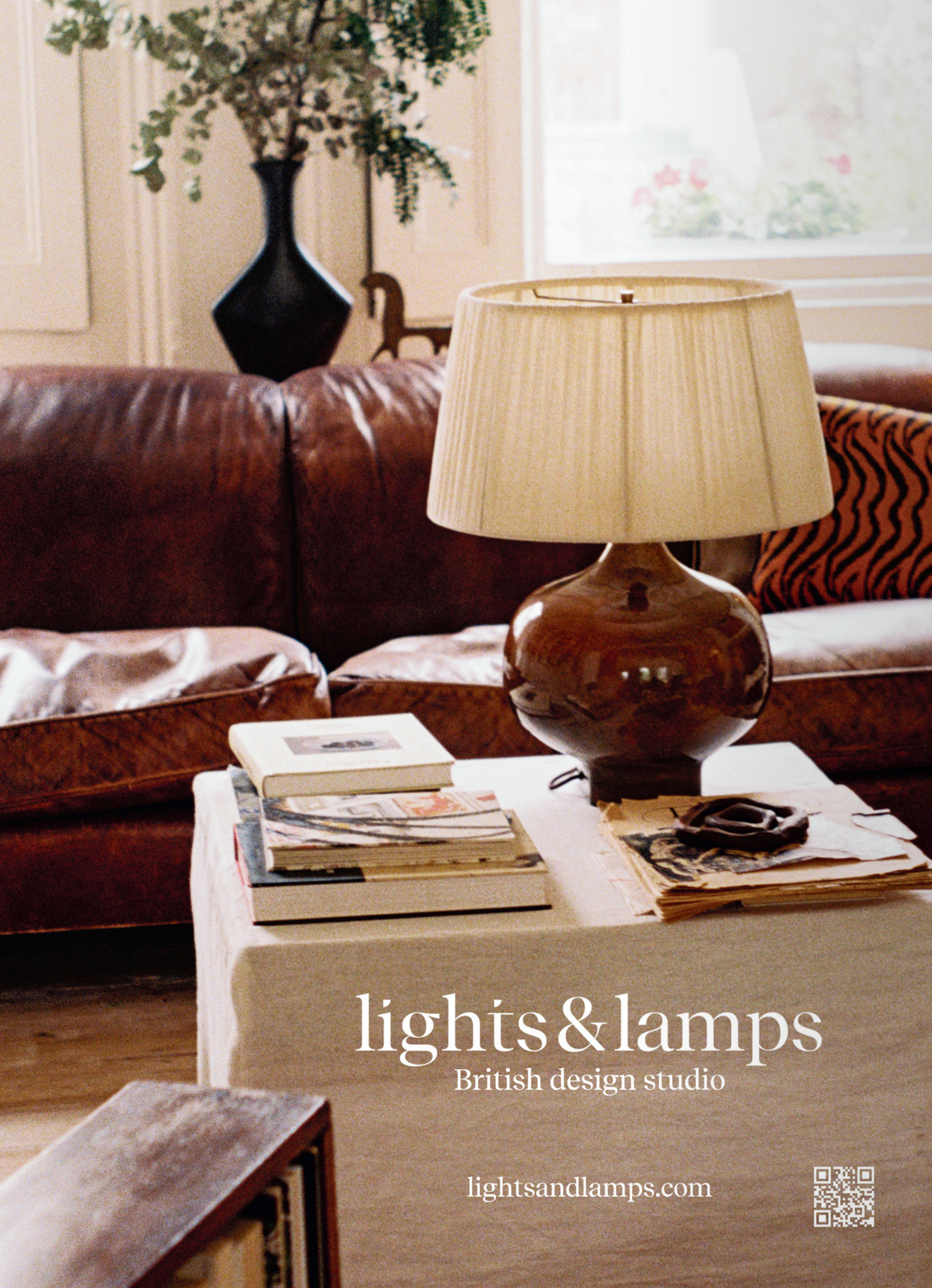


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Your insider
guide to this
year's London
Design Festival

2026



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Editor's letter Magic in the air

Words by Jennifer Hahn

When Lewis Duckworth returned to London in 2022 after studying at the Design Academy Eindhoven, he told me he was shocked to find no design community to speak of – at least not one he felt he could be a part of. “I was like, ‘What’s going on?’” he remembers. “It really felt like there were quite a lot of barriers, and not many spaces and places that I could find to meet people.”

Over the last few years, this picture has started to change dramatically. In this special edition of Dezeen Dispatch, we’ve attempted to chronicle this shift and provide an unofficial guide to the best the city has to offer during London Design Festival (LDF) 2026 (page 20).

The vast majority of established designers and brands might still be saving their launches for more blingy design weeks in Milan or Copenhagen, but a groundswell of young designers is jumping at the chance to show off the things they’ve made in the city they’ve worked so hard to call home (meet some of them and hear their London survival stories on pages 8 to 12).

Sick of waiting for someone else to give them space or opportunities, this new generation is doing what designers do best – doing it themselves. They’re setting aside time from their design work (not to mention the part-time jobs they do to fund that work) to set up their own galleries and exhibition platforms, such as Duckworth’s Design Everything (page 6).

All over London, but especially in the Hackney hinterlands, third spaces like Allotment and Unit.d are sprouting up to give the community a chance to meet, mesh and drink together outside of the intermittent design week calendar. “There is loads to be really positive about right now, and I’m just amazed at where we’re at,” Unit.d founder Duncan Riches tells Dezeen’s Cajsa Carlson in an interview on the unlikely resurgence of Shoreditch as a design district (page 26). One can only hope it will go hand in hand with the demise of ball-pit bar Ballie Ballerson.

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Then, of course, there is the ascendance of London Craft Week in May, which is giving LDF a run for its money. On page 15, we investigate whether craft has finally conquered design, or if it’s all just marketing. And journalist Alice Fisher makes a case for exhibitions that actually let us touch the designs on show, spurred on, in part, by a story about someone defecating in a department store display toilet (bear with her and withhold your judgement until page 29).

Completing this publication while being slowly boiled alive, we would be remiss not to discuss the new realities of living on the world’s fastest-heating continent. On page 33, the winner of LDF’s 2026 Design Innovation Medal, more-than-human design pioneer Anab Jain of Superflux, tells us how design can still be used to “imagine, will, prototype” alternative futures into existence – even if that future might not involve 24/7 running water.

Finally, in an exclusive Q&A with our very own Sadiq Khan (page 38), the mayor shares his thoughts on the city’s design scene and why, despite all the challenges of the past decade, London will always be a little bit magic.

To stay up to date with LDF as it happens, you know where to go.
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We are so back

After almost
a decade
of doom
and gloom,
London's
design scene
is back
on the up

Overleaf, we profile some of the
spaces and faces behind the resurgence.

Making it as a creative in such a
demanding city is never easy, of course –
so we also asked designers to share a
look behind the curtain at what it takes
to keep the dream alive.



The galleries

Words by Jennifer Hahn

A clutch of young design galleries and community-led platforms are injecting renewed energy into the London scene. Below, we profile five that you should know about.

Slancha

The Scottish export: Slancha was born in 2022 to address the lack of spaces for emerging designers in Scotland, including founders Harvey Everson and Findlay MacDonald, to show and sell their work. With the young Scottish design scene finally gathering steam thanks to platforms such as theirs, the duo has moved down south, aiming to bring underrepresented talent from across Britain and Northern Ireland to London's global stage. "We want to cover as much of the UK as possible," explains Everson.

After making its LDF debut in 2025, Slancha returns this year with not one but three different shows: two at The Hoxton hotel and another at concept store Awaykin. Online and at The Hoxton and Awaykin for LDF (see page 23)



Slancha founders Harvey Everson and Findlay MacDonald. Photo by Craig McIntosh

Design Everything

The collective: After being quoted £900 per square metre to show in an emerging design show at LDF 2024, London designer Lewis Duckworth decided to throw his own.

Joined by Tabatha Pearce Chedier, Jacob Marks, Eleanor Murphy and Sammi Cherryman, the effort to organise these free shows quickly turned collective. "We're all kind of co-parenting Design Everything," jokes Duckworth.

Following the guerrilla exhibition they hosted out of the back of a van in 2025, their annual presentation has gone mainstream this year with a zero-fee, open-call show at design shop Aram, featuring work from no fewer than 100 designers. Outside of LDF, the collective also runs regular meet-ups and has turned its website into an emerging designer directory to keep the community alive throughout the year. Online and at Aram for LDF (see page 21)



Design Everything's show at LDF25

Allotment

The incubator: The brains behind birdwatching collective Flock Together,

Ollie Olanipekun, turned the ground floor of his Haggerston office into an experimental gallery last year. Allotment gives local designers, artists and recent graduates a place to exhibit for free before taking it to commercial galleries. "We're very much an incubator space," says Olanipekun. Unit 8 Ability Plaza, Arbutus Street, E8 4DT



Ollie Olanipekun and his team at Allotment

Max Radford Gallery

The next-gen blue chip: At its new HQ on Vyner Street, Max Radford Gallery is representing some of

the buzziest names in London's collectible design scene: Andu Masebo, Lewis Kemmenoe, Tessa Silva. From the get-go in 2020, its mission was to fill the gap left by established galleries reluctant to take a bet on a new generation of talent.

