

Designers Block

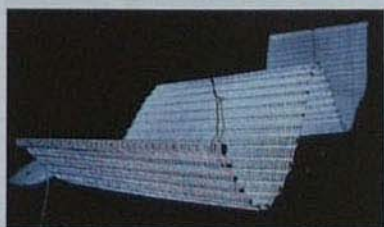
Abigail Branagan discusses the development of this innovative platform for contemporary design and explores its value to exhibitors.

A BRICK LANE BREWERY, VICTORIAN GOODS YARD and the Gothic station hotel may not appear to have much in common. However over the past three years they have become the dramatic backdrops for 'Designers Block'; the innovative showcase for international design. In September over fifty designers and companies from across the globe exhibited in 5,000 square metres of raw industrial space located within an ex-jam factory in Brompton, London. This annual event, which has become a highlight of the design calendar, is the brain child of Piers Roberts and Rory Dodd. They met at Rycote Wood college in Oxfordshire where they trained in furniture making. Their mutual passion for international design led to the conception of Same – a unique selling space on Brick Lane. To capitalise on the international audience brought in by the annual interiors fair '100% Design', and to promote Same, Roberts and Dodd developed 'Designers Block'. It also addressed the glaring need for an independent design event that wasn't a trade show.

The first exhibition took place in the Old Truman Brewery in Brick Lane in 1998 and in the four days that it was open more than 10,000 visitors passed through the door. Public demand for a follow up event was huge and so in 1999 'Designers Block' set-up temporary home in Bishopsgate Goods Yard (just off Brick Lane). Same closed the following year, which meant that Roberts and Dodd could focus their energies on developing the third 'Designers Block' (at St Pancras Chambers), and continue to strengthen their presence internationally. This year 'Designers Block' made its mark on Milan (International Contemporary Furniture Fair in April) and Barcelona ('Prima Vera del Disseny', the bi-annual cultural festival that took place from April to July). Although Milan had a strong commercial feel to it,

Barcelona focused on the more creative element and this can be felt strongly at this year's London show. The success of 'Designers Block' stems from the fact that Roberts and Dodd have a good understanding of designer's strengths and capabilities and are therefore proactive in encouraging new designers to show, alongside more established companies. Those exhibiting gain direct access to a varied audience – such as press contacts, architects, specifiers, buying departments of major retailers, and designers. This presents invaluable networking opportunities which are an essential element to any designer's development within the industry. Where else could someone straight out of college have the chance to mix with companies such as Vitra, Purves and Purves, and Ecos – all of whom took part in this year's show?

Designer Tim Parsons graduated from the Royal College of Art last year and after visiting previous



'Designers Blocks' decided to exhibit at this year's show. It was the perfect opportunity for him to launch his *Brushanger* which was an addition to a collection of brush products manufactured by The Berlin Institute for the Blind (Blindenanstalt von Berlin). The *Brushanger* was a redesign of a combined clothes brush and coat hanger found in a charity shop in Wandsworth. From a graduate's perspective Parsons felt that the exhibition was more about a discourse between designers than pure commercial selling. It was an environment that stimulated ideas and on a practical level was more economical for those designers with smaller promotional budgets. The event has a reputation for attracting companies looking for designers which is an appealing prospect for those wanting to focus on designing rather than making products.

'Designers Block' also reflects the current dynamism apparent in design collectives. The past decade has seen a noticeable shift in the industry as designers no longer seem to be lone pioneers. One such collective is the multi-disciplinary arts practice Foundation 33 formed by architect Sam Solhaug and graphic designer Daniel Eatock. They act as a studio and shop where collaborative and independent projects are developed (including this year's identity for Channel 4's *Big Brother*). Foundation 33 wanted to exhibit in a challenging environment and 'Designers Block' was the perfect platform from which to reveal their ten new products. These included two pieces that explored the idea of space – a cube with an internal one-way mirror creating an infinite space – and an A1 sheet of millimetre graph paper with each millimetre square dotted by hand. The exhibition also featured the first showing of their bench sofa constructed at a Southampton shipyard and made solely from carbon fibre (a material developed for use in the yacht racing and

motor sports industries). Other notable collectives who have shown at 'Designers Block' include the design groups Droog (from Holland), Norwaysays (from Norway) and Snowcrash (from Sweden).

