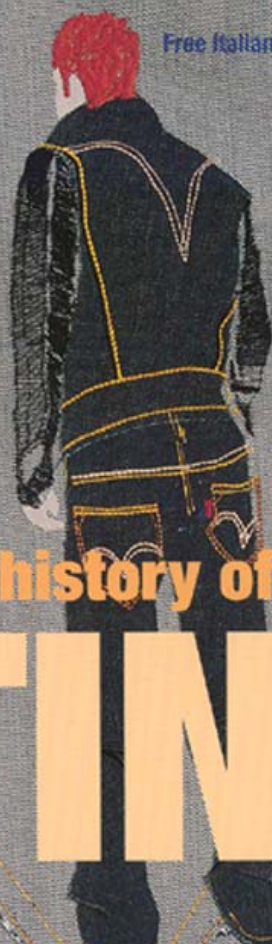


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UP AND RUNNING

Just a year ago Etienne Burgos and Simon Dance left Foster & Partners and John Pawson's offices to set up in practice. Now they are on the same shortlist as Peter Zumthor. **Katy Greaves** charts their rise

PORTRAIT JOE MILES

Some people are born to be A-list.

BorgosDance & Partners has only been (officially) in business a year, yet already it's being shortlisted for invited competitions with the likes of Richard Meier, Shigeru Ban, Alvaro Siza, Peter Zumthor and Daniel Libeskind. You couldn't say it's gone to their heads, as it's refreshingly human to see Simon Dance clearly delighted and slightly disbelieving that his firm is on the same shortlist as Zumthor, his hero. Yet BorgosDance & Partners is building up something of a reputation.

Simon Dance and Etienne Burgos are self-confessed devotees of "rigour" in design. But then I guess you don't emerge from six years with John Pawson without either being something of a perfectionist in the first place or having a little of it rub off on you. Dance left Pawson's office last year to set up the new firm with Burgos, formerly a project director at Foster & Partners.

The pair has been collaborating on projects in their spare time for several years. Their first, a 1997 design competition for a 30ha site in the port area of Osaka, covering everything from masterplanning down to street furniture, won the runner-up prize out of 531 entries, demonstrating the practice's ambition and capability.

"It was a perfect fit for us, because we like to work at different scales," says Dance. BorgosDance's proposal addressed the linear open spaces adjacent to Osaka's harbourfront, unifying a canal promenade and

seafront park with carefully placed translucent and solid wall elements with different functions, scales and colours. Unfortunately, the Japanese economy faltered soon after and the project was put on hold.

After this, a few residential and furniture-design projects kept Burgos and Dance busy, along with an office for North – a graphic design company – in a rather basic Thirties industrial building in Bermondsey. They created an open-plan studio space and bound it in a Stanley Kubrick-inspired translucent double-glazed skin. One transparent wall allowed views out to a small courtyard space with translucent screens and bamboo planting. Inside, custom-built furniture displays a Pawsonesque oasis of calm clean lines and pristine planes.

So just how much of their former employers' methods come through? Cross Foster and Pawson and do you get BorgosDance & Partners? It hardly seems a match made in heaven; Foster's large-scale structures, all steel and glass and macho expressionism, and Pawson's restrained, concealed interiors... But things are never that clear-cut. While acknowledging a debt, Burgos and Dance definitely have their own ideas and ways of working.

Dance is British, always knew he was going to be an architect and studied at Brighton University before giving up his place at the Bartlett to dive straight into practice. He worked in Brunel for a time, with the Sultan

among his clients. Burgos is a globe-trotting American of Puerto-Rican extraction. He studied architecture at Yale, graphic design at a German university and then architecture again at London's Architectural Association.

"We've both got a broad outlook, but we come from disparate backgrounds and the combination of the two is electric. It creates tension," says Burgos – before laughingly amending his words to "creative tension". "We're both passionate."

They clearly work well together, though, as they can be working in separate offices only to find that they've drawn almost the same thing. They also have this rather endearing – and clearly unconscious – habit of saying the same thing at the same time, sometimes just chiming the odd word together while the other is speaking. In fact the only tension during our interview is the need for Burgos to catch an afternoon flight to the practice's Barcelona office, which is housed in the factory of its Spanish director, Xavier Basiana.