Six years on, the gallery faces a juggling act of continuing to push its roster of rising stars to new heights while also lifting up new voices. "It's about balance," says founder Max Radford, "because you don't want to become one of the blue chips where you just work with a stable of five people for the next 20 years." 25 Vyner Street, E2 9DG, and at Christopher Farr for LDF (see page 22)



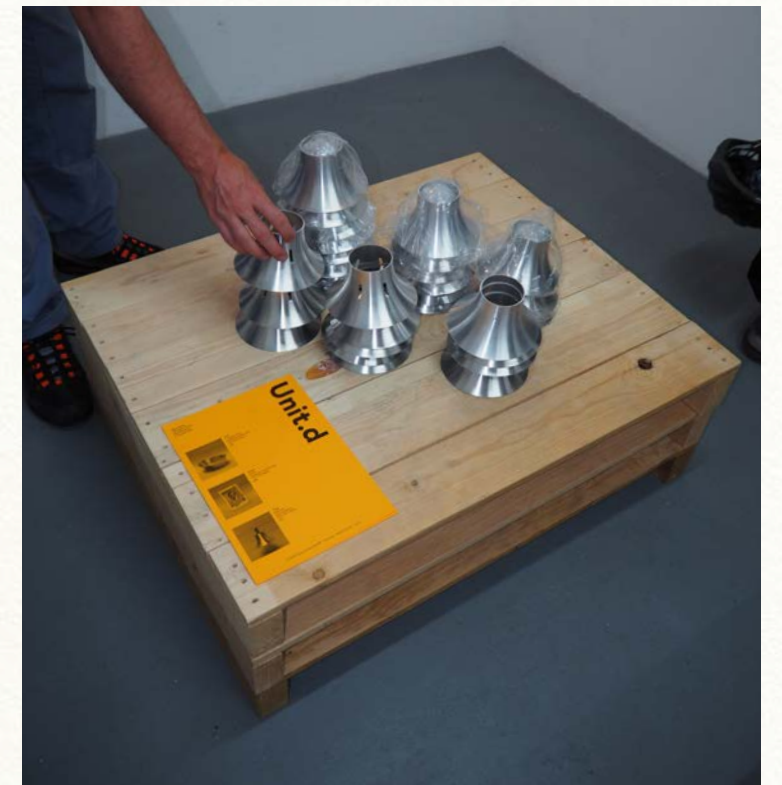
Max Radford Gallery's new Vyner Street HQ. Photo by Will Edgecombe

Unit.d

The actually affordable one:

Although it's been less than six months since Unit.d opened in a glorified garage near Haggerston station, the gallery has quietly revolutionised London's design scene. Counter to the collectible design hegemony, its speciality lies in well-made, mass-produced everyday objects: wall hooks, bottle openers etc. Despite being made by the likes of Jasper Morrison, Michael Marriott and Alexandra Gerber, the pieces are universally affordable, with most retailing for under £50.

Unit.d's monthly shows have also offered the community a much-needed chance to congregate regularly, likened by some to a "church service affair" – but with beer (more on that later). Unit.d isn't showing at LDF this year, although founder Duncan Riches already has plans to take the gallery to Milan for next year's Salone del Mobile. 4 Frederick Terrace, E8 4EW, and online



Alexandra Gerber's show at Unit.d

Rising talent

Words by Jane Englefield

London's bursting with emerging designers casting off convention and doing things their way. Here are six names to have on your radar.

Tessa Silva

The stitcher: Tessa Silva started her career crafting vases from a clay-like material made from waste skimmed milk and chalk, which she developed over three years and fed through a sausage stuffer to create distinctive lumpy vessels. Asymmetric, swollen forms have been something of a throughline in Silva's constantly expanding portfolio ever since.

Her current focus is Smock, an ongoing project that involves smocking metres of fabric by hand to create intricately upholstered furniture pieces. The collection includes a lounge chair made from hand-stitched horsehair and coconut fibres, which caused a stir when it appeared in the Max Radford Gallery presentation at this year's Collect show at Somerset House. Silva is once again collaborating with the gallery during LDF as a contributor to its Progressive Permanence exhibition, which is taking place at the Christopher Farr showroom in Shoreditch.



Tessa Silva smocking textiles to create furniture. *Photo by Kane Hulse*

Mitre & Mondays

The materials geeks: Mitre & Mondays is the brainchild of Freya Bolton, Josef Shanley-Jackson and Finn Thomson, a trio on a simple mission to connect people to the material world around them. Founded in 2019, the UK's answer to Formafantasma aims to investigate the broader implications of design, as well as the social and environmental impact of its production.

Mitre & Mondays sees design for disassembly at the centre of its practice, and for LDF has reconstructed its popular Wood for the Trees exhibition at the Shoreditch Tab Centre. The studio is also responsible for the scenography of the Design Museum's new Mineral exhibition, made entirely from "reusable, reconfigurable or borrowed" materials – mostly stone offcuts from a Lincolnshire quarry.



Josef Shanley-Jackson, Freya Bolton and Finn Thomson of Mitre & Mondays. *Photo by Petr Krejčí*

Georgia Merritt

The trompe l'œil painter:

After finishing her degree in fine art at Goldsmiths in 2020 and struggling to find work, Georgia Merritt completed a gilding apprenticeship – an experience that armed her with a knack for the most granular of painting techniques. As a designer, Merritt draws on this experience to create trompe l'œil faux marble furniture made of fibreboard, which she hand-paints and glazes to look like smooth, veiny stone.

The strength of Merritt's technique lies in her ability to use a more sustainable, low-cost wood-based product instead of actual stone, while maintaining a beautifully realistic marbled finish.



Faux marble steps by Georgia Merritt



Faux marble table by Georgia Merritt. *Photo courtesy of Max Radford Gallery*

Ralph Parks

The self-taught carpenter: Ralph Parks has described the smoothed ashwood composition of his Rhine by Night standing cabinet as reminiscent of something fossilised or aged underwater over decades. This poetic approach is typical of the designer, a self-taught carpenter with a penchant for inverting historic and religious motifs in his alternative timber pieces, including a curved armchair inspired by a Romanesque church.

Parks recently found an abandoned piece of unidentified wood and chipped away at it until he had produced a wall-mounted shelf with the undulating quality of an untreated tree branch, which was designed to hold keys or trinkets. His curiosity about what can be done with discarded timber shows no sign of slowing down.



The Rhine by Night standing cabinet and chair by Ralph Parks. *Photo by George Baggaley*



Wall-mounted timber shelf by Ralph Parks

Lewis Kemmenoe

The hardcore patchworker:

Countless pieces of timber furniture have flooded the design world in recent years, but few craftspeople have managed to put such an instantly recognisable stamp on their creations as Lewis Kemmenoe.

The designer painstakingly collages slabs of wood together to achieve beautifully patchworked pieces, from neatly formed chairs to layered cabinets and bookshelves. He also applies the technique to metals including copper and aluminium, creating similar pieces of furniture that bear his quilt-like design language.



Lewis Kemmenoe and his patchwork timber furniture. *Photo by Will Edgecombe*

Barnaby Lewis

The blacksmith: Barnaby Lewis earned his stripes as a carpenter before realising he was far more drawn to working with steel. His back catalogue of collectible design has ranged from a gothic-style desk with spindly legs to room dividers adorned with abstract figures, moons and stars.

At this year's LDF, Lewis is presenting work in Brompton Design District as part of the second-ever Studio Iron show, the interdisciplinary design gallery set up by artist Isamaya Ffrench. When he's not conceiving intricate furniture, the blacksmith can be found patching up cars or solving whatever local steel-based puzzles he can get his hands on.

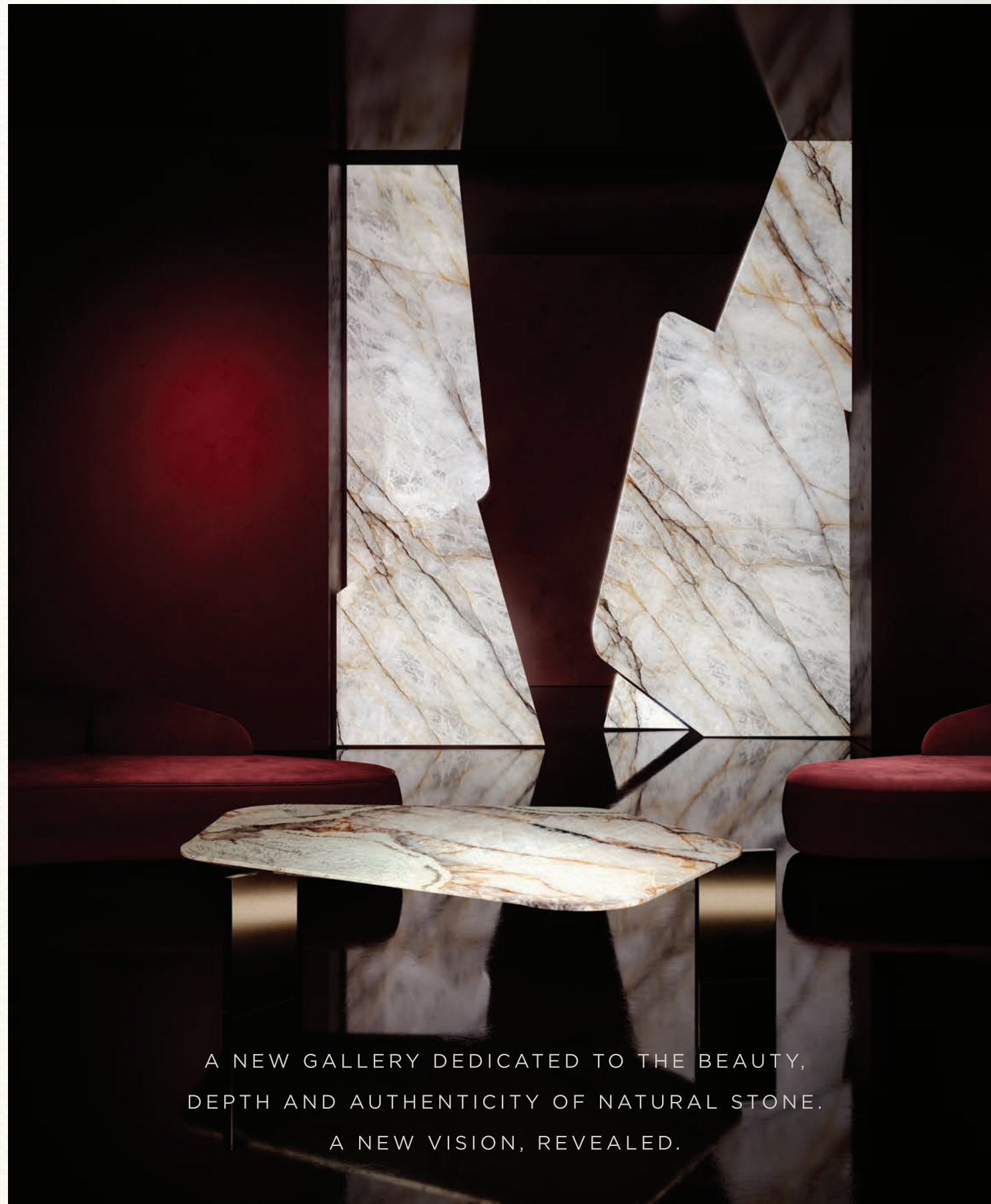


Decorative room divider by Barnaby Lewis



Gothic-style desk by Barnaby Lewis. *Photo by Studio Adamson courtesy of APOC*

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Making it work

Interviews by Amy Peacock

London may have a lot to shout about design-wise, but is it actually possible to survive as a creative in one of the world's most expensive cities? We spoke to five local designers about the challenges they face making ends meet.



Tessa Silva, staying hopeful.
Photo by Kane Hulse

“I’m willing to live very modestly”

Tessa Silva: “Financially, I’ve had the toughest start to the year that I’ve had in the 10 years since graduating. I was teaching and assisting another artist before, I had my finger in a couple of other pies, but I let it all fall by the wayside. I suddenly found myself in a position where I didn’t have anything to fall back on. It’s taught me I have to keep connections with people and let them know I can still work for them, even if it seems like I have a big commission.

