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# FORUM

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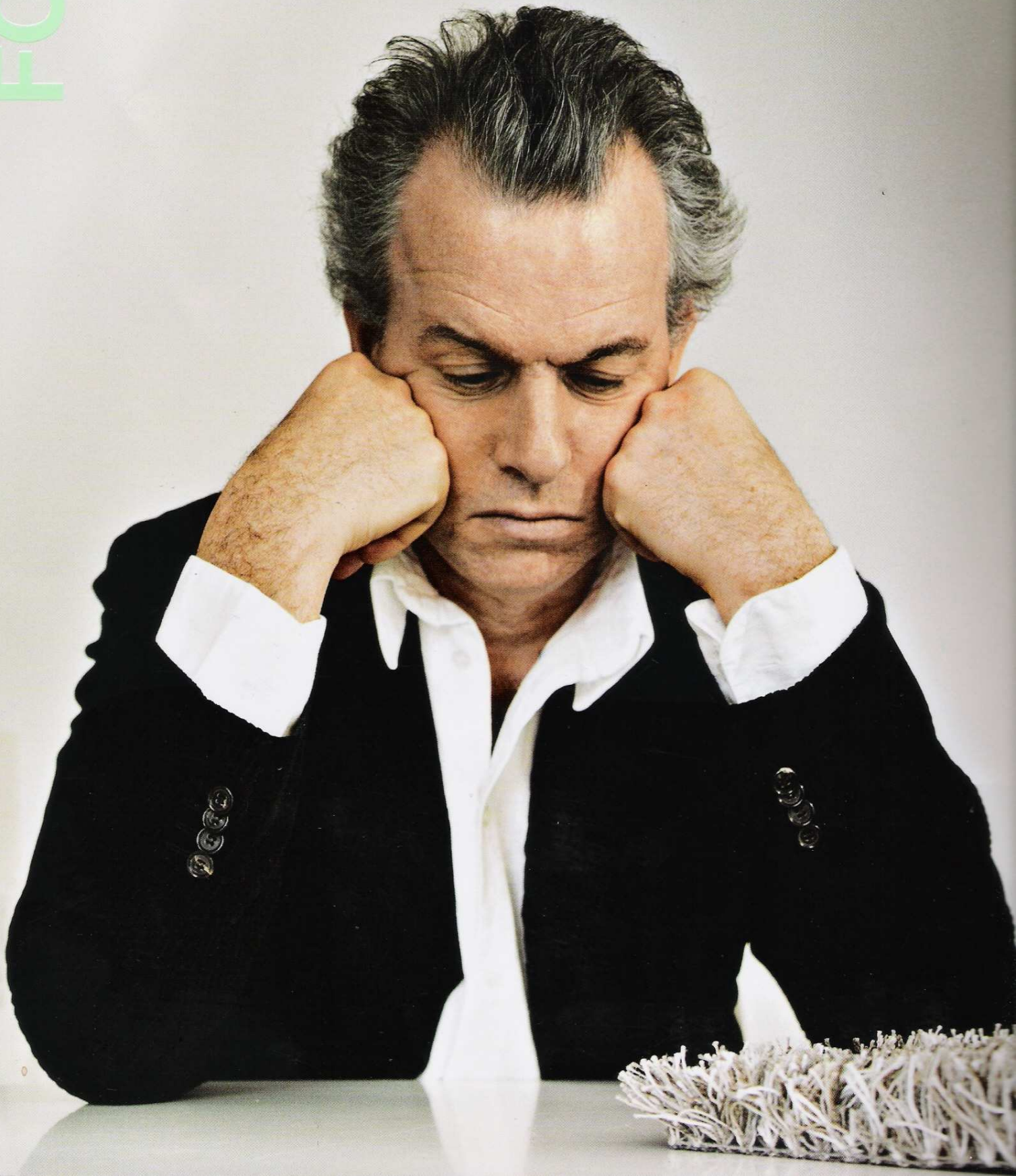
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Eero Aarnio



# LIBERTY PATCHWORK FRATERNITY

One room. Two brothers. And an enormous number of textile tiles. The Bouroullec Brothers have given Kvadrat Sanden a showroom no one knew they wanted. And, as a bonus, a belief in textile's renaissance in the public arena.

