockholm Furniture Fair, where they created a lounge environment using their own designs. At the fair, *belle* caught up with the brothers to talk about design and their latest projects.

The Bouroullecs' rise to stardom was propelled by furniture manufacturer Giulio Cappellini, who spotted Ronan's Disintegrated Kitchen – a flexible, mobile kitchen – at the Salon du Meuble in Paris in 1997. Their work has since included furniture for

Brothers in armchairs this page, left Paris's Erwan (left) and Ronan Bouroullec, who were guests of honour at this year's Stockholm Furniture Fair. **below** The brothers' Samurai chair for Cappellini. **bottom left** Spring Plastic chair for Cappellini.

Fertile imagination opposite page 1 Assemblage 4, a limited-edition system with a screen made of black seaweed, made for Galerie Kreo in Paris. **2** Storage system shown at this year's Stockholm Furniture Fair. **3** Fair visitors could see the lounge area created by the brothers. **4** Zip Rug for Vitra. **5** The Floating House, the brothers' first architectural commission, being built at the Centre d'Art de Chatou on the Seine in Paris. **6** The Cloud shelving and wall system made for Cappellini.



names such as Ligne Roset and Magis as well as the interior of fashion designer Issey Miyake's shop in Paris, and packaging for the perfume l'Eau d'Issey. Their designs are often described as highly functional, meticulous and slightly romantic.

For designers who have achieved so much, the brothers are surprisingly unassuming, down-to-earth, almost shy when talking about themselves. Ronan, born in 1971, began designing while still at art school. When Erwan, five years younger, joined him in 1999 after his fine-arts studies, they created every design piece together.

"When we design, it's really like playing ping-pong," Ronan says. "We bounce ideas off each other – and we do fight. It can be very difficult to work with a brother. We are quite different.

"The way we enter a project is we often start to talk a lot. It's the best way to work. We generally sit at the same table – we sit and work in front of each other every day. I draw in front of Erwan, then I take his drawing and work on his designs, and he takes mine. So we build a project together. A project goes out of the studio when Erwan and I both consider the design is good."

They employ only a handful of staff in their Paris studio. With so many projects offered to them, how do they decide which ones to accept? "What we especially like is to work on projects that we are not quite sure about," says Ronan. Perhaps it's why they tackled the problem of office systems, having never



Keeping it in the family

The Bouroullecs aren't the only famous brothers working in design. Brazilian brothers **Fernando and Humberto Campana**, who teamed up in 1983, create raw, bold furniture pieces that are almost overshadowed by their materials – everyday found objects usually sourced from the streets. Examples include the Favela chair, made from wood scraps found in a slum, and the Sushi chair, composed of fabric off-cuts, both produced by Edra.

Another set of famous brothers inspired by the simplest found objects were Italian architects **Achille, Pier Giacomo and Livio Castiglioni**, who began working together in 1947. Livio left to work independently in 1952, and Pier Giacomo died in 1968, leaving Achille to work alone until his death in 2002. The latter two created humorous and inventive lights for Flos, such as Snoopy (1967), and chairs such as the 1957 Sella bicycle-seat stool and Mezzadro tractor-seat stool, produced by Zanotta. Achille, who emerged as a renowned industrial designer and architect, developed audio-visual products in the 1960s, and in the 1970s he designed for Alessi.

English artists and brothers **Jake and Dinos Chapman** began working together in 1990 and soon gained recognition for their three-dimensional installations of Goya's etchings *The Disasters of War*. Since then, their obscure artworks, which explore themes such as globalisation, sex, racism and violence, have pushed the boundaries of taste, creating mixed reactions in the public.

Husband-and-wife design teams are not uncommon either. London-based Japanese couple **Shin and Tomoko Azumi** teamed up in the early 1990s and have since been producing subtle and playful design pieces. Their sleek and clever 1995 Table=Chest can be converted from a low table to a high cabinet in just seconds.

Legendary husband-and-wife team, **Charles and Ray Eames**, created some of the most important 20th-century furniture and architecture. In their first years together, they experimented with plywood, creating elegant, organic sculptures and furniture, many of which are available today. Notable designs include the Eames House, an example of their Case Study Houses, a budget housing project. The steel house, which could be built in four days, illustrated the couple's easy approach to design.



Plastic fantastic

- 1 Assemblage living system shown at Galerie Kreo in Paris, 2004.
- 2 The Joyn office system designed for Vitra, with interchangeable components.
- 3 Disintegrated Kitchen (1997) kickstarted the Bouroullecs' careers.



“Design is like cooking. You’ve got a lot of components, you have to consider them all and find a good way to mix them. It results in lots of surprises.”

worked in a formal office. Their Joyn modular office, produced by Vitra in 2002, was made for people who work together, with partitions and seating that can be reconfigured around a central table. “There are many different combinations in Joyn – this is just one,” Ronan says, gesturing to the set.

How do the brothers approach each design brief? “Design is really like cooking. You’ve got a lot of components, you have to consider them all and find a good way to mix them,” says Ronan. “It results in lots of surprises and shapes. We don’t have a design philosophy. We take a different approach each time we start a project. Our spectrum of work is very large – we have designed cosmetics, now we’re doing a floating house, we work for Vitra, sometimes we’re working with craftsmen in ceramics. So every time we are in front of a different type of object, we are learning along the way. It’s very healthy to consider the question of object or the question of design from different angles every time.”

Working with architects presents another learning curve for the brothers. Among their current projects is Floating House, their first architectural commission. “It’s a project for the Centre d’Art de Chatou in Paris. The house is a temporary house for artists. It floats out from the Seine River in the suburbs of Paris.” Construction of the house, in collaboration with two French architects, began in November last year. The facade, clad in wooden trellises, will eventually be covered with vegetation to create an intimate environment for the artists.

It’s just another of their many challenges. Would they ever consider designing electronic gadgets? Ronan’s face lights up. “I would really like to work on a mobile phone or a computer.” □

The Bouroulle brothers have their own website, at www.bouroullec.com and a book, *Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec* published by Phaidon, \$89.95. Cappellini products are available through de de ce, www.dedece.com, in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. For information on the Bouroullecs’ creations for Vitra, visit www.vitra.com