The choice of space is integral to the popularity of the show and provides a source of inspiration and motivation for the organisers. So often events are dropped into the sterile settings of a conference or exhibition centre. These do have the benefits of convenience as finding unusual locations demands a huge amount of effort and in Designer Block's case endless phone calls. This year Roberts and Dodd were the ones being contacted by a property developer who was converting the disused Bermondsey factory into apartments and offices. Developers are now starting to see the benefits of promoting sites through well-publicised art and design events. However using such spaces can have drawbacks in the form of stringent health and safety regulations. Roberts and Dodd have found these problems to vary with the venue and therefore have learnt how to be extremely flexible. This also has meant that they spend much of their time curating the space as well as organising the show. This considered approach enables designers to invite their clients to something very specific which shows the work in a different context to that of a trade show, giving greater confidence in the potential of the designer.

The event is a labour of love as there is no funding. This is the first year that the exhibitors have covered the cost of the event through the nominal exhibition fees paid. Regardless of the financial restrictions they plan to continue, and Roberts is keen to move into more curatorial work for spaces like the Design Museum or to pursue working with major design retailers. One thing is for certain whatever projects they undertake, they are guaranteed to delight advocates of contemporary design everywhere.

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She is currently working with the Applied Arts Agency and Mazarca Projects.

'Designers Block' was at The Jam Factory, Green Walk, London 27-30 September. This year's exhibitors included: Aldo Bakker, Brian, Byproduct, Charlotte Packe, Concrete Blond, Daunbailo, David Henrichs, Design UK, Diapo, ElectricWig, Enlai Hooi, Eoos, Fiona Scully, Foundation 33, Frame, Full Blown Metal, Francesco Draisci, George Baldele, Hector Serrano and Lola Llorca, Homework, Intracasa, Keltum, Mark Finzel, Medio Medio, Money for Milan, MNO, Niall O'Flynn and Hiroshi Tsunoda, Norwaysays, Peppermint, Peter van der Jagt, Erik-Jan Kwakkel and Arnout Visser, Pergo, Permafrost Design, Purves and Purves, Putti Design, Objecthaus, Olaf Kolte Design, Simon Jones, SKK, Surreal, Scheuffler & Heiss, Snowcrash, Susan Kralovec, Tal Gur, Tim Parsons, Ben Martin and Rajko Debeljevic, Tisettanta, Tomato Interactive, Ung Svensk Form, Vitra, W2.

Contacts:

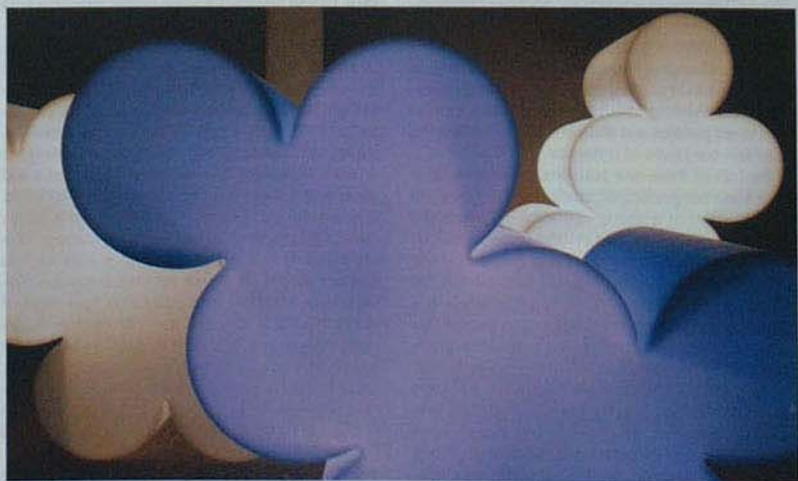
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100% Design
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Tim Parsons
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Hector Serrano and Lola Llorca
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Left top: Francesco Draisci. Photo: Carlo Draisci. Left middle: Tim Parsons. Photo: Benson. Left bottom: Benson Saw. Photo: Carlo Draisci.

Clockwise from top: Manolo is gonna have fun (an initiative of Hector Serrano and Lola Llorca). Take me higher. Photo: Jordi A. Torals. Money for Milan. Photo: Carlo Draisci. Tal Gur. Photo: Carlo Draisci. Manolo is gonna have fun (an initiative of Hector Serrano and Lola Llorca). From infinity to beyond. Photo: Jordi A. Torals.