*Text: Eva Wrede. Photo: Ola Rindahl, Paul Tahon and Ronan Bouroullec.*

FEBRUARY GLOOM, cold and snow slush. The opening party for Kvadrat Sanden's new showroom in Stockholm couldn't have begun better! The contrast is all-encompassing once the guests come into the warm; embraced by soft, padded walls, muted acoustics and a welcoming light wooden floor.

"I'm so surprised! The first thing you think about is the acoustics, it's very special, almost like having cotton wool in your ears. When you come into the long, narrow corridor you are immediately aware of your body. You feel small, but not frightened. The sound and softness, everything becomes so tangible and intimate. I feel moved!" exclaims Ola Rune, architect and designer at Claesson Koivisto Rune.

He is not the only one who has made his way to Nackagatan 4, this out-of-the-way spot on Södermalm where you can find Barnängshuset from 1917, with its past as a spinning mill, weaving mill and printers. Kvadrat assesses it to about 500 guests. To manage to attract such a public in competition with all the other events during the Furniture Fair is a very obvious sign of the branch's interest for the French Bouroullec brothers.

The event is relaxed. English liquorice allsorts are served alongside Absolut vodka and canapés that have passed their sell-by date even before the first guests arrive at 7 o'clock. The principal figures, Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, don't make a fuss. Just like any well brought-up Scandinavians they stand by the window exhaling their cigarette smoke. Their dark clothing

is ordinary, on the verge of anonymous. Smiling carefully they accept the collegial slaps on the back and shy handshakes.

"This is what has meant the most to me during the whole fair. What a total experience with all these colours! Together with the broad floor planks, it feels almost old Swedish. The doors are also fantastic, you feel that even the smallest details have been considered carefully," says Alexander Lervik, designer with his own design bureau.

It took four people four days to set up the four-metre-high walls of the showroom. Now they hang like curtains on steel wires fixed into the ceiling. A total of 3,900 tiles have been used for all the curtains, in ten different nuances and three different textile qualities. The tiles have a nucleus of foam plastic on which the material is laminated.

"A bit like fish scales" and "like plumage", is heard mumbled amongst the visitors.

From the entrance you are led into a passage that billows forward, widens and opens out into a 170-square-metre room. The dark moss-green, almost wood-like walls lighten up by the windows into something pale light blue, like clouds in a sky.

Along the floor run 30 centimetre wide unbroken planks of wall-to-wall whitened fir. Douglas fir, brought over from Germany, is used again in the specially designed work tops and movable door sections. Thonet beech chairs are placed around the tables, a Bouroullec favourite which they used last time they

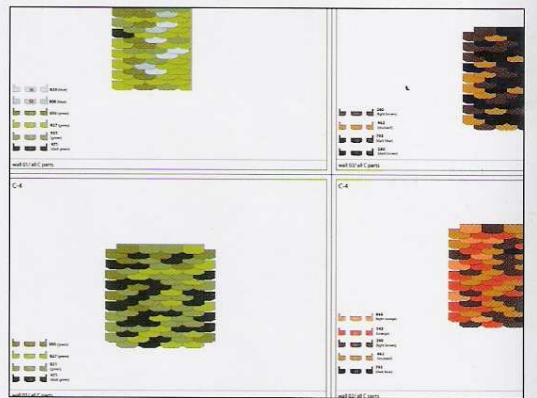
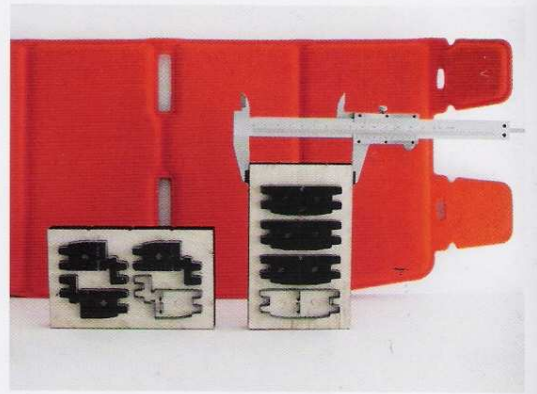
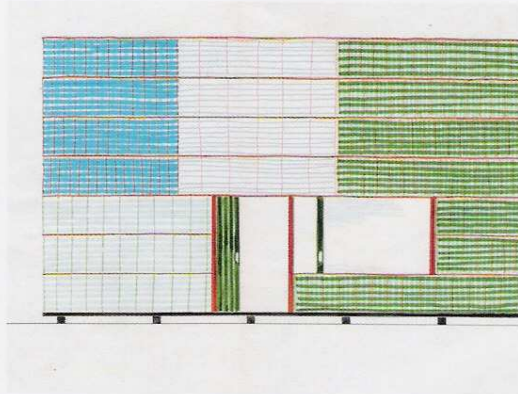




