

dispatches

Designers Hector Serrano and
Lola Llorca
from Spain

While talent can be found anywhere, cultural tradition continues to place designers from certain countries at an advantage. In a new regular column, Piers Roberts looks at design success through reference to place and working methods – and in the process tells us who we will be buying stuff from in the future

Spanish steps

What can the work of Spanish designers tell us about design in the UK?

Manolo works as an administrator for the government. He is a serious man with traditional values. Manolo doesn't go out too much. He prefers to stay at home. But he has left his city to go to London and participate in the *Manolo's Conna Have Fun* exhibition.

Manolo is the creation of Hector Serrano and Lola Llorca. His role is to reveal the fun that can be had through interaction with mundane domestic objects twisted ever so slightly to encourage play. Tables become trampolines, dinner plates are Frisbees, and footballs become lights – or is that the other way around? 'Use only as directed' may be the advice, but 'intentional misuse can be even more fun'.

Playfulness is a theme explored by many of the new generation of Spanish designers. Following in the footsteps of London-based El Ultimo Grito, or Martí Guixé in Barcelona, Serrano and Llorca's work provides a refreshing insight into both how and why young designers can establish themselves in a competitive market.

The pair met studying a mixture of furniture, product, graphic, textile and automotive design in Valencia. Serrano went on to London's RCA, graduating in 2000, and Llorca followed a year later, dissatisfied by the range of jobs available to her in Spain.

They have chosen to remain; two more designers drawn from across the world into the cultural melting pot of London, one of the things that makes British design so hard to classify. "We came to London for the education and a contrast in points of view," says Serrano. "In London you are freer to express yourself at a younger age," adds Llorca. "In Spain there are more formal roles for the designer – the development of ideas can be limited to a predetermined view of commerciality."

The promise for Spanish design that was generated in the 1980s with the work of André Ricard and Mariscal, a cultural explosion fuelled by the Barcelona Olympics and post-Franco freedoms, receded with the economic downturn at the end of the decade. Spanish design policy has mainly concentrated on competing with Italy in the manufacture of mid-market commercial products.

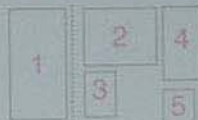
However, the situation is changing, particularly around Barcelona



and Bilbao, where – say Serrano and Llorca – designers have begun to show British influences in their working methods. The most evident of these is the incorporation of more flexibility into production methods and the exploration of broader themes.

There is a perception in Spain, says Serrano, that London is a cool, glamorous city where success is seen to justify ability. The pair acknowledge that this impression helps when seeking new commissions in Spain (interest from their home country in the pair's work followed when Serrano won the Peugeot Design Award in 2000 for his Superpatata lamp), but say they value London more for its position as an international communications centre and what may be learnt from the mix of cultural perspectives to be found there.

In the UK, where increasing numbers of design graduates see self-employment as their preferred or only option, the resulting diverse collection of businesses manage the process of delivering innovative ideas in different ways. The British tradition of workshop-based designers dates back to the 19th century arts and crafts movement. Across the UK many designers still market themselves through the production of one-off



Fun and frolics 1, 1, and 2. The Manolo's Gonna Have Fun exhibition builds domestic objects to encourage play (1). Hector Serrano's Superpatato lamp won the 2000 Proust Design Award (individual work by Llorens Llorca, and 5). Hector Serrano is generating interest in their home country of Spain.



pieces or develop batch production techniques.

For Serrano and Llorca, the Manolo's Gonna Have Fun exhibition is a means of attracting commissions from manufacturers. While traditional weaknesses in UK manufacturing persist, new risk takers with skills in marketing and distribution are beginning to take root in the sector. Employing a new generation of designers, managing the responsibilities of delivering quality products on time, at the right price, they source manufacture from the UK or abroad.

The unhappy story of British manufacturing has a long past. Innovation was key to Britain leading the Industrial Revolution and the creation of new markets. But financially crippled by the Second World War, exposure of outdated methods of manufacture came with the ending of closed markets as the UK gave up its Empire. Germany, Italy and Scandinavia sought to link innovative design with quality production as a means of generating international perspectives on manufacturing potential. Britain gave up on leading the world through social housing projects, drew back from its 'patronising' approach to teaching design and retreated to contemplation of its 'glorious past'.

The decimation of what remained of industrial Britain with the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s still provokes anger, though some observers would defend it as a necessary but somewhat drastic clearing of dead wood from the sector. If economic policy since then has maintained a strong pound, raising international prices to the detriment of UK exporters, it also re-emphasises the need for high-quality, value added through good design manufacture – a strategy employed with some notable success by the Design Council.

The national joke will remain as long as designers like Jasper Morrison and Ron Arad find no employment from UK manufacturers. However, it's a recent phenomenon that Britons are looking to contemporary art and design as signifiers of success, and to modern architecture as a mark of national prestige, central to the regeneration of inner cities. The international view of the UK is of a vibrant creative culture. Now is the time to reinvest in innovators by reflecting on the diversity of business models capable of delivering good services to demanding markets. With so many designers from across the world choosing London as their base, the UK can only benefit from welcoming these diverse talents. **I**