“Any time I do make money, I put it back into making new things in my studio. I’m willing to live very modestly, and hopefully that pays off one day. I don’t buy new clothes or go out for dinner a lot; I make my own packed lunches. I live in a small flat that I’ve made beautiful – that’s just part of choosing to live in London.

“A good currency for designers is doing swaps with people. I’ve gotten a photographer to photograph my work because I’ve given them a piece of my furniture, or I’ve got some nice jewellery because I’ve swapped it for work. It’s a way of owning a few precious things when you can’t afford to pay upfront for them.

“Even though this year has been really hard, I’ve been getting a few bites this summer that are making me excited and make me think this could be something long term and sustainable for the future, which is a really nice feeling.”

Tessa Silva is exhibiting at Max Radford Gallery’s Progressive Permanence (see page 22)

“You find nifty ways of transporting wood when you’re going on a bike everywhere”

Jake Robertson:

“Work for a designer who’s got plenty of work for you to do, and they might be keen for you to use their workshop in your spare time – that’s what James Shaw has done for me. I had to get inventive and learn how to make stuff that can fold up, disappear, and slip into the cracks of the workshop so

I’m not taking up someone’s space. It does mean you’ve got to graft outside of work and on the weekend, but it gave me access to great machinery.

“A great place to go for cheap offcut materials is Renée Materials. You’ll find stuff there that you would never think could make furniture. I cycle – I’m not paying for transport, I can’t do it – but you find nifty ways of transporting wood when you’re going on a bike everywhere.

“I don’t really make money from my practice. I’ve sold a couple of things, but it’s not a money-making business. Hopefully one day I can get there, but that’s a reason I would suggest people work part-time or full-time for a designer. I don’t have to keep pumping my own work out. I also need a job that pays the rent. I can make good work and keep putting those things out – I don’t need to dilute my Instagram by constantly putting stuff out for likes when that doesn’t equal more sales.” Jake Robertson is exhibiting at Out of Worky and Design Everything’s With Limitations (see pages 21 and 23)



Jake Robertson at his workstation.
Photo courtesy of Slancha

“My hack is trying to overcome my feeling of cringe”

Hannah Fastrich: “There are a lot of challenges in London, but it’s a super-rich environment, and what’s most important to me is my community. I have friends from uni or group exhibitions that are also designers, and we support each other. I work on ceramics and metal in my

workshop, and sometimes I want to do some wood or something else, which a friend can give me access to. There’s a beautiful sharing economy in my community – there’s no gatekeeping.

“I always intensely apply to open calls, prizes and grants. I get loads of rejections, but every once in a while you get a yes. In the beginning, it felt cringe to reach out to people or send an email with my portfolio to a gallery, so my hack is trying to overcome my feeling of cringe and not to think about the worst possible outcome. Someone could say no and reject you, but that’s not a horrible outcome, it’s just a numbers game in the end.” Hannah Fastrich is exhibiting at Slancha’s Hanging Baskets (see page 23)



Hannah Fastrich in her studio.
Photo by Jasper Jones



Marc Sweeney in his family boatyard.
Photo courtesy of Slancha

“It’s more valuable to have relationships with expert makers”

Marc Sweeney:

“After I graduated in London, I moved back to Scotland and quickly discovered that I wasn’t part of any design community. I may as well have been making work on the moon – there’s just no point doing it if nobody’s engaging with you.

“I am wrestling with the balance of being in London to network and work freelance, and I’m going to be teaching at Instituto Marangoni, then coming up to Scotland to make things. My family runs a passenger boat business on Loch Lomond, so we’ve got unbelievable workshop facilities. The long-term plan is to have a space in London, but it is eye-wateringly expensive – almost pretty much unaffordable for a single emerging designer.

“I’m a hands-on maker, but my work’s got to a point where I need the help of experts. I’m outsourcing some work, or certain stages of my work. It’s more valuable to have relationships with expert makers, which there are loads of in London, than it is to have your own space with machinery and you’re trying to do absolutely everything yourself.” Marc Sweeney is exhibiting at Slancha’s Hanging Baskets (see page 23) •

“I turned to using waste materials as a necessity”

ThisIsByron:

“My biggest overhead is material costs. That’s how I turned to using waste materials – as a necessity. I then looked at what I could find within London and made a patchwork series with hardwood

offcuts I found from various studios.

“I currently have a part-time job at the Royal Academy Schools as a workshop tutor. It’s important I earn a wage that supports London living but also pays back into my studio.

“London is tricky, but it’s also a bit of magic. Unit.d in Haggerston is like a church service affair where designers descend each month to hang out and share ideas – this only exists because of living in the city.” ThisIsByron is curating We Lift Each Other (see page 24)



ThisIsByron in the workshop

22 Parkside is where Richard+Su Rogers tested ideas that would go on to change architecture. Built as an experiment in new ways of living, this pioneering steel-and-glass house introduced concepts that later influenced some of the world’s most celebrated buildings.

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Steelcase's redesigned WorkLife Studio shows how "thoughtful design can enhance wellbeing"

Furniture manufacturer Steelcase has unveiled its renewed WorkLife Studio space in London, which was designed to bring both people and design expertise together.

The studio, located in London's vibrant Clerkenwell neighbourhood, aims to showcase the brand's latest workplace research and design solutions in an inspiring physical space. Organic materials, including wood, were chosen to create a warm, welcoming interior, which is completed by a soft colour palette and plenty of green plants.

Steelcase said the redesigned space now reflects the changing needs of today's workplace,

which has been affected by increased screen time, shorter attention span, the rise of AI and a growing crisis in wellbeing.

With WorkLife Studio, Steelcase aimed to create a space where people could connect with each other and collaborate creatively.

"Visitors will discover seven interconnected zones, including collaborative neighbourhoods, technology-enabled meeting spaces, a co-design studio, a WorkCafé and flexible event areas," says Steelcase workplace strategy and design lead consultant Anisha Patel.

"The new space provides an opportunity to exchange ideas, discover the research and insights shaping the future of work, and experience first-hand how thoughtful design can enhance wellbeing, collaboration and performance."

Steelcase undertook extensive research and held design workshops to be able to tailor the WorkLife Studio to suit a range of styles and a variety of work preferences. It now has focus areas for privacy and deep work, as well as collaborative spaces designed to encourage teamwork and a sense of belonging.

According to the brand, the aim is for the space to become a "living laboratory" where it can test new workplace and design concepts and share insights with customers.

Visitors to Steelcase's WorkLife Studio in Clerkenwell, which is now open, can collaborate with the brand's experts and see its products in action, as well as interact with a larger community of creators and designers.

Drop into Steelcase's Worklife Studio at 77-79 Farringdon Road, EC1M 3JU •

Feature

How craft conquered design

Words by Debika Ray

'Handmade', 'heritage', 'bespoke' – most of us are used to reading these words by now. Just like the food industry before it, the world of design has internalised the language of craft – that of the 'local', 'artisanal' and 'authentic'.

At LDF this year, exhibitions of craft abound. These range from Reviving Craft at Somerset House, a show of more than 60 artisans from China curated by Beijing-based media entrepreneur Yang Lan to "create a dialogue between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary design", to Wood for the Trees at the Tab Centre in Shoreditch, an "abstracted woodland" in which to contemplate responsible forestry, designed by London-based Mitre & Mondays for the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC).

From Milan to Copenhagen, it's the same story: where once objects on display were proudly modernist, minimalist, sleek and uniform, they are now just as likely to be textured and imperfect. The growing status of collectible design is part of the same movement – the desire for unique objects met by the inherent unpredictability of the human hand.

Pavel Klimczak, founder of design retailer Monologue London, has noticed this desire in the questions his customers now ask him. "People are becoming much more curious about the stories behind objects," he says. "They often come for the design, but quickly the conversation turns to them asking where a piece was made, who made it, how it was made, why it was designed that way and the material used."

Craft was once dowdy. Now it's cool. And industrial design – that 20th-century emblem of democratised mass production, functional innovation and accessible beauty – has, whether fairly or unfairly, somewhat lost its sheen.

What underlying social and economic tensions does this shift reveal? And, beyond face value, is the line between 'craft' and 'design' especially meaningful in the first place?

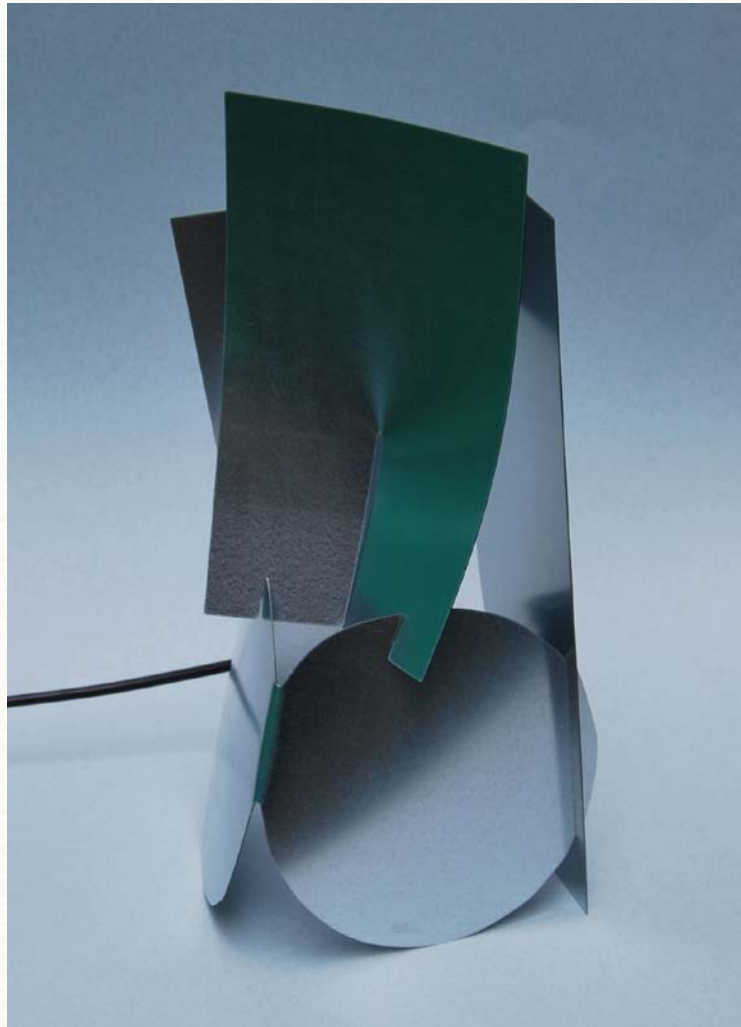


Symbiosis of Chrysanthemums II by Huang Lu, on show at Reviving Craft. *Photo courtesy of Reviving Craft*



Monologue London's showroom on Portman Square. *Photo by AXIIS Studio*

The growing interest in craft is often attributed to our modern condition: the frictionless and ephemeral nature of our daily interactions, the cold dead pieces of technology we're continuously pawing, the deceptive nature of digital content, and the stylistic uniformity imposed over decades by globalised mass production and online connectivity. In that context, it's no surprise we're drawn to unique objects that carry traces of human intention, are made of materials we recognise and are connected to a time, person and place.



