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Jörg Boner for Schätti

Langenthal

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Jörg Boner's architectural lights for Swiss manufacturer Schätti are very simple. They have traditional, industrial forms and are all made from cut and folded sheet steel. "In fact, to borrow Jasper Morrison's title (<http://www.supernormal.co.uk>)," says Swiss designer Boner, "they're super normal."

Yet despite their simplicity, the Schätti lights represent a fresh approach for those involved in their creation. The lights are the first own-brand product that Schätti has produced. Based in Schwanden, in east Switzerland, until 2012 Schätti had worked exclusively as a manufacturer for other brands ("a lot of the European furniture brands who everybody knows," says Boner). Now, it is beginning to operate independently.

Earlier this month, Boner's range for the brand – elements of which were launched in 2012, and which now extends to five wall, floor and ceiling lamps – was recognised in Switzerland, with a display of the products displayed as part of the country's Designers' Saturday festival. The installation won the event's main prize. Displayed in Création Baumann, a textile factory in Langenthal (a municipality halfway between

Zurich and Bern), the display was a large halo of suspended, white Tyvek fabric, inside of which a circle of Schätti lights had been arranged. "Every success we have helps this project to continue," says Boner.

The project began in 2009. Boner, a Zurich-based industrial designer and teacher at Lausanne's ECAL, had designed a range of simple lights for the Axpo building in Zurich and asked Schätti to manufacture them. "I knew the quality was extremely good," he said and following on from the production run, the company's director Thomas Schätti asked Boner to develop a similar lighting range for his company.

"It was a good moment to start because LEDs were entering the market, so it was a time when everyone had to start from zero," says Boner. "Schätti had already bought a small coffee machine brand called Olympia Express and this made them think it could be interesting to follow the path of having their own collection. I think the numbers of pieces they were being asked to make by other brands was decreasing a little bit every year, so Thomas had to think of a new strategy for his company. This is one answer to the situation."

It is a similar story, albeit on a smaller scale, to Mattiazzi, an Italian manufacturer that worked as a subcontractor for furniture brands until the recession hit in 2008. Forced to reassess its strategy as many companies around it closed down, the company began to design its own furniture. The results were critically acclaimed, with the company launching successful collaborations with vaunted designers such as Sam Hecht, Konstantin Grcic, and Jasper Morrison.

Much of Mattiazzi's success was built on its technical expertise – the company invested heavily in CNC machinery which made technically complex furniture such as Hecht's Branca chair possible – and similarly, Boner's range for Schätti has been built around the company's expertise in folding and cutting metal.

"They make products here in Switzerland with the very high salaries that we have and manage to produce for reasonable prices," says Boner. "They have a manufacturing intelligence and an industrial culture, which means they can learn things very fast. But I worked on the fact that they're really coming from metal bending and cutting. Maybe we'll look at casting in a few years, but for now this is their speciality and we want to stay there."

The modesty and meditative quality of the Langenthal installation was in part a result of the nature of the Designers' Saturdays festival ("It's hard to do something nice for a two and a half day festival. On Sunday evening you have to take everything down as they start production on Monday morning"), but it was also indicative of the methodical manner in which Boner and Schätti have approached the project. The lights they have produced thus far are simple with traditional forms; the collection has grown steadily over time; and all of the products are based on Schätti's manufacturing strengths.

The next step for the project is however more adventurous. Schätti is hoping to produce a desk top using OLED technology (a plastic-based coat that can be applied to a surface and which lights up when a current passes through it). OLED remains expensive and little used, but it has the potential to revolutionise lighting design. Using the technology, designers will be able to move away from the traditional forms of luminaries prescribed by the lightbulb.

How then will this experimental strand of the project square with Boner's otherwise traditional collection? "That's the most important question for us to answer," he says. "On the one hand we have to follow the technology and be fresh and actual, but on the other hand everyone is looking for products that are romantic and which recall products from the past. I don't have the answer to that yet. But it's very important to collect experiences in this field even if the technology is not there yet. We're future-driven enough to start with a small desk lamp. We want to be ready for when the technology is here and affordable."

WORDS Oli Stratford, *deputy editor of Disegno*

Designers' Saturday took place in Langenthal, Switzerland between 31 October and 2 November

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