

# Modern Design Review

The Soft Section

Neo-primitivism with **Andrea Branzi**

**Wonmin Park** and the appeal of the obscure

Pushing our buttons

**Ronan Bouroullec** on comfort

Hardness

Spring/Summer 2015



Issue 2

£1



9 772054 968001



## Seeing, feeling, believing

The realisation of comfort is a recurring theme in the work of Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec. It might be most obvious in their considerable work with textile – their soft installations and upholstery – but it is a preoccupation that transfers to less expected works too. Ronan Bouroullec explains what comfort means to him, how difficult it is to quantify and why it can be found in the atmosphere as much as in the deepest armchair.

Text by Ronan Bouroullec

Much of our work could be considered research towards creating comfort, or to be about the visualisation of comfort. Comfort was a consideration at the beginning of the 20th century, although it had certain bourgeois overtones then. In particular, it was associated with the notion of 19th-century laziness – it was not something productive or desirable. But after a century we should now consider the positive aspects of comfort. There is still much misunderstanding of what we as designers are supposed to do, of what good design is. A good object is an alchemy of elements and comfort is a part of that. I am surprised that the question of comfort is so little explored in furniture design – one wouldn't design an economic shoe that was uncomfortable. Why should we have to deal with uncomfortable things in industrial design? Creating comfort can be as difficult as finding comfort, however – under scrutiny it becomes something intangible, individual and complex.

**'Why should we have to deal with uncomfortable things in industrial design? Creating comfort can be as difficult as finding comfort, however – under scrutiny it becomes something intangible, individual and complex.'**

Some years ago we were asked to produce an installation in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The result was the Textile Field. I don't normally feel comfortable in museums. Compare how you feel in a museum with how you feel when you are in the natural landscape or when you are alone on the beach, lying under the sun, gazing out to sea. In these instances you are part of a landscape; there is a physical elation, there is something that generates positive activity in your brain. With this project we wanted to create a soft textile platform which would simulate that, which would allow the audience to experience the art around them differently. It was interesting to see the teenagers, who are so easily bored, enjoying it and the art around them. I don't think that the museum has to be a playground, but in our experience comfort had added something that wouldn't have been achieved in any other way.

The inclusion of textiles in interior spaces is about function and decoration; their presence serves to make rooms comfortable as well as having the potential for carrying a strong visual message. During the medieval period when kings travelled from castle to castle they would bring their own carpets, and when they arrived they would put a carpet on the floor and a carpet on the walls to generate an atmosphere of warmth and comfort. Even the walls of the Parthenon were originally covered with tapestries. One titan of modern design, Le Corbusier, made several tapestries. He wrote an essay titled *Tapestries: Nomadic Murals* in which he described them as 'the mural of the modern age'. Corbusier considered himself an artist as well as an architect, and at the time there was an opinion that tapestry was a means for artists to connect to 'the common man'. Le Corbusier also appreciated their mobility – a pleasing function. In addition he saw a vital relationship between textiles and architecture. Despite perceptions about cold modernism, Le Corbusier was pro-comfort. He designed many solitary pieces of furniture that were extremely comfortable: he was very careful about it, and had a very sensual understanding of what comfort was.

We too have always experimented with ideas around comfort, even when we were young, naive designers. We found it could be really pleasing to generate comfort with a lot of foam, with thickness, with softness, and by respecting certain angles or certain traditions. But when we made the Slow Chair for Vitra it was done with almost nothing: just 100 metres of yarn knitted together. The final chair is a net full of air. We generated the physical comfort in this piece through support, through elasticity, through relations of structure, the position of structure. The expression of comfort was not found in the old system, in the expected use of textile, but in another. This wasn't a nostalgic idea of comfort.

When trying to create a certain atmosphere, textiles are an important part of the palette. For us, we considered them part of an alternative palette. Textiles had been well used in the Sixties and Seventies but, aside from their use in upholstery, had been largely ignored in the Eighties and Nineties. So we saw them as something to be explored again. But they are not the whole solution and are not always necessary in the equation of comfort at all. In truth, for me, comfort is more about an exact curve, the expression of the radius on the side of a table, the end of a drawer. It is really more of a question of a complete atmosphere. Light is a question of comfort too (we are currently in a situation with the use of LEDs where we are very quickly losing control of our spaces), and so is the acoustic environment: we did much research into this when working on the North Tiles project. The beginnings of that project lie in a childhood memory. I remember visiting an exhibition in Paris when I was perhaps 13 or 14 years old. The walls of the space were made of felt and the quantity of fabric had a subtle affect on me – I felt it on my skin. Sometimes you might enter a room with soft acoustics and there is an immediate change in atmosphere. Voices are low, sound is soft and there is a direct physical reaction: your skin immediately feels a certain sensuality.

Alvar Aalto is the architect who interests me the most. We have just completed a collection for Artek and so have studied his thinking carefully. Aalto designed his furniture and his buildings to be ultimately human, in scale and in feeling. He had an almost rustic approach to production, very low tech. This humanity is an important consideration when talking about comfort. Just like people, a good object is very often something that isn't perfect. Ergonomics is just the study of numbers – it is how it is applied that is important. And perfectionism in this area misses the point somewhat. Comfort is not a science nor is it an equation. Mathematics alone might help you make something that is extremely comfortable, but actually you lose the aspect of comfort if you are bored with the object.

**'The expression of comfort was not found in the old system, in the expected use of textile, but in another. This wasn't a nostalgic idea of comfort.'**

I once visited Le Corbusier's Le Cabanon near Monaco. It was close to the sea in a beautiful aspect and although it was a tiny building, a strict and confined space, you strongly felt this sensuality of comfort. Sometimes you can find comfort in detail. The way a cast door handle feels in your hand, for example, or jewellery sits on a body: these things are intimate. And this, then – intimacy – is perhaps part of the answer to a very complex question. At any rate, comfort has to again become a central question to the industrial designer.