A4 Lamp handmade by Andu Masebo.
Photo courtesy of Unit.d



Peaches chair by Lara Bohinc, also handmade.
Photo by Rebecca Reid

A greater interest in the local, in heritage and in the vernacular also tracks with the current political mood: the simultaneous return, globally, of traditional values and a growing focus on cultures that have long been marginalised by modernisation and globalisation.

London Craft Week founder Guy Salter is convinced that our renewed interest in craft is here to stay. “It’s not going anywhere soon, as it’s built on solid foundations – on more than just fashionability,” he says. “We’re rediscovering [things about quality of workmanship] that our forefathers knew for hundreds of years. And whenever I travel, I meet people who aren’t attracted by the glossiness of luxury brands, but instead feel pleased to be supporting craft on a community basis.”

Drawing on this interest, London Craft Week now attracts about 250,000 visitors every year – up from about 35,000 a decade ago – which compares robustly to LDF’s 475,000 in 2025. This year, in a boost for its credentials, fashion designer Jonathan Anderson – who set up the €50,000 Loewe Craft Prize while creative director of the Spanish luxury house – came on board as a sponsor via his own brand, JW Anderson.

Alberto Merlo Carrero, Loewe Foundation’s head of programmes, says the founding of the prize in 2016 was a recognition that contemporary craft was on the ascent. “Extraordinary work was already happening around the world, yet the field remained relatively fragmented and often underrepresented within the broader cultural conversation,” he says. Fashion brands from Hermès to Gucci now more often than not tend to showcase craft in their increasingly visible presence at design weeks.

Fostering a healthy craft ecosystem requires long-term commitment, which – more broadly – hasn’t always been evident. Salter says the expansion and corporatisation of the luxury sector in recent years has shaken up a business model that a century ago was mostly based on “a small number of customers buying or commissioning from what were often family-owned luxury shops”.

In the process of trying to attract a mass audience, he explains, money was channelled into marketing via flagship stores and advertising, with craft often taking a hit – the in-house artisan replaced by outsourced production, for example. “Now, a number of brands have realised what was lost during that period, especially during the recent downturn, and are trying to retrofit it.”

Against that backdrop, Salter says, craft has become a marker of quality and trustworthiness. He adds that, while initially those new “aspirational customers” they were after took brands at their word, today’s buyers are more

“For designers, for example, the move to making is often driven by a fragile job market in which brands favour existing names over investing in new work”

discerning, and trust companies with a track record of standing by their values.

In contrast, industrial design is facing a “difficult predicament” as people increasingly question the ethics and purpose of mass production, according to London-based designer Lara Bohinc, who has collaborated

with brands for decades and recently started working with clay. “We’re drowning in products. There are too many brands, too many chairs, too many beds,” she says. Meanwhile, cheaper design is often associated with bad labour practices, unsustainable processes or toxic materials, factors that are often ignored because these products are what most people can afford.

Calling something craft and charging a lot for it doesn’t necessarily change the ethics behind an object, though. Between 2023 and 2026, luxury fashion brands, including Armani, Dior and Valentino, were placed under court monitoring in Italy after investigations found they had outsourced production to illegal workshops where undocumented migrants were working under exploitative conditions on supposedly artisanal products. “Just because it’s handmade doesn’t mean it’s angelic,” Bohinc points out.

Andu Masebo, a London designer who creates functional objects and art pieces in wood and metal, says he never had a “romantic notion” around craft – rather, he started making his designs simply because of the difficulty of finding



Sotheby’s fair at London Craft Week 2026.
Photo by Rayan Bamhayan courtesy of Sotheby’s

a company willing to produce them for him. He points out that the rise of craft isn’t only a story about what consumers want, but also of what the industry is producing.

For designers, for example, the move to making is often driven by a fragile job market in which brands favour existing names over investing in new work, leaving emerging designers with few options but to produce things themselves. “I feel like there could be a more positive conversation around how we create conditions that allow people to work in design and not just in the gallery space, and a concerted effort by the industry to reach out to emerging talent, not just as a marketing tool but as a way of supporting the future design pool,” he says.

While craft may be in vogue, Masebo has observed that making itself doesn’t necessarily offer a more sustainable livelihood than working for a design company. “Few of my peers are making money exclusively from selling objects and furniture they’ve made,” he says. Instead, they use it to “express the highest version of their practice”, while generating an income for themselves by diffusing that into a range of other related and unrelated sources, from social media to part-time jobs to commissions.

As Bohinc and Masebo highlight, categories such as craft and design may be useful from a marketing perspective, but underlying both are similar dynamics and challenges about quality, labour, employment and environmental impact that the sector cannot escape simply by changing how it describes work.

These extractive practices are among the subjects Nigerian-American designer Zoë Chinonso Ene is striving to address through her research and experiment-driven studio Homenkà. In reality, she argues, craft and design aren’t



Nchọ by Homenkà, showing at LDF 2026.
Photo by Christian Cassiel



Bamboo baskets with hand-blown glass made by Dima Srouji for a Gucci exhibition at Milan design week 2025.
Photo by George Baggaley

mutually exclusive categories, and the way we use those terms reveals underlying hierarchies in the value we place on different cultures of production – often based on aesthetic cues such as particular motifs, materials and styles. “For example, with everyday objects from Igbo culture, I can see the decisions that were made to create object typologies for specific uses,” says Ene, questioning why these are called craft rather than design.

For LDF, Homenkà is creating an intervention as part of Brompton Design District – a parlour that will host evenings of play, eating, conversation and remembering “in the company of everyday design”. Its broader focus is on supporting craft ecosystems in Nigeria. In envisioning these, Ene isn’t a purist about the separation between hand and machine. “It may mean artisans working in a semi-industrialised space where they do 50 per cent, not 100 per cent, by hand, to speed it up while creating a fantastic product whose materials are sourced locally and gaining and exchanging skills,” she says.

London designer Bethan Laura Wood has always straddled both worlds. She recalls that during her student days “craft was a dirty word in relation to design” – certainly not the case today. For LDF, she is showing work as part of Craft x Tech, an exhibition by design studio Tangent that brings artisans from the Tōkai region of Japan together with international designers – in her case, to create folded hanging lamps made with shibori tie-dyeing company Suzusan.

Wood points out that public interest is like a pendulum – shifting from minimalism to maximalism, machine production to craft making – even as all these things continue to exist all at once. The reactionary resurgence of craft is also not a new thing – think of the Arts and Crafts movement emerging in response to the industrial revolution, she adds.

That’s not to dismiss the significance of what’s happening now: waves of fashion can leave behind more substantive and meaningful change. “When industry started to pay more attention to recyclability or circular design, some companies just flirted with those ideas to tick boxes, but others adopted it into their systems in a long-term way,” says Wood.

Similarly, beautifully produced videos revealing the process behind objects – the metal spinning, the turning pots, the scraping of lathes – probably won’t dominate social media algorithms forever. But what might persist is a deeper concern among all of us about the provenance of the things we buy and a relationship between makers and designers that rewards both sides equally. •

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Event highlights

Our roundup of must-see exhibitions, installations and events across the city during LDF

Compiled by Gabriella Wong

The Art of Sound at Wapping Hydraulic Power Station

11 to 15 September. 25 Wapping Wall, E1W 3SF. The historic Wapping Hydraulic Power Station is opening its doors to the public for the first time in 13 years to host an immersive sound experience. French manufacturer L-Acoustics has created a system of 12 speakers especially for the venue, filling the halls of the 1890 industrial icon with a sound installation from computational biologist Max Cooper, as well as an auditory journey down the Humber estuary courtesy of award-winning sound recordist Chris Watson.



Isamaya Ffrench runs Studio Iron. Photo by Hans Neumann

Awakenings at the V&A

12 September to 18 October. Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, SW7 2RL. Artificial intelligence takes centre stage at the V&A. As part of this year's Emerging Design Commission, Playfool presents a game reflecting on human labour in the age of AI, while an installation from Nina Davies examines how human bodies are starting to mimic AI-generated movement. Taking a more positive view is Aziza Kaydri's Sender Unknown, which combines Uzbek embroidery techniques with a bespoke AI model. Similar themes are explored at Craft x Tech, which pairs Japanese craftspeople with international designers to reinterpret traditional techniques through contemporary design, with this year's cohort including Philippe Malouin and Bethan Laura Wood.



Bethan Laura Wood at the V&A. Photo by Masayuki Hayashi

Studio Iron exhibition by Isamaya Ffrench

12 to 20 September. The Lavery, 4 Cromwell Place, SW7 2JE. Fresh from its debut exhibition at Saatchi Yates, makeup artist and creative director Isamaya Ffrench's design gallery Studio Iron presents a new group exhibition as part of the Brompton Design District. The show features sculptural furniture and collectible design from a melting pot of independent makers, including Iranian-American furnituremaker Kouros Maghsoud, Dutch designer Paul Coenen and interior designer Kelly Wearstler.

The Pangolin Shield installation by Studio Saar and Atelier One

12 to 20 September. Strand Aldwych, WC2R 1ES. Architecture practice Studio Saar and engineering firm Atelier One have collaborated on this year's Landmark Project – a bamboo pavilion inspired by the world's most trafficked mammal, the pangolin. Clad in traditional Indian bamboo police shields and palm-leaf rain covers known as knups, the installation transforms symbols of authority into a communal space for reflection while examining colonial legacies and ecological exploitation.

SCP showroom opening

12 to 19 September. SCP, 16 Clerkenwell Green, EC1R 0QT. Furniture brand SCP celebrates its move from Shoreditch to Clerkenwell with a programme of launches and events across its new five-storey townhouse, with interiors by Nice Projects. On show is a collection of ceramic vases by Martino Gamper and Italian manufacturer Bitossi Ceramiche, a new lighting collection by Manhattan studio Blue Green Works and the UK launch of Italian brand Very Simple: Kitchen.

