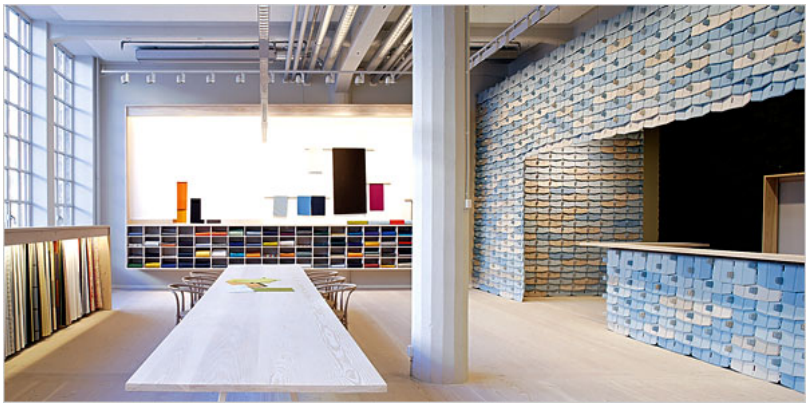
Dream Weavers



by Kvadrat

The Kvadrat showroom in Stockholm was designed by Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec, who transformed the space using their colorful, Lego-like fabric tiles.

By JANE WITHERS
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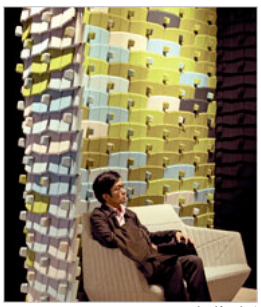
Modernism has not been kind to curtains. Le Corbusier damned them, along with cushions and other props of bourgeois prosperity. Mies, on the other hand, was a tyrannical curtainmeister: in some of his Lake Shore Drive apartments, in Chicago, residents are still obliged to use a gray, white or silver material to shade their floor-to-ceiling windows. By the time minimalism rolled around, fabric was at its nadir. For the textile industry, it must have felt like peddling fountain pens in the dawn of the computer age. Of course, there have been talented fabric designers all along, but the net effect of modernism has been to reduce our idea of textiles to a sea of nubby beige tweed. Now that decoration is no longer Satan in satin, the challenge is how to reinvent the possibilities — and ultimately the perception — of fabric in a modern setting.



by Kvadrat

Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec Lego-like fabric tiles.

Here's where Kvadrat comes in. The innovative Danish textile company, which was founded in 1968 by Poul Byriel and Erling Rasmussen, is designing as fast as it can, collaborating with designers like Tord Boontje and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, as well as with artists like Rosemarie Trockel, Thomas Demand and Olafur Eliasson.

From the start Kvadrat was immersed in postwar design. Anders Byriel, the son of Poul Byriel, who is spearheading the company's new direction, recalls that when he was growing up, Verner Panton and the experimental architect Gunnar Aagaard Andersen were frequent visitors to the family home in Jutland, where the headquarters remain. Another early collaborator was Finn Skodt, the graphic designer and artist, who was instrumental in developing Kvadrat's palette. His designs Divina and Topas are still produced in a spectrum of about 60 eye-popping colors.

Arvid Furniture Courtesy Of Maharam

The company's best-known fabric is Hallingdal by Nanna Ditzel.

Kvadrat's best-known fabric, however, is arguably its first: Hallingdal, a tweedy texture in a kaleidoscope of hues, was conceived by the legendary Danish designer Nanna Ditzel, who died in 2005. You can find Hallingdal covering everything from an Arne Jacobsen chair to a Jasper Morrison sofa, but more important, it has come to symbolize fabric's role as a powerful — if unsung — partner in modern design.

From Kvadrat

The whole nine yards: "Red Dress," a collaboration between Kvadrat and the

Peter Saville, the noted British art director who has been hired by Kvadrat to overhaul the company's visual identity, says: "The thing that amazes me about Hallingdal is that one fabric can evoke so many associations. In orange it can be one thing, in gray quite another. From people smoking

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designer Aamu Song.

pot to the dentist's waiting room. Not many things cross the sociocultural spectrum like that."

Byriel's goal for Kvadrat extends beyond artistic collaborations and new patterns to textile products that have never been imagined before. Perhaps the most salient example of this can be found in Kvadrat's Stockholm showroom, located, fittingly, in a former mill. Designed by the Bouroullec brothers, the space is an exercise in futurism, a blank white box transformed by walls of their fabric-covered North Tiles into a dazzling, pixilated color field. In addition to lining the entrance, the scaly walls function as partitions to define the meeting and sample rooms. The impression is playful — like weaving through an amusement park of Technicolor armadillos. Not only do the tiles divide the space and soften it, but they also absorb sound and light (qualities that also made them particularly useful in the dining area that the Bouroullecs designed for I. M. Pei's glass wing of the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean in Luxembourg).

Each tile is made of foam core sandwiched between fabric layers. Essentially textile modules, rather like soft Legos, they interlock into all manner of configurations. All this ingenuity comes at a price, however — about 400 euros per square meter, or roughly $50 per square foot — and they require considerable scale for effect. Just launched in Europe, the tiles are undergoing tests for use in the United States and will eventually be distributed here through Kvadrat's American partner, Maharam.

Meanwhile, in Milan, Kvadrat's new showroom features the work of the Argentine designer Alfredo HÃ¤berli. Here, too, fabric is used to create spaces, and for dramatic effect: the staircase is hung with a patchwork fabric that makes the bannister look as if GaudÃ had designed it. The London showroom, which is due to open next year, is a collaboration between Saville and the British architect David Adjaye, who plan to give the work, living and gallery space a "homelike atmosphere."

In the company's collaborations with artists, the only brief seems to be Byriel's wish that a textile "is used in a way you would not normally experience it." For example, in the "Red Dress" project in 2005, the Korean designer Aamu Song created a vast red gown large enough to accommodate both a singer and the audience. Kvadrat also worked with Rosemarie Trockel on the exhibition "Post-Menopause" at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. Wool is to Trockel what felt was to Jospeh Beuys. A dense forest of blood-red threads were stretched taut to fill the exhibition space, creating a spatial experience in three dimensions.

As fabrics return to the interior landscape, it is reassuring to see a fairly large player like Kvadrat willing and able to explore new frontiers. But sometimes all that is required is a fresh perspective. When the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson and the Norwegian architect Kjetil Thorsen (of the firm Snohetta) undertook the design for the Serpentine Gallery in London, their use of cushions and balls made from Kvadrat's upholstery fabric Tempo was temperamentally perfect.

Mies, rest in peace.

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