

British Designers Edward Barber And Jay Osgerby Celebrate A Quarter Century Of Partnership

Invited to imagine the torch of the London 2012 Olympic Games, [Jay Osgerby](#) and [Edward Barber](#) came to incarnate the emerging generation of British designers ready to take over the reins from the likes of Jasper Morrison and Tom Dixon. A project that brought them international recognition, their streamlined, lightweight and triangular gold-colored aluminum alloy torch was pierced with 8,000 circles representing the inspirational stories of personal achievement of the 8,000 torchbearers who had carried the Olympic Flame. An unusual and moving object for them, it had to have a ceremonial and rich, visual quality yet be very functional: it had to perform in extreme weather conditions, in high winds, low temperatures, torrential rain – all the things you’d expect from a British summer. In designing an icon for the Games, they also wished to make the most of pioneering production technologies and to demonstrate the industrial excellence available in the UK – a torch for their time. Few designers get to see their work paraded up and down the country and make headline news for an entire season, so for the dynamic duo, their design of the Olympic Torch – the most potent symbol of the Games at just 10cm wide and 80cm long – marked a milestone. For the first time in their career, they had designed something of universal interest. Osgerby recalls, “It was a remarkable thing to be associated with, a really challenging project producing a torch on time, on budget and in such quantities and also to have something that functioned flawlessly in front of four billion people on TV.”



The limited-edition, highly-complex and colorful Iris table for Established & Sons PHOTO PEER LINDGREEN

The darlings of the design world followed this up with a £2 coin for The Royal Mint, commemorating 150 years of the London Underground in 2013, which went into controlled circulation. It depicts the familiar image of a Tube train emerging from a tunnel, the outer ring of the coin being used graphically to suggest the tunnel walls. They love a challenge, reinventing everyday objects, and are known for their ingenious solutions whose simplicity of use belies their extreme difficulty of making. Take for example their limited-edition, highly-complex and colorful Iris tables for [Established & Sons](#) milled in sections from solid aluminum, anodized and joined with hidden bolts and tightened using magnets. Seemingly simple, the aerospace engineers and manufacturer that worked on the tables had to increase the accuracy of the milling machines to a level greater than that used for producing medical instruments.

“Our design work is very aware of the space around it,” says Osgerby. “Our objects sit well in a room and also sit well together. I think that’s partly because of

our architectural training that we've considered space much more than purely the object. You'll notice in lots of our work, there are apertures or frameworks that create space around and through the object. Then there is human interaction, for example on the [Flos Tab lamp](#), we emphasize a point of contact or we give people clues about how an object should be used. We look for simplicity and clarity as well as a soulfulness and joyfulness in our work, but more than anything, we seek to create objects that will be fit for future generations, not just this one, which can live for a very long time, in terms of esthetics, functionality and wear and tear, and become collectible in the future instead of landfill. Sustainability is critical to us. All the manufacturers that we work with now not only use recycled materials, but also insist that the products are recyclable and last for a very long time before they fail.



Flos Bellhop table lamp PHOTO COURTESY OF FLOS

Working with manufacturers, engineers and factories is integral to the development of the duo's projects. This intimate relationship with the making process influences their work, enabling an explorative approach to materials. Less concerned with producing showpieces and more preoccupied with filling a design void, their creations – characterized by an esthetic of restraint, meticulous attention to detail, a sense of lightness and an ability to push materials and manufacturers beyond their existing limits – have long delighted the most established brands, from [Vitra](#), [Cappellini](#), [ClassiCon](#) and [Dedon](#) to Flos, [Glas Italia](#), [Knoll](#) and [Magis](#), as well as companies outside of the furniture design field, such as Authentics, Coca Cola, Sony, Levi's and H&M. Royal Designers for Industry and [Maison&Objet](#)'s 2013 Designers of the Year, their work is held in permanent collections worldwide including the Victoria & Albert Museum and Design Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Both born in England in 1969, Barber and Osgerby founded their London-based design studio, BarberOsgerby, in 1996, after graduating from London's Royal College of Art, where they had first met as architecture students. "My dad was a chef and my mom raised us," Osgerby recounts. "We grew up in Oxfordshire. There wasn't much to do in those days, so we spent a lot of time drawing, painting, making things, experimenting and cycling around the countryside. My mother was always very interested in the arts so we spent a good bit of time in galleries and museums, where we were exposed to art and design at an early age. I had a real passion for making models and was always fascinated by the way that things were made. We lived near a Royal Air Force base and I would watch the planes flying by. So I was exposed to this kind of contrasting situation of countryside and then engineering, aviation and flight. It was certainly something that started my curiosity in forms that perform or lightweight structures that have volume."



Working on hospitality, residential and office architectural projects in London before they had even graduated, the pair depended on their architectural work to support their furniture design business during the initial years. Independent from the start, they have never worked for others. “When we left college, we didn’t really ever have a job,” Osgerby remarks. “We just carried on working and then suddenly 25 years later, we have an incredibly integrated design studio. We never had a plan. It was just a happy coincidence that we had the opportunity and found an ability to work together. Both Ed and I have two brothers, so we are used to being in a fraternal relationship, and I think that’s helped us navigate our relationship. We’re more like brothers than colleagues really.” Their big break came in the form of the minimalist [Isokon Plus](#) Loop table (1996) – the first piece of furniture they designed together – which was quickly taken up by Cappellini and consists of two U-shaped sections of plywood joined seamlessly together and interrupted by two panels forming the supporting legs, so it appears to float. The idea evolved from a handmade model of folded and slotted card, as their early works were often the result of experimentation with folded structures using architectural model-making materials.

