

# Vitra × TOM DIXON

---

**Inside** — The inspiration and process behind the collaboration / Tom Dixon in the hot seat / Behind the scenes on set



A collaboration from **Tom Dixon** and **VitraA, Liquid** takes the bathroom in a new direction – with a touch of the familiar.

Here we celebrate the design journey to a new aesthetic of expressive minimalism rooted in Britain's engineering heritage.

# Learning curves

Tom Dixon brings larger than life lines to a fresh, new collection for VitraA. Here he explains the process – and why Victorian plumbing has a lot to answer for.







“The art is to do something that feels contemporary without being of the moment. These products will go into a house and they’ll stay there for 20 years or more.”

— Vitra caught up with Tom Dixon at his showroom in Coal Drops Yard, King’s Cross to ask him about the making of the Liquid collection.

**You’re known as something of a polymath in design but this is your first bathroom range. Why did you want to design a bathroom collection?**

Well, if I post-rationalise, clay is what introduced me to design in the first place, so it’s partly about a desire to work in ceramics. My only formal qualification in design is a pottery A level – a Grade A, but that’s my only A level. It still fascinates me, the way a bit of grey and greasy earth can transform into something so white, clean and shiny.

I love the challenge and opportunity of working with things you use every day, asking questions like: ‘How do you make things that people will love to use?’ or ‘How do you make it easy to clean?’. It’s also about wanting to create your own version. We’ve spent almost 20 years building the Tom Dixon Studio, venturing into product categories from textiles to lighting. But basins and toilets are completely different, it’s bought in a different way. So we always knew we’d go into a partnership to create products for the bathroom.

Another driver was the way the bathroom is changing, with people using the space in different ways and seeing it as something to be proud of – like the kitchen evolving into somewhere people want to spend time. I think the way we view our bathrooms has been accelerated by the pandemic, with more emphasis on a place you can escape to.

**And why did you choose to work with Vitra?**

Because what I really wanted to do was tiles, taps, sanitaryware, accessories and furniture – an integrated system, all in one go. Very few manufacturers have the capacity to do that, or the vision to do it all as a collection. Having access to manufacturing capacity for ceramics, taps and showers all in one place alongside design and research expertise made it a lot more straightforward. I was looking at it from a consumer perspective – why should you go to a separate tile and tap shop when it’s all for one space? I’m always intrigued by why tradition dictates things are done a certain way, and I wanted to do it differently.

**Is this the first time you’ve worked with ceramics in a manufacturing context?**

I’d say I’ve dabbled a bit. I’d visited ceramics manufacturers in my previous life at Habitat and had been fascinated by the scale and complexity of it. At Habitat it was a bit of a mad dash through a vast range of products from toys to tableware so I probably came across every type of homeware manufacturing you can imagine. I’ve worked in terracotta and also

porcelain and stoneware for the table. But I was creative director then, so I wasn’t doing the design but commissioning it – I think I was a bit frustrated that I couldn’t get my hands dirty with clay.

**What was your starting point for the collection?**

Well, one thing was asking: ‘How can you make it simple for people to specify a really great bathroom?’. It’s actually a difficult thing to do, with spaces that are often small and different trades and products to be brought together. I wanted to make it simpler.

I started off on this obsession with a modular grid – the idea that everything begins with the tile. In principle I still love that idea. But the reality of designing objects to fit the human body, creating products with complex internal piping, and aligning that to an artificial grid imposed by an ego-maniac designer just doesn’t work. So I had to ditch that one quite early!

In some ways the tiles were the departure point, then the grid idea was put aside, and then tiles – the modular aspect – were brought back in again. There are five colours and five patterns of tile so you can make a great interior design out of them.

With every design you start off somewhere and you end up somewhere else, when you’ve got to know the trade. I love being naïve. I think it makes you more likely to come up with an original solution. I don’t like being the super expert.

**What are some of the inspirations behind the collection?**

One stream of consciousness was Victoriana – the robustness of the butler sink for example. The contemporary trend in ceramics has been the opposite – to go really thin and sharp-edged. Or even square, which doesn’t feel right for bathrooms to me.

I like the feeling of permanence in Victorian bathrooms, with their big, chunky taps and fat tubes. They feel civic. It’s an aesthetic that’s closely connected to a whole tradition of British engineering – the hygiene infrastructure and sewage systems that influenced the development of the bathroom.

I found myself looking at things like ceramic pipework – the kind of stuff you dig up in your garden from time to time. The construction of those Victorian sewage systems was monumental. It was the first proper sewage infrastructure and some of it was made right here, from the mud of London. Much of it is still in operation now.

On a rather different tack, I’ve always been drawn to the heavy sculpted quality of vessels associated with ritual, like the font in a church or the Roman bath – big marble containers for dipping yourself in.

**How did the collaborative process work as a journey?**

The way I look at things, I’m here to stir things up a bit – to say what if, can we, why don’t we? It’s inevitable when amateurs come up against professionals that there’ll be a bit of: ‘Oh no, you can’t do that because we’ve always done it like this’. And there are some things you can’t fight, like the U-bend.

What you lose in naïve momentum in a project like this, you gain in a real understanding of the complexities of the field. Visiting the Vitra production lines with Erdem Akan, Design Director and Boğaç Şimşir, Innovation Director, I learnt a lot about mechanisation, about robotisation. I was fascinated by the scale of the operation and the investment mindset, the belief in the power of design. You might be tempted to think that technology and investment will be better here, in the UK, but that’s not the case.

