International design duo take a fresh look at blinds in Europe-wide competition

***Our windows and blinds say a lot about how we open our homes to the world, according to international design duo GamFratesi. As jury members for the VELUX International Design Award, they look forward to seeing what design students come up with as they explore the future of the design and innovation of window blinds.***

Stine Gam and Enrico Fratesi, the Danish/Italian design duo who make up GamFratesi, are all too familiar with how difficult it is for young designers to start a career. That is why they have enthusiastically agreed to sit on the jury of the VELUX International Design Award competition, which is open to design students all over Europe until the end of December 2013.

**A chance for talent to break through**
“Design competitions are extremely important,” explains Fratesi, “because they are a very democratic opportunity for design students to gain access to companies. If you have a great idea – but no connections or money of your own – design competitions give you the chance to show off your talent and develop a relationship with a manufacturer. Even if you don’t win the prize, you learn a lot from the process.”

In fact, it was an international design competition that gave the pair of architects-turned-designers their first breakthrough. Since then, things have developed quickly. While still a fresh new voice in European design, the up-and-coming couple have established a strong position in the design world and already have furniture in production with companies such as Ligne Roset, Casamania and Gubi.

“The VELUX International Design Award competition is interesting because it asks us to take a new look at something we see every day. Yes, window blinds have an important function – they manage how light enters a room and how we define the boundaries between the interiors of our homes and the outside world – but they also have the potential to create harmonious interaction between light, furniture, materials and textures.”

**Different approaches to window coverings across Europe**
With roots in both northern and southern Europe, GamFratesi have first-hand knowledge of just how different the approach to window coverings can be. “The sun is very strong in the south, so there we need blinds to screen the light. Perhaps southerners also prefer to keep their homes less open to the outside world. The Scandinavian window tradition, meanwhile, is much more open. Larger windows are the norm there, and it seems that people are also more accustomed to opening their homes to the world outside – both architecturally and socially. Scandinavians are much more likely than Italians to show the outside world what’s going on inside their homes.”

GamFratesi hope the Europe-wide design competition will display the vast range of different traditions regarding windows and blinds, as young designers explore and express ideas that have roots in their own backgrounds. But they also look forward to seeing what the students – who probably have fewer preconceived notions of what blinds “should” be – will come up with. Both designers expect to see some completely new ideas that may either confirm or go beyond current trends.

“We don’t necessarily believe in trends,” continues Fratesi, “but there are certain developments that seem to be heading in the same direction these days. One that we find particularly interesting has to do with quality. The recent economic crisis has led us to focus on things that last for more than a single season, and we look for higher quality in these things than we did previously. Other tendencies we see gaining momentum in many countries are simplicity and natural materials. We want to interact with things that feel good to the human touch. Natural materials and tones – as compared to glossy ones – are something we see more and more of in textiles, materials and colours. This is also true for our own work.”

**Rethinking window coverings**According to Kent Holm, Global Director of Decoration and Sun Screening Products at VELUX Group, the VELUX International Design Award competition reflects the company’s ongoing dedication to experimentation as a key driver of product development. “VELUX was founded on the belief that one experiment is better than a thousand expert views,” he says. “We hope to learn how the newest generation of designers tackles the challenge of rethinking window coverings through experimentation. And we believe that young designers can learn a lot from applying their creativity in a project that asks them to think very openly, yet still within some clearly defined guidelines.”

The VELUX International Design Award competition will judge design projects on four criteria, which GamFratesi also use as guideposts in their design efforts: innovation, quality of life, sustainability and market potential.

“Quality of life is something that is very important to us as designers,” Fratesi believes. “We want to create products that people feel good about using and living with. Sustainability is something that designers simply *must* integrate in their work; it’s not that everything has to be made from recycled materials, but contemporary design must be sure to use materials in the right way to minimize waste and maximize re-use. Innovation is very close to our hearts, of course, and we believe that many students will also think not only about new materials, but also about new aesthetics and messages that bring fresh meaning to their projects. Market potential is not something that many young designers have much experience in, but it will be up to the jury to look for this.”

“With participants from all over Europe, we expect the VELUX International Design Award competition to really challenge the way we cover our windows,” Fratesi concludes. “Who knows? Maybe some of these students will come up with something that opens a new window into how we look from the inside out, and from the outside in!”

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