As they are collaborators by nature, Osgerby explains why they work as a duo, “We feel that design is very much about a conversation and sharing ideas. It’s not about having a manifesto for how something should be. Partly why our work has been successful is because it’s interrogated by two people before it becomes real. It’s not just from one person’s sketchbook, so we already have to jump a hurdle before it can be considered.” Beginning by discussing a project together and drawing, they often misinterpret each other’s sketch and eventually an idea will take shape. Then they request their team’s input and within the same day, they’ll produce a one-to-one scale model to start testing. Subsequently they’ll leave it for up to a week before dealing with the manufacturer and proceeding to make a prototype “because very often you can fall in love with an idea and a design, but it can fade quite quickly and you need to make sure that before you move on to the

next step, the idea has lasted,” Osgerby discloses. “When you look at it again, if you feel happy about it, it’s generally a good idea. If not, you start again.”



Dedon Brea outdoor furniture system PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBER & OSGERBY

Barber and Osgerby actually run three firms now, leading a team of 80 working from 9,000 sqft of studio space occupying several buildings of an entire block in Shoreditch: BarberOsgerby for product design, [Universal Design Studio](#) for architecture, interiors and exhibition design, and [MAP](#), a strategy-based industrial design consultancy that translates new technologies into useful objects. Keeping things broad is much more productive and interesting for them. “That whole scale thing is great,” notes Osgerby. “I couldn’t really concentrate just on one. I think I’d go crazy.” Nonetheless, the majority of their creative effort is within BarberOsgerby. “We decided fairly early on that we wanted to differentiate between the work that Ed and I considered to be our authored work, which we

honestly considered to be our language, and other type of work which we saw as a collaboration,” Osgerby comments. “Architecture and interior design are naturally collaborative, and very often you’re working with other people or brands that have very strong personalities. We have worked with Stella McCartney, Damien Hirst and Paul Smith, who have strong identities, so we thought that it wasn’t appropriate to call it BarberOsgerby because BarberOsgerby is what Ed and I believe the world should be.” This separation allows them to retain their design integrity, while providing clients with the total package. And working on interiors helps them figure out what is really required in terms of furniture.

For example, the evaluation of the furniture specifications for a school sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts made them realize that a revolution in school chair design was sorely needed. This led to the all-plastic Vitra Tip Ton chair with dual seating experience: from a resting position, it tilts forward nine degrees, straightening the pelvis and spine and improving blood flow for better concentration. This new sitting position, which up until then had only been offered by mechanical office chairs, is now available as a cost-effective, durable and stackable polypropylene and polyamide chair manufactured using plastic injection molding as a single piece with no mechanical components. This means that the benefits may be enjoyed in many more environments including schools, libraries, cafeterias and even at home.



The sculptural B&B Italia Tobi-Ishi round dining table in smoke blue PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBER & OSGERBY

Limiting the number of manufacturers it collaborates with, BarberOsgerby chooses instead to multiply its projects with fewer clients, concentrating on less than 10 brands. “We see our clients as part of the family,” says Osgerby. “Once you really get to know them, you don’t want to lose them, you just keep working with them. We take a long time to build these friendships and working relationships and to understand each other. When you’ve known someone for that long, you can just pick up the phone. There’s no formality, even the top people in the companies, like the CEOs, so things happen really quickly. Also, after a while, it’s easier to persuade somebody when you believe something’s right when you have developed that level of trust between each other.”

Keeping themselves busy, the tireless duo recently presented the Soft Work modular office furniture system for Vitra, which completely redefines how people work, and digital innovation agency [AKQA](#) founded by Ajaz Ahmed acquired a majority stake in Universal and MAP to form a pioneering alliance proposing intuitive, esthetic and interactive solutions between architecture, product and experience design. “I love the way that we as designers can challenge and change the direction of people’s habits and modes of use,” states Osgerby. 2019 will see them present their first big show with [Galerie Kreo](#) in Paris where they will exhibit a new collection of objects, and they are currently working on new products with [Emeco](#), Knoll, Dedon, Magis and [Hermès](#) to be launched at the Milan Furniture Fair. So what keeps them motivated at the end of the day? “I think the thing Ed and I share is a very short memory,” Osgerby replies. “We never really look to the past or look back at things we’ve done. We’re always looking at projects as if it’s the first time we’ve ever done them. We have a sort of childish excitement at the beginning of things that we never tire of. We haven’t done so many things that we get bored of the archetype. Our work has gotten more complex over the years; we’re doing more complicated things now that perhaps we couldn’t have done when we were younger. Every day brings its challenges and the challenges bring reward. There’s nothing more satisfying than the feeling that you’ve made something new that has answered a problem or made life a bit simpler or more joyful for people.”



Ballot chair in the Isokon Plus workshop PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBER & OSGERBY