

# Form prefects

Paris is a hotbed of design, with age-old crafts at its service.

By Nolan Giles  
Photography Benjamin Schmuck

From Gustave Eiffel to Philippe Starck, Parisian designers have tended to define themselves through daring and divisive work on their ascent to stardom. But there's a change afoot in the French capital, with the next generation of design talent focused on a simpler, more contemplative and craft-driven approach to their work. Guillaume Garnier and Florent Linker, two of modern Paris's most promising designers, typify this shift. On a frosty January morning they are working quietly alongside artisans, surrounded by the white speckled walls of a plasterworks on the city's edge.

"We want to be close to the manufacturers," says Garnier, eyeing up the clean lines of a freshly cast stool from his and Linker's design firm, Garnier et Linker. The piece's plaster of Paris form

(currently in development for top Swiss gallery Ormond Editions) is much more minimalist than the ornate cornices, corbels and ceiling plates normally produced here. "We tend to drop the decoration but retain the references," says Linker, noting similarities between his firm's work and the output of 1930s French minimalist (and master plaster designer) Jean-Michel Frank.

Despite its musings on yesteryear, Garnier et Linker is part of a new avant-garde in Parisian design. Furniture makers here are eschewing loud and experimental ideas popularised in the showy 1990s and 2000s and instead drawing inspiration from tried and true manufacturing techniques. Interior designers too are championing the expertise of old French ateliers in commissioning custom



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(1) Materials on display at Pierre Yovanovitch's studio  
(2) Florent Linker (left) and Guillaume Garnier at Staff Espaces Volumes plaster works

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furniture for homes accross Europe and beyond. Even commercial-interior jobs in Paris are taking on a more sensitive and socially minded tone. “Contemporary design combined with the best French savoir-faire is coming back now,” says Garnier. “Of course, things were easier when manufacturers were inside cities but if you want to work with good workshops it’s still very achievable in France.”

Garnier et Linker tries to show the hand of the maker in its work as much as possible. The company says its DNA has been solidified since its formation in 2013 via conversations and collaborations with artisans skilled in working with alabaster, obsidian, volcanic stone, bronze, plaster and cast glass. At present they are working directly with nine ateliers in France, from coastal Brittany to central Auvergne. “Our design is almost ‘no design’; we try to make shapes that are very simple and reveal the materials,” says Garnier. “Sometimes customers get it, sometimes we have to explain the design and sometimes people just love the piece and don’t want to hear about how it is made at all.”

“The only way to create a product with proper techniques and materials is through working with these French craftsmen”

Garnier et Linker is not the only young Parisian firm crisscrossing the country to knock on the doors of French ateliers.

“We’ve been working with Atelier François Pouenat in Burgundy since 2012 on collections that emphasise its techniques, materials and savoir-faire,” says Studio Pool co-founder Léa Padovani. She meets us at Joyce Gallery, by the Palais Royal gardens, for an exhibition that her firm is launching with François Pouenat, a fifth-generation metal worker at the head of his family business. While the pieces on show are not cheap to make (after all, hours spent hammering a metal sheet to create a tactile finish for a piece of conceptual furniture is a costly undertaking), the well-heeled crowd here reflects a growing market for this type of design. “If we want to work locally we need to aim at

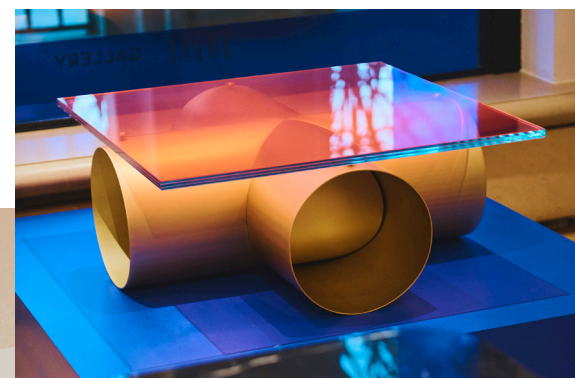


- (1) The team at Staff Espaces Volumes
- (2) Léa Padovani and Sébastien Kieffer of Studio Pool
- (3) Blow-torching bronze
- (4) Pierre Yovanovitch
- (5) Metalwork by Atelier François Pouenat
- (6) Meeting room at Pierre Yovanovitch’s studio
- (7) Materials at Pierre Yovanovitch’s studio
- (8) Lost wax casting at Garnier et Linker

a higher end of the market,” says Studio Pool co-founder Sébastien Kieffer of a portfolio blurring art and design. “The only way to create a product with proper techniques and materials is through working with these French craftsmen.”