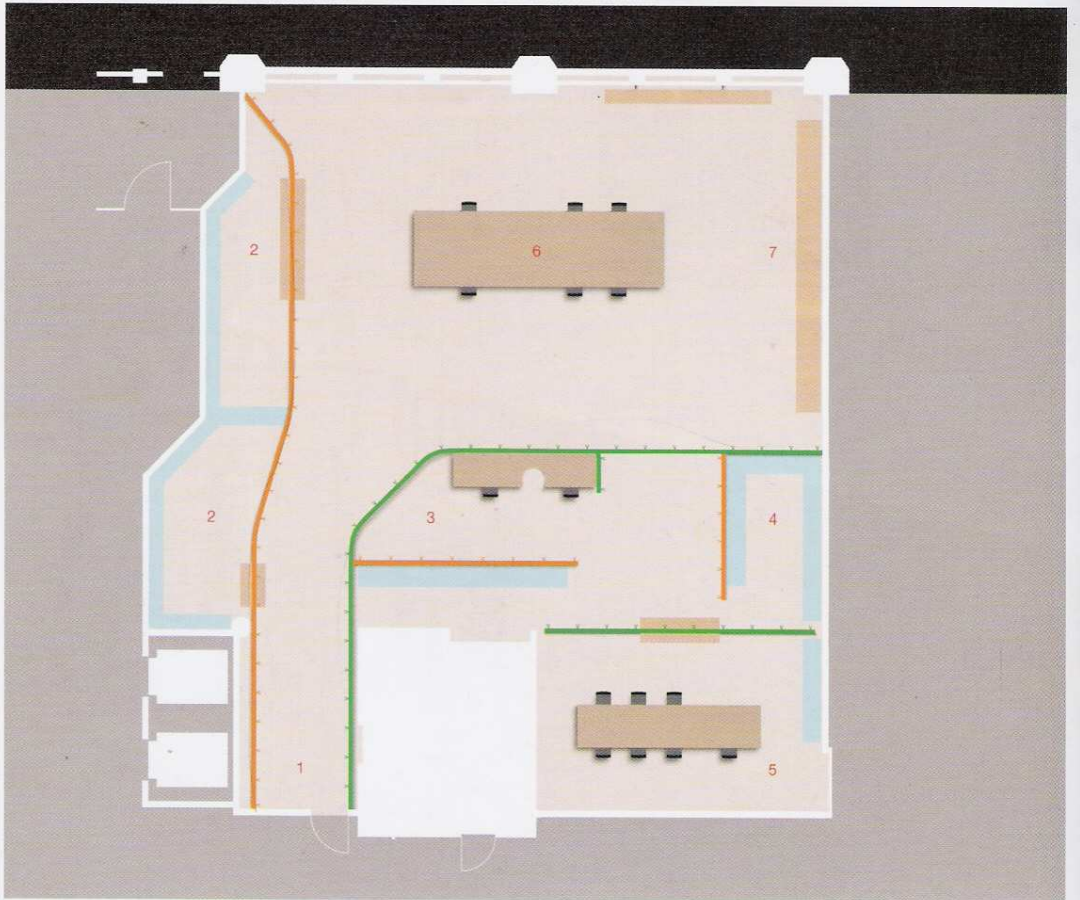


Four-metre-high walls in linked textile tiles divide up this old factory locale into offices, exhibition area and store space. Floor and the specially designed work top in Douglas fir, chairs from Thonet. Previous spread: Erwan (left) and Ronan Bouroullec.

