

Designers and Manufacturers – Establishing Distant Collaborations

What do you do when you are a designer living on the other side of the world from Europe – the centre of design manufacturing?

If you want to live in New Zealand and there are many reasons to do so, how can New Zealand designers create networks and relationships to get their work into production in Europe?

At the end of September 2009 with a Creative New Zealand grant, I set off for Europe to interview key designers and manufacturers to discuss how they worked together and to examine the relationships between them.

I was looking for a way forward for New Zealand designers to form collaborations with Europe based manufacturers and how issues of geographic isolation might be mitigated; maybe there were even advantages to being a designer on the other side of the world.

Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, Designers, Paris, France

French designer Ronan Bouroullec works with his brother Erwan from their studio in Paris and they design for some of the most influential manufacturers.

It was a rainy day and the studio courtyard was like another world from the surrounding streets. From the look of the buildings I was immediately struck that it was the perfect place for a studio; it was quiet and the large white-framed steel windows suggested industry and manufacture.

I met Ronan who was quietly spoken and he asked if I minded if he drew while we talked. I briefly outlined some issues of New Zealand's relative geographic isolation, in terms of design.

"From here it seems a very beautiful country," said Ronan, "I grew up in the countryside, so if it would be possible for me, I would prefer to be in New Zealand than Paris."

I was a little surprised, but I could understand his comment. I asked him how important it is for him to be close to the manufacturers they work with.

Ronan suggested that design is a collective intelligence. "You can have a very interesting idea, but if you don't have a good manufacturer it will never be something interesting, in terms of global success. You can have a very good idea but if there is no distribution of it, it's a problem."

From Ronan's point of view it makes no sense to work with too many companies. The Bouroullecs try to identify companies in a sort of map, that suggests what the object could be and in what context it could exist. Ronan drew the analogy – they are the conductors of the orchestra, but that they need to have a different and important partner to make the project exist.

Ronan explained that when he started, the internet did not really exist and it was very difficult to obtain information about manufacturing processes. He contrasted this with today, where the internet makes it very easy to quickly access this information. "This discipline is changing very fast", said Ronan and suggested that tomorrow there may be a new way of doing things. He followed this by emphasizing the importance of creating a team between the designer and the manufacturer to find the best project solutions.

For designers considering working from New Zealand for European manufacturers, the geographic distance potentially impedes or restricts the frequency of face to face communication so I asked Ronan what importance he puts on seeing clients; but I was aware his relationships were already well established and it was possibly quite different for someone based in New Zealand building new relationships.

Sometimes it is easier to see people and other times it is unnecessary Ronan explained. He outlined they have worked for the same companies now for many years and they don't always need to be in front of each other. Ronan explained that the type of project and the company they are working with creates a particular process for itself. He pointed out that they visit Vitra, their biggest client about twice a month to check prototypes. Their relationship is made easier because of the internet and with the advent of 3D modelling.

Ronan considers it possible to connect from New Zealand with manufacturers, but outlined that to be a good designer you must have an extremely good understanding of the companies context, its manufacturing processes and the cyclical nature of the company. Ronan outlined if a designer has a very good understanding of these issues and how they are affected by distance, then it could work.

Establishing relationships with manufacturers in Europe is one of the big challenges for New Zealand designers and I was interested to hear how Ronan saw these issues and what he would be doing if he were in New Zealand.

As a European, Paris based designer, Ronan outlined, there is always a distance between the designer's studio and the manufacturer – it could be 1,000 kilometres or it could be 20,000 kilometres. The fact is, he suggested, if you're a young designer, getting to meet with Giulio Cappellini or Rolf Fehlbaum of Vitra is very difficult, so you have to send them ideas. With the proviso that the work had to be very good – by

using the internet and new technologies he was certain that it was easier now for a twenty-five year old designer living in New Zealand, than it was for him at the same age living in Paris. He reflected that fifteen years ago, you had to participate in exhibitions and to make slides of your work for the publications. He calculated that at the beginning of his career he would spend an hour a day in a queue at the post office.

Discussing the importance of 'design shows,' Ronan commented that Milan's Salone del Mobile is very interesting because almost all the design world is there for a week. However, although it presents an opportunity to physically show work, he isn't convinced it's necessary. "If you're very, very good you don't need it . . . if you're just good, maybe you need it." He suggested that things would change because it is too expensive for many companies to participate.

Ronan believed that even over distance it is possible to work with European industry. It is certainly easier than before and always a question of strategy. He suggested that the only really important element is to do good work. Every year, he outlined, there are many new things but very few are very good. He explained that even in their own work, some things are good, but not everything. Ronan suggested, if it were really interesting it would become known via the internet.

Vitra is a big client for Ronan and Erwan so I was interested how they ended up with such a close relationship with the owner Rolf Fehlbaum.

Ronan started by saying that he participated in his first exhibition when he was eighteen, which was twenty years ago, and it has only been over the last ten years that they have been seriously working with Vitra. In the early years he was doing small things and exhibiting in small shows that supported the creation of a modest reputation, however when he was twenty-five he participated in an exhibition in Paris.

Gulio Cappellini saw their work and was so interested, that very soon Ronan and Erwan were working for Cappellini, who at the time were one of the most interesting furniture companies. “To be part of their team was like being part of a very good England football team,” said Ronan. The result was that their name became the focus of attention.

One year later Issey Miyake approached them to do a project and after that Rolf Fehlbaum came to them. Ronan explained that from the initial step of working with Cappellini all the clients came to them, which made for the perfect situation.

Working with Vitra, Ronan and Erwan have the opportunity to do everything – design the product, take the pictures, make product movies and have strategic input.

Ronan outlined, that once the challenges of the product development have been met and the product exists, then the real machine of Vitra is able to promote, market and sell the product.

As New Zealand designers often take on the responsibility for the production and manufacture of their own work, I was interested to see how this mode of working would be viewed from a European perspective.

Whilst it may be possible to produce something, Ronan explained, it is not enough because there is the question of distribution and how to show the product. Ronan gave examples of Tom Dixon and Richard Hutton who have produced their own work. He said that the work has been interesting, but on a small scale and in the case of Richard Hutton, he invested in a roto-molding machine and had to produce roto-moulded pieces for the next ten years.

I wanted to see what a Paris based designer saw as the challenges for a designer based in New Zealand and working with European manufacturers, so I asked Ronan a hypothetical question. “If you had to take your business to New Zealand – it’s a long way away, it’s beautiful, four million people, do you think you could do it?”

“I think so, I think I could” said Ronan. Ronan and Erwan are travelling less and less – what is travelling between the companies is the prototype. “I don’t know the price of flying a chair from Italy to New Zealand”, said Ronan. He suggested if it was a factor they would have to change a lot of things. He explained that with their experience, maybe it would be easier now to use pictures. Ronan felt they would quickly start to understand the problem of using mock-ups and prototypes over such a distance and be able to make it possible.

