

# Beyond Aesthetics

by ALEXANDER WELSCHER

*Highly functional with a clear contemporary aesthetic. Inspired by nature and history, based on the traditional cultural heritage and stimulated by new technology. Baltic-made design is on the rise.*



**E**stonia, Latvia and Lithuania have long been known for their natural diversity, beautiful landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Being heavily forested, sparsely inhabited and directly located on the Baltic Sea between the Nordic countries, Central Europe and Russia, the Baltic states boast plenty of untouched nature and a climate characterised by warm summers and fairly severe winters. This raw, ancient power of the landscapes, environment and seasons feed the imagination of many contemporary designers who tap into the attributes, forms and values of nature. Further inspiration comes from national crafts and artistry, which are skilfully combined with today's modern elements.

For designers from the Baltics, innovations often go hand in hand with the wide use of traditional materials, colours and patterns. They exhibit a broad scope of talent and exquisite craftsmanship in their work which is indicative of their country of origin and reflect its heritage, while moving it forward into the 21st century. A design scene has emerged throughout Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and is promoting itself to the rest of the world – with a somewhat Nordic approach and aesthetic that also adds a distinctive twist of its own by eschewing convention and pushing materials into unexpected territory. The lines between design and applied art are often blurred.

### Combing tradition and modern ideas

“Baltic Design has been influenced by local climatic conditions and the quality of available resources and suitable materials. Another important role is played by contacts with other people and their traditional crafts. Due to our geographical location, we have always been

at the international crossroads of trade, commerce and cultural exchange”, explains Viva Ieviņa of the Latvian Designers Society (LDS). “Contemporary designers have found a way to honour that past and make it their own. We have seen a broad and extensive development within creative fields that is being taken forward by a younger and increasingly cross-disciplinary generation.”

Representing the LDS at the international design fair “Design Isle” in Riga, the certified interior designer also refers to various handicrafts that have been kept alive for centuries. “Designers are still using many long-established techniques and elements, but they are also incorporating modern influences from all over the world. This makes their designs more and more global”, says Ieviņa and points to some of the exhibits at the fair. Showcased at her stand are the nominated works for the LDS Design Award, which is held annually in four categories – interior, environmental, product and visual communication



by various cultural influences and creative minds with unique solutions. Despite certain differences between the designs from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, they generally have much in common: minimalism, simplicity and understatement is widespread – with clear lines, simple shapes and ecological materials. Colours also tend to be reticent, but in the end there is no such thing as a monotonous product.

### Form follows function

Offering many similarities with Scandinavia, it is all about honest, no-nonsense design for the people. Utility and longevity dominate.

## » Each country has its own approach and aesthetics, based on its complex socio-political history and shaped by various cultural influences and creative minds with unique solutions.

design. Further on, other leading Baltic designers and design companies present their ideas and solutions which mix elements from different cultures.

Having many connections with folk traditions, national motifs and symbols, contemporary design in the Baltics is still often a modern interpretation of something from the past. Each country has its own approach and aesthetics, based on its complex socio-political history and shaped

“Ascetic, oriented towards basic needs and functions, a smart aesthetic, and little focus on luxury”, is how Ilona Gurjanova, President of the Estonian Association of Designers, describes the intrinsic qualities of Estonian design. This can also be said of the styles shown by its Baltic neighbours. All are characterized by their thoughtfulness: functionality comes first, mixed with wit, a clever use of forms and plenty of clarity that offers space to breathe.

**BALTIC DESIGN HAVENS**

You want to find something for yourself in the vast selection of Baltic design products? Then design shops and concept stores are the best places to visit – most of them also operate as showrooms and give a quick overview of local trends. Here is our selection for where to go in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius:

