

WORKPLACE DESIGN

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# onoffice



MARIO  
RUIZ

RATIONAL REFLECTION

PENGUIN BREAKS OUT  
TO OPEN PLAN

EDOUARD FRANÇOIS BRINGS  
LOVE TO THE TABLE

BANISHING THE GREY FROM  
DESKTOP PRODUCTS



# Back to basics

Mario Ruiz is a rarity – a Spanish designer who has broken through to the office furniture market – and he's a firm believer in the ethos that work is work and home is home. But that doesn't mean we can't make the office a better place to be...

■ When thinking of Spain, many images spring to mind (I'll spare you from rattling down the long list of obvious stereotypes), but furniture design is not one of them. And indeed when you speak to Spanish furniture companies – of which there are surprisingly many – they all seem to have a chip on their shoulder, a result of comparing themselves with or being compared to the Italians. Their fellow Mediterraneans have a long design history and a healthy self esteem... occasionally referred to as arrogance. The leading Spanish designer besides Mariscal – well known in the industry – is the gorgeous Patricia Urquiola, but she's lived, learnt (with Italian maestro Achille Castiglioni) and worked in Milan for so long now that she can hardly count as an example of typical Spanish craftsmanship.

Nonetheless in terms of office furniture manufacturers, Spain is experiencing a boom and adopting the Italian model of working with signature designers at that. So in light of the big office furniture exhibition Ofitec, 26-28 February, I went on a voyage to the land of the fighting bulls to investigate where this surge of office products is coming from. I didn't have to venture far to find the same name popping up again and again: Mario Ruiz. Spain's answer to Antonio Citterio?

One thing is for sure, every Spanish manufacturer from Dynamobel to Bordonabe is working with him, or is at least "meeting for pinchos" – a sure sign in Spain that future

collaborations are afoot. But Ruiz doesn't stop here. He is currently working on products with US biggies such as Haworth and Steelcase, proving that his popularity is spreading internationally and repositioning Spain on the design radar. The majority of the country's furniture manufacturers, such as Stua, Akaba and Sellex, are based in the Basque region due to its heavy steel industry and large port, but like most Spanish designers Ruiz is based in Barcelona. Unlike most, however, he hasn't gone down the route of creating eye-catching domestic furniture. Instead Ruiz specialises in office products. And this strict, rigid focus on functional design is largely part of his success.

"Office furniture design is complex," Ruiz tells me, via his translator. "It's about solving problems, it's very difficult but somehow this type of design suits the way I am." Which doesn't mean that Ruiz is complex and difficult – it's more that he's attracted to the challenging engineering side of design. "I feel comfortable in the type of environment where you work closely with the manufacturer." Ruiz doesn't have the flamboyance or air of certain celebrity designers, he seems to just want to get on with it – more of an accountant than a prima donna. "If you can design good office equipment you can design anything. It's the toughest sector of design due to the many variables that need to fit together." ☐



So once you've designed a task chair, a sofa is merely a walk in the park? "No, no." Ruiz slows down his Spanish and expresses division with his hands. "Office furniture and soft seating are two separate worlds! I believe there are two distinct types of design, one being the category of, for instance, office products: rational, involving a lot of logical thinking. The other, like a sofa, is emotional, more about what you feel when you see it, part of a moment." Ruiz has specialised in what he sees as rational design, developing a product through programming and a high level of intellectual effort.

His most popular products include Corner, a family of management tables for offices, for the Citterio Company, and K22 for Haworth, an office system made up of geometrical elements with a variety of coloured panels. Dis for Dynamobel is a stunning task chair, comfortable and classic in design. But Ruiz also has more unconventional products in his portfolio, like the outdoor lounge beds for Gandia Blasco or the Frame light fitting for B.lux, as well as the Panama lighting collection for Metalarte. But his core concern is the office, and for him it's a conservative place.

"In Spain especially people don't work flexibly, they work at a desk in an office. And to be honest any project I've worked on that tried to break

with that tradition failed. Either it was cancelled during development or it didn't make it onto the market. The concept of working from home doesn't work. The home office is always simply a mini office at home and you shouldn't work in your private surroundings. So while bringing the office into the home didn't work, bringing the home into the office did."