I asked Ronan where his focus would be if he were a new designer today starting out and trying to get some work into production.

Ronan outlined that he would be doing more or less what he did fifteen years ago – try to produce some good ideas, develop some to reality and take some beautiful expressive pictures.

Ronan expressed a real enthusiasm for graphic design, especially the pictures of their work and the media they could ‘play with.’ He put a big part of their success down to their capacity to communicate with different media.

Ronan outlined that today designers are more integrated into the communication, promotion and rationale for an object in partnership with the manufacturer. When they started, the designer was creating the objects and the company was handling the communication.

A big question for the New Zealand designer is choosing manufacturers to approach.

“The fact is that when you are young it is very, very difficult,” said Ronan. He suggested that they had the opportunity to work with Vitra because they had been working with Cappellini over three or four years. There are just a few brands that are open to new and unknown talent, he pointed out, Cappellini being one. Ronan suggested that although Cappellini still takes on new design, it is not in the same quantity as in the past.

What is important at the beginning is that you associate with someone that wants to do the best for you. He outlined that although you need to make some money, the most important thing is to have patience and produce very high quality work. If you could do that and show the piece, it was possible to have the beginnings of success. Giving a touch of perspective, he pointed out he had his first exhibition twenty years ago, but only in the last two or three years have they had the money, to consider their company with its small studio, is in a ‘more or less’ safe position.

Ronan outlined that the industry is extraordinary, but at the same time frustrating because an object takes two to five years to come into existence. It is important that during this period you are considering the project; it is not enough to have a good idea, you have to concentrate very hard, right through the process until the presentation in Milan or the launch on the website. “Each level has to be perfect”, said Ronan.

Creating a good project is like being a good cook, “You can have the best meat, you can cook it perfectly, but too much salt at the end and it will be a nightmare.” Being a designer is the same, suggested Ronan. “You can have a good idea, good shape, good price but if the comfort is terrible it is nothing. If you have nobody to distribute

it, it is nothing. There is a map with a lot of points that you need to connect together to make that good idea into something interesting.”

Ronan outlined that working with Vitra was the opposite of Cappellini. Vitra is a very structured company – like a mathematician trying to find a good formula, very scientific, based on experiment and observation. Cappellini was something totally different based on the intuition of Gulio Cappellini who never said no and was always willing to make a prototype. Cappellini would produce many prototypes for the April show in Milan without investing in tooling. Whereas Vitra, outlined Ronan, is producing products industrially with investments in tooling and putting all their energy into two or three new products per year.

He reflected, that with Cappellini their work was very fresh and alluded to the problem currently of being perhaps too professional in their approach. Having a naïve view can be helpful – knowing the problems and issues of manufacture can be a restriction to imagination, Ronan outlined.

History shows us, suggested Ronan, that interesting things come from young countries. He is interested to see incredible and beautiful things and doesn't care if they come from the suburbs of Paris or New Zealand. In the future there will certainly be a new generation of partners in the likes of India and China, but Ronan suggested this won't happen in the next ten or fifteen years so maybe it is more interesting for a designer to start with Europe.

Commenting on whether Italian manufacturers will change into the future as markets change, Ronan explained that it is impossible to say. It is very complicated because there are many different sized companies. When they were working for Cappellini, very often a family of two or three in a garage made the prototype and the first

product. If the product were successful then it would go to another small factory of twelve to twenty people.

He contrasted this with France, where in the 1970s the government wanted to help industry and very quickly, over twenty years, all the small sized companies and craftsmen totally disappeared. Ronan pointed out that all this manufacturing possibility just vanished. He outlined that in Italy this still exists, but in a totally opposite way to that found in Germany where manufacturing is very precise and organised. He found this interesting, as Germany is the world's biggest exporter.

Eckart Maise, Vitra head of Home Division

Vitra is one of the world's most famous furniture manufacturers and based in Birsfelden Switzerland.

After an exchange of friendly emails to arrange the interview, I was looking forward to meeting Eckart. When I arrived at Vitra, Eckart welcomed me and we walked to the company cafeteria and took a seat.

I started by asking Eckart how important it is to be geographically close to the designers they work with.

It is relatively important explained Eckart, because the usual way Vitra works is to have long-term relationships with designers and a long lasting cooperation. He explained that you can do certain things over the phone, but when you are producing three dimensional objects, in the end you always have to come together – to look and work on the prototypes in the Vitra workshop, or the designer's studio. He outlined that a fast design process and product development is usually three to

four years, or two years if they were lucky. He explained that you could win or lose a lot of time by how well the sequence of the design process was coordinated. “The closer a designer is, the easier it is, because sometimes it is a question of days; you reach a certain stage of prototyping and then you need to come together for a development meeting before you jointly decide to take the next step. So sometimes if it is hard to organize a meeting the project comes almost to a standstill for a week or two. So distance plays a role.”

Eckart outlined that they might visit a designer’s studio if it is in the concept discussion phase, but usually the prototyping happens at Vitra with the designers usually coming for full day meetings or workshops, in order to move the project to the next step. Because Vitra works with few designers with long lasting collaborations, Eckart explained that they usually have more than one project underway with a designer, so a whole day workshop can be filled – “they don’t come for five minutes.”

Vitra works with a small group of designers, because of capacity and focus. Eckart explained it is like a choir, if you have certain voices or if you already have a baritone in your choir then you don’t necessarily need a second one.

Electronic communication can help get over some of the issues of distance “You can work a lot on the pure construction, on the digital construction, you can have a web conference and work on the drawing simultaneously and jointly but you cannot do that for the 3D world, for the material world, it’s not possible.” Textures and how the product feels and looks need to be experienced in reality, Eckart outlined.

He explained modern technology helps to reduce the number of meetings but in the end you still need quite a lot of face to face meetings.

I asked Eckart how he would feel if one of the designers working with Vitra wanted to move to New Zealand and keep working with Vitra and whether he thought it could work.

“Let me give an answer from my private life. When one of my children was born a couple of years ago we spoke to some of our friends, South African and English friends and we asked the woman in the couple ‘would you like to be our child’s Godmother?’ and she said ‘yes, of course’ and then in the same conversation they told us they were going to move to New Zealand. So we’re still good friends, but we meet much less. So we exchange emails and phone calls and we see each other maybe once a year or maybe every other year so I think it would be definitely a change in the relationship.”

Eckart described the situation they had with Jasper Morrison, long time designer for Vitra, who was for a period living in Japan. He pointed out that Japan was half the distance to that of New Zealand, but their relationship worked. However he suggested that establishing a new relationship would probably be quite difficult.

He suggested that a way around that might be for a young or new designer, to live in Europe for a year or so and establish a relationship that could be then continued over the distance. Eckart felt that starting a working relationship over that distance probably would not work, “you evaluate if you should start a working relationship or not; distance might be a factor in that.”