Bethan Laura Wood for Bocci

12 to 20 September. 15 Bateman Street, W1D 4AQ. Designer Bethan Laura Wood joins forces with Bocci to create a maze-like installation, informed by the cult 1986 film Labyrinth starring David Bowie.

Set in a Soho pop-up, it was designed to mark the launch of a purple edition of the brand's 14p lamps, which Wood has dubbed "Bowie Balls". The installation features striking arrangements of the spherical lights, perched atop colourful totems informed by the film's elaborate, labyrinthine architecture and the designer's own vivid style.



Jake Robertson is showing with Design Everything

Village Meeting group show by All Ears

16 to 20 September. All Ears, Hackney Downs Studios, 17 Amhurst Terrace, E8 2BT. A number of practices are opening up their workshops in Hackney Downs Studios as part of LDF. Rather than just spotlighting its own work, East London duo All Ears is hosting Village Meeting – a group show of more than 30 makers from London's emerging collectible design scene. Look out for works from Milan design week standouts Jane Wright and Jesse Butterfield, ashtray connoisseur Amelia Stevens and Andu Masebo (fresh off the heels of his IKEA collaboration) as well as the show's curator Demi Oyeyinka.

Material Matters fair

15 to 17 September. Unlocked Shoreditch, 118 Curtain Road, EC2A 3PJ. London's materials fair has found a new home in Shoreditch for its fifth edition, bringing together more than 50 exhibitors showcasing natural, reclaimed and newly developed materials. Among the highlights: furniture crafted using salvaged oak from a brutalist building in Holborn courtesy of design studio Prima Materia, bacteria-grown tiles inspired by coral from biotech company Biomason and a 3D-printed ceramic



SCP debuts Very Simple: Kitchen. Photo by Matteo Bianchessi

facade system designed to integrate wildlife habitats into buildings by design studio Phyta Biodesign.



Prima Materia at Material Matters. Photo by Tom Carter

Design Everything exhibition at Aram

11 September to 10 October. 110 Drury Lane, WC2B 5SG. Non-profit collective Design Everything hopes to visualise the many barriers faced by independent creatives in London with its show at Aram. The shop's downstairs gallery has been transformed into the typical flat of a young designer, populated exclusively with objects made by 102 emerging practitioners. Selected via an open call that received more than 500 responses, each piece was created in response to a limitation – space, time, budget, access. Design Everything hopes that the free-to-exhibit show will serve as an "important point of reflection on the current state of the industry" while also celebrating designers' indelible ability to turn restrictions into a source of inspiration.

Max Radford Gallery at Christopher Farr

15 to 20 September. Christopher Farr Shoreditch, 18 Calvin Street, E1 6HF. London's buzziest collectible design gallery (meet them on page 7) has taken over Christopher Farr's Shoreditch showroom, with an exhibition pairing contemporary

furniture and archival rugs. It features works by London designers LS Goma and Tessa Silva (pages 8 and 11) that have never actually been shown in their home town before, alongside pieces from rising German star Carsten in der Elst.



Max Radford Gallery has teamed up with Christopher Farr. *Photo by Ed Rollitt*

The Lavery at Cromwell Place

12 to 20 September. The Lavery, 4 Cromwell Place, SW7 2JE. The Lavery is once again hosting a packed programme, in which district curator Alex Tieghi-Walker introduces us to international names to know alongside homegrown talent. New York creative director Beverly Nguyen shares an exhibition of Vietnamese domestic objects, while Nigerian-American designer Zoë Ene has reimagined one of the rooms as a parlour for playing the strategy game Ncho. Mexican designer Rafael Prieto takes over The Lavery's dining room with sculptural chairs inspired by positions of the sun. And in nearby Cromwell Mews, furnituremaker Byron Pritchard showcases furniture informed by research into medieval woodworking at the V&A.



Beverly Nguyen is showing at The Lavery. *Photo by Sean Davidson*

Past Made Present at Ham House

12 to 20 September. Ham House and Garden, Ham Street, TW10 7RS. Richmond's 17th-century Ham House provides a dramatic backdrop for this exhibition from graduates of Kingston University's MA Product and Furniture Design programme. The show offers visitors new ways of engaging with the history, interiors and gardens of the property. Highlights include a contemporary throne exploring colonial histories through reinterpreted Dutch marquetry, Coade stone objects that act as viewfinders for forgotten architectural details and a speaker cabinet inspired by the house's Japanese lacquer cabinets and modern listening bar culture.



Béton Brut reimagines Marcel Breuer in masur birch. *Photo by Gareth Hacker*

The Masur Edition launch by Béton Brut for Isokon

12 to 20 September. Béton Brut, 30 Felstead Street, E9 5LG. Collectible design gallery Béton Brut has reimagined four Marcel Breuer designs for Isokon in rare masur birch veneer. Launched to mark the 90th anniversary of Breuer's designs for the British furnituremaker, the collection aims to challenge the assumption that Breuer's modernist plywood icons were intended to remain unadorned.

Hanging Baskets and Travel Light shows by Slancha

14 to 20 September at Awaykin, Unit 5, 39 Gransden Avenue, E8 3QA. 12 to 20 September at The Hoxton, 81 Great Eastern St, EC2A 3HU. The humble hanging basket has been reimagined by 10 designers as part of an exhibition at Awaykin from emerging design gallery Slancha (meet them on page 6). The show's UK-heavy roster includes metalwork studio Six Dots Design and Scottish designer

Marc Sweeney (page 12). Slancha is also taking over the gift shop at The Hoxton with pieces submitted by newer talents from more than 20 countries. Drawing on references from Welsh love spoons to Ugandan barkcloth, all the pieces are available to buy at accessible price points.



Chair by Leo Russo and Milo Tonry-Brown at Past Made Present. *Photo by Spring Cheng*

Out of Worky show by The Worky

15 to 20 September. 16 Horner Square, E1 6EW. There's no shortage of leftovers at Out of Worky, an exhibition made entirely from the offcuts accumulated by four young designers – Kieran Slater, Milo Tonry-Brown, Marley Wellings and Jake

Robertson (meet him on page 11) – while working “odd jobs” across the design industry over the last few years. For LDF, they've transformed these scraps into furniture, objects and material experiments, filling every corner of a space in Old Spitalfields Market. They also invited guest designers to contribute some works of their own to the exhibition.

You Can Sit With Us exhibition by 2LG Studio

15 to 17 September. Shoreditch Town Hall, 380 Old Street, EC1V 9LT. Interiors firm 2LG Studio's always excellent showcase of emerging design talent has returned to Shoreditch Town Hall for its fourth edition. This year's lineup includes one of Milan design week's breakout stars, reformed production designer Jabez Bartlett, alongside JoshJen, Hanna Fastrich, ThisIsByron and more, while 2LG Studio will also debut a new lighting collection with Indian studio North South AD. While you're at Shoreditch Town Hall, check out the wider House of Icon exhibition, which also includes a show from Italian design platform Isola.



Ham House in Richmond hosts the Kingston University show. *Photo by Spring Cheng*

After School show by Gallery Fumi x RCA

12 to 26 September. Gallery Fumi, 2-3 Hay Hill, W1J 6AS. Gallery Fumi partners with the Royal College of Art to present After School, a selection of outstanding work by recent alumni, spanning textiles, ceramics and design. Outside of the Mayfair gallery, graduates of the MA Design Products degree are presenting their final year projects at RCA's Kensington campus, while just down the road at Thurloe Place, the One Tool, One Stool exhibition shares outcomes from the first exercise they undertook as fledgling design students: creating a stool using only a single tool.

Made x Barbican launch

12 to 20 September. Barbican Centre, Silk Street, EC2Y 8DS. One of London's most recognisable architectural icons has received its own furniture collection courtesy of furniture brand Made. Drawing on the Barbican's original interiors and architectural details, the 23-piece collection also includes lighting, textiles and accessories. On the ground floor of the Barbican Centre, an installation delves into the design process, exploring how the estate's original layouts and show home interiors by architect Miriam Howitt informed the collection.



Relik Interior at Kiln Shift. *Photo by Giacomo Aberico*

Kiln Shift exhibition by Clink Street Ceramics

12 to 20 September. 16 Winchester Walk, SE1 9AG. From ceramic lighting and hand-blown glass to sculptural furniture combining wood and clay, Kiln Shift presents a cross-disciplinary exhibition exploring post-industrial landscapes through material

experimentation. Curated by Clink Street Ceramics, the showcase brings together over 20 artists and designers working across disciplines such as clay, timber, glass, metal, textiles and photography, including returning exhibitors Abid Javed, Anouska Samms, Julia Ellen Lancaster and Holly Hooper.



Otzi provides furniture for the Deer dinner

Deer dinner at Fortnum & Mason

16 September, 6:30pm to 9:00pm (tickets available online).

Fortnum & Mason, 181 Piccadilly, W1A 1ER. An experimental dinner at department store Fortnum & Mason explores circular solutions to Britain's deer crisis. Zero-waste chef Douglas McMaster of Silo joins leather company Billy Tannery and furniture

studio Otzi to demonstrate how every part of the animal – from nose to tail – can be transformed into wild venison dishes, vegetable-tanned leather and handcrafted furniture, highlighting the role of design and craft in responsible conservation.

We Lift Each Other exhibition at Blackhorse Workshop

19 September. Blackhorse Workshop, 1-2 Sutherland Road, E17 6BX. Curated by designer ThisIsByron (meet him on page 12), We Lift Each Other celebrates the creative community behind Blackhorse Workshop in Walthamstow. The exhibition spans furniture, joinery, blacksmithing and metalwork, highlighting the diverse practices that have emerged from the social enterprise's open-access workshops, which Byron describes as "one of the few financially accessible spaces left for creatives in London". •

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Interview

“We have the best design community in Europe,” says Duncan Riches

Words by Cajsa Carlson

If you ask people in London’s design scene which of the ever-increasing LDF districts are a must-visit, chances are they’ll say Brompton – where the V&A hub is – and Shoreditch. The ex-industrial east London neighbourhood was the epicentre of the city’s creative scene during the early 2000s, but has since become better known for its restaurants and nightlife – which seem to cater mostly to tourists – than its independent designers.

That could be about to change, though, as Duncan Riches, creative director of the newly minted Shoreditch Design Week, aims to help emerging designers and commercial brands work together to bring the design trade back to Shoreditch.

The week will be centred around four curated trade exhibitions, including the interior design show House of Icon at Shoreditch Town Hall, graduate design showcase New Designers and materials fair Material Matters.



Shoreditch Design Week creative director Duncan Riches.
Photo by Luciana Britton Newell

“I want to have a real core of trade; brands that show in the main venues, people from across London, hopefully companies from across the UK, and even better, companies not from the UK who want to work in the UK,” explains Riches. “I want to get those brands with their products in front of our audience – honestly, we have the best architecture and interior design community in the whole of Europe.”