Clockwise from the right:  
 Early sketch; first full scale  
 prototype together with miniature  
 models of two of the three  
 elements; schematic plans for  
 each wall in the Kvadrat Sanden  
 showroom; the first tiles arrive at  
 the Bouroullec studio.



- 1. Entrance
- 2. Store
- 3. Office
- 4. Archive
- 5. Conference room
- 6. Sales area
- 7. Customer area





The green partition wall separates reception from pantry (left).  
Below: Entrance to the showroom is via an enclosed corridor progressing from dark to light.



were in Stockholm – the brothers were guests of honour at last year's Furniture Fair with an extensive exhibition in the entrance square.

Apart from the tiles that totally replace traditional walls, it is the door modules which attract the most attention this evening. Each box-shaped module has two sliding doors that can be used separately or in a combination as desired: one frame with clear glass and one with thin, white cotton weave.

TWO DAYS after the opening ceremony Ronan is back at Nackagatan again. Erwan has already returned to Paris and piles of work before the opening of the Milan Furniture Fair.

Ronan looks rather pale. Says hallo and asks if it's OK to postpone the interview a while. He and photographer Paul Tahon have been working all night but they are not satisfied with the result. They want daylight and are taking new shots.

The desirable light diminishes for every glance out through the barred, four-metre-high windows. Ronan chain-smokes his SG cigarettes, drinks Coca-Cola and periodically looks guilty that the interview isn't starting at the appointed time. Finally it's dark outside and the camera can rest.

Freedom was built in from the start, explains Ronan and sits down at the seven-metre-long table, specially

designed for the room. The commission was painted with a few, wide strokes of the brush, he says: Kvadrat Sanden wanted a showroom where the presentation of their fabrics was a part of the room itself. The original ideas centred on transforming the 250 square metre premises into something jungle-like. The jungle was changed into something less wild, but still soft and welcoming.

