



a new interplay

From shops to products, **Robert Urquhart** asks how graphic design can impact on product design.

Professor Holger Jacobs of Mind Design and his students on the first year course at the University of Applied Science in Düsseldorf, Germany, have just shown *Typomöbel* (typographic furniture), an exhibition showcasing work looking at how typography and product design can work together. "Many graphic designers move into designing products, interiors, display design, signage or way finding systems. In commercial design, more and more emphasis is given to concept and strategy, while the realisation comes later. I maintain that often good ideas develop only in the process of making and can be informed by the production process itself," explains Jacobs of Mind Design.

It seems that Jacobs and the show are riding a current trend. When the professor isn't teaching in Germany he's working from his studio in East London. A long time collaborator with Tom Dixon among many others, the aptly named Mind Design is one of the most thought provoking and thoughtful studios around. "We learned a lot from working with Tom Dixon who often explores a method of production or material first and then decides what kind of product to make

from it," states Jacobs. He adds: "When we designed his first catalogue we structured all the products by materials (wood, steel, aluminium, etc), not by type. I am generally interested in design that has a physical presence and has been built to last, too much work nowadays just ends up in PDF's or in very short-lived digital formats."

This appetite for construction has led designer, art director and Fellow of the Japan Graphic Designers Association (JAGDA) Asano Shinichiro to swap dimensions, from 2D to 3D, in order to create Shinn Asano Sen furniture, which featured at last year's Tokyo Design Week. "The major role of graphic design is to communicate something to people, and the major role of (physical) product design is to be used by people," states Shinichiro, before adding: "Graphic design is dealt in a limited plane, in an imaginary or unreal world, so to speak. On the other hand, product is a solid object in a real world. While such differences cross over with one another, respective results are achieved; I feel the fun in such design process. I have given 'sen' a functional role of product, as well as a role of plainer composition and communication of graphic."

Nowhere is playfulness in design process more evident than with maverick impresarios Designersblock. Long-term graphic design studio partner Hawaii has been involved since 2001, helping accentuate the positive attitude of the Designersblock mission. Designersblock is arguably most well known as a curated exhibition platform for product design, but it feels as if there is as much consideration given over to performance as there is to the products themselves. Paul McAnelly of Hawaii says that the very reason he started Hawaii was to work with organisations like Designersblock. "They are the perfect client, Designersblock has always been different in the way it curates shows and indeed the exhibitors it chooses to show. I think that this also comes across in the show graphics. It has the knack of getting it right with the theme."

Rory Dodd, co-founder of Designersblock, agrees: "We are about the content, context and ideas of the different locations, countries and situations and people that we work with. So the graphics change for each event that we do. More of an exchange, we want the graphics to be as interesting and creative as the content of the events." ►



Opposite page: *Typomöbel* Top and above left: Design Museum Awards, Michael Marriott and Anthony Burrill Above right: Milan, Michael Marriott and Anthony Burrill



Designersblock's most recent collaboration at Interiors UK, at Birmingham NEC in January 2013 was, Dodd states, about "Presenting products of the future but using a department store theme to do so." Both Designersblock and Hawaii clearly relish the surreal and symbiotic nature of the two company's collaborations. As Dodd says: "It's an exchange."

That exchange, shared humour and friendship, is also the basis of a working relationship between product and furniture designer Michael Marriott and graphic artist Anthony Burrill. Both Marriott and Burrill independently cite love of innuendo and double entendres as their main bond but there are clearly other links to their respective chains.

Working on several collaborations from The Right Kind of Wrong exhibition (2009) and the Design of The Year Awards (2009) for The Design Museum, London, through to Clear Your Head Every Day, a gallery installation of multi-coloured geometric giclée prints, fabric hangings and furniture at Outline Editions Gallery, Berwick Street, London (2011) and We Must Have The Truth exhibited at Graphic Design Worlds, Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2011), Marriott and Burrill feel the benefits of product and graphic collaboration keenly. "The shows and installations that we have worked on together have always felt like a

single piece. Our work and aesthetic has got a broad overlap, we share very similar concerns; a use of simple every day materials, humour and a pleasure in the every day," explains Burrill.

Marriott echoes Burrill when he talks of their work on creating the identity and the award itself for the Design of the Year Award at the Design Museum. "I was keen to incorporate something like brass, as a weighty, more trophy like material, and it made sense to use this as the base that joined the two flat panels with space between," explains Marriott. "The awards had a simple playful feel, they felt friendly and acted as a suggestion of how materials and techniques could work together in unexpected ways," adds Burrill.

3D printing, smart products and digital developments in visual design either reinforce or engender new demands of the architecturally led 'form following function' debates of the twentieth century. Graphic design has long struggled to make it's own sense of this debate, but perhaps these recent collaborations are in some way clearing the path, or as Holger Jacobs puts it: "The general graphic design discussion about form, functionality and content is somehow much more clear when you move to furniture or product design: Your ass tells you what feels comfortable and your eyes what is aesthetically pleasing." ■



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Below: Typomöbel Above: Shinn Asano Top right: Clear Your Head Every Day, Michael Marriott and Anthony Burrill
Opposite page, bottom right: Shinn Asano All other images: Designersblock/Hawaii