For Eckart and Vitra, relationships with designers usually develop with designers that they already know and who share certain joint values. Eckart explained that there maybe a project that you would like to work on with a particular designer and the designer would also like to work with Vitra, “then at one point, sometimes years later all of a sudden there is an occasion where you can say, now it makes sense to work

together.” Sometimes the designer comes up with a proposal for a project and Vitra will then suggest they take it as a start point to develop something together. At other times there is a need that may come from a new technology and it becomes the right thing to work with a particular designer. “Again like in private life there is no standard way of meeting your husband or your wife – everybody has their story and we have the same – basically working with relationships.”

Vitra gets between two and five email proposals from designers a day but so far they have not gone on to become collaborative projects. Eckart said they look at them, give feedback and sometimes advice if they have an idea of how the proposal could be improved.

“The slightly unfair thing is that of course you cannot evaluate a design within one minute, by email, or pdf, but on the other hand we cannot give the time to study each of these proposals, because again on the other side we are focussing on a few relationships with a few people, so this strategy kind of excludes the possibility of actually working with, let’s say young talents.”

For a designer based in New Zealand wishing to establish relationships with manufacturers in Europe, Eckart thought you had to trust your own instincts. Eckart is amazed when he gets a proposal and the designer says, “I’m so convinced that this is absolutely perfect for Vitra” and Eckart can see that it totally ignores the values of Vitra or their approach to design. He thinks that it is important to step back and look at your design like a third person and say ‘what does my design do, what kind of values do I have, what kind of technologies do I like, what kind of formal expression do I like?’ and to then consider how that would match with a manufacturer. He explained to not just be in love with your own designs and then aspire to the most prestigious manufacturer.

Vitra always looks for designers with a clear position and a clear attitude to design – preferring to call them authors because they feel it better describes somebody who has a position, who wants to share it with the world and doesn't change it with every new job.

For example the designer Jasper Morrison has a clear position across his work that he describes with his description 'Super Normal,' comments Eckart. For a manufacturer it is very interesting to be able to feel a designer's position because that is how you start noticing their work. When a designer focuses on getting the perfect product and basically tries to do the job of the manufacturer, he feels that it may be more difficult for them to express their position. Eckart explained, "for us, if we start working with somebody it's more like we say, 'ok we noticed your position, we like what you want to tell the world in design'" and follows by saying that this is always the beginning of the process.

Eckart explained that in consultation with their R and D department, marketing people and so on, constraints and restrictions are placed around the project – it is from there that something develops. "If somebody comes and said 'I have the perfect product for you,' it rather turns us off in a way."

At the beginning Vitra is concerned with the conceptual nature of the proposal, they want to see what position the designer is taking, what is important for them, how they see the world and whether they have a specific view. From there Vitra can decide if it matches what they want to bring to the world.

Eckart suggested that the effort going into an initial contact should be relatively small and that it maybe more interesting to receive an email from somebody who tells you a story or gives you an idea of what their position is, what their ideas are and what

their concept is. “What is the least convincing is saying ‘I have the perfect product for you,’ because how do they know?”

Eckart said, “If somebody wrote ‘I did the summer class and one of your workshops or I saw the Verner Panton exhibition in Tokyo or what ever and I was deeply touched because of this and that and I feel it’s really the right match, or it touched me and I think there is something in common or something like that. It’s like making an acquaintance in personal life in the end. It starts somehow and then if it’s somebody that sends an open honest direct email or phone call and you feel that it is somebody who really cares about design, about what we’re doing and who is enthusiastic about it, of course even if it is an email, then the email we send back is a different email, because then it is the beginning of a relationship. If it is just, ‘we have the perfect design for you,’ then basically what you can write back is that, ‘I looked at it but I don’t think it’s perfect for us’ and then there is no relationship starting. It is a communication thing in the end – how you communicate.”

Although Eckart has not been to New Zealand he believes that despite globalisation, everybody has something to offer from their part of the world, whether for example it is in society, resources or cultural history. He suggested that if you are a New Zealand designer you may decide to deny those roots, claiming the position of the global designer, or you may choose to accept them and search inside yourself, your country and culture for something specific. Eckart however cautioned that if it is something too obvious then it risks being vulgaristic or considered a cliché.

Cultural exchanges through residency programmes are common in arts or literature but quite rare in design. Eckart thought exchanges between countries made a lot of sense. He outlined that many European designers have a fascination with the Japanese movement and the Japanese crafts. He considers that every place has something to give and it could be in the crafts, history, materials you do not find

anywhere else, or in a spirit. He was sure that for someone coming from an old society like Europe it could be very inspiring and enriching to work in a younger society like New Zealand.

An interesting cultural adjunct to Vitra the manufacturer, are the Vitra workshops where, students or designers can come together over a week and go through a design process, coming up with something tangible at the end. It's not a talent show according to Eckart, but he suggested that it might be the start of a relationship and so therefore, maybe something could happen from it in the future.

Discussing the type or size of manufacturers that New Zealand based designers should be contacting, Eckart outlined that within the high quality furniture world, Vitra was considered big and that the bigger the company the more difficult it is to start working together.

However, he outlined if he was an ambitious designer from New Zealand, he would certainly try to get in touch with bigger companies like Vitra, but at the same time look for the slightly smaller more agile companies. He saw the beauty of the furniture industry, including Vitra was that many companies are family owned and managed by the owner. If for example said Eckart, the owner is also the creative director and they love what you are doing, then you'll get an immediate reaction – while larger companies have more things to consider in the company strategy and their responses become less spontaneous.

Eckart explained that there is no standard answer though. He outlined that design as a discipline, is the child of the industrial age and the industrial revolution. It is about the manufacture and distribution of things and about bringing out a good product to as many people as possible. For him a product designer needs be very aware what happens in the commercial world, otherwise they should become an artist. He

outlined that you need to know a lot about what is going on in the industry, who is who and what company does what and to understand the positioning of the different companies is very important.

Eckart outlined that this is not only applicable to the New Zealand designer but also the designer that lives in Milan. However the more distant you are the more precise you need to be in your analysis and more focused otherwise you may invest a lot of time without results.

When I asked Eckart for his vision of what the ideal designer would be like to work with, he outlined that the designers they work with are comparable with the voices in a choir, each with their own specific strengths and positions, common to them all, is that they have a strong conceptual approach. He outlined that they don't say to a designer 'we want a chair this size using this material.' In the beginning there is a lot of talking and it is a very conceptual discussion. A good understanding of materials, production technology and a certain hands on approach is important.

With the existing designers that Vitra works with, projects can start in a myriad of different ways. Some may be from an analysis of the product range, from a new technology, a new material or production process. The designers also may suggest ideas. Not every product is innovative in the same way; some being very innovative typologically or formally and others are purely design projects that will replace existing products.