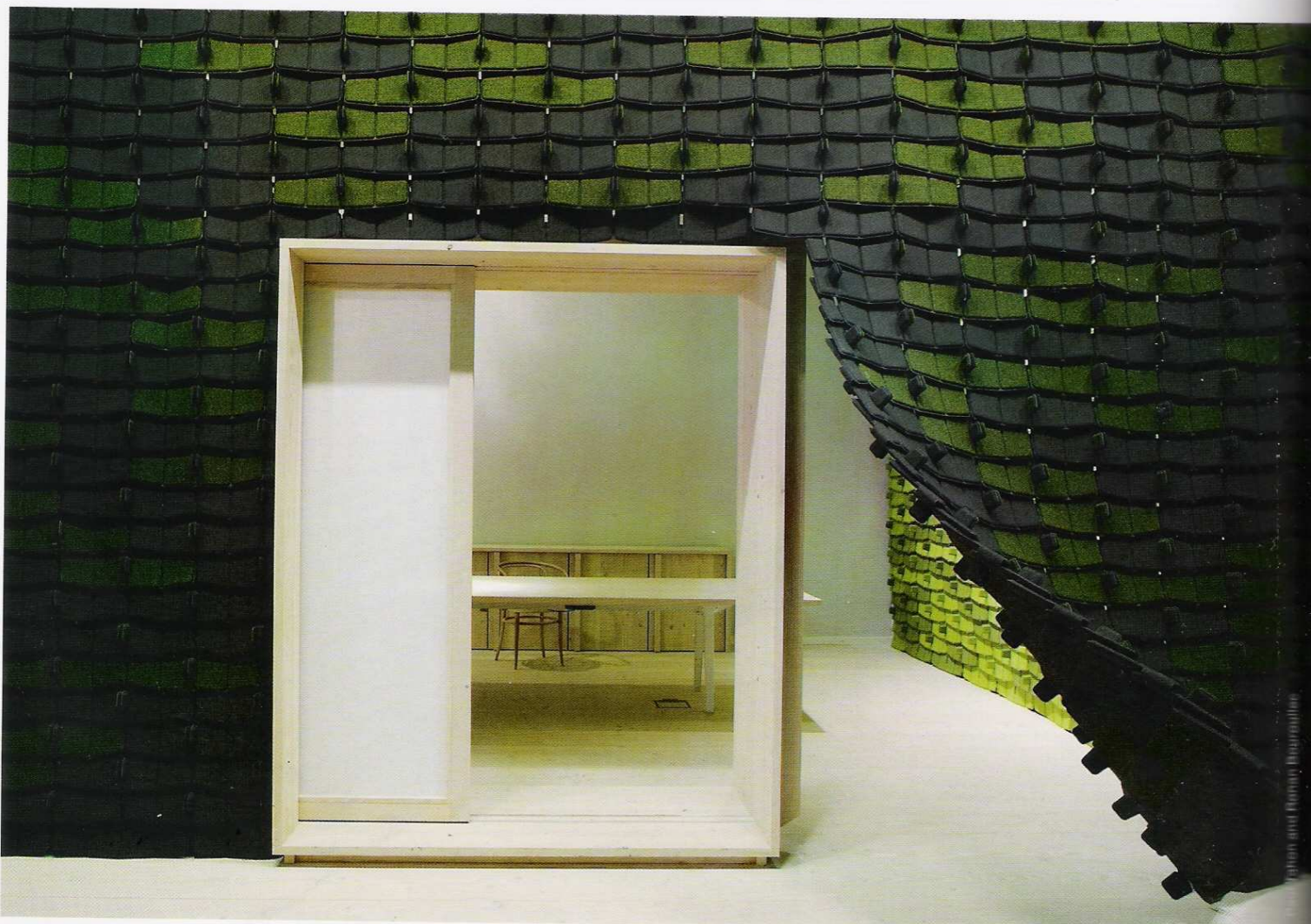
"When I leaf through design and architecture magazines, which I don't do very often, I can be frightened by all the modernistic cold and synthetic rooms. I too feel like a stranger in such milieus," says Ronan and turns around a simple cardboard model of the showroom.

He points out several times that neither he nor Erwan are architects, and don't think like architects. They take on architectonic commissions as product designers. Therefore it's logical to consider both walls and doors as furniture: movable and flexible.

"In the case of Kvadrat we wanted to create a design solution that doesn't demand skilful carpenters and painters for the final result to be successful. Thanks to the system with tiles and detached door modules the interior can be delivered as a finished product. It does not need to be polished up afterwards."

He continues to talk about the brothers' ambition, to simplify as much as possible. A desire that becomes

*Free-standing door modules containing two sliding doors, one with clear glass the other with white cotton textile. All modules and walls are moveable.*





Ronan is often described as the visionary aesthete and Erwan as more earthbound, technical and rational.

"But sometimes it can be precisely the opposite," Guisset points out.

Ronan, together with designer Inga Sempé, lives nearby and walks to work in 15 minutes. Erwan lives at Bastille near the Paris opera, and his journey on his Vespa takes ten minutes. If you ask about their working hours, you get a vague answer. Nine to ten hours a day, at least, is usual.

The list of their completed projects is increasing steadily and nowadays contains everything from jewellery and flowerpots to interior design of shops for Issey Miyake (2000). Among all their clients, Vitra with its managing director Rolf Fehlbaum at the helm, has since the development of the office concept Joyn (2002), held a special place as constant sounding board for their ideas.

