



DARA FLYNN

Young, innovative Irish designers are joining forces to put their ideas on the world map

If you thought you knew what Irish design looks like, take a second glance. The Irish Furniture Designer's Network, set up in 2002, is a collective of enterprising young product and furniture designers using strength in numbers to push their products onto the world stage — with original results.

A show of the latest work of some of its designers went on display last week in a suitably industrial-chic setting, the D Light studios in Dublin's Summerhill, as part of Irish Design Week.

As a collective, the IFDN are creating quirky, quality design informed by modernist principles of purity of form, allowing them to fit in just as well as the world's best design fairs as they do in a high-ceilinged warehouse with white-washed walls in inner city Dublin.

You'd never point to Private Jet, for example, a rocking chair cleverly engineered by Vaughn Shannon to mimic a light aircraft, and say, "Now, that's Irish." Instead, you'd probably find it interesting and original, and begin to imagine how it could add a playful twist to an interior design scheme. Which, in the end, is the goal.

The IFDN isn't trying to free itself from the grasp of an Irish craft tradition — it's attempting to redefine Irish design without losing that sense of national identity.

Furniture designer-maker Martin Gallagher, is inspired both by craft and the far more commercial world of industrial design — his Ardu console draws to some extent on both traditions.

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# Rebel faction

Clearly, inset left, Gallagher's Three-D table and stools



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O'Toole's graffiti-inspired Jigsaw table; above left, Gallagher's Ardu console

design is craft-led. We don't conform to that. We are aiming to make work that is modernist, visually refined and can be tured," says IFDN furniture designer Byrne.

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Clearly, functionality and wit are their guiding principles, which can be seen in Madra, a comical, angular magazine holder inspired by man's best friend.

"We are big fans of international design. We never saw Irish design represented and wanted to do something about that, so I think that's why our

designs have an interna-Vaughn. build their types-to-exhibit it at trade shows and license their designs to international manufacturers on a royalties basis.

"We're a bit like children, in that we look for a way to put fun in our products. There is so much out there that is conservative, so I like the idea that someone who brings our furniture into their home is bringing in an element of fun," says Shannon.

Being part of this collective, alongside famous designers like Leo Scarff and Charles O'Toole, is good for our own brand, and great exposure for Irish design. If we don't go back to London year after year we get forgotten, so it's important to keep our name out there," says Vaughn.

O'Toole, one of the more established of the IFDN group, has recently produced the Jigsaw table, a series of stainless steel tables designed to be attached to one another and featuring tabletops which can be customised. One of the more striking of these features the graffiti art of two Spanish artists.

"Graffiti is controversial, as plenty of people perceive it as vandalism, but I see it as an art form," says O'Toole. "When I saw these artists spray painting in Smithfield, I noticed it was quite detailed work, and invited them up to paint a panel. They spent a whole day painting it — they began by messing about and then went through their entire creative process. When it was finished they sat and had a game of poker around the table."

Heritage is an evolving body of work involving the IFDN with an objective to create a collection of contemporary furniture inspired by Irish heritage to express a sense of national identity.

Clearly of Unleaded produced Scuba, a non-functional work comprising the head of a traditional yard brush fitted with three shortened legs, so it resembles a tripod. Meanwhile, Byrne has produced the Briquette ottoman — a timber-frame bench shaped and upholstered to resemble a peat briquette — and it too carries the hallmarks of wit and simplicity of good Irish design.

"Heritage is about purity and simplicity, but it's also about the characteristics of Irishness. When Irish design finds its place on the world map, it is these personality characteristics that will define us as unique," says Byrne.

The National Museum has indicated it may purchase some of the prototypes for a permanent collection, and an exhibition of new Irish design — with a contemporary-led brief — is on the drawing board for 2011. Both encouraging prospects for an industry aiming to assert itself beyond the traditional notions of what Irish design is about.

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