Reflecting on the New Zealand position, Eckart outlined that it is a specific situation to work from a country that is far away from most of the manufacturing, "you can't be an industrial designer without manufacturing, so that makes it more difficult." He explained that it was the same for American designers with most of the furniture manufacturing taking place in Europe.

Most of the designers that work for Vitra develop prototypes in their own workshops. For Eckart this hands-on approach is very important. On one side there are three-dimensional models – working with materials and giving the object form with your own hands and on the other side are the digital tools. He explained that there is a ping-pong between the two processes and it is this process that in the end makes a good design. For example comfort, Eckart suggested, is something that needs to be physically tested and cannot be imitated on the computer, so a mock-up needs to be made and given the “butt test”, changed if necessary and then scanned to bring it back into the digital world.

The designers that Vitra work with all use three dimensional software which gives a screen image that looks well advanced, however Eckart explained that this is only the beginning of the process and sometimes the physical object shows quite brutally that there is still a lot of work to do.

Vitra is able to mill prototypes, which can then be worked on and then re-digitised back into the 3D construction software. He suggested that the process is similar in other companies but each will have their own specific mix.

Ilaria Marelli, Designer

Ilaria’s studio was a pleasant twenty minute walk inland from the shores of Lake Como, Italy. Our meeting was at five pm and I pushed the bell at the entrance to an enclosed courtyard and Ilaria came to meet me. She was smiling, warm and effervescent.

Early in our conversation Ilaria told me she also works in interior and exhibition design, both of which she likes, but importantly because they contribute financially

as much to the office as products. Ilaria outlined that it can take two, three or four years before product royalties are received and you never know how successful it will be. The companies that Ilaria works with are at the top level, but they usually don't sell large quantities. She explained that working with companies like Cappellini, "you can be famous, but not very rich with royalties."

Being close to manufacturers is good, but Ilaria explained they would probably love to work with a foreign designer more than her, because there is an added appreciation of the designer, if they come from outside Italy.

Peculiar to the region where Ilaria lives are the very good carpenters, metal workers and those able to work with plastic. She explained that there are a lot of small companies that are open to making prototypes and for her this was very important. In contrast her American designer friends find getting prototypes made a nightmare. They have to deal with companies of two-thousand people that are not open to making prototypes, while in Italy there are lots of small, quality manufacturing companies of four to ten people that are quite open to help you.

Ilaria outlined that for her, meeting clients face to face, with the prototype to discuss, is much better than speaking over the phone. Ilaria suggested that the physical language is fifty percent of the conversation. She suggested when you are in front of somebody the conversation is much more detailed and they may offer ideas or make suggestions. "If you are discussing an idea over the phone you may get 'no thanks we are not interested,' but you don't get the reason it's not working for them."

Ilaria humorously explained that you could read clients physical language; when they don't speak and just say 'um,' move their eyes or look strangely at their staff, you know there is something to work on.

Ilaria outlined that there are good opportunities for design in Italy, but there are too many designers and too many expectations on design with little or no state help for the designer, unlike France or Britain. In Italy Ilaria explained that you have to do everything yourself and there are many competitors all trying to get to the same companies.

Whilst Ilaria supports the proposition that Italy is the centre of furniture design in terms of companies and the way they work, she suggested that if there were a good design school there would be good designers, whichever country they were in.

The Milan Furniture Fair is the centre for new design explained Ilaria, "It's a meeting where everybody comes to Italy from all over the world to speak about design."

Ilaria outlined that for the rest of the year, Milan is one of the most important centres of design, but not the only one.

She outlined that when she started her own office, it was not easy, but it was great to be able to say she had worked with Cappellini, "it was a good business card, as it were, for my work." Ilaria outlined that she was also working with an important professor at the Milan Polytechnic, giving her two good points to start with.

For a New Zealand designer building relationships and creating a dialogue with manufacturers, she suggested that they get in touch with small companies, with a very high interest in design. She included Cappellini, saying that they are not a big company and are open to new designers. If you look at a company's catalogue and you see that they have everything designed by one designer, explained Ilaria, you know it is probably a closed field. Ilaria outlined that Moroso presents thirty products from twenty designers every year making them an interesting company to approach, but cautions they get thousands of approaches from designers every year.

When at Cappellini, Ilaria vetted the designs submitted from young designers. “The thing to avoid, is to design something and send it to everybody hoping that somebody is interested.” Putting together a design that could fit two or three companies is fine suggested Ilaria, but not two-hundred. Another strategy for the designer starting out is to start with a smaller object, as the big names are mainly interested in designing a table or sofa system, but not the side table or coat rack.

Cappellini, suggested Ilaria, doesn't have a preference for famous designers over the less well known. However she notes, once a company gets to know you, it is easier for them to continue year after year and you will probably be the one that gets the brief for the new product.

In contrast, Ilaria outlined, the manufacturer Kartell has a policy of working with big names because they consider part of the communication of their brand, comes from the designer, for example Philippe Starck.

Ilaria suggested there might also be small companies open to working with new designers that have good quality production, but perhaps lacking in design. While Cappellini may receive one thousand proposals each year and produce twenty new products, she suggested that approaching a small company that receives twenty proposals a year might increase the possibility that a design becomes a reality. Ilaria suggested that if a company's catalogue has ten successful chairs, maybe they don't need another, however there maybe other opportunities in terms of typology.

Ilaria was in favour of a proactive approach – calling a company to arrange a meeting. She suggested that rather than say ‘I want to design a chair for Moroso’ it is better to suggest a concept, for example, ‘I have a concept of bringing nature into design.’ Ilaria outlined that it is important to consider whether the project you are proposing is in the spirit of the company.

There were regional differences in the presentations that she vetted at her time at Cappellini. “The young Italian designer often used to write ten pages to explain the concept of the product and you never got to see the product . . . and this doesn’t work.”

Ilaria suggested using a page to express the innovative part of the idea and then to show the product, rendered or sketched to fill the page, without wooden floors or marble, “something very pure, where you see what you have in terms of product.”

The ingredients of a successful proposal during her time at Cappellini were that the mood had something in common with Cappellini and there was something innovative. “Especially if you are a new designer the company asks for a little bit of innovation, because if they want something just stylish, they can ask other designers they are working with.” There are also market requests – if a company is searching for a table and you arrive with the right table, then you are in a better position, outlined Ilaria.

It is the quantity of manufacturers in Italy that contribute to its’ importance as a centre of design. Ilaria outlined she couldn’t name fifty French manufacturers but could name hundreds of Italian companies, from the production of taps to furniture. For this reason she sees Italy as a very good place to be.

Ilaria suggested that Italian manufacturers might see foreign designers as special, in the same way that she is more respected when she works abroad. “When I work in Japan or America they say ‘you are an Italian designer,’ somehow when I’m here it is normal.”

Although Ilaria considers it very important to participate in the Milan Furniture Fair, she suggested that the chances of a manufacturer seeing your work at the Salone Satellite is only about two percent, as they are very busy managing their own booths.

