The perfect plate...



A long and distinguished career in design affords **Nick Holland** somewhat of an expert eye on crafting the perfect piece of crockery. Here, he explores the intricacies of designing the perfect plate…

Nick Holland

Nick Holland Design is a leading international product design company, founded in 1997, with its main studio in Porto, Portugal. Specialising in the design of tableware and housewares products, especially in ceramics, glass and cutlery, its clients are high quality manufacturers in many different countries. **www.nickhollanddesign.com**

I sometimes ask myself; does the world really need a new design for a plate? We have had perfectly usable plates in various materials for thousands of years – metals, wood, leather, stone, glass and of course, ceramics.

The quick answer is no; but this misses the point. Plates and dinnerware are an integral part of the experience of eating a meal, one of the great pleasures in life, as well as a necessity for survival.

As the dining experience has developed over the years into an art form, both in terms of cuisine and its presentation, the humble plate has accompanied this development. As well as being a functional product, dinnerware has become an art object which enhances the whole dining experience. I rest my case.

It is not so easy for a designer to design a successful new plate or a complete ceramic dinnerware collection… the world is already full of countless dinner services.

Starting the process

How does one start a new tableware design? To design something different is very easy, but to design something different that is also better is a real challenge.

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Before even starting, as a designer you need to be well aware of products that already exist in the market, to avoid inadvertently copying anything. You need to be aware of general trends in the market and in the world at large. You need to know your client and understand their markets and their particular requirements, whether you are an in-house or independent designer. Also essential that you know the factory that will produce your design, understand the production methods and processes they use, and any particular features that can be of benefit. Lastly, but not least, you need to have a good technical understanding of the particularities of ceramics and ceramic processes. Ceramics is sometimes referred to as a dark art, as during the firing of the clay pieces at the very high kiln temperatures, some movement and deformation generally occur. When the door of the kiln is opened, with some apprehension, you just hope for the best. If you can learn and gain experience and tick all these boxes you are ready to start your design work.

In the beginning

My first experience of designing dinnerware collections was when I became design manager for a big earthenware factory in Stoke on Trent, the center of the British



UNO fine stoneware dinnerware for Mesa Ceramics, Portugal. Award winning design inspired by nature



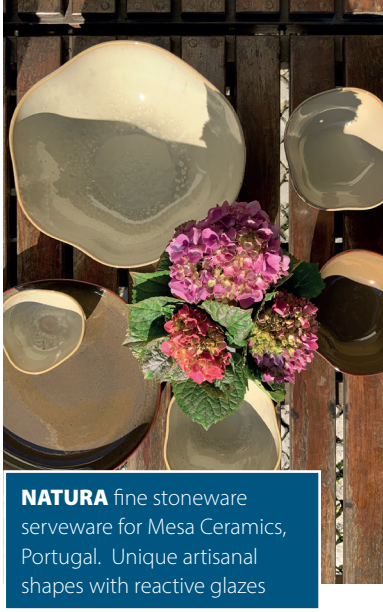
ORIGIN fine bone china dinnerware for Hankook Chinaware, S.Korea



OLSON stoneware dinnerware for Crate& Barrel stores, USA



AURA fine bone china dinnerware for Monno Ceramic, Bangla Desh



NATURA fine stoneware serveware for Mesa Ceramics, Portugal. Unique artisanal shapes with reactive glazes

ceramic industry. The factory was a high-volume producer with advanced production systems. For six years I was head of a design team of talented designers, mainly working on surface patterns. At one point we had a bright young student working in our studio for work experience, Richard Eaton, who went on to become the highly successful design director at Denby.

At our instigation the factory developed a red clay body, in addition to the regular white earthenware body. We designed a stunning range of dinnerware and cookware using this red body, fully vitrified and partly glazed. It was a great design but way ahead of its time and consequently was not a success. A hard lesson learned.

After starting my own design company and running it successfully for several years, I worked with Queensberry Hunt Levien in London for three years. It was a privilege to be part of this group and a great learning experience, rubbing shoulders with world class ceramic designers, David Queensberry, Martin Hunt and Robin Levien.

