

interior design TODAY

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Allermuir Grainger. A modern take on a classic design.

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DESIGNER PROFILE

MARK GABBERTAS

JADE TILLEY CHATS TO **MARK GABBERTAS** ABOUT FURNITURE DESIGN, THE CHANGING SHAPE OF MASS PRODUCTION AND IMPERIALIST CHINESE CERAMIC PERFECTION.

MARK GABBERTAS FOUNDED THE **GABBERTAS STUDIO** IN 2002. HIS LACK OF FORMAL DESIGN TRAINING HAS PROVED NO OBSTACLE TO HIM BECOMING ONE OF THE UK'S MOST SOUGHT AFTER TALENTS.

The studio has received an extraordinary number of awards, including two Red Dots, 11 Design Guild Marks, and the Good Design Award from The Chicago Athenaeum Museum of Architecture and Design; these for its work for leading international brands including Allermuir, Boss, Chorus, Gloster, Leland, Oasiq, and Oiside. Over the last decade, the Gabbertas Studio has been quietly establishing itself as one of the leading design studios around and using the time to hone the design principles that define the practice's approach and particularly an intuitive belief that the objective is to create character through simplicity.

In a new series of features, Interior Design Today reaches out to a plethora of design talent to discuss where they came from and how they have established themselves as a force to be reckoned with in product design. Mark Gabbertas was first on our list and he didn't disappoint.

WHAT IS YOUR PRINCIPLE LINE OF DESIGN?

We are furniture designers. There are some products as well, lighting and home accessories but predominantly it is furniture design we focus on. That's our craft and we're established in the field. I started out as a designer maker in 1991. For the first 10 years I was designing and making, then 13-14 years ago we stopped making and concentrated on the design. In 2002, the Gabbertas Studio was born.



WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST COMPLETED DESIGN AND WHO WAS IT FOR?

My first ever design was in fact the first design that went into production for a brand. It was the Tree Degrees Chair created for a restaurant and in Soho called Atelier. I designed all the furniture for the space and the chair was taken on by Allermuir, a major feat at the time. Considering it was my first design and first time to production, it all happened rather speedily. It's an extraordinary chair and it still looks good today so it's something to be very proud of. I think the time we didn't realise how lucky we were.

WHAT KIND OF TRAINING HAVE YOU HAD?

I've actually had no design training. I read political philosophy at university and then went on to work in advertising. I quickly became enchanted with it and wanted to move away from it all. Within a week of breaking away from the world of advertising I found myself as an apprentice to a cabinet maker, earning £1 an

hour under the arches. I went from a be-suited city boy to a floor sweeper in a flash and it was the best decision I made. I started off sweeping floors and making coffee and progressed to making fine furniture. I was an apprentice for 18 months in total; during this time I made countless visits to exhibits and gained a lot of valuable experience that I carry with me today. I can appreciate that the stakes are much higher now for young talent entering the industry but I very much believe that if you really want to do something, you should just go ahead and do it. I made the switch to furniture design when I was 30, I had real drive and a strong commitment to making it work and it did.

WHILST STUDYING, WHO WAS THE BIGGEST INFLUENCE/INSPIRATION TO YOU?

In the 90s when I was studying I would so often look at the UK design scene. It was just at the time of many emerging British brands such as Allermuir and there was so much to take in from

our British design pot. In my eyes some of the absolute design Gods include Matthew Hilton, Terence Woodgate and Tom Dixon. They were designing exactly what I wanted, and they were doing it beautifully. What is essential to intellectual and innovative design is a good business model. These guys had that in spades, their model was correct and the designs were just extraordinary.

DO YOU PRIMARILY WORK AS AN INDEPENDENT DESIGNER OR DO YOU MAINLY CONTRACT YOUR WORK OUT TO OTHER DESIGNERS/BRANDS?

We design for brands around the world. We commission to brief and off brief for clients where we can then liken the designs to the specified company. As a studio we are very involved in the prototyping. I spend a lot of time working directly with manufacturers, overseeing the prototype process and the eventual refinement of the design, right up until the moment the design is approved. It's a big job and

there's a lot of handling involved but at the end you really see your vision for the whole process come together just so. I often liken it holding a butterfly in your hand. It is fragile and requires time and patience but the aim is to make sure that the butterfly 'the design' is still intact at the end of the process. Something that is so easily destroyed has to survive, endure and carry through. This is important to us as a company. Understanding the spirit of the company is also incredibly important to us. Once you understand the spirit, the challenges are less so when working together. We really aim to get under the skin of our clients to decipher the best route for both parties involved.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST SUCCESSFUL PIECE IN YOUR COLLECTIONS?

My basic view is that if the design doesn't sell, perhaps it was not a good design after all. Equally, the world is full of fantastic designs that never see the light of day. In this sense it is hard to measure the potential for success of any one particular design. There are however two ranges that I am very proud of aesthetically and in terms of their longevity and functionality. In outdoor upholstery it has to be the range for Gloster called 'Cloud'. It really redefined the way of designing outdoor furniture. It has set the bar for all subsequent sofa solutions and is the largest, most comprehensive range of outdoor furniture ever designed. It is

technically difficult but it works. Secondly I would have to say 'Haven' for Allermuir. It was commercially an extraordinary success combining an integrated range of sofas, tables, screens for offices and much more. In my opinion it has really set the standard in that area of the market.

IN YOUR TIME AS A DESIGNER, WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BIGGEST SHIFTS IN THE DESIGN WORLD THAT HAVE AFFECTED YOU?

I think the biggest shift has been the realisation that the process of outsourcing to China and the Far East was not the panacea that everyone forecast. Bringing manufacturing back to the UK and Europe and adjusting to the approaches and principles of

the UK and Europe demonstrates a big shift, a far-reaching change and an interesting one.

WHAT IS YOUR ULTIMATE DESIGNER AMBITION AND HAVE YOU ACHIEVED IT YET?

Goalposts constantly change as with any business that is constantly growing. Something I have been working on for the past three years is an antidote to the restrictive processes of mass production. We have been looking at limited edition designs that utilise crafts from around the world in different ways. It's a very different job all together, the process, the technology, but I feel strongly that it needs to happen. It is a refreshing change and a real challenge. Wearing such a different design hat has its positives and it's difficulties.

NAME A DESIGNER (PAST OR PRESENT) WHO YOU WOULD LOVE TO WORK WITH?

This is an interesting one. When I first saw this question my immediate reaction was because I am a lapsed potter and because I'm a small pot

collector of Chinese ceramics, to say a ceramic designer. I would love to work with such a designer, in their kiln in Imperial 18th Century China. They produced the most amazingly beautiful designs using incredible processes that haven't been bettered. It required the highest skill imaginable and to achieve even one perfect product in that era would be the ultimate. Thinking more industrially I would say Marcel Breuer. He was very much at the forefront of chair technology and typology. That opportunity to work with someone of that calibre doesn't exist anymore. He changed the face of chair design.

IF YOU COULD DESIGN ONE ULTIMATE, ICON PRODUCT FOR THE INTERIORS WORLD, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I've always wanted to design a range of cutlery because it is a completely unforgiving typology that requires perfection in form and function.

www.gabbertas.com