Although it may not present the right opportunities to meet with manufacturers, you are still exposed to the best design public and people from magazines and galleries. It could also be an opportunity to meet with other designers, or a wood worker for example who would like to work with you.

Ilaria puts some of her reputation down to the exposure she has received when companies like Cappellini have her designs published. She explained, whether you could have your product publicized through the manufactures communication or have your own personal show, giving journalists something to say about you starts the process.

William Sawaya, Sawaya and Moroni

Sawaya & Moroni was founded in 1984 by William Sawaya and Paolo Moroni and are based in Milan.

It was a beautiful morning as I took the train and travelled the sixty minutes from Como to Milan. I found the office and with time to spare I had a coffee and contemplated the meeting I was going to have with William, whose company I have known about for many years.

I started by asking William of the importance of being close to the designers they are working with and the value of face to face relationships.

“It’s primordial, if you don’t know with whom you are dealing, you can’t really do it comfortably.” William outlined a concept always reflects the mind of the designer, so it is important to understand the mind of the person you are working with. He explained a completed project was never what it was at the conception of the initial

idea. The process was a dialogue, he outlined, “It is never the way it started, it was meant to be at the first thought, so you always have to modify, to adapt, to simplify, to industrialize, so at all of these phases you need the person in front of you and to discuss together of course, otherwise it becomes like a dictator. I can resolve it myself for them, but it is not their product anymore or their concept.”

Normally Sawaya & Moroni doesn't produce a design without knowing the person. William outlined they don't have to be a known designer and it could be anybody who sends sketches, or through a chance meeting, but in the end it is always an interactive relationship.

Rarely William receives an interesting proposal with a strong idea behind it. He suggested that the new generation make excellent 3D renderings, but they are usually unfeasible or it feels like *déjà vu*. For William the younger generation need to work less with the computer and more with their brains, because they all end up doing almost the same thing. He viewed this as a result of the possibilities that the computer gives you, “Anyone who is good at rendering sooner or later has the same effect and idea as somebody else.” He pointed out that those a little older used to have the concept first, then translate it into sketches and in the process of sketching, it took you to other ideas that were not thought of before.

William believed the computer was giving the same look and spirit to all of the new generation, “It could help at the beginning, but in the end it homologates, so everybody looks like everybody, you cannot distinguish anymore who the designer is . . . until you read the name below.” It is the loss of the accidental imagination, he said, “The sketch could be only two lines, but you think you know what you will get out of these two lines.” Technically the computer, helps but conceptually it is limiting, he explained.

William suggested that being far away doesn't mean that you cannot participate if you have a good concept. It is where you get your ideas from that count and the ambience around you.

Designers should be modest and hard working suggested William, because nobody is born a genius. "Everyday is a new day, every day you should wake up and say 'what can I learn today?'" He suggested that ninety-nine out of one-hundred ideas should be thrown out during the design process, until you get a real concept with ideas that are new.

When William opened the Sydney Design Festival four years ago he met a lot of young people imitating the designer Mark Newson, which he considered very negative. William outlined the importance of separating yourself from the work of other designers, to have your own way of thinking, your own voice and being able to prove it is valuable.

William suggested that a good way to approach a manufacturer is to first email sketches or pictures of a prototype. Often at design fairs, designers with proposals approach him, but he outlined that this is not a good time for such a discussion and can be embarrassing if you're not interested. William outlined that if a manufacturer is sent something that is really interesting for their company, they will contact the designer the minute they receive it.

I asked William to comment on the importance of magazines.

William outlined that magazines and publications are important because they can give you exposure, but very bad because they publish anything, without offering sufficient criticism. William said that on occasion they create monsters by

showcasing designers that have little substance behind them, or designs that are ninety percent copies of original works.

William explained they have great critics in Italy but suggested that much of the critical culture is limited to intellectuals and is not seen by the broader base that read design magazines.

Hendrik Flötotto, Authentics

Authentics is a manufacturer of objects and furniture and has strong relationships with designers of many different nationalities.

After taking a couple of buses and connecting trains on a clear crisp day – I arrived almost outside the Authentics buildings in Gütersloh Germany. I met with Hendrik of the Flötotto family, owners of Authentics.

I asked Hendrik how important it was to be geographically close to the designers they work with.

Hendrik outlined that it depends on each product. If they have very complex products, furniture or items that are high-tech, he believes it is valuable to see each other quite often. He suggested it is common to meet every four to six weeks with a designer, face to face to make sure that there are no misunderstandings. Hendrik explained that with emails, although the actual text maybe correct, the intended meaning might be different due to cultural differences or interpretations. He prefers to meet with the designers to discuss details, which can sometimes then be altered within the day. Suppliers, technicians and the Authentics design department may all be involved and when an agreement is reached, Authentics is then able to go on

working for another four to six weeks. If the tasks are simple then they can be communicated just with drawings and pictures.

If you make a suggestion, outlined Hendrik, when you are face to face with a designer you can see from their expression whether they like it or not. Hendrik considers it very important because you want to have a long-term relationship and preserve a continuous design language within the company, which is also why Authentics doesn't often change designers.

Authentics works with a group of fifteen to twenty designers and design studios that understand the spirit of the company and this team receives the briefings for new products.

I asked Hendrik what he saw as the barriers to working with New Zealand designers.

If designers based in New Zealand, Australia or the US have never been to Europe, suggested Hendrik, they may not understand subtle differences in culture in terms of the quality of design and product quality. Both the designer and the manufacturer need to have a good understanding of each other's countries. He believed that if both are open-minded it could work. With travel, overseas study and practical semesters Hendrik suggested that designers are becoming more open minded, thinking less nationally and more internationally. Hendrik comments that an internationalization of design language is especially visible in a borderless Europe.

Most approaches from designers, outlined Hendrik, are at fairs where Authentics is exhibiting. They will often introduce themselves and say that they are interested in working for Authentics. Another way Authentics meets designers is through referrals from designers that are already working with them.

Authenticics receives two or three emails each day from designers with proposals and Hendrik explained that ninety-eight percent of them are totally unsuitable for Authenticics, suggesting that the proposal probably went to one-hundred other suppliers or manufacturers. However Hendrik prefers emails to samples and commented he would need another building, just for receiving and sending back samples, if that were all he received.

Hendrik considered it was important for designers to be written about in magazines and gave the example of Stefan Diez, who having completed projects for Authenticics received a lot of press. Hendrik outlined that Stefan is in every second magazine, being storied for the projects he is doing for different companies. There are other designers for example Stefano Giovannoni, who are not so extraverted and in the public domain, but are also doing ongoing work for manufacturers. Hendrik suggested that if you have enough work you probably aren't so reliant on publications.