As well as the larger exhibitions, the week will also feature numerous smaller shows, while local brands such as Ally Capellino and Lee Broom will open up their showrooms to the public for product launches and drinks.

Riches’s aim is for Shoreditch Design Week to become a place where “all the young talent and the emerging things can also have a home because really, what they all need is footfall and professional interest”.

But making Shoreditch fertile ground for designers once again is not without its challenges. Other popular design weeks, perhaps especially Copenhagen’s 3 Days of Design, often integrate the entire neighbourhood, something that doesn’t currently happen in Shoreditch.

“One of the problems in Shoreditch is there are so many restaurants and bars and a nighttime economy,” says Riches. “They don’t have a relationship with the daytime economy. If you go to 3 Days, you’ll go to a lovely showroom, you’ll see some beautiful lights, and then the florist across the road has got the lights hanging there and the pastries are from the pastry shop next door.”

In contrast, Shoreditch doesn’t have those connections as the industries aren’t working together, according to Riches, despite his various attempts to integrate them.

“I desperately tried to get a lovely restaurant last year to take out all of their furniture and put in Fredericia because they wanted to do a show there,” he says. “They were like, ‘You’re mad. What is this?’ And then like four weeks before, they said, ‘Oh, we think we could do that.’ And I said, ‘We need to know four months in advance.’”

With events company Media 10 having recently bought Shoreditch Design Week – formerly known as Shoreditch Design Triangle – from furniture brand SCP, Riches says the event now has access to larger spaces and is able to put on much bigger shows.

“What Media 10 do, and the investment that they bring, is multi-year deals,” he says. “So when you go to Shoreditch Town Hall and say to them, ‘Look, we want to do it for three years,’ you get the kind of rate which allows you to put on a show and make it okay in terms of the cost for the exhibitors.”

“I desperately tried to get a lovely restaurant last year to take out all of their furniture and put in Fredericia. They were like, ‘You’re mad’”

job in promoting design culture across London,” he says. “But what happened is they’ve stopped serving the kind of core design community, and that is furniture, product, lighting, textiles, ceramics, glass, that kind of world.

“It’s great that there’s a platform for design, all types of design around London. But the people in the industry, they need an industry event; they need buyers to come, they need architects to come. They need both of them.”

Riches believes that creating a trade hub in Shoreditch will also prove to be beneficial for the wider LDF event. “I just hope that us being able to create a kind of trade epicentre, if you like, will really help LDF in general,” he says.

And while he doesn’t see Shoreditch Design Week as being a competitor to LDF, Riches also wants the area to have its own unique identity. “We’ve called it ‘Design Week’, by the way,” he says, “because it really does need to stand on its own two feet.”

Riches hopes the mixed programme at this year’s inaugural edition will mean that everyone can see something they’re interested in – whether it’s design industry people spending a whole day in the area, or people who just swing by an event after work.

As well as the main flagship shows, there are a number of younger designers showcasing their work, including design gallery Slancha.

Riches sees facilitating collaborations between smaller designers and brands – such as Slancha’s takeover of the shop at The Hoxton hotel this year – as a key part of his job.

“My role is to be a friend to everyone,” he says. “Often brands are so wrapped up in the busyness of what they’re doing, they find it hard to actually know who to go to or where to go. My job is like a massive matchmaker.”

Riches believes there is still a need for an event that is more focused on people working in the industry – something that he thinks is lacking when it comes to LDF as a whole. “They’ve done a brilliant



House of Icon during LDF 2025. *Photo by Sam Frost*



Demolition to Design furniture collection by Prima Materia, shown at Material Matters. *Photo by Tom Carter*

But there might be less need for design matchmaking in the future. Riches has found that emerging designers today are more capable of getting their work seen than in previous years, which he takes as a reassuring sign.

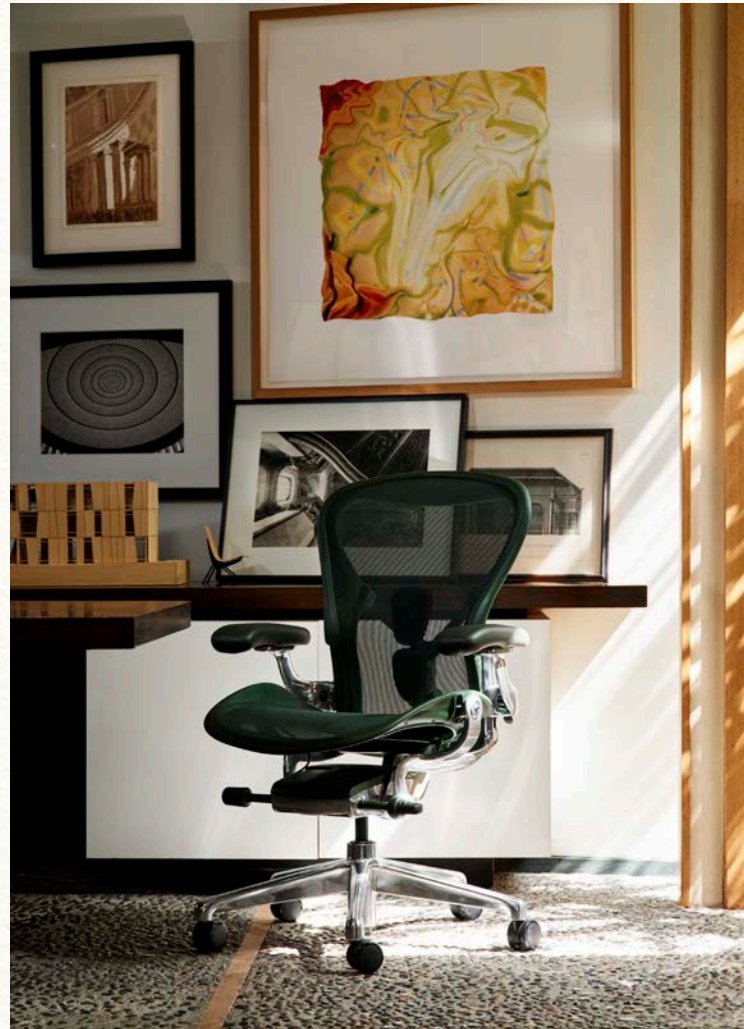
“If I take a young designer now and I look at their knowledge base, I think they’re a lot more canny than they were 15 years ago,” he says.

Overall, he believes that the current London design scene is also more vibrant than it has been in many years.

“There is loads to be really positive about right now, and I’m just amazed at where we’re at,” says Riches. “And as a Londoner, I’m just kind of thrilled to come back, because London always has that up and down. It’s always going to have that, but it feels like we’re at the stage where it’s just coming up once again, and there’s a bit more excitement about it.” Shoreditch Design Week runs from 15-20 September as part of LDF •

Advertorial

Herman Miller updates Aeron chair to ensure its “lasting design”



Herman Miller's updated Aeron chair



Bill Stumpf and Don Chadwick designed the Aeron. *Photo by Brad Trent courtesy of Herman Miller Archives*

American furniture design brand Herman Miller has been honing its Aeron office chair for decades, equipping it with innovative materials and features for modern workplaces. Featuring an ergonomic form that supports sitters of different sizes and technological enhancements for better long-term sitting, Aeron was first designed in 1994 by Bill Stumpf and Don Chadwick.

According to Herman Miller, its launch was revolutionary in the office furniture industry, and it continues to lead the charge, thanks to a timeless design informed by ongoing research and use of innovative materials.

“For decades, we’ve been perfecting it so that it’s not only good for your body, but good for our environment too,” says MillerKnoll vice president of sustainability Gabe Wing. “Aeron’s launch was revolutionary in the office furniture industry, and it continues to lead the charge thanks to updated research, material innovation, and an iconic design that lasts.”



The Aeron comes in three sizes and six colours

The most recent iteration of Aeron is equipped with Herman Miller’s patented 8Z Pellicle, an elastomeric suspension material designed to assist weight distribution. It features an adjustable back support system that helps encourage a healthy posture when sitting. The chair’s tilting motions also mirror the sitter’s natural pivot points at the joints, moving with the body to help keep it relaxed.

Over 50 per cent of Aeron is constructed from recycled materials, including ocean-bound plastic waste, which Herman Miller has been incorporating into the design since 2021.

The ergonomic office chair comes in three sizes and is available in six colours that range from dark blacks and blues to varying tones of grey and an olive green.

“Aeron’s material innovation is at the heart of its sustainability story, and a lesson in the major effects of dematerialisation,” says Wing. “Not only is Aeron actively innovated upon, but it’s also naturally sustainable through its quality design, which keeps it out of landfills. When we say Aeron is a lasting design, we mean it wholeheartedly.” •

Opinion

“Is touching really asking too much?”

Words by Alice Fisher

In the 1990s as a student in London, I got a summer job at a famous department store. I was a sales assistant for towels and robes working next to the bathroom furniture department which, true to the shop’s reputation for ostentatious luxury, included some incredibly ornate toilets.

One morning, word spread around the staff that someone had – somehow – managed to use a display toilet for its intended purpose. Reactions ranged from outraged disgust to amused respect.

Personally, I was envious – imagine clambering into that sterile room set and settling on the porcelain throne. Even the most prestigious customer wouldn’t get away with that.

I’m surprised how often I think about that toilet when visiting design exhibitions these days. Not for any weird reason – the only stool I like to see is one that’s handmade, preferably from reclaimed wood – but because I so often want to climb into the displays of beautiful furniture I’m looking at and settle in.

Sadly, at most design festivals that would be as shocking and frowned upon as hopping onto the lav in a department store display.

Looking but not touching or interacting with design is, to my mind, a strange and impotent experience. I spend so much time staring really intently at chairs trying to imagine what they feel like, when what I really want to do is loll in them.

The two things I overuse the most at LDF and other such events are my camera phone – obvs – and the surreptitious finger.

You know what I mean – the index finger you slide out at hip height to feel the buttery softness of a leather chair arm, or the cool surprise of a marble tabletop, when the publicist and designer are looking the other way.

Just to be clear, I’m not stupid. I understand the financial and creative investment that studios and

“Personally, I was envious – imagine clambering into that sterile room set and settling on the porcelain throne”



Home from Home by Charlotte Taylor at 3DD 2025. *Photo by Elizabeth Heltoft Arnby*

designers have put into these displays. I know that most of the furniture on show is a prototype or produced at great personal cost to the maker and that letting the clumsy, feckless public loose on these masterpieces is not a good idea.

And yet... wouldn’t it be great if there was an idiot-proof version of the furniture you could have a go on?

