

INTERNATIONAL  
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## A world of talent goes to London town

By Alice Rawsthorn

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**LONDON:** The metal gates are plastered with handwritten signs suggesting that anyone with a delivery should call this or that cellphone number. Inside the building, the floor is cluttered with bits of broken chairs, and the walls covered with torn-out magazine pages and Post-it notes. A dozen or so bicycles are stacked between the stair rails.

It looks like thousands of other design studios in cities all over the world, and the occupants' accents give few clues as to its location: German, Dutch, Israeli, Spanish, Norwegian, British and Japanese. This particular studio is in London, to be specific in an old piano factory in Stoke Newington, a not-quite-as-gentrified-as-it-would-like-to-be suburb of north London, where nine young product and furniture designers work together as OKAY Studio.

Those designers - Shay Alkalay, Tomás Alonso, Jorre van Ast, Jordi Canudas, Mathias Hahn, Peter Marigold, Oscar Narud, Yael Mer and Hiroko Shiratori - met as students at the Royal College of Art, and formed OKAY after graduating two years ago. "We started talking about sharing a workshop and studio towards the end of our time at college," Alonso said. "It was partly for financial reasons, but also because we wanted to continue working together, bouncing ideas and helping each other."

Mostly they work independently, but occasionally they collaborate, and all of them are now preparing for "Under the Same Roof," an exhibition opening on Sept. 18 at the Aram Gallery in Covent Garden. Curated by Daniel Charny, who taught them at the Royal College and has established Aram as one of the liveliest contemporary design spaces in London, the show features new work by each of the OKAY designers. It is timed to coincide with the London Design Festival, which opens Saturday as the highlight of the city's design year when the industry decamps to London in search of new talent, or so the OKAY team hopes.

"Under the Same Roof" is one of more than 150 festival events. The commercial focus is the 100% Design furniture fair, and satellite shows like Designersblock in Covent Garden and Tent in Spitalfields. The cultural highlights are the opening of "Wouldn't it be nice ...," an exhibition exploring the blurring boundaries of art and design at Somerset House, and "Cold War Modern," the Victoria & Albert Museum's retrospective of postwar design.

London's dozen or so commercial design galleries are set to open exhibitions as a prelude to DesignArt London, the design event to be held during the Frieze Art Fair next month. Gallery Libby Sellers is showing the work of young designers, such as Julia Lohmann and Adrian Rovero, at the department store Liberty, and Established & Sons is unveiling new pieces by the British designer Terence Woodgate. Sustainable design is the theme of the Greengaged debates at the Design Council, and of an exhibition at the Gasworks gallery inspired by the disagreement between the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard and the British design historian Reyner Banham at the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado. You can also watch designers at work. Tom Dixon is to make furniture in an abandoned ballroom in the Brompton Design District, and college students and graduates from Goldsmiths will stage 24-hour design marathons.

The festival comes at a fraught time for London's designers, many of whom have flourished in the last decade but are now braced for recession. The tumbling pound should help exports, but confidence is fading as the British economy weakens. "We would certainly expect some impact," said Tom Campbell, head of creative industries at the London Development Agency. "However, although people are nervous, no one has reported a drop in business yet."

One in eight Londoners, some 550,000 people, works in the creative industries, many in design. The city dominates the British design scene. Manchester and Sheffield are emerging as digital design centers, and there is a lively product design community in Cornwall. (MARK, a company making furniture solely in Cornwall, is to be launched at 100% Design.) But most of the top design schools are in London. They attract gifted students from all over the world. Once they would have had to leave

after graduating, as there are too few British manufacturers to support them, but thanks to digital technology, they can now work in London for clients anywhere in the world.

The OKAY designers are typical. The only Briton among them is Marigold. The others stayed in London after graduating from the Royal College because they wanted to stay, except for Shiratori, who also has a studio in her native Japan. "There's so much going on here that every other city feels like a village in comparison, even Paris and Berlin," said the Israeli-born Alkalay. "Everyone in the design world comes to London, and you really feel that if you do something good, people will notice."

There are other benefits. Cheap flights to other countries (oil prices permitting), a design media that's receptive to young designers and a growing number of commercial design galleries to represent them. Marigold shows with Gallery Libby Sellers, and Established & Sons put one of Alkalay's pieces into production after spotting it at last year's London Design Festival.

So far these positives have compensated for London's negatives and stopped young designers from migrating to cheaper places like Berlin. But the economics of studios like OKAY are increasingly fragile. One problem is the cost of operating in one of the world's most expensive cities. Another is the dearth of cheap property. The OKAY team searched for months before finding an affordable space with a workshop. The recession may ease the property problem, but many of the subcontractors and suppliers used by the OKAY designers have left the city for good. Even their local hardware store is closing.

"One of the great things about London is its size, especially if you come from somewhere smaller," said Canudas. "But you can easily waste half a day traveling from one place to another just to buy wood."

*Correction:*

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