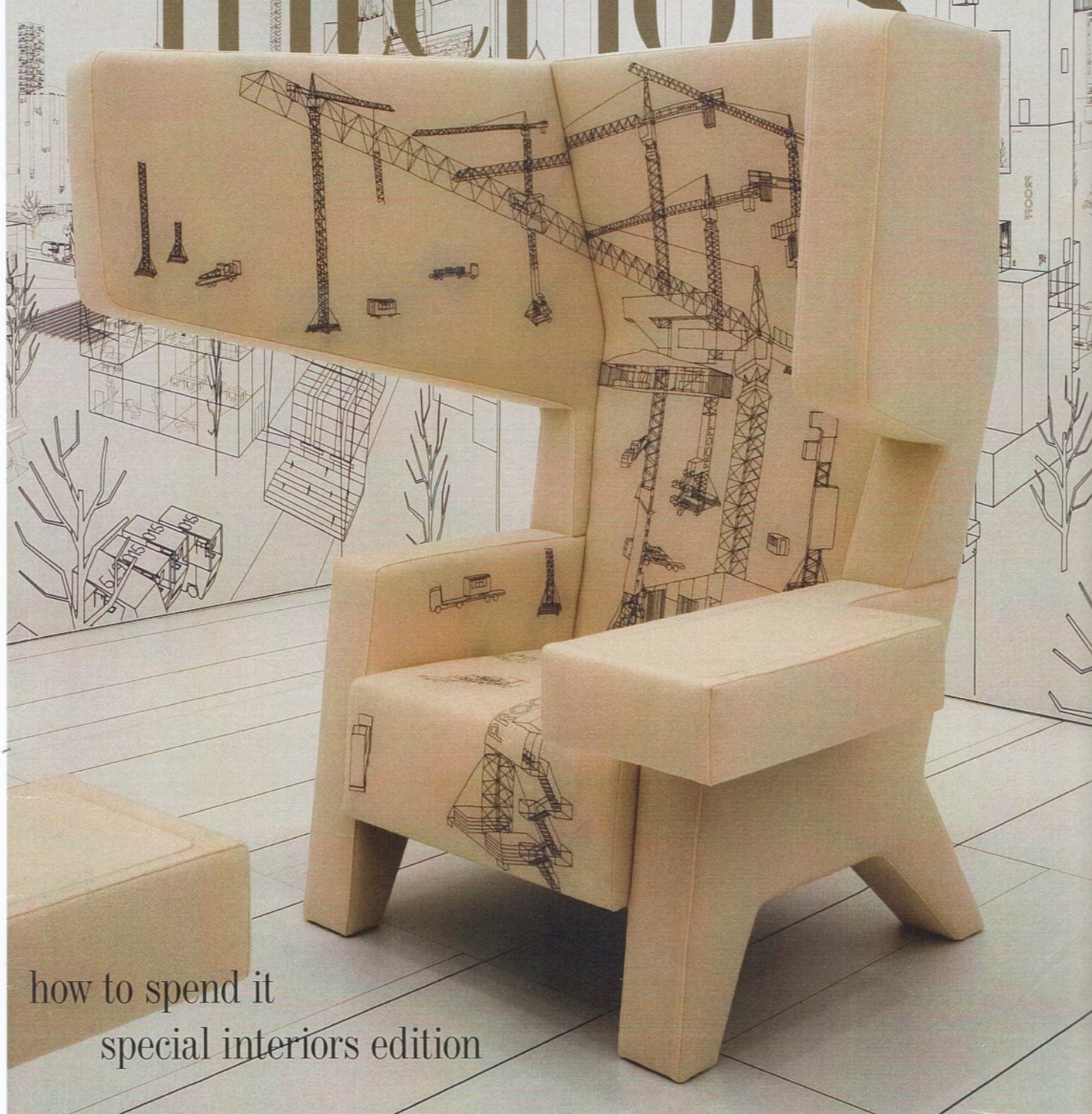


FINANCIAL TIMES

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superior interiors



how to spend it
special interiors edition

that's a beautiful code

The latest computerised objets can be surprisingly poetic. Emma Crichton-Miller reports.



