

# **The 10°N/10°S Design Exchange: A comparative study highlighting the cultural differences in design training and working practice between France and Britain**

by Charlie Arnold and Anne Béchard-Léauté

(Charlie Arnold:)

At its core The 10°N/10°S design exchange project simply aimed to link independent designers from France and the UK to encourage direct dialogue and collaborative work between diverse creative individuals from two different European backgrounds.

The project grew from an initial meeting between myself; an artist/designer and curator, recently arrived in France from the Northeast of England; and Dr Anne Béchard-Léauté, a researcher in language and design at Saint-Etienne University. We worked together to make connections between equivalent French and British organizations in the Northeast of England and the Rhône-Alpes region of France and subsequently secured funding to commission new collaborative work from four British designer makers from the Designed and Made association in Newcastle and four independent French designers from a Saint-Etienne based collective, Collectif Designers+. The project culminated in two exhibitions of the new work. One at the Sage, Gateshead during the Design Event festival last October and one at the new International Design Centre in Saint-Etienne during December and January.

The successful aim of the 10°S/10°N project has been to broaden the horizons of, and international opportunities for regional designers by creating new, dynamic and lasting Anglo-French partnerships both at an individual and professional level. It has also offered an exceptional opportunity to begin to compare and understand the cultural similarities and differences in working practice between the two countries as well as for all of us to engage directly with new partners to create new work, contacts and opportunities for the future.

As many of you understand, the advantage of working in an interdisciplinary way across art-forms and cultural barriers is that everyone has so much more to learn from everyone else because there is far less of a skills and experience overlap. However, the challenge and risk elements are much more daunting for all concerned because it becomes essential we move out of our 'personal comfort zones' in order to work constructively with 'others with different ideas to our own' and what is more to actually come up with something 'concrete' that will eventually be displayed (and here I would prefer to use the French word *exposed!*) to a 'critical audience'.

We are going to show you two short excerpts from the documentary film Anne made about the 10° project. The first was filmed during the Biennale du design 2008, where the four Anglo-French design duos first met, and the second during the Newcastle Design Event in 2009 where the exhibition of the subsequent 16 works was first shown.

**VIDEO:**

(Anne Béchard-Léauté:)

This film started out merely as a didactic video to highlight the differences between independent French industrial designers and British designer-makers, but it finally proved to be even more useful and revealing as we discovered that the filming process itself obliged the participants to very formally present their work to their partner and to explain their activity particularly concisely and clearly.

In this clip, filmed during the design Biennial 2008 Florian Méry begins from a theoretical point of view, saying that his concern is to show the creative potential of the object he has made for the Biennale. He explains that the arrangement of plastic pipes presented in his studio is designed to demonstrate “the creative intentions and concepts” of his design agency. He also maintains they are a “reference” for his entire work. He uses the kind of theoretical language he has learnt during his Master’s degree at the Fine Art and design School in Saint-Etienne.

Saint-Etienne is home to one of the largest Art Schools in France, Ecole supérieure d’art et de design de Saint-Etienne (ESADSE), that was responsible for instigating the creation of the new International Design Centre known as the Cité du Design. All design partners in the region have now united to form a collective (Consortium Design) that promotes a new and unparalleled training initiative in the field of design. All local academic institutions, whatever their main subjects, are now required to provide their students with supplementary design courses in order to foster the use of design as an economic driver in the region. I must explain to the British audience here that Rhône-Alpes is the second most-developed economic area in France after Île-de-France.

After his degree course Florian completed his studies by taking a Master’s degree at St-Etienne’s Engineering School (ENISE), a course that has been developed in partnership with the Art school. This course is entitled ‘Dual Design’ and offers twelve graduate art students and engineers a one-year course aimed at teaching them to “design together”. It consists of six-month theoretical training followed by an internship in industry. This is an innovative new development that reconciles the traditional artistic training of French designers with the world of manufacturing. I must emphasize here that generally speaking in France a scientific training is held in a higher regard than an artistic training. This is why this ‘Dual Design’ concept has become very popular as it lends a more serious aspect to a designer’s profile.

During this project, we have noticed the French designers often adopted a theoretical and sometimes scientific stance to legitimize their work whereas the British designer-makers were far more comfortable to rely on their craft skills. Most French designers have a Fine-Art based training but tend to take pains to keep their industrial design practice separate from their personal creativity. They do not promote their craft skills because these are considered less important than their design concepts. This could be because product designers in France only sell ideas to manufacturers and would never actually consider making the final product they have designed, hence the strong distinction between the French industrial designers and the British designer-makers. This is also the reason why the French designers were very eager to participate in an exchange that gave them a chance to escape from the constraints of industry and somehow recover their creativity.

The British designers were also interested in the project as a chance to make more personal pieces but were more concerned with developing their international profile. The British are also very proud of their craft skills which they are keen to promote. Nick James, a design graduate and a skilled cabinet maker trained at Rycotewood College, explains during the filming that he is “happy” with a dovetail joint he has made. For this reason it would seem his level of job satisfaction is often higher than that of Florian.

