

Bright sparks

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Everyone has to be hard-headed to cope with the realities of the downturn, but emerging lighting designers are still managing to give their commercially viable output an environmental and ethical twist. Anna Bates looks at the work of three rising stars

Most people's awareness of lighting design usually focuses on mechanics - switches, bulbs, shades and so on - but the discipline is surprisingly broad, one which is increasingly embracing elements from other areas of design to address wider issues. A new wave of designers is exploring the potential of lighting, recognising its ability to improve people's lives in socially responsible ways.

Here is a snapshot of three European exponents of the art, each experimenting in their own way with notions such as sustainability and psychology, and exploiting materials and processes to devise products or installations that have a serious - and occasionally comic - message. All of them are designing with manufacturing in mind.

Creatmosphere 'It's about education, basically,' says Laurent Louyer, the French founder of London-based lighting design studio Creatmosphere.

He creates site-specific installations that are more a form of teaching than design. 'People don't know about the context of a space,' says Louyer, so, using lighting as a tool, he tries to make people react with or reflect on a space.

To date, the four-strong studio has lit up a water tank in Blackpool with a rippling water effect for the city's Festival of Light, to visually explain the piece of historical architecture. Along an arctic beach in Greenland, the team used its Lun'art spheres to represent the UK per capita consumption of CO2 for the Cape Farewell Climate Change project. The group has been commissioned by arts foundations and local councils, as well as for events such as 100% Design in London.

Creatmosphere's projects often have a Green agenda. One of its fun concepts is Breathing Trees - accompanied by the sound of air moving in and out of lungs, light spreads through branches until 'full capacity' is reached, and then dims again. 'They're lungs of the earth,' says Louyer. 'This makes people aware that we need trees to live.'

Taking the concept a step further, Louyer's team intends to make trees cough when CO2 levels rise. The project is set to go live in the Peruvian capital Lima, before touring elsewhere.

He is proud of working with new materials, and collaborating with factories to initiate new products. His team is working with Goldsmiths University in London on new technology that will allow trees to be controlled remotely. 'Parks are closed at night because they are seen as dark and unsafe,' says Louyer. 'But if you lit the parks nicely, you could change the light throughout the evening, or trigger them with sound without even being there - then we could enjoy the parks again.'

Daniel Rybakken Daniel Rybakken doesn't want you to be aware of his lights. The Norwegian lighting designer creates little tricks, to make you think the space you are in is lit naturally.

Among these tricks is a fake window in the form of an LED screen, playing a blurry film of a tree swaying on repeat, and Subconscious Effect of Daylight, a coffee table with a projector hidden beneath it. The table projects the image of a shadow on to the floor, to make you think one of its legs has been caught in a ray of sunlight.

'The feeling of space is greater with natural light,' says Rybakken, by way of an explanation. 'In the winter you feel enclosed and alone in a room - by recreating sunlight, you create the illusion that something is outside.'

Rybakken's concept developed when he was a student. The Gothenburg-based designer visited his mother, and was struck by how sad and enclosed one of the rooms in her house felt without daylight. Using ambient lighting seemed too artificial, and daylight lamps are 'medical', says Rybakken. 'They're about how much light gets into your eye - I'm interested in the social aspect of daylight.'

His solutions represent an original way of thinking about lighting, and his portfolio has seen him win a string of awards - most recently, the Salone Satellite award for best design at the Milan furniture fair for Surface Daylight, a plastic board with a streak of light across it, emitted from behind.

Rybakken's work is ideal for installations, and he has already been commissioned to design the foyer of an office space in Stockholm. He is using his concept for

Surface Daylight, but integrating huge slabs of Corian into the walls. Rybakken has no intention of keeping his pieces

in this domain though, as he is now in talks with Artemide to get his work in production.

'Most lamps are just sculptures,' he says. 'I want to make lamps in a different way.'

Mark Braun 'I go pregnant with an idea,' says German designer Mark Braun. 'I see something, then it takes about four weeks.'

Braun is explaining how his Lingor lights - a series of enamelled steel phosphorescent hats which recently went into production with the German manufacturer Elmar Floetotto - came to be. He really wanted to experiment with a traditional technique of metal-spinning, and also to inject some life into enamel by making it glow. 'Then I saw this hat shape,' he says, and an idea started to evolve.

This is typical of Braun. He starts experimenting with materials and processes, and then layers on a shape, plucked from a dictionary of visuals that he stores in his head. His Pyrus pendants, made out of waste paper pulp from a coffee-filter maker, are moulded into the form of a wagon he saw in a picture of a gold mine. While Braun sees himself as a general product designer, most of his products become lights, 'because light combines so well with my love of materials, and it touches people somehow', he says. 'I make simple products for daily use, but with a special character, to bring an emotional quality into a room.'

Braun's products certainly achieve this. The huge Pyrus lights look rough and cold from the outside, but, inside, the lit area is a zone of warmth. 'It's cosy - it looks like a sheep with short hair,' he says. The Lingor lights, by contrast, are more sculptural - especially when they are turned off. The blue phosphorescent glow has a surprising presence in a room; the piece wasn't designed with a Green agenda, but Braun says he's pleased that 'they make you aware of energy and light-saving'.

The experimental nature of Braun's products would see them sit happily in a gallery, but they are designed with manufacturing in mind. He has been approached by several manufacturers interested in the Pyrus shades. He is also in the process of reworking one of his earliest products - a ceramic light that snakes along the floor - to make the piece more practical and therefore more sellable.

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