**ESTONIA**

**Tallinn Design House**  
tallinndesignhouse.com  
Rotermanni 14, Tallinn

**Estonian Design House**  
estoniandesignhouse.ee  
Estonia puistee 9, Tallinn

**Tali Concept Store**  
talidesign.eu  
Kotzebue 33, Tallinn

**Les Petites**  
lespetites.ee  
Telliskivi 60A, Tallinn

**Oma Asi Design**  
omaasi.com  
Viru 21, Tallinn

**LATVIA**  
**Riija** riija.lv  
Tērbatas iela 6/8, Riga

**Bold Concept Store**  
boldconceptstore.lv  
Blaumana iela 7, Riga

**M50** m50.lv  
Miera iela 17, Riga

**Kluug** kluug.eu  
Lāčplēša iela 31, Riga

**Look at Riga** lookatriga.lv  
Rātslaukums 7, Riga

**LITHUANIA**  
**Locals.lt** locals.lt  
Gedimino pr. 9, Vilnius

**Balta Balta** baltabalta.com  
Pilies g. 32, Vilnius

**Dominikonu14**  
dominikonu14.com  
Dominikonų g. 14, Vilnius

**V2 Concept Store**  
v2onlinestore.com  
Dominikonų g. 5, Vilnius

**Le Muse** lemuse.eu  
Savičiaus g. 12, Vilnius



Being environmentally conscious and favouring natural goods, Baltic designers are generally also aware of where their input materials come from. They prefer local resources and this also dictates the design aesthetic, which often combines everyday practicality with creative inventiveness. Much attention is given to sustainability – both in production and consumption. Wood, in particular, is a very Baltic thing, and designers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania embrace it in many ways and forms – in furniture, lamps, watches, toys, smartphone cases or even bicycles and glasses frames. Not to forget wooden houses and saunas that form not only an important part of the historic and cultural heritage, but also still enjoy wide popularity. Having stood the test of time, wood has re-emerged as a material of choice for new cutting-edge contemporary architecture and versatile sustainable construction material. In the Baltics, there are many companies that build houses

from wood – from small-scale artisan businesses working with original concepts, manual methods and a strong emphasis on design to big manufacturers that offer serially produced prefab houses, log homes and other modular timber buildings by using industrial methods. Both craftsmen and designers have also become involved in the creation and restoration of furniture and interiors, or the carving of wooden household utensils such as spoons, plates and bowls.

### Deeply rooted in culture, supported by advanced solutions

Another sector steeped in design and with deep roots in culture is the clothing and textiles industry. Wool, linen, flax and hemp grown in the Baltic states have traditionally been used to create fabrics and home textiles. Hand-woven garments, lace items and knitwear with ethnographic samples and rich patterns are still very popular among locals and tourists alike, while



several quality fashion brands from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have become well known both in the Baltics and abroad. Many of them can be seen on catwalks around the world or in fashion magazines and international design journals.

Having artistically and technically already reached a high level of skill, both fashion and textile products are being reinvented by a new generation of fashion designers that combine traditional handcraft techniques and new innovative solutions. In a collaboration project, the Estonian pearl embroidery



Lithuanian Artists' Association president Edita Utarienė (from left) and Red Dot Award Winner 2019 Agnė Dautartaitė-Krutulė

of the experiment. Founded in 2006, the Incubator has since been involved in training and mentoring programs, as well as sharing advice and business know-how with start-ups and young designer brands.

Works by the designers participating in the incubation program are presented together with a wider range of Estonian design brands in a special showroom – the Tallinn Design House. Located in the Rotermanni Quarter in the centre of the Estonian capital, it promotes Estonian design and serves to help designers enter new export markets. The same role is played by the Estonian Design House run by the Estonian Association of Designers and other similar venues in Latvia and Lithuania. All of them put a spotlight on the best creations by local designers that are often handcrafted – with products ranging from interior accessories and home decoration to artworks and fashion. In addition, there is a growing number of cafés and restaurants that showcase local design.

### Gaining fame, international recognition and new markets

Baltic design has also been introduced outside Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as well and is being increasingly appreciated internationally. Collections are repeatedly displayed at exhibitions and trade fairs to showcase the finest of design made in the Baltics throughout Europe, and even a bit further. Products and designers from the three countries regularly earn merits and prizes at international design awards such as the Red Dot Design Award, iF Design Award and the A' Design Award.