BorgosDance & Partners has several projects in Spain, including schemes for the city councils of Barcelona and Valencia. Having an office there and a Spanish director helps with regulations and codes but the space there is also a luxury after their "compact" London office. Often they'll take a couple of members of the team for an ideas "jamming session". "It's good to feed off a different environment," says



RICARDO GONZALEZ

Previous page, Borgos (left) and Dance. This page, left and right, Mercado de Colon, Valencia, view from the first floor; below North Design Studio reception; bottom, clockwise from top left, desk and stool; Mercado de Colon view from basement; East Hoe Barn, Hampshire, view towards living area; view of existing barn



RICARDO GONZALEZ

Dance, admitting that the availability of great beaches, bars and tapas may also have something to do with it.

In fact, a project in Spain set the practice up on its own last year. Borgos left Foster & Partners to do some travelling, but BorgosDance was invited to interview for a building project in Valencia. The practice won and he had to cut short his holiday to

"IT'S ABOUT SENSITIVITY. WE TAKE IN THE CHARACTER OF THE BUILDING AND CITY AND DRAW FROM IT; WE LIKE THE TENSION BETWEEN OLD AND NEW"

turn in a very fast scheme for the refurbishment of a market square.

This scheme demonstrates the practice's approach to architecture. The Mercado de Colon is a market building dating from 1916 and is essentially two masonry portals with a plaza underneath; a Grade I listed monument which had fallen into disrepair. The Ayuntamiento de Valencia wanted to regenerate the building and its commercial activity.

BorgosDance went to meet the city council with one of its typical packages – a bible-sized wad of detailing for all the architectural elements, right down to the cladding specification. Also in there was a range of designs encompassing signage, street and

interior furniture right down to the candelabra on the dining tables.

"We like the idea of total design, a total experience," explains Dance. An element of control freakery perhaps, and what you would expect from your typical perfectionist. But where BorgosDance confounds expectations is in its respect for what is existing. The practice exerts rigorous standards over its interventions, yet also has the confidence to leave well alone.

"It's about sensitivity," says Dance. "We take in the character of the building and city and draw from it; we like the tension between old and new. For instance, you can never straighten walls in a 100-year-old apartment and why should you? That's 100 layers of history – why try and eradicate that? Our point is that you deal with what is there and your intervention, your object, is your concern."

The modernista architecture of the Mercado de Colon with its mosaics and Gaudiesque carved animals will remain, therefore, and BorgosDance's intervention is a series of discrete volumes housing activities such as small exquisite retail outlets and cafes. The volumes are apparently supportless etched glass boxes which filter light into the space with a rippling effect as through ice. An elegant open atrium at the lower level uses planting and water features to create an oasis for the hot Valencian summers.

The practice employed a similar approach in its design for a Hampshire barn conversion and extension to create a residential and work space.

The red brick, oak and elm envelope is preserved intact, with wavy roof and odd slope in the floor, and closed off where necessary with glazing. Inside, spaces are defined with structural elements – really large-scale pieces of contemporary furniture that stay short of touching the building fabric directly.

"It's the juxtaposition of the old and new that creates the tension we like," says Borgos. The new-build element of the scheme is subtly constructed in timber and glass on the site of a former outbuilding. It tucks under the eaves of the existing barn creating a natural courtyard and melds, through sensitive planting, into the landscape. English Heritage is so appreciative of BorgosDance's approach that it is using the project in its own publication.

With all this historic sensitivity going on, you'd think that the practice would be hankering after an unencumbered piece of new-build to get its teeth into. Its latest competition entry is probably as near as you can get. It is for a school of design on one corner of a huge industrial site that was formerly a mining plant, masterplanned by OMA – this is the one in which it is competing with a stellar cast of architects.

The brief is for a whole identity as well as a new building for a new German design school. "It does make you focus your thinking to get it just right," says Borgos, as presumably does the list of their fellow invited competitors. No Foster or Pawson on the list though... proof, if needed, of the pupils outgrowing the masters. **B**



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