



Luke Pearson and Tom Lloyd, the founders of industrial design practice PearsonLloyd

FEATURES

[Click for gallery 1 of 1](#)

The quiddity of PearsonLloyd

London

08 November 2013

It is a time for reflection in the studio of Luke Pearson and Tom Lloyd. The designers are sat at the squircular table that fills much of the back room in their workspace off London's Shoreditch. The shelves are stacked with chair maquettes, books, and bottles of maquillage - empty.

"There is a strange tyranny of the new in the design world, which is unfortunate," says Lloyd. "It's the lifeblood of the industry and everyone is expected to create novelty all the time." "Just think of Milan," adds Pearson. "There's so much demand for newness there that it feels like a soufflé that has been frantically beaten and beaten. Everyone knows its just about to go pffft and disappear in on itself."

Reflecting on the worth of the Milan Furniture Fair is indicative of the studio's mood. Pearson and Lloyd are taking stock. The studio is 16 years old, established in 1997 after its founders graduated from MA design courses at the Royal College of Art in 1993. Since then, it has created products and commercial service design for the likes Tacchini, Lufthansa, Bene and, this year, the City of Bath.

Yet the studio's contribution to the 2013 London Design Festival was strictly non-commercial. Rather than a product launch, the designers presented 1:1, an exhibition demonstrating configurations of 3m-long plywood boxes in the Great Western Studios space. The exhibition was experimental, with the various box layouts exploring how the design of public spaces affects people's behaviour. "It's something we might not have done had it not occurred at a moment when we felt we could stand back and look at what we're doing," says Pearson.

RELATED STORIES

LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL

Marcel Wanders' Dressed for Alessi

London
02 October 2012

In celebration of the launch of a new range of cookware with Alessi, Marcel Wanders invites Disegno into the kitchen >

PRODUCT

Tarot by Sara Berner

Stockholm
02 October 2012

Swedish designer Sara Berner leads tarot cards out of the occult and into the whimsical >

**Disegno's Olafur
Eliasson
Interview**
London
25 October 2012

As part of Disegno No.3, we met the designer and artist Olafur Eliasson in a darkened gallery at the Tate Modern. Here, we publish the full interview >

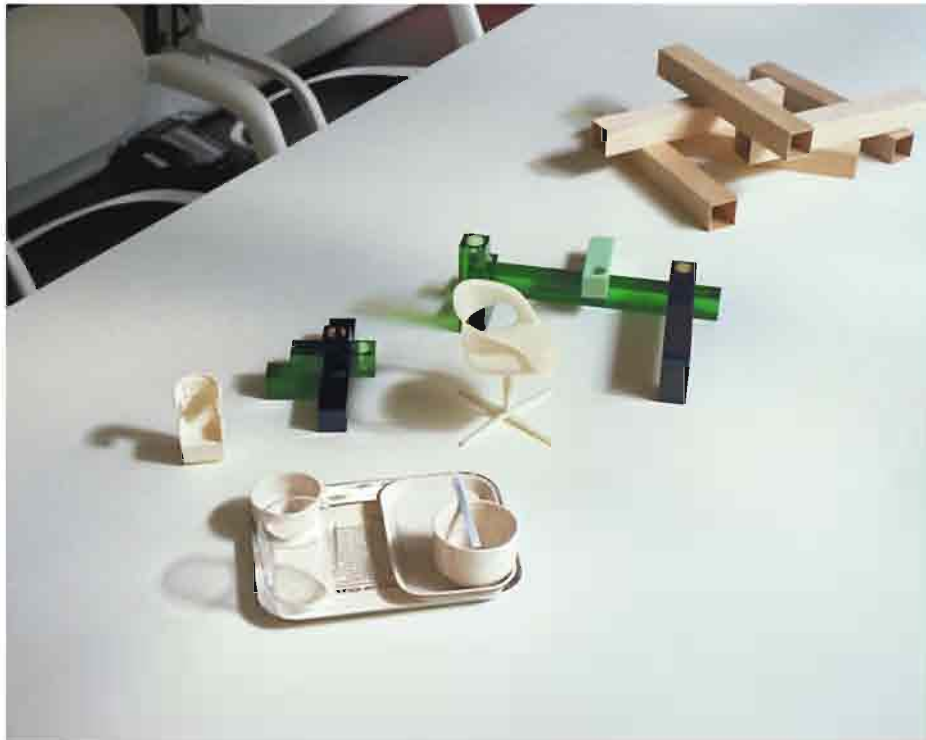


The back room of PearsonLloyd's studio in Shoreditch, with the large central meeting table

Pearson and Lloyd formed their studio at the same time as their Royal College contemporaries Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby created theirs. Yet whereas Barber Osgerby's graphic handwriting of loops and perforations is easily recognisable in their design, PearsonLloyd's work is more nebulous; more embedded in the constraints of industrial design. It is a situation exaggerated by the variety of projects the studio takes on – from furniture and pathfinding systems; schemes to reduce violence in A&E wards and street lighting; through to a plan to work with makeup (the source of the bottles in the studio). It is not easy to define a typical PearsonLloyd project.

"We've been trying to understand the ideas that structure what we do," says Lloyd. "1:1 is a part of that. One of the things that is behind much of what we do is public space, be that a workspace, a city square, an aircraft or a hospital. As soon as you step outside of your house, you're in foreign territory. We're very interested in the way design can affect that process and how design can have an impact on people's experiences." Lloyd's statement raises two themes that resonate through the studio's work: a fixation on public space and a conception of the value of objects as lying in the behaviours they provoke.