One of the last winners was the Lithuanian designer Agnė Dautartaitė-Krutulė. In November, she received the Red Dot Design Award 2019 for her non-standard, conceptual, innovative design book “Memorabilia”, which presented the works of the members of the Lithuanian Artists' Union. “We succeeded because we all worked together and believed in one another and trusted each other”, claims Dautartaitė-Krutulė. “It is gratifying that Lithuanian designers are becoming visible and competitive in the world. At least on a European scale, we have grown out of our provincial pants and can offer our creative power to the world with dignity.”

A high profile at an international level is indeed important. Having small domestic markets and limited production capacities, Baltic designers and enterprises have to start thinking internationally and to find their way to the global market from very early on. Alongside an increasing public perception comes a new attitude towards using environmentally-friendly materials, techniques, and forms that is beneficial for design brands from the Baltics.



Craft-based, handmade, and with a predominance of wood and clear lines, the works correspond with the sustainable lifestyles and the preference for Nordic design in the Western world. Especially Germany appears to be a promising market, as Scandinavian designers have been successful there in shaping furniture trends for many decades and the love for design from the north has remained unbroken. “Design from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is competitive, in demand and very well received”, says Brigitta Ziegler, founder and owner of the Baltic Design Shop and a corresponding blog. “Customers are satisfied and my manufacturers are looking forward to new markets for their cool designs.”

Originally from Estonia, Ziegler has lived in Germany for many years and tries to open up the German market for high-quality design from the Baltics. In 2014, she started from the scratch with her Stuttgart-based online shop for design products from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and

sells furniture and home accessories produced in small series by handpicked manufactures. “My first impressions and intuitions have not disappointed me. There is a market for Baltic design in Germany”, Ziegler reflects about her first five years in business, which has now reached the next level. At the beginning of 2019, she opened a showroom in Bruchsal, a city about 70 kilometres north-west of Stuttgart.

To get to know the designers and find new brands for her shop, Ziegler frequently visits her home country and the other two Baltic countries. The direct, personal contact is very important to the Estonian sociologist-turned-businesswoman – and she always looks forward to it. “It is like a big family, there aren’t as many people here as, for example, in Germany, we know each other well”, Ziegler says. Surrounded by nature, their long, close connection to the land has prompted designers to value and preserve the heritage of their home country in many forms and ways. “So much is happening in the Baltics right now. The scene is extremely innovative.”

## Why good design is good business

Design does more than simply make things look cool. At its best, it combines creative thinking with craft and technical skills to address people’s real needs. Once focused mainly on products and packaging, design is now a philosophy spanning creative processes that can transform organisations. Many companies seem to have bought into the idea that design is important and they emphasize good design in the development of their products and customer experiences. Similarly, the strategic use of design in public areas is

increasing as well, since it can transform the environment and improve the quality of life.

“Design results in lasting value when it relates and is effective, tells a narrative, enhances our lifestyle, and creates personal and cultural identity”, argues design expert David Carlson in his pocket book “Make design matter”. A study published in October 2018 by McKinsey & Company seemed to substantiate this view. The consultancy tracked the design practices of 300 publicly listed companies in multiple countries and industries, and measured the

correlation with their financial performance by creating an index to identify “design-driven” companies. The analysis showed that companies scoring in the top quarter of the index substantially outperformed industry-benchmark growth.

Over a five-year period, this resulted in 32 percentage points higher revenue growth and 56 percentage points higher shareholder return growth compared with their industry counterparts. The results have been consistent across all three industries that McKinsey studied – medical technology, consumer goods, and retail banking. “Good design matters whether your company focuses on physical goods, digital products, services, or some combination

of these”, concludes the report. “The potential for design-driven growth is enormous in both product- and service-based sectors.”

However, arriving at the right design for the right company at the right time involves intensive research. Investments in design are therefore sometimes perceived to be too expensive – especially by small and medium-sized enterprises. In turn, design professionals and industry experts emphasize the importance of regarding design not just an expense, but rather as a vital investment that is crucial to achieve better results. Ultimately, it can also build national reputations and boost a nation’s economic standing.