

Lievore altherr. molina

words by Jenny Brewer

Fresh from the launch of their latest collection for Arper, this trio of Barcelona-based designers have proved that functionality doesn't have to be unsightly

Simplicity is more complicated than it looks, especially when it comes to workplace furniture. Aesthetically, designs are often bogged down by clunky mechanisms, or functional to the point of cold, and devoid of human connection. This is something Barcelona-based design trio Lievore Altherr Molina aims to change. Since 1991 the studio has focused on the delicate balance between functional and humanist design, developing a knack for pure aesthetics that has steadily infiltrated the contract market, and is exemplified in its latest collection for Italian brand Arper.

Launched at Orgatec, Kinesit is a regulation task chair, but not as we know it. All its unsightly gubbins, including seat and height adjust mechanisms and lumbar support, are neatly hidden away, leaving nothing to interrupt its slim, minimal outer shell, and its form is soft and subtly curved at every angle. It further develops a concept Jesonette Altherr – one of the studio founders – calls Soft Tech. “It means the technology is embedded in the furniture,” explains Altherr. “It’s not visible – it’s intuitive, it whispers, it does not shout.”

A simpler appearance, however, requires it to be more technologically advanced. Kinesit’s clean lines are

made possible by a patented new mechanism that has prompted some lofty comparisons. “There is a rumour we did it with Apple, which is not true,” Altherr laughs, “but it’s the same idea. People have become used to working technology and equipment being neat, lightweight and fuss-free, she says, and the same thinking should be applied to the whole environment. In many cases it isn’t, especially with chairs, which seemed “like dinosaurs” comparatively and initially put them off the idea of designing for the workplace at all.

“I have to admit, we were never attracted by this grey, functional idea of workspaces. From the outside it’s very bulky and noisy. An environment should be seen as a holistic idea.”

If any trio can holistically cover all aspects of a project, it’s these three, with international perspective and a wide scope of design disciplines. Argentinian Alberto Lievore studied architecture and worked as a furniture designer in his hometown of Buenos Aires before moving to Barcelona, while German Jeannette Altherr studied industrial design, and Manel Molina – the only Barcelona native – trained in interiors.

“We are three totally different and complementary personalities, but we share a similar sensibility,” says Altherr of the studio dynamic. All three design, she says, but each has developed a specialism, their own role in the group. “Alberto is the intellectual, strategies and theories, myself in the contemporary culture and visual communication, and Manel in the

design development,” she explains. → This breadth allows each project to be looked at from every angle possible, which is perhaps how they manage to trim the fat so adeptly. “When a project leaves the office it has gone through so many filters that there is little danger that it will awaken only a short-lived interest.”

The studio began when Lievore worked with Spanish brand Andreu World, designing the Lynn chair in 1989. When he began working with Altherr and Molina two years later (then officially founding in 1994), they continued to work with their fellow Spaniards on art direction, product design and consultancy – an ongoing relationship they still enjoy now. Then in 2001, the Catifa 53 chair was created for Arper, which Altherr considers the studio’s big break. It was representative of how the studio set out to design visually lightweight and user-sensitive products that reduce the superfluous. “A client said our works are ‘conclusions’, which we really identify with. It’s a pretty good translation of the Spanish ‘síntesis’, which means to concentrate an idea to its essence, not to be confused with minimalism from a formal perspective.”

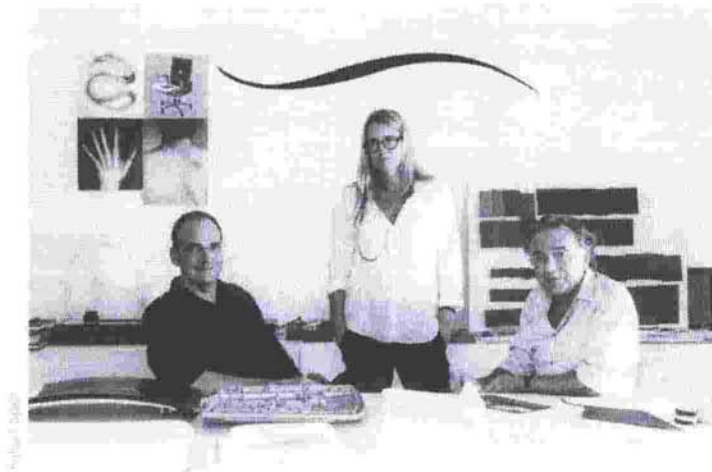
Since then there have been numerous iterations of Catifa, including the latest, Catifa Sensit; a plethora of other Arper products, including Leaf, Zinta, Saya, and Ply; and other pieces, such as lighting for Vibia and Foscarini, and furniture for


Poltrona Frau, Tacchini, Arketipo and Sellex. Due for launch in 2015 are a system of acoustic panels that Altherr says could become space dividers, a sofa and AV-integrated wall panels.

Each project starts with an in-depth exchange of views between the three of them, says Altherr, and work flows from one desk to another with the designers using drawings, renders and models to convey ideas. Ultimately it all filters down to a simplified final piece. "We're searching for a form that is dense but balanced, attains a serene tension, free of stiff gestures or jokes."

Referring back to Kinesit, Altherr comments on the "revolution" in the landscape of workplace. She believes it is a reaction to technology allowing us

to work anywhere, and studies showing the importance of interaction between workers, and that there is a growing conscience that different moments require different work environments. "I think we will revise our clichés of how an office should look, to find more individual expressions for our work environment," she says. Kinesit, for example, wouldn't look out of place at home, which Altherr says is part of an across-the-board merging of domestic and commercial environments. "It's the kind of furniture that could move from one area to the other, home and work. It makes no sense to divide it any longer. Offices [have] become more like home, more human." □



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