Another approach to making connections with manufacturers that Hendrik has observed is the formation of design collectives that try to sell their designs to companies and manufacturers under their own brand. They sometimes have their own newsletter with all the designers putting together a list of the manufacturers and distributors they have worked with. Hendrik suggested this works well and gives relatively unknown designers an opportunity to have work in a publication and to be seen.

From the designers that Hendrik works with, he has heard they prefer to work with small to medium sized companies that are family run. He explained that often, if the company is not family run, there are too many people who want to make decisions on the project and the time from the beginning to the product launch is a lot longer.

He suggested that it was more straightforward to work with family owned companies because there are usually only one or two decision makers.

Authentics has gone from a company that chose sixty percent to seventy percent of its new designs from those submitted from designers, to the last three years, working mainly on specific briefs given to two or three designers or studios, in a kind of pitch.

Hendrik suggested that if you like a designer for the person they are, it makes it much more fun. Sometimes there is a great sympathy, you become friends and talk outside of business, “sure it is a great thing if you laugh with them.” Some designers leave Hendrik feeling totally exhausted after a days meeting. “With other designers you have a meeting and you say wow, that was a nice meeting, a lot of fun and you feel really enthusiastic.” “It makes it much easier if you like each other. If you understand each other, you can say something in two sentences and with the other one you have to write twenty to reach an understanding.”

Hendrik suggested that for New Zealand designers creating European networks, it is important to be open minded and to get an international design sense by visiting design shows and making contact with manufacturers. Even if you don't have any designs to show, Hendrik outlined it is important to introduce yourself and give a positive impression. He explained that if you show an interest in a company and stay in touch, by perhaps developing an email relationship, then in the future when your designs are getting more serious, you would be in a better position to present them.

Universities with good, well-known tutors that encourage students to look over the borders of New Zealand and even Australia are very important. When Hendrik reflected on the designers that they work with, most of them have been related in some way to the Royal College of Art in London.

“Really try to suck in the spirit of a company,” suggested Hendrik and get the feeling of which proposals you send to which companies. He pointed out that ninety-nine percent of designers fail to do this. Hendrik gave a recent example of designers that sent a whole collection made of wood when Authentics produces items in plastic, metal and porcelain. He could see that they were blind to the spirit of Authentics products, which are industrially produced and identical.

Some national identity can still be seen in every designers work, suggested Hendrik and it can contribute to something special in their design language. He described the collaboration of Doshi and Levien, from India and Scotland. Although some people, he suggested, may have a hard time understanding their work, because they have had limited contact with India. Although creating products really loved by a small group is always a risk, in the future everyone will remember the product for its uniqueness. Hendrik explained that Authentics is doing small experiments with their design language, using the patterns of ‘Tord Boontje’ and the Indian influences of ‘Doshi and Levien.’

For Hendrik a design has to create emotions in you, “if something touches you, you’re doing it with a lot of love, with a lot of power, that’s the most important thing about design, that it creates emotions in you.” Hendrik describes the feeling when working on a product that endears those qualities, “I want that on the market as soon as possible,’ to be able to have the first item coming out of the machine.”

From Hendrik’s experience, in a hard business climate, it is much easier to sell emotional items than very straightforward items that are very cool. To have a mega seller, he suggested, you have to hit everything – you have to have the right timing for the design, the right designer and the right manufacturer. The company must also have the market power to distribute the item quickly to market, but most importantly the object has to touch your heart.

Tomoko Azumi, Designer

Tomoko moved from Japan in the early nineties and studied at the Royal College of Art – in London where she is still based. I'm interested in her viewpoint, especially as it relates to non-Europeans participating in an activity largely acknowledged as having its centre in Europe.

I briefly outlined New Zealand's relative isolation and asked Tomoko how important it was to be close to her clients.

Tomoko explained that when she works with her Japanese clients from London, she sometimes feels a little disadvantaged, as she can't catch up day by day. She often has to wait for a response to an email and comments that an eight or nine hour time lag can create a strange feeling. The advantage Tomoko offers to her Japanese clients selling into Europe is her knowledge of the market. However she explained that for some it is not convenient to work over such a distance with her.

I asked Tomoko whether she thought it would be possible to be based in New Zealand as a designer and work with clients in Europe.

"I don't even know if I could do my business in Japan or not, I don't think I could. The situation is so different. Here European companies don't mind if I'm female or Japanese, if I can provide the service they want." She outlined that in Japan clients probably want to talk to a man with a tie and don't want to listen to a female speaking out or correcting them. She reflected that her chances in Japan would be limited. However being based in London she is able to offer European opinions to her original country, Japan.

Tomoko suggested there is not a furniture industry in Japan. She outlined that Japanese designers are coming to Europe to see people in Milan or exhibiting in shows like 'Designers Block' – London and Milan, but also New York.

Tomoko explained that manufacturers based in the UK wanting her international input will employ her, but those wanting something very English will not. She sees this as a geographical balance that works for her depending on the company.

When she is working for Italian companies it is possible to make a day trip if needed by taking a one and a half to two hour flight. A project typically requires three meetings before the launch of a product. Although many things can be discussed over the phone or with emails, Tomoko commented, progress is often swifter when you're able to meet with clients. "A picture doesn't depict every little detail", she said. For this reason she tries to meet with clients as often as possible.

Tomoko considered that the most important element for the designer trying to get the attention of a manufacturer is to show them a good design. When Tomoko started fifteen years ago the '100% Design' show was seen as an incubator that manufacturers visited to discover new designers. The Salone Satellite part of the larger Salone del Mobile or Milan Furniture Fair, was also where manufacturers went to find new talent. However, she commented, today it is larger and the selection is a bit loose and speculated that manufacturers now might wait for journalists to story the good designers in their magazines.

Tomoko suggested that blogs and the internet are weakening the power of the journalist. She also believed that '100% Design' is losing its power and now people go to 'Salone del Mobile' in Milan or 'Maison De Object' in Paris to launch new designs.

The following year after Tomoko finished her MA at the 'Royal College of Art,' she showed her work for three years at '100% Design.' After saying hello to people for three years British companies started to appoint her with their briefs. She outlined it is rare that a client picks up what they see at a show, but rather they see the potential and offer a brief based on their own specific requirements. In 1999 she showed her designs at the Salone Satellite whilst also entering competitions to benefit from the exposure in the media associated with the competitions.

Her graduation piece received a lot of press and was featured in magazines, weekend supplements and newspapers. This helped her to get into curated and auction house exhibitions. Tomoko then made a portfolio and sent it along with copies of her press coverage to twenty companies that she wanted to work with. She had three replies saying they liked her work, but they were not looking for someone like her. One reply was from an Italian company wanting to produce one of her pieces. Tomoko felt lucky with this response and explained she knows designers that have sent out fifty portfolios with no results. Tomoko outlined her experience, "Sending out portfolios even if you have good press coverage doesn't work. You have to meet people."

Tomoko explained that she liked to work with people she feels comfortable with. An aspect of working with large companies she doesn't like, is the amount of discussion meetings they have, resulting in slow responses from them.