SO IT is in this building that was once a stable and is now a design ocean of light and air and white walls, where Erwan sits when he punctually at 5 o'clock lifts the receiver for a telephone interview. I hear him draw on his Marlboro Lights. It is in the middle of a hectic period with projects for Kartell, Magis, Ligne Roset and Vitra that all have to be completed for the Milan Fair in April.

*How did it feel to come to Stockholm and see the completed showroom?*

"Very good. It feels as though we have succeeded in doing something with an open mind that can open other peoples' minds. The combination of wood and textiles feels genuine. Even a blind person can feel the quality in the floor planks. That feeling for quality is impressed on everyone's cerebral cortex. For me those planks are more luxurious than marble".

*The tiles in Kvadrat's showroom build on the idea, like several other of your products, that the final user gets a set of building blocks that can be combined at will.*

"Yes, it's an appealing thought, and a way of creating opportunities for variety in series-manufactured products. The most important thing is to create a system built on simplicity. If the construction needed ten different different-sized screws the user would focus all his energy on not doing anything wrong. The sys-

tem must be extremely simple in order to release people's imagination."

*Even before you completed your education in 1999 at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'arts in Cergy-Pontoise, you started working with Ronan. What made him take you on as his partner?*

"Ronan is more of a dreamer than I am and can get totally crazy ideas. I don't think he could get many other people to hang on in there... And then he imagined that as the older brother he would always be able to put me in my place, if he needed to... There's a type of security in the fact that we can disagree deeply without it affecting our family bond. Perhaps we have that unconsciously from our upbringing, the same frames of reference when it comes to colour and form."

*Today you turn down nine out of ten commissions. Wouldn't it be a better idea to let the company grow instead?*

"Neither Ronan nor I are interested in becoming a trademark and letting others design in our name. We are not scared of large projects, but we don't want to create a large organisation that necessitates bringing in large commissions all the time."

*What do you do when you don't work?*

"I try to avoid pure design exhibitions. I get more inspiration from walking, seeing films, reading magazines and books – I like science-fiction. I know my design history, there are designers such as Eames, Sottsass and Mendini that you can't ignore, but when it comes to contemporary design I don't want to know so much. Many of today's designers have a similar background, regardless of nationality, and there is a large risk of uniformity. Quite simply I want other starting points in my work. My girlfriend isn't involved in design at all, so I am happy to listen to what she thinks."

*Three years ago you wrote the book Ronan et Erwan Bouroullec (Phaidon). How would you like others to write about you in 20 years?*

"That we did good things and opened up new channels that others can use as a stepping board. That is about the most you can hope for."

EVA WREDE [eva.wrede@provisa.se]  
is a new editor at Forum.

**KVADRAT SANDEN  
SHOWROOM**

**Address:** Nackagatan 4,  
Stockholm, Sweden

**Architects:** Bouroullec through  
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec

**Local interior architect:**

Sweco through Andreas Westberg

**Consultants (selection):**

Claus Mølgaard (textile walls),  
Vincent Muracciole (lighting)

**Contractors (selection):**

A-Z, Snedkeriet (furniture  
makers); Dinesen (floors);  
Fagerdala Cellplaster (textile  
walls)

**Client:** Kvadrat

**Area:** 250 sq m

**Total cost:** Not official

**Duration of construction:**  
1 month

**Completed:** February 2006

**Info:** Bouroullec

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apparent especially in the furniture they design: "We like the visible part of an object to be composed of just one material and one colour, to make things easier on the eye and eliminate details. This is a way of not straying too far from an idea's more undeveloped stage, as it first appeared, without details, on a sketching pad."

The sketching pad is a key element in Ronan's world, a place where everything essential originates. Just as much as he hated school, just as much he has always loved to sketch. Now he doesn't have to go to school and can sketch to his heart's content. To make 10,000 sketches of one and the same chair is for him an important element in the process of understanding the product. He sketches by hand, never uses a computer.

"A good working day is one when I can do 500 sketches," he says and positively glows, as the thought of this for a moment chases away his tiredness.

APART FROM a showroom to boast about, as a bonus, Kvadrat also has a new product to develop: *Tiles*.