Cast your mind back over the most discussed or fondly remembered exhibits at recent design weeks and you can see I’m not the only person who feels this way. Paul Cockledge, Alison Brooks and Waugh Thistleton all made landmark wooden LDF installations in recent years that could be sat on, walked through or even climbed up.

I’m so pleased that the AHEC exhibition Wood for the Trees, which debuted at Copenhagen’s 3 Days of Design (3DD) in June, will also appear at LDF this September. The show includes beautiful rocking wooden benches by Benchmark, which are such a great place to sit.

Also at 3DD this year was an outsized conversation pit. This version of the 1950s favourite – in beautiful lemon linen – was a collaboration between furniture brand Vipp and Spanish architecture



Vipp conversation pit at 3DD 2026



Please Be Seated by Paul Cockledge at LDF 2019.
Photo by Mark Cockledge



Metamorphosis in Motion at Milan design week 2026. Photo by Nathalie Krag

studio Mesura. Big enough to hold 60 people, visitors were encouraged to slip off their shoes and climb inside using swimming pool-style ladders. Most design critics opted to bounce like toddlers at soft play rather than hold a meaningful conversation, which made the experience even more delightful.

Metamorphosis in Motion by architect Lina Ghotmeh at this year's Milan design week gave a similar thrill. Watching people explore Ghotmeh's magenta maze, which filled the courtyard at the Palazzo Litta, was a pleasure.

The trend for staging shows in apartments rather than sterile showrooms also reflects how many design-week visitors want to experience furniture in a natural way. While design shop Artemest is probably the OG brand for turning fabulous apartments into even-more-fabulous fantasy exhibition spaces during Milan, I think French vintage dealer Antoine Billore's Loreto apartment for perfume house L'Artisan Parfumeur this year was the one in which I really wanted to sit down and pretend it was mine.

British designer Charlotte Taylor's breakout show was Home from Home at 3DD 2025. She not only curated this exhibition of work by 40 furniture designers held in an apartment at Noura Residency on Sankt Peders Stræde, but also lived in the space during the design festival.

Recently, Taylor told me that, although the idea was to get away from the "untouchable tableau" of the typical design show, she hadn't expected visitors to get quite so comfortable, quite so quickly in her personal space. "It became a performative piece, to the extent that I'd be filmed by a load of strangers while making coffee in the morning," she said. "It was pretty extreme."

She should have held a lottery that gave visitors the opportunity to apply to spend the night there themselves. I can think of few things that design fans would like more.

All I would like designers to do is think of any way it's possible for visitors to engage with their beautiful creations beyond the look-but-don't-touch of a standard design fair. Using a toilet absolutely crosses the line, but is sitting down, or even touching, really asking too much? •

"Wouldn't it be great if there was an idiot-proof version of the furniture you could have a go on?"

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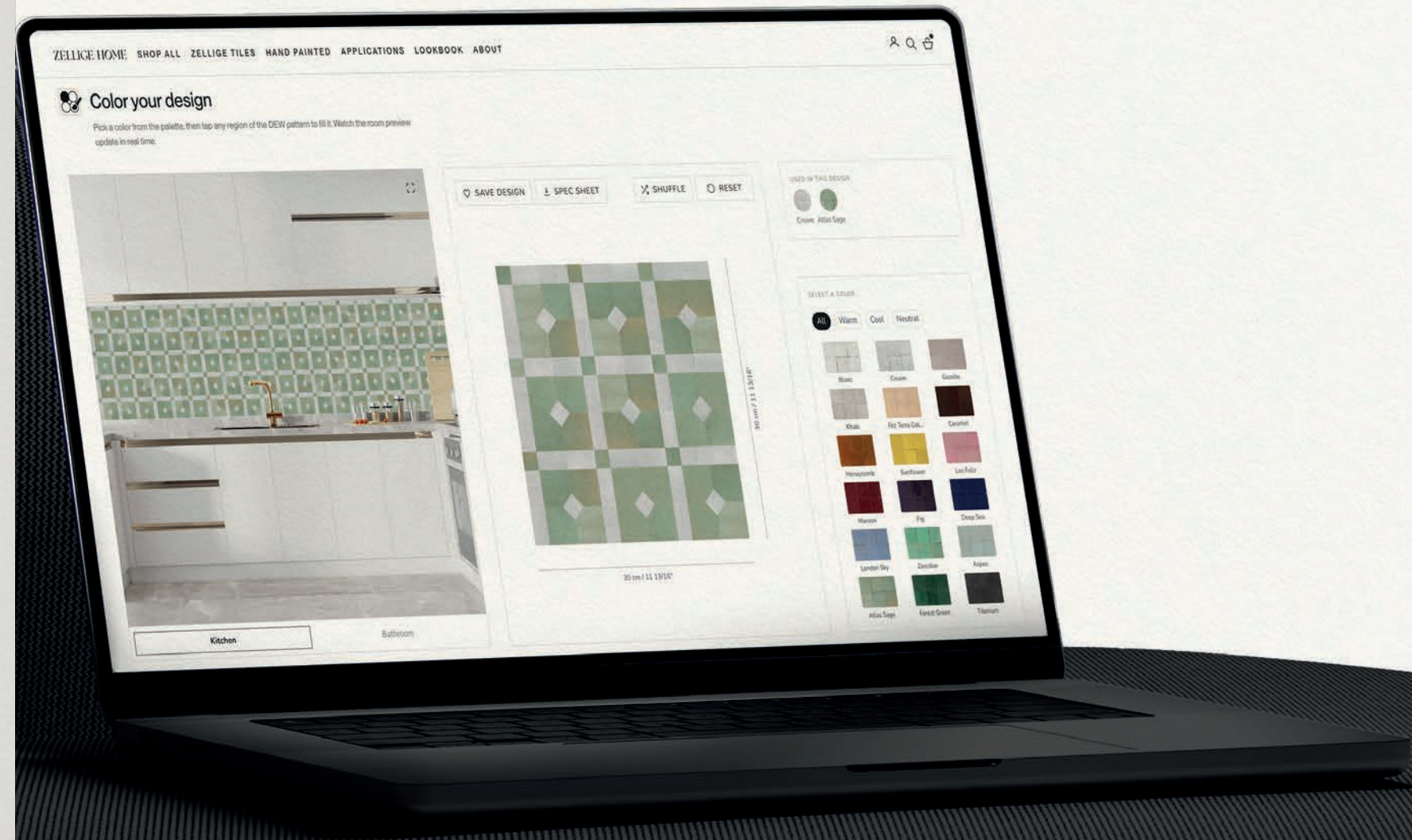


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Interview

“In these conditions, how can we be optimistic?” asks Anab Jain

Words by Rima Sabina Aouf

It's yet another 32-degree day in London's alarming summer of 32-degree days, and Anab Jain has been telling her colleagues about her childhood in India. It was a time of national emergency, with food rationing due to drought and crop failures, water for only one hour a day, stifling heat – and yet, young Jain was happy.

“I still had the best childhood, in a way,” she says. “It makes me think a lot about how what we have assumed are the perfect conditions for us to live happily might not necessarily be so, and how that sort of living – growing up fairly frugally but very happily, with no television, no telephone, being bored out of our minds, cooking up stories, and reading a lot about Indian mythology because that's all that was around – really shaped my worldview.”



LDF 2026 Design Innovation Medal winner Anab Jain. Photo by Jamie Salmons

That worldview, with hope and resilience peeking out from behind a profound understanding of crisis and scarcity, has subtly infused Jain's 17-year body of work, which this week won her LDF's Design Innovation Medal.

As part of Superflux, the design studio she started in 2009 with her life and creative partner Jon Ardern, Jain has repeatedly cast herself into the future, addressing the challenges of climate change and social upheaval through speculative propositions and ecological thinking.

In 2018, she gave a talk at the Interaction Design Association (IxDA) conference in Lyon, turning the field's guiding concept of human-centred design on its head by proposing a “more-than-human-centred design”. Drawing on the work of academic Anne Galloway and her More-Than-Human lab in New Zealand, Jain argued for a practice of listening to, working with and creating for the planet's interconnected species and natural entities. At that time, no one knew what she was talking about, she says.



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But the next year, she gave a similar presentation at Madrid festival Tentacular to a crowd that included John Bridle, who was in the middle of writing what would become the influential book *Ways of Being*, exploring the intelligence of animals, plants and natural systems. Shoots of like-minded thought, inspired by indigenous knowledge and rights of nature theory, were starting to look like a movement.

Seven years later, it is difficult to find a critical design thesis that does not at least touch on the notion of the more-than-human world.

The roots for all of this are embedded in Jain's formative years. After her summers of paucity, she went on to study film – an unusual speciality for the design field that was offered at Ahmedabad's National Institute of Design, the school set up on the advice of Charles and Ray Eames to combine modernist approaches with a focus on the needs and traditions of India.

There, she was exposed to a great breadth of cinema, while also developing the skills that would inform the film, storytelling and experiential sides of Superflux's practice.

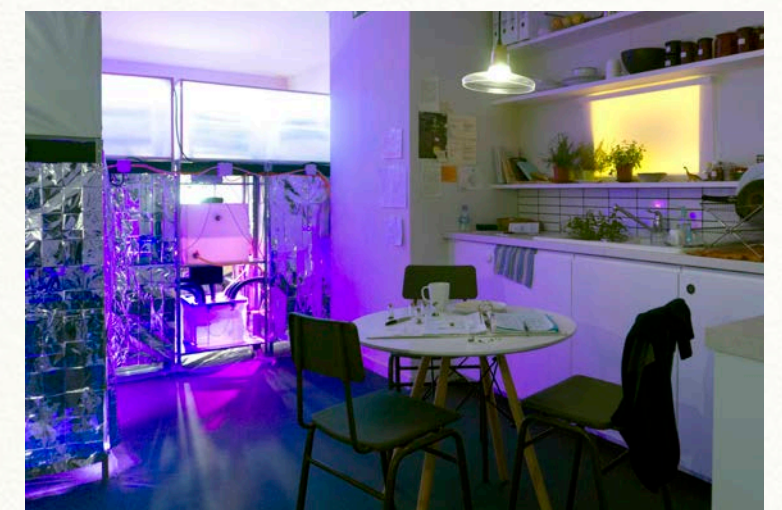
"We used to look at a lot of French cinema, a lot of Iranian cinema, a lot of Italian, Korean cinema," says Jain. "We didn't watch that much Hollywood. So in a way, I was aware of the fact that

there are plural perspectives that exist in the world, that there are different stories that need to be heard and need to be told, and there is not just one way to be."

