Flos

Simplicity can be extremely complicated, a principle well demonstrated by Flos’s Superloon standing lamp. The light, designed by British minimalist Jasper Morrison, is an elegant glowing disc mounted on a pivoting stand, resembling the offspring of a movie spotlight and a shaving mirror. The only features that hint at its technical sophistication are the thinness of the disc and the lunar evenness of the light it produces.

Supericon uses a technology called edge lighting, which is primarily used in display systems and more utilitarian commercial settings. But Flos was looking to apply it in the home.

“We showed some designers how edge lighting worked, using architectural lighting suspensions for office space that we have,” explains Flos’s chief executive, Piero Gandini, “and they reacted in different ways.” Konstantin Grcic, for instance, employs it in a very small scale in the OK lamp. But Morrison proposed something much more ambitious, stretching the capabilities of the technology.

Edge lighting uses LEDs, but rather than simply arranging them in a field pointed where you want the light to go, it arranges them around the edge of the
field, pointed inward. So the LEDs in Superloon are arranged at the outermost edge of the disc, and point towards its centre. What turns this into a glowing field emitting a smooth beam of light is a sandwich of prismatic films. These capture the ray emanating from the LEDs and turn them 90 degrees out into the world. Gandini refers to it as a kind of “indirect direct” light.

That makes it sound almost easy, but it wasn’t. In normal applications, edge lighting uses square or rectangular forms. Arranging the LEDs in a circle – and a relatively large circle at that – meant it was fiendishly difficult to get the prismatic films to work correctly.

“The risk of bad lighting, or dim lighting, or inefficient lighting, is very very high,” says Gandini. “So it was problematic to achieve serious quality and good efficiency. We went everywhere. We went to factories from Germany to Taiwan, and we looked at every material... This stuff needs to be very specific.” The calculations to align the LEDs with the prisms were a considerable headache. “And if you do that on a big scale as we did, you really multiply the problem.”

But the result is not only attractive, it achieves something unusual for LED lighting: it gets warmer as the light is dimmed, similar to an incandescent light.
Above: The luminous disk of the Superlooon by Jasper Morrison being controlled in the anti-dust room.

Below: Stacked on the rack before the final assembly, a couple of Guns Lounge lamp stands from Philippe Starck’s Guns Collection for Flos.

Right: A view of the presentation room where designers are invited to review their projects and samples.
“I’m always looking for what the most definitive material or process might be for the specific job it has, so while I’m interested in the latest technologies, there comes a point where newer is not always better. And we’re certainly looking for better, not newer.”

John Kings
Vitsoe

Flos is not a business venture, it is a cultural venture. We have to create some business as we go, but it is mainly a cultural venture.”

Piero Gandini
Flos

“It’s hard when you’re trying to disrupt your own systems and to get people to think about what you’ve been working on for a long time in new ways. It took a couple of us to say ‘No, this is really important for us, we need to show we can do things in new ways, and even if we lose money on the business side of it, the learning will be worth it.”

John Hamilton
Coalesse

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and the tooling was still in place, Kings tells me. “[The moulds] still had Vitsoe’s name on them and the surfaces were in amazing condition for their age. These huge hydraulic compression machines don’t die. And that solved all our problems at once.” In-depth research had resulted in no change at all: a completely faithful component.

It’s a story that connects all these efforts to innovate — a sense that design is an ongoing dialogue of material and technique, connecting to previous generations of designers and artisans. All of these companies are acutely aware of being part of a design tradition of experimentation, exemplified by the fiberglass and plywood investigations of Charles and Ray Eames in the 1950s.

“I think if [the Eameses] were alive today, they would be playing with carbon fibre, in combination with wood,” says Coalesse’s Hamilton. “As designers, it is our responsibility to be looking at materials and wondering how we can process them different ways.” Indeed, Coalesse has an internal project specifically to do this, continually applying old-world materials to new-world processes, or vice versa, to see if something useful can be developed. This sense of being part of a continuum is nicely expressed by Gandini when he says that Flos “is not a business venture, it is a cultural venture. We have to create some business as we go, but it is mainly a cultural venture.”