Beyond top-tier galleries and chic furniture showrooms, good design is present in Paris’s more mainstream interiors commissions. Near the Champs-Élysées we meet Ramy Fischler, founder of RF Studio, a young firm currently overhauling major independent French film company MK2, while designing interiors for an adjoined Accor hotel. One of Fischler’s ambitions is to provide a truly social space that will coax locals back to this tourist-flooded corner of the city.

“As interior designers in Paris we don’t want to just change buildings – we want to change the whole ecosystem around them, we want to improve the neighbourhood and the mentality of the people using the buildings,” he says. As a case in point, last year his team designed Refettorio Paris, a project for chef Massimo Bottura’s Food for Soul initiative. The project was aimed



**Top techniques:** Comprehensive know-how around the decorative arts is drawing designers back to the atelier.

1. **Lost wax casting:** Shards of recycled glass are melted and recast using a method that creates some mesmerising results.
2. **Plasterwork:** Drawing upon plaster still mined in France, this malleable material can create decorative flourishes at a low cost.
3. **Embroidery:** A delicate craft still coveted in haute couture. Parisian design firm Studio MTX is reimagining the use of embroidery to create fabric façades and room dividers.







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(1) The loft at Pierre Yovanovitch's office  
(2) Mathieu Bassée of Studio MTX, a firm that draws upon the embroidery knowhow of its parent company, Atelier Montex (3) Pierre Yovanovitch's office (4) Handworking plaster

at dignifying the dining experience for the city's poor and homeless people. Here, in a crypt-like setting in the 8th arrondissement, whimsical touches such as playful hanging "clouds" and a lighting system cased in handsome curved timber frames creates a dining experience that feels both welcoming and intriguing.

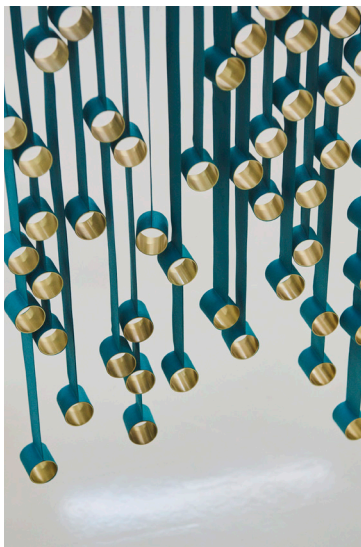
Fischler speaks of a contagious mentality within the design community in Paris to get on with doing thoughtful, quality work. The reason these designers rarely shout about it, it seems, is because they are all so busy getting on with the job. While emerging architecture companies have a difficult time getting past Paris's tough building codes, winning commissions within the walls of existing buildings is simpler. And, with the city in the midst of a revamp in the run-up to its hosting of the 2024 Olympics, interior design commissions are rife.

"Right now is the right time for the young generation here because of the mayor," says Fischler, noting that mayor (and urban reformist) Anne Hidalgo's introduction of policies on the redevelopment of old public buildings by private companies has been an enormous help. He says developers buying public buildings are being challenged through competitions to provide purposes beyond purely commercial ones – and it's often young designers coming up with the best ideas. "When asked what they can give back to the city, it's the younger firms that can provide the answers that the people of the city want to hear," he says.

We wrap up our tour in the Sentier in the 2nd arrondissement, an area formerly known for its manufacturing clout



(1) Studio MTX designs (2) Relaxing vibes in Pierre Yovanovitch's office (3) Ramy Fischler, founder of RF Studio (4) Bronze design by Garnier et Linker



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and now a base for a healthy mix of young start-ups, designers and creative businesses. Pierre Yovanovitch, one of France’s most respected interior designers, has his atelier here in an 18th-century *hôtel particulier*. Over multiple storeys of this beautifully refurbished architectural site, Yovanovitch is able to present his vision of French design to a bulging client base. “In many ways my design is quintessentially French in that I am focused on craft and historic preservation,” he says. “To me it’s never been about making bold, splashy design statements.”

As the daylight fades and a young cast of staff cheerily flip through libraries of material and fabric samples, the allure of this hands-on style of design is becoming more apparent. “At first sight you can see if the quality of the material is reliable, how deep and beautiful it is, and imagine how it will evolve in time,” says Yovanovitch. “This has to do with the fact that we live in a society in which we need design to make sense, to be more sustainable, quieter and more meaningful.” — (M)



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