Typically when you work for a manufacturer, outlined Tomoko, you have to wait up to four years to receive any royalties, which means that running a studio is always a balance between getting cash for the running costs and seeding for future returns. Exhibition design and product design where she receives development fees helps offset this. "It's a very, very, very slow process," she outlined. Sometimes Tomoko

does a project with a manufacturer knowing that the return is far into the future but that her profile will be increased.

She suggested that to enter the 'Design Art' market you must first be famous and to get into that position, the designer has always made many sacrifices and a tremendous effort.

Tomoko reflected that she sacrificed every weekend and worked solidly for ten years without holidays. She suggested that getting a high profile doesn't happen naturally and you really have to work for it. Following up with journalists, supplying them with images and information could be a full time job, explained Tomoko.

For Tomoko, international magazines are more important than British, because there are not many manufacturers in Britain looking for new designers. It has been suggested to her that manufacturers tend not to view magazines other than those they have advertisements in.

Konstantin Grcic Industrial Design, Alexandra Fürstenhagen

Konstantin Grcic is one of the most successful industrial designers of recent decades. He has studied at the Royal College of Art in London, worked with Jasper Morrison and formed his own studio in 1991 in Munich.

A couple of days before our meeting Konstantin was sadly called away on business, but Alexandra Fürstenhagen kindly spoke on his behalf.

As I entered the studio, the first thing I was conscious of was the classical music – I immediately felt comfortable.

We sat at a large table in a work area full of prototypes and items ready for an exhibition in Chicago. I asked Alexandra how important it was for Konstantin to be close to his clients.

Being close to clients is important replied Alexandra. There are different types of contact possibilities she explained. Konstantin is often on the phone, because although at the beginning emailing is fine, as the project proceeds you always have to talk and very importantly, meet regularly with the manufacturer so they can see and touch the models and prototypes, and in the case of a chair, sit on it. For Konstantin having a studio in Munich is good because most of his clients are in Italy. For example the Italian furniture company 'Plank' is only four hours away by car. They have used Skype video conferencing outlined Alexandra, "That's ok but meeting face to face is always better."

Faced with the hypothetical question of whether Konstantin could continue his business with his existing clients if he relocated to New Zealand, Alexandra suggested that the first steps in the design process would be fine. However she speculated, some of their Italian clients would say "lets work with somebody who is nearer because it's too complicated." Because of the cost of travel she suggested, instead of having three meetings over five months you would have to make do with one. It is product dependent and Alexandra gave the example of industrially produced items with production runs in the thousands requiring many meetings and at the other end, handmade pieces requiring only one or two meetings in the production process.

Konstantin's first big project was for the lighting manufacturer Flos. His 'Mayday' lamp created an explosion of excitement and everyone was talking about this new designer from Munich, outlined Alexandra. All the press and the magazines wanted to have an interview with Konstantin whose work was seen as engaging with new

ideas. The momentum continued with 'Chair One' and then with the 'Myto' chair in 2008, which were accompanied with strong interest from the press and magazines. Alexandra outlined that Konstantin's networking has assisted him in making the right contacts with manufacturers.

Participation at design shows, of which the Salone Del Mobile is the most important, would give New Zealand designers the opportunity to meet lots of people suggested Alexandra, "Communication is really important, especially when you are at the beginning, because you have to know the people." She suggested that if you go to a manufacturers stand, introduce yourself and say that you are from New Zealand, they would remember you, whereas with phoning and mailing they may not. Another advantage is that you can see what they are doing, view samples of their work and see if a relationship would be good for you and if your work would be good for them.

Alexandra saw having work in the few really key magazines as important. She gave examples of 'Form,' 'Abitare' and the broader publications, 'Wallpaper' and 'Elle Decoration.'

Although Konstantin has had exhibitions of his design projects in museums and galleries, Alexandra emphasized that he doesn't see himself as an artist, but an industrial designer of functional, everyday objects, usually manufactured in huge quantities. One exception she pointed out was the 'Karbon' long chair, created for 'Gallery Kreo' in Paris, which was not industrially manufactured but produced as a small edition, making it more similar to a work of art than a product design.

Discussing how to build relationships and create networks, Alexandra outlined that Konstantin knows a lot of people, who in turn know a lot of people. She described the situation where a contact hears that a manufacturer wants to produce a new product, so they ask Konstantin and if he is interested, they facilitate the start of a

relationship. Konstantin has a very warm and friendly manner and Alexandra outlined that it's important to be somebody willing to meet, talk and to have lunch or dinner with people, especially at the beginning. Konstantin has friends who are designers and he is often meeting them. Alexandra outlined that whilst this is not really important for his designs it presents an opportunity to learn more about manufacturers.

On the question of how to decide which companies to work with, Alexandra suggested that it is not a matter of whether the company is big or small. Konstantin instead considers whether the philosophy of the company fits with what he is doing. Like any collaboration, occasionally the manufacturer and Konstantin have different views as to how the project should be resolved; sometimes solutions can be found and other times not. Alexandra explained that with one successful project came the expectation from the manufacturer that the next would have the same commercial success and this is not always the case.

Konstantin has an interest in the work from designers outside of Europe, suggested Alexandra. She outlined they may find it difficult to be successful, however it could be interesting as they may bring some really new, local ideas. She suggested that their success may come down to how the company is organised and whether they have the opportunity to travel and present their work at design fairs which are expensive. She suggested that companies will emerge from China and outlined that if the company was interesting, she believed Konstantin could imagine himself working with them.

Jasper Morrison Studio, John Tree

Jasper Morrison is one of the most notable designers of the last twenty-five years, with studios in London, Paris and Tokyo and a worldwide client base.

The black door to the courtyard of his East End London studio was almost invisible amongst the other doors on the street. I rang the bell and was almost surprised when the door opened and I was welcomed in – as you would never know there were life, let alone a studio space beyond.

Sadly Jasper was unavailable for the interview. John Tree, manager and studio designer kindly spoke on his behalf.

We sat at one end of a large table in the brick walled studio and I started by asking John how important it was to be close to their clients.

John outlined they have clients all over the world and in terms of realizing the product it is important to go and speak with the engineer, making sure that what you want is going to come out. You can also immediately deal with any problems they have and resolve them to match your expectations.

I asked John whether he thought Jasper could hypothetically relocate his business to New Zealand.

John thought they would survive because they were quite well established, having offices in London, Paris and Tokyo, with Jasper travelling between them all. “We don’t have a geographical presence to be honest, we are a kind of global operation.”

Although electronic communication to a degree gets around physical meetings, John outlined it is very hard to do without face to face contact, “It kind of helps in a way; it doesn’t replace it.”

I asked John for his view on the importance of the smaller countries outside of Europe in terms of participating in a dialogue. “I’m sure people care, I don’t think

people judge where you come from, they judge what you say.” However the problem he suggested, maybe getting a platform to offer your viewpoint.