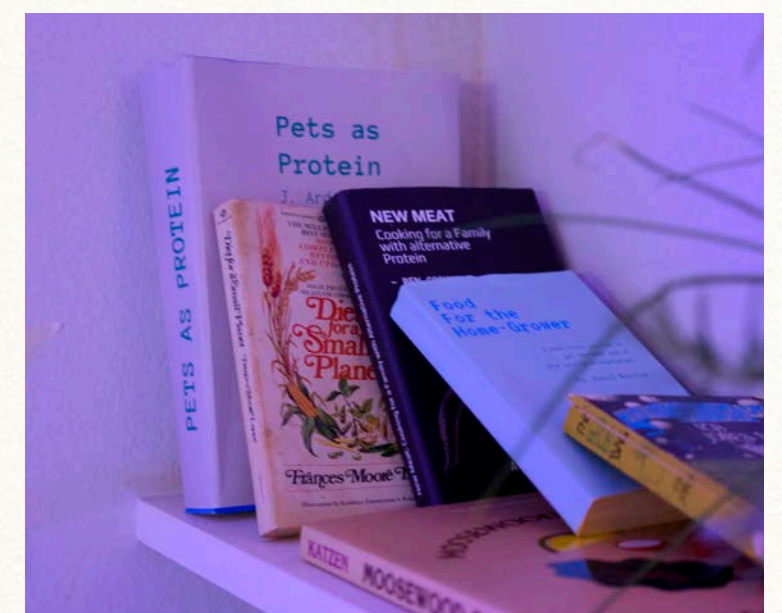
"Instead of powering AI with natural resources, let's flip it, and ask what if AI was used in the service of our rivers and water systems instead"



A river sample analysed for the Ecological Intelligence Agency project. *Photo courtesy of Superflux*



A Mitigation of Shock installation apartment. *Photo courtesy of Superflux*



Superflux-created books imagining life under climate change

“What we have assumed are the perfect conditions for us to live happily might not necessarily be so”

In 2008, after gaining her masters at the Royal College of Art in London, Jain went to work on machine intelligence at the Microsoft Research lab in Cambridge – the first place where she was prompted to think about intelligence in a non-human dimension.

Her experiences converge in Superflux projects such as the Ecological Intelligence Agency, which was included in last year’s More Than Human exhibition at the Design Museum. It started with a simple idea: “Instead of powering AI with natural resources, let’s flip it, and ask what if AI was used in the service of our rivers and water systems instead,” says Jain.

In the work, a large language model is fed multiple sources of data about Essex’s River Roding, from ecological reports to community social media posts, and told to draw on English Romantic ballads, free-verse poetry and the tongue of London spoken-word artists for style. Then it is asked to speak for the river itself. Hearing this voice can be, for the listener, deeply moving, as well as a chance to envisage a radically different future for AI.

Then there are the Mitigation of Shock installations – pragmatic imaginings of future apartments adapted for living with climate change. In one version, heavy aluminium shutters provide protection from intense storms, while a kayak propped against

a wall suggests how the residents travel through regular flooding. At the same time, there are elements of what is sometimes termed ‘hope-punk’, such as bountiful indoor gardens that double as a reliable food supply.

The installation is emblematic of Superflux’s version of optimism, based not on denial that climate chaos is coming, but on belief that human resilience, ingenuity and practices of care will shine through regardless. Asked whether she stands by the defiant optimism she expressed then, Jain says, “In the short term, I think there’s not much to be optimistic about, in all honesty,” citing the widespread wildfires in Europe, energy challenges, proliferating wars, social disruption from AI and likely changes to the Atlantic current as reasons to be dour.

“These conditions point towards what you can call a closing down – more boundaries, people wanting to hold on to what they think is the right thing, the narrowing of possibilities, rather than an opening up of,” she continues. “So, in these conditions, how can we be optimistic?”

This is where speculative design comes into its own. Previously at the margins of the design profession, the practice has recently become a part of its commercial sphere and looks increasingly like the approach best-matched to the challenges of the present moment.

Here again, Jain has been an influential thinker, leading the Design Investigations course as a professor at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and this year, publishing the book *Designing Questions* with her colleagues to outline a pedagogic pathway for the field.

“The work we do as Superflux in terms of making sure the future remains a possibility space, and that there are many possible futures within this possibility space, gives me hope and optimism,” says Jain. “There is still a chance to imagine, will, prototype, create, test all these other possible futures.”

One beautiful possibility? “We may not get 24/7 water, but we may live a more cohesive, collectively happier life.” •

“There is still a chance to imagine, will, prototype, create, test all these other possible futures”



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Q&A

London design “an international success story,” says Sadiq Khan

Questions by Amy Peacock

Ahead of LDF, we asked long-standing mayor of London Sadiq Khan for his thoughts on the festival and what to see this year.

Why do you believe London’s design scene is worth investing in, and what role does LDF play in this?

“London has a remarkable history of producing designs that have become global icons. Visionaries such as Thomas Heatherwick and Norman Foster have reimagined architecture and public spaces, while Vivienne Westwood revolutionised fashion with her rebellious designs, and celebrated product designer Tom Dixon and multidisciplinary artist Es Devlin are all showing why London’s design is an international success story.

“I’m delighted that LDF plays a key role in the success of the industry, showcasing, celebrating and developing our leading talent. The festival is an incredible advert, drawing international attention, investment and visitors as it welcomes more than 600,000 visitors.

“I’m hugely proud to support the festival and over the past 10 years have invested £2.2 million that has helped to unlock £1.23 billion for the economy through jobs and investment.”

What are you looking forward to seeing this year at LDF?

“London Design Festival is a huge highlight in the capital’s cultural calendar because there are so many great events taking place. There’s a lot to look forward to, including The Pangolin Shield, which will be a significant installation on the Strand.

“There are design districts that showcase 11 neighbourhoods across the city as local studios, showrooms, galleries and cultural venues open their doors with exhibitions, installations, events and talks, while the V&A continues its long-standing relationship with the festival with Awakenings.”

“There is no doubt that the UK’s departure from the EU has made it harder for London’s design industry”



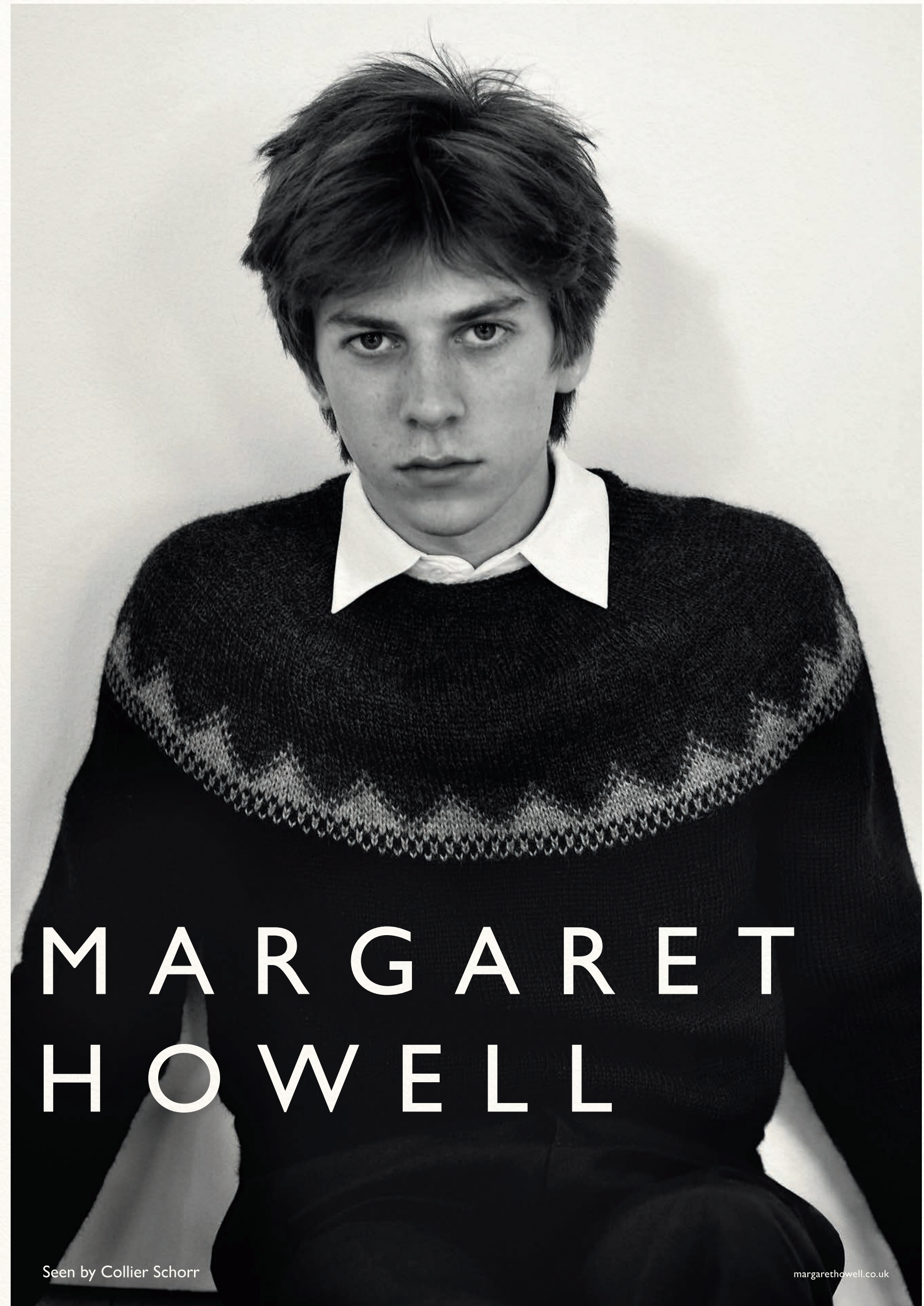
London mayor Sadiq Khan. Photo by Caroline Teo

How does London’s design scene compare to other cities? Do you think it’s possible for LDF to have an impact on the scale of design festivals in Milan and Copenhagen, and how does the UK no longer being in the EU have an impact on this?

“Our capital is a powerhouse for the creative industries and LDF is a fantastic example of our influence in the design industry. The festival promotes our city’s creativity, drawing in the country’s greatest thinkers, practitioners, retailers and educators to deliver an unmissable celebration of design. That’s why it is one of the world’s leading design events and has served as the blueprint for design weeks and festivals globally.

“However, there is no doubt that the UK’s departure from the EU has made it harder for London’s design industry to trade, collaborate and recruit talent across Europe. Increased

paperwork, barriers for the movement of creative talent and reduced access to EU funding have brought challenges, but despite all this, London continues to be a thriving and welcoming place for designers.” •



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