At the far end of the balcony overlooking the main hall at Design Miami/Basel in June, there was a small, dark room. In this space of velvety blackness, visitors were confronted with a mesmerising constellation of square coloured lights that were fixed, somehow, onto the wall and changed colour in a programmed sequence, running a gamut of cool or warm hues (pictured overleaf). Beyond that, however, the installation itself was changing shape as people, now dimly glimpsed, moved the 220 squares of light into different patterns on the wall, creating shapes that were then animated by the changing colours. Then, most curiously of all, if you approached one of these coloured boxes yourself and placed your hand on it – one winking through green, blue and yellow, let us say – and then reached out to touch another box with your other hand, the second box would change colour to match the first.

Radius by Random International; a sound-reactive installation at Home House members' club in London.

howtospendit.com

The two boxes were sending messages through your body.

Two kiosks down, there was an entirely white room with what looked like a chandelier hanging in it, consisting of three large cube shapes created by vertical brass rods hung with LED lights (pictured overleaf). So far, so elegant. But as soon as you made a sound – spoke, clapped your hands, took a step – something remarkable happened: a shiver of light in the shape of a swarm of bees swept through the entire structure, passing from the first cube into the second and on into the third. The more sound you made, the more exuberant and various the movement of the swarm of light. The chandeliers could be made to show a swarm of bright light within a mostly dimmed background structure, or a dark swarm within a bright background. Like the previous installation, it looked like magic: poetic, thoughtful and sensuous.

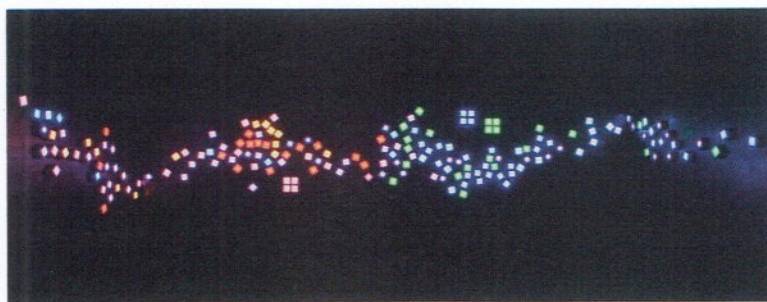
Both rooms were created by winners of the 2010 W Hotels Designers of the Future Award – design studios Zigelbaum + Coelho and Random International respectively. The award recognises designers working in innovative ways, either with new materials, new processes or new approaches. The focus this year was on designers working on the experimental cutting edge of design, creating objects for which there is as yet no distinct category, which cross the borders between art, sociology, design and technology. These two projects, in particular, brought to a design-minded audience – who are more accustomed to scrutinising tangible objects such as a Finn Juhl armchair or a Maarten Baas wardrobe – a glimpse of a world where what counts is the invisible part: the computer code that drives its transformations. Here digital technology is just as much a material for the creation of objects as wood or plastic; capable of not just beguiling an audience but actively responding to it.

Digital technology, and even interactive digital design, is not new. Within the worlds of television, graphic design, computer gaming, animation and even contemporary art, exploration of the borderlands of digital possibility is a daily adventure, with interactivity one aspect of a range of challenges. In whatever sphere, however, digital technology has until recently tended to result in objects – from the panoply of computer hardware to computer imagery and art installations – that are self-consciously “techie”: hard-edged, relishing function over softer values. What is new, then, is the desire among designers to turn these technologies to friendlier, more decorative, even domestic uses.

Shane Walter is the founder and creative director of Onedotzero, a pioneering arts organisation that has been supporting creative digital collaborations for 14 years, primarily through its annual touring festivals, the



Sellers identifies a trend among the young male designers trained in software design to create gentle, organic pieces.

