

# sharedspaces

Luke Pearson and Tom Lloyd's creative approach to design has seen the PearsonLloyd studio produce two award-winning airline seats in the last decade

 Luke Pearson and Tom Lloyd set up their studio in 1997. Since then, PearsonLloyd has designed furniture for Walter Knoll; carried out wayfinding for the heritage city of Bath; addressed violence in A&E wards; and become a specialist in task chairs, developing products for companies such as Steelcase.

The breadth of work is clearly wide, but the studio's goal is always the same: to respond to the changing patterns of behaviour in contemporary life, and materialise its research with products strong enough to shift the market.

To date, the studio's portfolio has seen it awarded the distinction of Royal Designers for Industry by The Royal Society of Arts in 2008; and in August 2012, it was named one of the top 50 design studios 'Shaping the Future' by *Fast Company* magazine in New York.

Design writer Anna Bates talks to Luke Pearson and Tom Lloyd about the ideas that shape the studio's work.

01. Lufthansa's business-class seat was designed completely from scratch
02. The process map Pearson-Lloyd created for UK NHS A&E departments



**LP:** We're interested in designing for shared spaces. It's kind of a black art: there's this dichotomy between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group. We have to deal with the psychology of people.

**TL:** With all our airline projects, we've brought a culture of furniture design to a sector that has been dominated by product and industrial design. Actually, bridging the gap between these two disciplines has been our goal from the start: we studied both disciplines, and we set up the studio to address the disconnect between the two.

**AB:** More recent projects see you tackle the issue of how strangers interact with

each other in shared spaces: such as your work addressing violence in A&E wards; and the shift in the way workers use office space, for Bene.

**LP:** There is a different dynamic in all of these projects, but the goal is always to create environments that encourage certain behaviour, by making it feel natural. Getting this right is the difference between someone having a good experience and a bad one.

**AB:** How have these ideas materialised in your work for airlines?

**TL:** We did a lot of research when we were designing the business-class cabin for Lufthansa, and we discovered that

people experience a sense of privacy if their head and shoulders are further apart – it doesn't matter if their feet are close together. We built this into the seat plan by using a 'V' configuration.

**AB:** So these big ideas are prevalent in the smallest details?

**TL:** Yes. What's really good about this design is that if co-travellers want to talk, they just need to tilt their heads forward slightly, and because they are positioned diagonally, they find themselves facing each other.

**LP:** A lot of airlines apply branding a bit like a sticker, but both Virgin Atlantic and Lufthansa knew that

“ WE DESIGNED A SEAT SPACE THAT SUITED THE BRAND'S CHARACTER ”



buying off-the-shelf products and simply re-dressing them wouldn't do. It's in the details that you can express the values of a brand – and this is how you create a memorable experience. *Wallpaper\** magazine recently wrote that our Lufthansa seat was its favourite – for all these reasons.

**AB:** When you designed the upper-class cabin for Virgin in 2003, you saw 'experience' in more theatrical terms.

**LP:** This project was all about breaking new ground. It was the first time a completely flat bed had been designed in this format, and Virgin wanted to take the opportunity to re-position the brand. We designed a seat space that

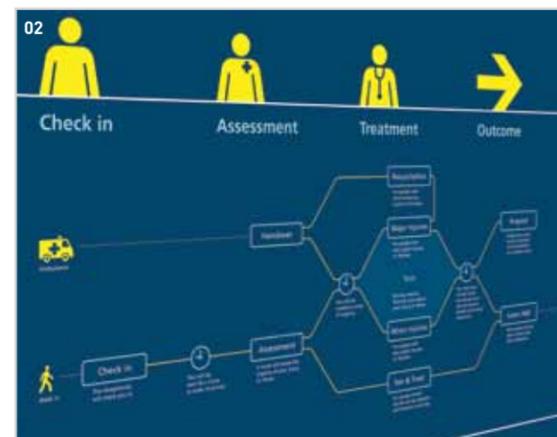
suit the brand's character; Teague described it as having a "clubby sexiness".

**AB:** It also introduced a new aesthetic language into the aircraft cabin – critics said it brought Virgin into the realm of a design-led brand.

**LP:** The seat became iconic; it's one of the few airline seats that is known outside of the airline industry. When we designed it, aircraft seats looked like they were made for racing cars.

**TL:** We thought: you go from hotel to hotel via this seat – why does it look like a machine? We stripped away the unnecessary technology and made the

03. An attractive and informative wayfinding post in Bath, UK





seat more discreet so people felt like they were taking off in a lounge chair.

**AB:** Would you say that the market has changed now? For starters, the consumer is smarter – there are even websites that enable passengers to review each seat of an aircraft.

**LP:** Absolutely. It isn't just about big gestures anymore. Our clients – the passengers – are very educated, and much more critical.

**TL:** It's become about the nuances. Especially as the market is very developed – there are a lot of lie-flat seats. The challenge is to do something that adds a different kind of value.

**AB:** You've credited the collaborative process of your work for Lufthansa as the reason you were able to achieve such a high level of detail. But was it difficult to maintain a strong vision with so many people involved?

**LP:** We love this bit – we have a gestalt philosophy of how the part we're working on affects the whole, so we get involved with all the teams in the project: engineers, accountants, upholsterers. We have to know how different groups behave, because to design something well you need to be able to bring bits of information from one environment to another.

**AB:** What about with the client?

**TL:** There can be a bit of a wrestle, because our priority is always the end user. But we really enjoy the tension around this relationship.

**AB:** You have created long-standing relationships with many of your clients



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– like Walter Knoll, Bene and Tacchini. You've also been commissioned by some of your clients to work on completely different projects: Joe Ferry, previously head of design at Virgin and senior vice president of design at InterContinental, recently commissioned you to work on hotel projects based on your work for Virgin. He said you were an “exceptional creative team” and that your “versatile talent made it an easy choice”. What do you think the reason for your repeat commissions is?

**LP:** We care, and we bring this to all our relationships. It's a really simple thing, but it is related to everything we do. To a degree, we see ourselves as servants of the brand; over time we've become really good at stepping into the client's world and understanding what

- 04. PearsonLloyd has designed a wide range of office furniture and enclosures for Bene
- 05. The Riya task chair, designed for Bene

is relevant for them and how they need to develop.

**AB:** You've described your ability to navigate the relationship with the client and all the other parties involved as part of the “craft of industry”.

**TL:** We see the craft of industry as the ability to manipulate the tools at our disposal, work with the restrictions of the factory, the market, the client, the engineer, the materials and the price – all the things that aren't usually spoken about when you talk about design.

**LP:** This is the lifeblood of our design process. It is a process driven by passion: we can spend months tweaking it. When we succeed with this equation, the result is something efficient, beautiful and memorable. ☒

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