

Launched in 2008, the British Insurance Design Awards are the Oscars of Design.

By Eléonore Halluitte (eleonore@madebymeta.com (mailto:eleonore@madebymeta.com) / Meta – Production Manager)

Architecture, Fashion, Furniture, Graphics, Interactive, Product, Transport, **each category is reviewed by a panel of judges selected by the Design Museum**, founded by the Godfather of Design himself, **Sir Terrence Conran**. Without doubt, innovation is the main criteria – think *Avatar* by James Camron – yet the quality of manufacturing is also of prime importance, just as in any Tim Burton production. All in all, Design is best defined by its ambition to improve our daily life, either by making it easier, with products like the Magimix worshiped by all our mothers; or by making it more beautiful, the way Jonathan Ive took the mp3 player to a whole different level with iPod for Apple.



Jonathan Ive presenting iPod to the press for the first time in 2001, Getty Images

The Brit Insurance Design Awards may only be **three years old**, but they are already identifying trends, especially in Furniture. The controversial Design-Art movement climaxed in April 2008, during the Salone del Mobile in Milan. The pieces edited that year were divided into two categories. The first one gathered the works which were based on the various forms furniture offers (table, chair etc...), to create sculptural pieces, like **Nacho Carbonell's *Lovers Chair***, part of the *Evolution Series*, where **two independent chairs are linked together by a papier-mâché cocoon**. This body of work might have been more "grotesque" in its aesthetic,

than functional; it was nevertheless **Design Miami Directors' favourite piece, nominating it for best Furniture 2009.**



Lovers Chair by Narcho Carbonell. *Evolutions Series*, 2008

The second category put together all the designers who followed the reverse creation path, using the arts and the crafts, to create or reinvent certain types of furniture. **The Dutch designer Tord Boontje**, known for his poetic aesthetic, but also more widely for *Garland*, the pendant shades edited by Habitat, was also **nominated in 2009 for best Furniture with *Fig Leaf***. *Fig Leaf* is a fantasy wardrobe entirely made by the best French bronze and steel craftsmen, but also, and most importantly, by the British enamelling masters. The unparalleled know-how which these artisans poured into *Fig Leaf*, propelled the wardrobe into the grand tradition of 18th century fantasy furniture, putting the Decorative Arts back in the heart of design.



Fig Leaf by Tord Boontje, presented in Milan 2008 by Meta

What a contrast then, was it to see the 2010 Furniture nominees of the Brit Insurance Design Awards. If some pieces still recalled the design-art movement, like **the *Aluminium Extrusions* by the architect Thomas Heatherwick**, a new trend was yet clearly visible. **The Industrial designers had returned**, and they were claiming the centre stage back.



Aluminium Extrusions by Thomas Heatherwick, 2009

The Austrian duo, Katharina Mischer and Thomas Traxler, were favoured for their *Idea of a Tree*, where automatic production met solar energy. In this project, Man left his place to a loom, only put into action by daylight. Each object was then woven in the space of one day according to the amount of daylight it received, just like a tree. In other words, a concept 100% design, where each part was specially conceived for its function, and where its function's goal was to contribute to man's surroundings, should it be in practical terms, aesthetic ones and in this particular case, by being environmental friendly.



Idea of a Tree by Katharina Mischer and Thomas Traxler, 2008

Environmental friendly and simple manufacturing processes were indeed the key qualities to the nominated pieces of furniture in this year's edition of the Brit Insurance Design Awards. The same attributes were essential components of the winning piece, ***Grassworks* by Jair Strashnow**. *Grassworks* were a series of chairs, tables and other shelving systems, exclusively made from bamboo, with no extra parts to assemble them. Every aspect of *Grassworks* answered each preoccupation of Design: innovation, by choosing an under-exploited building material like bamboo; manufacturing quality, by going back to traditional cabinet making with classic dovetail joints; improving our daily life, by providing us with easy pieces to assemble and dismantle; and of course, placing beautiful furniture into our homes. Having perfectly scored on all of the above, Jair Strashnow could only win this year's Best Furniture Award.



Grassworks by Jair Strashnow, 2008-2009

The Brit Insurance Design Awards 2010 have pinpointed the changes in Design since 2008, showing designers slowly growing out of the creating frenzy of Design-Art, and returning to the roots of Design throughout 2009. Their evolution very much matched the world's own preoccupations. The sub-prime mortgage crisis, as well as the recession, had obviously walked through the door of designers' studios in 2009. The Brit Insurance Design Awards have had such clear-sight so far, that we can hope it will reveal if this mood swing in Design, clearly seen in Furniture, was either a simple lack of means, or a politically correct veil over Design-Art; or if more seriously, the economical crisis acted as a cold reminder of Design's quintessential values. Should the answer brought by the Brit Insurance Design Awards be as astute as its previous evaluation of the Design scene, then they will most certainly become a, if not the leading Design authority.

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