John believed if you could break through and get a base, you could move forward. He pointed out that it has taken Jasper twenty or thirty years to get to the level he is at. Originally Jasper met the owner of Magis because they were at a Trade Fair together. They had stands that were across the hallway from each other and after a couple of days Eugenio Perazza approached Jasper saying that he liked his chair and asked him if he would like to design him a bottle rack.

I asked John if Jasper had to work hard developing his profile or whether it happened naturally.

“It grew naturally, Jasper doesn’t like putting himself about a lot, that is why there are not a lot of interviews in magazines. A lot of designers love that side of publicity and being in magazines, Jasper really shuns that a lot. I think in the early days he put up with it more because it was beneficial to the company, but I also think the companies expect you to do it, so if someone wants a new chair in Milan, they would like the designer to be there and talk about it to the press. But he has got a bit older, he doesn’t have to do that as much.”

According to John the relationships with Magis and Vitra are like old friends who enjoy working together. He commented that Jasper is a decent, normal, hard working guy, not full of ego and so it is probably a joy to work with him.

John pointed out that the chemistry that exists between the manufacturer and the designer is really important. When a new client won’t let go enough, sometimes the relationship doesn’t work, John outlined. “That is where Europe is good because there is that history of a culture of understanding, of how a designer can work with a

company.” Vitra and Magis, explained John, know this. “There are a lot of companies that don’t and struggle to know what the designer is really going to do for them and let them do it.”

Generally you work as a team, explained John, with Jasper maybe working on a project with the team in London or Paris and at the same time working with the engineers, sending stuff backwards and forwards, making prototypes and having meetings as a team, until the product is realised.

I pointed out my observation that there was a close community between Jasper Morrison, Konstantin Grcic and other designers. John reasoned that making yourself known to other designers was quite important. He explained that they all know each other, work for the same clients and meet up quite a lot. He outlined that they’ve often recommended and introduced each other to clients. John outlined that Jasper might be working for a client who asks him who else he thinks is good, “Then Jasper can say, there’s this guy called Marc Newson or Konstantin, you should have a look at his stuff.”

John believed that New Zealand designers had the ability to stand out in the minds of manufacturers, “You probably have an advantage because they will remember one guy from New Zealand rather than six hundred from London that have got a chair they’ve designed. He pointed out, “New Zealand has a good brand globally – really you’d expect something nice.”

John commented, “Europe is flooded with designers, the colleges are just churning out more and more and more. It is just incredible; there are way more designers than we need.” He outlined it was very hard and they had to struggle and struggle – with only one or two going on to be successful.

Olivia Putman, Agence Andréé Putman, Interior Designer

Olivia Putman now runs the famous interior design studio in Paris created by her mother Andréé Putman, one of the world's icons of interior design.

When I arrived Olivia was finishing a meeting and I took a seat opposite a dark, human sized monolithic painting. When Olivia welcomed me she had the warmest smile and we moved to a meeting room adorned with awards.

I asked Olivia how important it was to be close to the designers she worked with.

Olivia outlined that when she works she likes to have designers physically close. She explained it was very important to be able to develop an idea on a day-by-day basis and to be able to make changes quickly to your idea. In the studio they have designers from Italy, Germany, England and France and she commented that even if they are all European, each has a different background and this adds to the richness of the design team around her. Olivia outlined they enjoy having discussions about the influences in their childhoods, how they grew up and what led them to be designers.

I asked Olivia how she values meeting face to face.

She explained that when she started in the studio, people were exchanging emails instead of going into one another's office. "I have to go to see the person, I cannot just send an email to the person who is next to me. It is just impossible for me. I need to have a face to face dialogue." She also outlined that this immediacy was necessary when explaining her sketches to the studio team who were to develop them further.

She commented that new technologies like stereo lithography are amazing because you can design something and within four days have it in your hands and be face to face with the object also.

When Olivia imagined working with a designer based in New Zealand, she suggested that the distance would dissipate the relationship. Even in France she commented, more and more people like to work away from the city, in the country and exchange emails. But for Olivia emails are cold, she needs to have a little nest of people around her to exchange ideas.

Olivia's mother, Andréé Putman, had a profile that grew naturally, she explained. Gradually people accepted her ideas, whereas in the beginning people were saying she was wrong. Olivia warned against focussing on being famous – you must have perseverance, trust in what you do and let it happen naturally.

She suggested that New Zealand designers should definitely knock on doors and she finds the thought that New Zealand is about the most distant place from France impressive. Olivia believes doors are opened to people who wish to push them.

I asked Olivia how important design shows were.

Olivia replied that although she doesn't like the ambience of Milan's Salone de Mobile it is an opportunity to meet people you would like to work with and share in a nice moment with them. She outlined that some of these meetings at events have been very important for her.

“It is also very important to go to La Biennale di Venezia which is contemporary art because it will open your eyes, it is important to see a Renoir exhibition, because even if it is not design, it will enrich your mind.”

Conclusion

In the words of Ronan Bouroullec, “You can have a very interesting idea, but if you don’t have a good manufacturer it will never be something interesting in terms of global success. You can have a very good idea but if there is no distribution of it, it’s a problem.”

Most furniture manufacturing takes place in Europe and for designers, it represents an opportunity to form collaborative partnerships. The problem for New Zealand designers lies in the perception of distance and the financial constraints of freight and travel. The advantage may be that our work can naturally demonstrate a unique character as a result of our position at the geographic margins, as long as we clearly understand the context of our European manufacturer partner.

The ability to build relationships with manufacturers at a personal, face to face level appears to be vital. When proposals were emailed to manufacturers with no personal contact and the designer was unknown to the manufacturer, the chance that the design went into production was extremely low.

Some physical presence in Europe appears important on two levels – to establish and maintain relationships, and secondly, to be present for developmental meetings with the manufacturer.

Milan’s Salone del Mobile represents one opportunity to meet people and initiate relationships, although it was rejected as a place to present proposals to manufacturers at their stands.

A common request from manufacturers was that proposals should have a strong conceptual base. Equally important for a designer, is to have a clear position and their own voice in terms of design – one that does not change with every new project.

Proposals need to reflect the mood and values of the manufacturers they are sent to and appreciate the manufacturers context. Proposals with some innovative aspect were noted as a common factor in projects selected for production with Cappellini. Manufacturers outlined that up to ninety-nine percent of the proposals they received looked as though they had been designed for another company. They commented that designers need to step back and ask themselves if the proposal is appropriate for the company that they are sending it to.

Suggesting a concept or idea rather than a finished design could be viewed as a good starting point to develop a project with a manufacturer. It acknowledges that the manufacturer will have certain constraints they wish to apply to the project.

Often at the beginning of an interview I got the feeling that it was going to be impossible to work from New Zealand, but as the conversation concluded, I always felt the door had been opened, just enough to see it was possible.