We discuss the recent movement of "softening" the workplace by adding home aesthetics like warm colours and soft fabrics. "Sure, the domestic influence in the office has been strong. In the evolution of workplace design, we first had the wave of ergonomics, then the 'electrification' took over, focusing on how to connect and wire up all the technology, and then came the approach to make offices more humane and with that the aim for it to feel more domestic." For Ruiz, this is a natural progression, and like most design disciplines, there is an overlap of influences.

"With workplace design the interlinks started a while ago: the home got into the office, the office got into the kitchen, the kitchen got into the bathroom and in the end it's a mix of environments." The strongest impact today comes from the kitchen, he says. "There is a common use between storage in the kitchen

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Left and bottom left: K22 office system for Haworth, 2005

Below: Corner management table for the Citterio Company, 2006

and the office. Most technical features that are applied in kitchen units are transferred onto office cabinets, such as hinges and soft closing mechanisms. Right now we're working on an office product for HBF that could easily be placed in a kitchen – the execution of the mechanisms and solutions are all adopted from kitchen designs."

Corian is a good example of a material that was developed for kitchen use and is now found frequently in workplaces – particularly as a material for custom-made furniture due to its highly durable properties. Looking forward, the phase of "domestication" has reached its climax, Ruiz claims. Like past evolutionary stages of workplace design, it takes its place as an automatic addition to the way office furniture is created now. A new era is on the horizon, and according to Ruiz this era is about returning back to basics: designing an office as a place to work. That may sound tautological, but looking at his products – with their technical, clean, almost sterile design – I see his point.

"Office furniture is moving back to looking more technical, to clearly distinguish itself from products at home. I strongly believe that in principle the office look, as a public place, should

differ from the home. Your private space should convey your personality while an office should represent a company's values or a team, and with that a very separate set of values from your own four walls."

So what about personalised design, the idea of each individual making their mark on their workstation, that was preached at Neocon and other shows last year?

"It's a misguided assumption that the self should have such weight in the workplace. The office is a place to work, that's what the design should facilitate. It can still convey a sense of belonging, but that's separate from feeling like a home. The ideal office equipment should be tailored to the individual, but not their personal characters, rather their individual job tasks. For instance, people may spend eight hours a day in the office, but most of these eight hours are split up into different activities, which require different environments and different equipment. Office furniture will not reach its maximum efficiency until companies realise they need to streamline the products to make the most of people's interactions while in the office." □

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This picture: Dis task chair for Dynamobel, 2006



How does a furniture designer know what I, as an editor of a monthly magazine, need?

**Right:** This handset, designed with Siemens for Telefonica, aims to be a popular fixture in Spanish and South American homes

**Below right:** New oven range for Teka [HPX750/2007] shows the linear theme Ruiz often uses in office furniture

**Bottom right:** Panama lamp, 2007, for Metalarte



So, adaptation rather than one appliance fits all. In reality, this depends on the degree of research manufacturers and employers are willing to invest in the development of specialised furniture. "Once it was about making people work, then making them comfortable – when health and safety and ergonomics hit the headlines – then easy access ruled the day. Now it's about making the most of people, aiding their skills to maximise the outcome," says Ruiz.

The idea has shades of the Frederick Taylor days, making people work as hard and efficiently as possible – a scenario most managers wouldn't dare to admit but secretly all push for. But also for employees, worklife could be much better if their environment was streamlined to make their job easier. We're not talking machines here, but small individualised design adjustments so that equipment is geared towards each job spec rather than person. If job descriptions are moulded to fit individuals' skill sets, could office furniture do the same? And what would it look like? How does a furniture designer know what I, as an editor of a monthly magazine, need?

Ruiz says he's already working with Steelcase in this direction, a firm that is conducting research around convincing FMs to buy into this multifaceted approach to office gear. "It's a new phase in the development of workplace design. Time will tell what the effect will be," says Ruiz.

Design is an obvious differentiator to add value to a company, making it stand out from its competitors, and Spain is currently experiencing a high. It can clearly distance itself from the Asian market through quality and design, and it's more down to earth in its approach to the market than other European countries. It's common knowledge that the Italian industry focuses predominately on retail, leisure and domestic, leaving a welcome gap for Spain's office surge. Spanish firm Akaba – once famed for unconventional design, now focusing on contract to survive financially – is rumoured to be talking to Ruiz about a possible collaboration. That'll be one to watch out for, as will the many launches Ruiz is working on for Milan. But for now we'll leave you with the very Spanish but very un-Ruiz "mañana" – look out for our Milan and Ofitec coverage in the next issues! ☒