For PearsonLloyd public space is a broad concept; one that extends beyond the norm of parks and plazas. The studio collapses the semi-public and semi-private into one: as soon as you leave your home you enter the public realm and that will invariably affect your behaviour.



Models developed in the studio over the course of projects, including plans for the 1:1 plywood boxes

"Airports are a classic example," explains Pearson. "When sat in the waiting lounge people will put their bag beside them to prevent someone sitting next to them, yet in 20 minutes time they're going to be on a plane with no choice of who to sit by. The different natures of public spaces change how you act and react to those around you."

This concern for public space is self-evident within much of the studio's work – the Docklands workspace system for Bene and business class cabin for Lufthansa, for example – yet in certain projects it is dealt with in more obscure fashion. PearsonLloyd's Bay office chair appears a straightforward product, yet its design is based upon extensive research into the changing way in which offices work.

"Up until 10 years ago you had a pretty strict idea of what an office was – a controlled, desking environment," says Lloyd. "Now, there's a realisation that more informal interaction and use of space stimulates productivity." The fallout is that offices have become less segregated, with fewer spaces that have been designated strict purposes. Meetings are not restricted to official meeting rooms and workers regularly swap desks and chairs.

In such an environment, the ergonomic focus of a traditional office chair becomes a disadvantage, as each chair requires laborious adjustment to fit an individual's body. The Bay is a compromise – only the chair's height needs to be manually adjusted, with ergonomic qualities provided by a backrest that automatically adapts according to the user's weight.



Storage at the PearsonLloyd office

“What we do in office design or workplace research is try and unpick how furniture can change that process of using space,” says Lloyd. “Architects and interior designers are interested in particular things and they don’t always include the way people use the spaces they design.” Even PearsonLloyd’s work that seemingly pertains to the private is infused with social concern. A screw-free commode designed for the NHS in 2012 was created to be more easily cleaned than traditional designs in order to help reduce the spread of the MRSA superbug in hospitals.

This concern with the way objects impact upon our daily lives is typical of PearsonLloyd’s output. Despite the centrality of the object to the studio’s work, PearsonLloyd’s essential concern is not with objects for their own sake – for their aesthetic or appeal – but rather with the way in which they influence our actions. “Our work is grounded in physical things, but is framed around the idea of how objects might affect people’s lives,” says Lloyd. “We are interested in affecting or improving behaviour.”

To this extent, PearsonLloyd’s practice parallels to design consultancies like IDEO or studios such as Industrial Facility. Its handwriting lacks the recognisability of industrial designers like Philippe Starck or Ross Lovegrove because it fundamentally aims at different ends. Rather than build a personal brand through distinctive products, PearsonLloyd treats objects in an essentially public way. “We’re looking at social interaction, and ways in which that can be forced,” says Pearson.



A member of the studio at work in PearsonLloyd’s space. Much of PearsonLloyd’s work has focused upon contemporary working practice

A recent public works commission in Bath, Somerset saw the studio create bus shelters and street furniture. More importantly, they also created a way-finding system for the city, featuring circular enamel maps set within brass monolithic rectangles. The rigid geometry of the rectangular forms is contemporary, yet the choice of materials nostalgic. This sense of nostalgia is strengthened by the somewhat astrolabe-like quality of the maps themselves: circles of intricate enameling dissected by the diagonals of the rivers and roads they chart. Such a connection to Enlightenment-era equipment is apt, tying PearsonLloyd’s way-finding system to Bath’s heritage of 18th-century Palladian architecture.

It was a deliberate choice. "Bath is traditional and has a paranoid fear of it being destroyed by design, contemporary life or modernism," explains Lloyd. "You only need to look at the scandal that surrounded the creation of the Holburne Gallery extension in 2011 to see that. Whenever design comes near Bath there are endless admirals and retired hedge funders saying, 'No, no, no this is Georgian Bath. You can't touch it.'"

The studio's challenge was to devise a system palatable to the city's traditionalist element, yet which remained modern and legible. "You try to understand the context and unlock that," says Pearson. The aesthetic chosen for the maps is highly stylised, yet that which is most fit for purpose – a styling acceptable to the map users' tastes, thus allowing the system's utility to come to the fore. The project is calculated to engage with the Bath community and in turn help that community connect with the public spaces that surround them. It's as close to an archetypal PearsonLloyd project as you can get.



PearsonLloyd's work revolves around a concern for public space and an awareness of how objects affect the ways in which we behave

It is this identity behind PearsonLloyd that was tackled in the exhibition at Great Western Studios. In its collection of stacked crates, 1:1 can be read as an attempt to codify the essential concerns of PearsonLloyd's studio. "The crates are neutral enough to serve multiple purposes," says Pearson. "They're theatrical elements that help your imagination become more fluid in its treatment of space – some crates become seats and others stack up to provide a sense of enclosure."

The exhibition was more experimental than previous work from PearsonLloyd, yet explored the same themes. How do we interact with our public spaces? What effect do objects have on the way we behave? That the crates were so minimal – oblongs of plywood planking – adds to the impression that Pearson and Lloyd were purposefully commenting on their practice: the crates themselves hold no intrinsic value, all that matters is how they're used.

"But it's easy to over romanticise these things," says Lloyd. "On one level we're just tradesmen. We're plumbers or craftsmen providing a service. At other times there is a vanity about designers – the sense that we're masters of the universe who can unlock things. Hopefully there is a little bit of both. Sometimes we're making a contribution, a lot of the time we're delivering a service. And sometimes we're just agents of capitalism."

RELATED LINKS

[PearsonLloyd](#)

[RETURN TO HOMEPAGE](#)

WORDS Oli Stratford

PHOTOGRAPHY Ben Quinton



[← PREVIOUS](#)

[NEXT >](#)