Somewhat out of the blue, I was approached by the famous Portuguese porcelain manufacturer Vista Alegre, who offered me the post of design director. When I accepted I expected to stay just a few years. I ended up staying 13 years and making Portugal my home. It was a great privilege to have this position in this historic company with a fabulous factory, with the full gamut of ceramic production from limited edition hand sculpted and painted pieces to automated mass production, and everything in between. My role was to direct the design and development of both shapes and surface pattern for the company. With our in-house team I started the whole process of modernising the Vista Alegre product range and also started to work with some of the best international ceramic designers. These collaborations with external designers and also chefs have continued and increased over recent years.

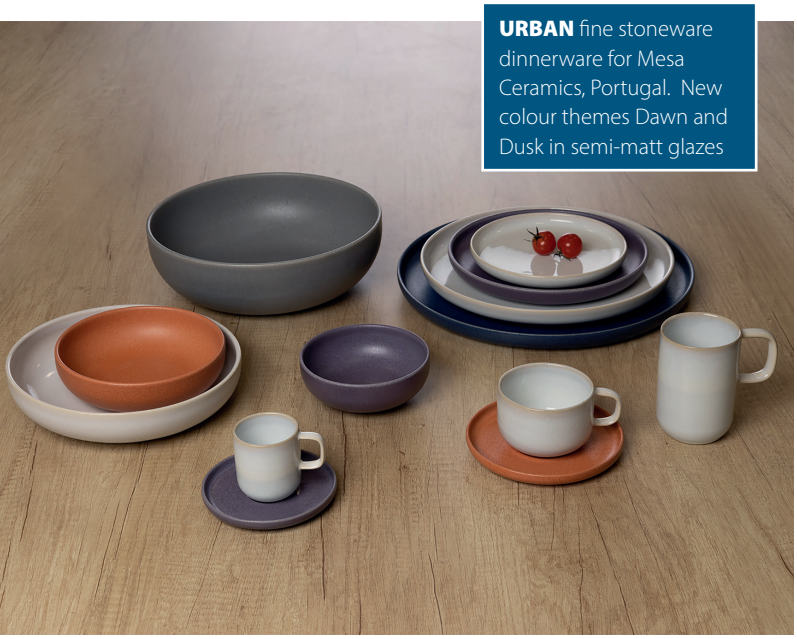
On leaving at the end of 2011 I restarted my independent design company Nick Holland Design. I have been fortunate to work with some excellent factories. My first ceramic tableware work came from Hankook Chinaware in South Korea. The same year I started working with the superb porcelain factory Minh Long in Vietnam. Many other notable ceramic tableware clients followed later – including Monno Ceramic in Bangladesh, and in Portugal, Grestel, and more recently Mesa Ceramics.

The creative process

Apart from all the technical and commercial aspects of designing ceramic tableware, what about the creative inspiration?

For me and most designers this comes from many sources. From nature, art, architecture, other objects and things seen etc. Once you are focused on your project and client the creative sparks can appear at any time and anywhere. I start to make quick sketches of possible themes and ideas over a period of time, then sift through them all and work on developing the ones that seem most promising. Once I have decided on the best ones, I work up the designs in detail, culminating in models, 3D visuals, technical drawings and 3D files for production, before working on decorations, glazes and colours.

I have especially enjoyed working with Mesa Ceramics recently. In May 2019 I was asked to prepare a report on my ideas for their future product development. My recommendations were accepted by the directors and board and so I designed four new dinnerware ranges for them that same year. This was a brave step and a big commitment for the company, both financially and for the future. It has gone well fortunately and I am now regularly involved and feel very much part of the Mesa team.



URBAN fine stoneware dinnerware for Mesa Ceramics, Portugal. New colour themes Dawn and Dusk in semi-matt glazes



URBAN fine stoneware dinnerware for Mesa Ceramics, Portugal. Rich blue reactive glaze