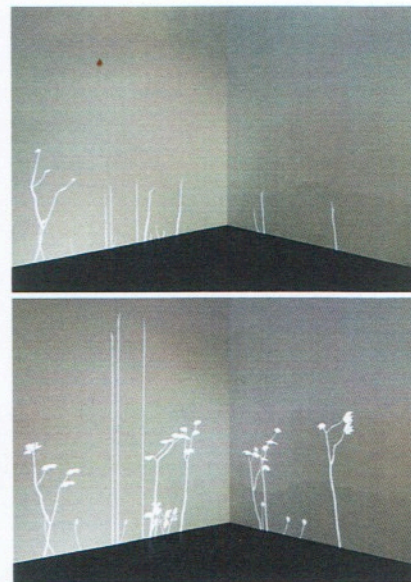


next of which is in London in November. “Over the past five years we have seen our audience shift from other creators, to the general public,” remarks Walter. “Everyone now uses computers. There is a confidence about digital technology among consumers, so it is no longer seen as alien, but as a much warmer thing. Designers are responding to this new attitude.” Onedotzero co-curated the groundbreaking show *Decode: Digital Design Sensations* at the V&A last spring, which introduced a wide general public to what has been bubbling under within the professional worlds of digital creation: “100,000 people came, of whom 95 per cent were not digital creators themselves. A lot of this work needs an audience in order to come alive, and that

makes it much more interesting. You become part of the artwork.”

This is literally the case with one piece exhibited in *Decode*. *Study For A Mirror* is a light-reactive screen print mounted like a mirror: if you stand in front of it, your image slowly forms, as if painted with light, then fades again to the mirror surface. This work, now in the V&A's permanent collection (other examples available, price on request), was created by the same young design collective as the *Swarm Light* (£105,000). Random International's three directors – Stuart Wood, Flo Ortkrass and Hannes Koch – met at London's Royal College of Art in 2002 and came together with a vision to provide a more hands-on, aesthetic experience of digital technology. For

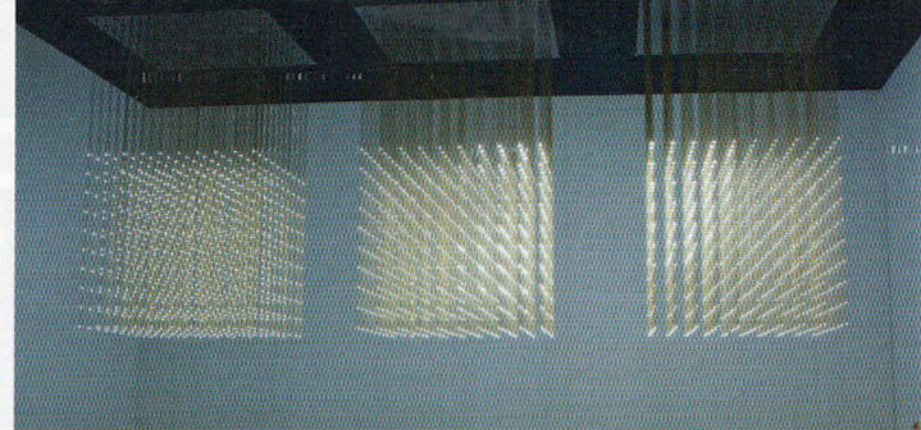
Clockwise from left: *Secret Garden* by Daniel Brown, from £14,500. *Lightweeds* by Simon Heijdens, price on request. *Six-Forty by Four-Eighty* by Zigelbaum + Coelho, price on request.



Basel they also produced a larger version of *Study For A Mirror*, entitled *Self Portrait* (£54,000). As you walk towards what appears to be a blank screen, an image begins to form, capturing the brief moment of your puzzled look, the designers standing to one side looking at your reaction. Then it disappears. An example of this work hangs in BMW's Munich HQ, but it is also suitable for domestic spaces. Other responsive pieces include *Radius* (pictured on previous page), a one-off commission for Home House members' club in London, made up of lights that respond to movement (it has inspired Random International's set for *FAR*, Wayne McGregor's new dance production, premiering at Sadler's Wells on November 17), and *Amplitude*, an extended version shown in Milan earlier in the year (site-specific variations to commission, from £64,000). An even more ambitious work, with the working title *Kinetic Chandelier*, will be launched in December; its lights, a series of parallel rods, will move around the viewer.

Daniel Brown, the London Design Museum's Designer of the Year in 2004, is another artist/designer keen to so entrance his audience that they forget the technology being used. Like many web-designers, Brown has been playing video and computer games since boyhood. In contrast to the often brutal aesthetics of such games, he has sought to create interactive images that draw on and elicit softer emotions. *Secret Garden* (pictured above left, edition of 25, from £14,500) is a software program that continuously captures the image of whomever stands in front of the monitor and then stimulates the growth of a field of digital flowers over the image. The flowers spread, blossom and fade in response to the physiognomy of the viewer.