These tiles, Kvadrat brainstorms, could serve as room dividers and acoustic improvers in many connections: possibly chiefly in lounges, lobbies and offices, but also at fairs and exhibitions.

"Office environments in particular over a period of time have used less and less textiles. Carpets have disappeared from floors, Venetian blinds and coloured glass have replaced curtains, many office chairs now have seats of net instead of padded cushions. This has turned offices into cold and hard places with bad acoustics. With the tiles we see a possibility of returning textiles to the public sector. There still remains some production development, but we are hoping to launch them in the autumn," says Ove Frandsen, responsible for all of Kvadrat's showrooms.

He is not the only one to believe in the future of the tiles as a commercial module system. Ola Rune is another who sees the possibilities:

"The limitation is in the fact that the tiles have a strong expression of their own and can easily dominate the entire room. However, a great advantage is that you can easily build arched forms and slanting ceilings with the tiles, which is often extremely expensive to do traditionally."

Fanny Aronsen, professor in Textiles at the art college Konstfack and textile designer with her own collection of decorating materials, sees the tiles as part of a trend:

"There's a tendency to soften up public areas with textiles. In Europe now you can see many offices investing in islands of suites, cushions and pouffes. Rather like creating a homey atmosphere and getting people to change their sitting positions. For example, Vitra, decorating their headquarters on the edge of Basle have worked a great deal with textiles in this way. The Bouroullecs' tiles can be useful, especially if you manage to find a solution with the freedom of choosing from many different material coverings."

Synnöve Mork is one of six freelance designers at Soft Walls, that develops new ways of working archi-

tectonically with textiles. She sees Kvadrat Sanden's showroom as a really great and cool sign of the times:

"I believe in textiles in a spatial perspective, as a replacement to walls," she says. "There has been a watertight bulkhead between architects and textile designers for too long now, but at present there are many textile projects that are wafting in no-mans-land between the two. I hope that architects will see the value, I have a feeling that they often make things harder for themselves than they are, that they will begin to realise the architectonic effects of textiles."

THE BOUROLLEC brothers grew up in a small town near Quimper on Brittany's south coast. Their mother is a nurse and their father a tax office official. There are no designers or artists in their family, rather plenty of farmers. Ronan is the elder brother, born 1971, and five years older than Erwan.

"There is no culture of design where we come from. Design is not important," explains Ronan.

After studying at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des arts Décoratifs in Paris, he opened his own studio in Saint-Denis, one of those Paris suburbs that used to flash past on the European TV news with burning cars and frustrated young people in the foreground. The distance to Milan's high-profile fair may seem enormous, but in the Bouroullec brothers case the journey was fast.

The starting shot went off in 1997: that was when Giulio Cappellini saw Ronan's *Disintegrated Kitchen* at the Salon du Meuble in Paris and offered them a collaboration on the spot. Three years later, at the Milan Furniture Fair 2000, Erwan and Ronan presented two of the year's most talked-about items: sleeping-loft hut, *Lit Clos*, and the chair collection *Hole*, both for Cappellini.

Since last September, working days for the Bouroullec brothers start at 23 rue du Buisson Saint-Louis in northern Paris. There, right in lively "Chinatown" which is neither picturesque nor touristy, just strewn with cheap Chinese restaurants and shops, is their new studio. A total of 400 square metres split over three floors.

The early 20th-century building looks like an industrial building, but began life as a stable. Erwan and Ronan sit along one side of the ground floor's entrance, their four assistants on the other. Constance Guisset sits in the middle, who besides having her own design studio looks after the company's signing of contracts, contacts with the press, plans meetings and looks after the home page.

Generally there is a calm and concentrated quiet essential for work in the studio, says Guisset. The heated arguments that from time to time interrupt the brothers' constant juggling of ideas are part of the picture. Almost like a method of working: if you can win an argument about an idea with your brother, that is a sure sign of the resilience of the idea. Since 2001, they sign all the projects together, quite simply because in the end it is impossible to point out exactly who did what.

