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London's furniture designers are making it their way

Between steep rents and shuttered studios, young makers continue to thrive



Francesca Perry

Rio Kobayashi lies on one of his fish-shaped tables © Sebastian Bruno

6 Sep 2025

Walking around Shoreditch in east London, cocktail bars mix with sleek start-up offices, and lifestyle stores neighbour Michelin-starred restaurants. A hundred years ago, this area was the heart of London's furniture-making industry, and traces of its workshops can still be seen in the streetscapes — industrial pulley systems attached to elegant brick buildings, faded painted signs advertising furniture companies. Luxury furniture shops dot the neighbourhood today, but the manufacturing is long gone, pushed to out-of-town factories. Less a centre for making, Shoreditch is now a showcase for it. At this month's London Design Festival (LDF), the area will be one of 10 "design districts" in the city staging exhibitions and events.

As with other post-industrial urban hubs, the heritage of making has become part of the cultural cachet that sustains Shoreditch's creative reputation, as well as its steep rents. But while design is co-opted by the commercial forces shaping the contemporary city, London's young designers are driven by something else. Based in Shoreditch, Max Radford is director of the eponymous design gallery that platforms the new generation.

"London is trying to create a new scene in which collaboration is key to success," he says. The designers he works with — many of which feature in his Grain Pile exhibition during LDF — are "elevating" one another, sharing knowledge and networks. In part that's a generational shift, says Radford, a designer himself, but it's also a response to the fact London is such a "challenging" place to be now for makers. The lack of affordable housing and studio space breeds a resilience, he says, that forces people to double down. "It's difficult to do it here — but we just do it better, harder, on the weekends and in our own time."

London's design culture builds on centuries of heritage beyond manufacturing, from educational institutions to museums. Waves of London-based furniture designers have come to the fore, including Tom Dixon and Jasper Morrison in the 1980s, who now both boast CBEs, and Martino Gamper and Max Lamb in the 2000s. Now, in the wake of a social media revolution and a global pandemic, a new community of young designers is taking root. Much of their work is celebrated as art — Radford calls it "art furniture" — reflecting a shift seen more broadly in the design world as the discipline's edges blur.

Rio Kobayashi

In Rio Kobayashi's furniture, tables are shaped like giant fish, benches resemble constructions of pick-up sticks and old doors are transformed into new objects. This playful experimentation might explain why Kobayashi's work teeters between art and design: a classically trained cabinetmaker, he is exhibited by art galleries (a solo show with London gallery Kate MacGarry takes place in November).



Rio Kobayashi, *Fish Table (Fatty Tuna)*, 2019 oak, acrylic paint, oil, hand-painted by James Hague

He jokes of a wooden chair he made last year for Californian gallery Blunk Space, crafted with irregular pieces of salvaged wood, that he cannot show it to furniture-making colleagues he trained with, “because it is all wrongly done”. Yet the chair was purchased by San Francisco MoMA. Kobayashi likes the art world because “no one tells me what to do”, but doesn’t care for labels. “I don’t need to be categorised as a furniture maker or an artist. It’s just me creating things. Growing up in a multicultural context, I always wanted to remove categorisations.”

Born in rural Japan, a furniture-making apprenticeship in Austria led to stints in Berlin and Paris before moving to London in 2017, where he worked for Martino Gamper and then established his own practice. Though Kobayashi sometimes dreams of the abundant, affordable space back in the mountainous Tochigi prefecture where his parents live, he admits there is something about London that catalyses creativity. “London makes me feel like I have to do it,” he says.

A version of this article appears online at www.ft.com, 6 September 2025