Sellers identifies a trend among the young male designers who are



Above: Swarm Light by Random International, £105,000.

trained in the hard, number-crunching business of software design, to create such gentle, organic pieces. "They are driven," she speculates, "to conquer the technology, to demystify it."

Another artist in her stable is Simon Heijdens, whose startling, delicately beautiful pieces *Tree* and *Lightweeds* also featured in *Decode*. Heijdens first studied experimental film in Berlin before moving to the Design Academy Eindhoven to study product design. All his work shows a fascination with narrative and the poetic evocation of time and place. For *Lightweeds* (pictured on previous page, price on request), a computer takes data from the environment outside – sunlight, rainfall, wind – and then generates and projects onto the wall digital plants that grow in direct response to those outside conditions. In addition, these "living digital organisms", as the designer describes them, move in response to humans passing both outside and in the room. In Basel, Sellers was showing *Branches*, a new piece by Heijdens – a further experiment in his quest to imbue our domestic environment with a richer experience of time and natural processes. Here again, Heijdens' software programming captures the outside conditions and generates, in direct response to the movement of people within, a rich canopy of leaves and branches over the ceiling of the room. In a vast exhibition hall in Basel, the unexpected sight was delightful. Within your own drawing room it would have a different poetry, presented to you as a modest ceramic canister containing all the equipment (from £22,000).

For Jamie Zigelaar and Marcelo Coelho, this startlingly inventive, easy way with digital technology is what they call "post-industrial design". Zigelaar and Coelho, the team behind the magical squares of light at Design Miami/Basel enigmatically named *Six-Forty by Four-Eighty* (three of eight editions remain, price on request), have enough academic expertise between them to found an entire university, having studied neuroscience, film, design, electrical engineering, computer science, history and human computer interaction. When I enquire how they worked out the digital technology to enable the transfer of information from one square to another through the user's body, they

look puzzled: "But we're from MIT." In the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab they were encouraged to cross the institutional barriers between different disciplines, and to evolve what they refer to as "highly hybridised" working groups.

However, as Zigelaar puts it, "A lot of the stuff that happens in the Media Lab is very high-tech, of interest only to a closed academic community. We wanted to take these technologies and make something playful and beautiful that everyone could interact with. The form of computers and all our digital gadgetry today is artificial – hard, and hard to understand. It doesn't have to be like that. Digital technology is a much more beautiful substance. It is the responsibility of designers and artists to reveal this. Our work is about changing the materiality of computation." So, for Zigelaar and Coelho, those little square boxes are metaphors. They are pixels – pixels that can be lifted by hand and moved about (on a metal wall, as the light tiles have a magnetic base), that can respond to human beings in ways that are intuitive and entrancing. This piece will be on show alongside more of their work at *Riflemaker* in London from November 22 to December 22. Meanwhile, they're developing a new work for Design Miami. "We are at a pivotal moment in computational evolution," says Zigelaar. "Post-industrial design is about designing using a spectrum of tools and materials to generate not just new objects, but new experiences." ♦

GET WITH THE PROGRAM

Carpenters Workshop Gallery, 3 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020-3051 5939; www.cwgdesign.com); Random International exhibition, to November 13. **Daniel Brown**, www.danielbrowns.com and see Gallery Libby Sellers. **Gallery Libby Sellers**, www.libbysellers.com. **Onedotzero**, www.onedotzero.com; Adventures in Motion Festival, BFI Southbank and Imax, London SE1, November 10 to 14. **Random International**, 020-7488 0143; www.random-international.com and see Carpenters Workshop Gallery. **Riflemaker**, 79 Beak Street, London W1 (020-7439 0000; www.riflemaker.org); Zigelaar + Coelho exhibition, December 1 to 18. **Simon Heijdens**, 020-7033 3457; www.simonheijdens.com and see Gallery Libby Sellers. **Zigelaar + Coelho**, www.zigelaarcoelho.com.