But the dilemma is that the French product designers often do feel the need to develop their creative practice in order to inform their commercial activity. Florian explains that it is not easy for him to position himself when he talks to his clients. He says that although he feels like an artist he understands that his clients want to deal with a designer, hence his use of two different business cards. As a designer he knows he has to work to his customers' brief but in the film he wants to emphasize that "he can also suggest his own issues", as an artist would. Although Florian sees no frontiers between art and design, he thinks he must adapt his presentation to suit his clients' expectations whereas Nick can apparently afford to be more transparent in his business dealings.

This may just boil down to the fact that the self-employed in France have to comply with strict employment rules that restrict the specific activities of each profession through the "codes emplois Insee". This is also what often makes it difficult for French designers to teach in schools and colleges. On the other hand in Britain, where the tradition of small enterprise is widely accepted, designers can just declare their income, however they have earned it. This allows Nick James the flexibility to work both as a furniture designer-maker as well as a high profile young businessman in Newcastle and the founder of award-winning artists' studios.

One of the key differences between the French and British designers lies in fact in the emphasis on business. As a designer or an artist, Florian declares that he is "not in business to sell things", and that he only sells his "creative know-how" which he exhibits at his studio. This appears to be a paradox for a self-employed designer who needs to make a living. On the contrary, Nick's first question to Florian is "How are you going to sell this?" French designers are apparently not really prepared to be self-employed but are forced into the situation because French manufacturers rarely employ in-house designers. Hence the need for the French product designers in Saint-Etienne to join an association like Collective Designers+, whose focus is utterly commercial while the British association in Newcastle, Designed & Made, has a more artistic outlook.

Having said all this I still feel the need to play down these contrasts slightly in the light of recent research by the European Design Training Incubator (see EDTI "Design at Higher Education (HE) Level"). They have discovered that in most European countries, including both France and Britain, there appears to be a lack of continuous professional development, particularly in the area of design management, where they have discovered that designers are often poorly trained to negotiate with clients and to explain their areas of expertise.

As a conclusion, Charlie will now summarize the general cultural differences we have observed between the French designers and the British designer-makers.

(Charlie Arnold:)

In my experience in Britain inter-disciplinary creative practice and the blurring of boundaries between visual arts categories, such as art, craft and design has been encouraged by organizations such as the Arts Council for quite some time now. In France there appears to be less flexibility and rigid categories and traditional attitudes still apply - such as the perceived low status of artisans or makers.

Another example is design, which one of the French designers involved in the 10<sup>9</sup> project even argued was 'not an artistic practice at all'.

In contrast to this in Britain and Northern Europe I think the current anti-globalisation trend has drawn some of the more 'fine art' based and 'conceptually' orientated design graduates away from industry towards the 'design-crafts sector. Because Britain has recently incentivised the creation of small business, it has been possible for exceptional design graduates to set-up successful businesses creating high quality craft products. Unlike most French designers, graduates in Britain often specialize in a particular material during their time at art-school which they often reinforce with further practical training, in glass, wood, ceramics or textiles after degree level to further improve their 'making' skills. Their ethos, as sometimes is wrongly perceived in France, is not at all profit-driven nor one of providing luxury items to the elite but rather a political back-lash against cheap mass produced products and a desire to return to real 'value' using locally sourced materials and employing a local workforce to produce unique, carefully designed and made, reasonably priced products with integrity and lasting quality.

The two differing cultural climates in France and Britain that we have briefly attempted to describe here have provided a background context to the 10<sup>o</sup> design exchange which has both challenged and informed the dialogue between the independent designers from the 2 countries who, as we now understand, often have differing aspirations.

Only now after a year of 'intense' collaboration, visits and dialogue between the 10<sup>N</sup>/10<sup>S</sup> participants is the appreciation and acceptance of the others 'cultural difference' finally developing between the project partners, and now that this has finally been understood, the bonds between the British and French designers are really strengthening and beginning to show signs of more far reaching potential.

During the 10<sup>o</sup> project we noticed certain cultural paradoxes that I have attempted to describe here as a conclusion to our paper.

#### Paradox 1

The French designers have a strong theoretical and conceptual artistic training which they subsequently prefer to conceal from their clients. The British designers promote themselves as skilled, artistic makers which the French often perceive as lowly.

#### Paradox 2

The French designers are very concerned with their professional image and the commercial application of their designs but tend to be less financially successful than their British counterparts. The British designers are more tolerant of individuality and less industrially focused

#### Paradox 3

The French designers are more socialist in outlook and often promote the group over the individual by supporting ideas such as 'Design for All' and 'Design for the Real World' but in doing so accidentally support capitalist mass production by being submissive to industry.

Conversely, the British designers want to move away from mass production but in doing so accidentally become elitist serving a luxury market for the rich.