We went to Turkey and threw around lots of ideas, lots of mood boards. Then the visits to the factory and a big discussion on different iterations of prototypes. They’ve got an impressive facility for producing full-scale prototypes at the Innovation Centre – it’s 3D printing for the taps but for the ceramics it’s milling. The forms are effectively carved by robots.

Later we spent time with the prototypes set up in a bathroom environment in Istanbul. Actually they tried to kill me! It’s my own fault, I was moving some stuff around and didn’t realise that the display boards weren’t fixed. I added another basin to an installation and the whole thing fell on me!

I would have liked to have got even more stuck into the factory but the pandemic got in the way. My fascination remains the possibilities of craft or industry; I really like knowing how things fit together and seeing if I can find a new angle to challenge some of the received wisdom of what a machine can or can’t do. I’m interested in an extended discussion around what you might possibly do using their ceramic technique, including more bathroom furniture. We’ve got the stool – which I’m really happy with because it’s a bridge between our world and Vitra’s world.

**Where did the idea of the ceramic stool come from?**

I really love the way the Victorians used ceramics for things like coat hooks and light switches – before stainless steel it was the most hygienic material. There are lots of things you can do when you get to that monumental, architectural scale and the amazing thing about ceramic is that it can last thousands of years – our museums are stuffed full of Greek urns that have survived this long.

When we’re thinking more and more about sustainability and circularity, it resonates that you can make something that will last forever out of something that’s widely available. In fact, we’re sitting on a massive slab of clay right now that stretches from here to the Chilterns and the South Downs. The eco slant comes from its ready availability and the fact that it will last forever if treated properly. The ceramic industry even reuses its own waste – it’s crushed up into ‘grog’ and added to the clay to give it different characteristics, like making it harder.

“The way I look at things, I’m here to stir things up a bit – to say what if, can we, why don’t we?”



“The trick is to make something that’s reduced enough to not be fussy but to make sure that people instinctively understand how to operate it, what the use is.”

**All the ceramic sanitaryware is white. Is that a commentary on hygiene and the modernist bathroom?**

There’s no doubt that white and bathrooms go very well together, and from a hygiene perspective too. But I did want an element of contrast and we’ve got that in the taps and in the furniture.

The reality is that when you’re doing sanitaryware and want to get it at a certain price point your whole facility can get polluted by colour – a small amount of black is like almonds or peanuts in a sweet production line. And black has a very specific vibe to it, like black satin sheets, whereas white is universal.

You could work around it, and in some ways I would have loved to have done avocado – a commentary on the 70s bathroom! But I’m not sure that’s what people want, whether it would have the necessary longevity.

**Touch – or tactility – seems to be an underlying principle – from the rounded forms of the ceramic pieces to the taps and the embossed surfaces of the wall tiles. Was interaction design a big driver?**

It’s really about what I call expressive minimalism. When people are doing minimalism they often kind of ignore the issue of contact. That’s what I don’t like about a square basin. It doesn’t make a lot of sense from a manufacturing process because it’s difficult to do sharp edges, and it’s not great from a cleaning perspective either. Arguably it might be a more efficient use of space but it’s not great with the flow of water. You lose the visible function of something – that’s why I wanted the pipes in the collection to be really ‘pipey’ and the knobs to be really ‘knobby’.

I was fighting against that experience when you go into a hotel bathroom and you can’t figure out how to switch on the shower and you end up burning yourself. I wanted something that has a very clear logic.

I see no point in hiding functionality. The trick is to make something that’s reduced enough to not be fussy but to make sure that people instinctively understand how to operate it, what the use is. It needs to be recognisable as an object. I wanted it to look like a kids sketch of a bathroom sink, or a tap.

**What are the inspirations behind the collection? Did you look to architecture or art, for example?**

Sculpture has been a big inspiration, and architecture is too. I’d love to have been a

sculptor but now I get to indulge within a functional framework, which actually suits me much better than having a blank sheet of conceptual paper.

There’re elements of pop art – Jeff Koons and his ‘Balloon Dog’ or Claes Oldenburg. I quite like an element of the comic – as long as you still recognise what things are.

Other inspirations are probably the work of Barbara Hepworth – that very rounded use of marble, the geometry of soft forms. And Isamu Noguchi, who worked with marble and a whole range of other materials.

We’ve been building this round-edged aesthetic for a while now – an example of which you’re sitting on, the Fat Dining Chair – which has got this generous use of material and a soft outlook. It’s quite blobby, almost cartoony, and it’s comfortable. I think it’s partly to do with family. I was very spiky until I became a dad and then I became more rounded. And kids run into things and hurt themselves, so you avoid that if you can.

**Would you say this is a designers’ collection, or is it for everybody?**

I saw the collection as an opportunity to do something a bit like a Swiss Army knife, metaphorically speaking, that works in professional situations and domestic ones. If you can do something that’s tough enough to survive in a professional environment, the toilets of a bar say, it will survive forever in the home.

It used to be that hotel sanitaryware was distinct and different from domestic products but the boundaries are increasingly blurred. People take inspiration from what they see in hotel rooms or restaurants, and if we do something that people recognise and want in their home, that’s no bad thing.

From the aesthetic point of view there’s no need for a distinction. For a long time, the office environment has looked a bit like a living room or people’s homes might look a bit like Shoreditch House. I don’t think there’s as much separation now between work and play, holidays and being at home.

**Do you think people will use the collection by picking and choosing what they want?**

Inevitably they will but I’m also hoping to convince people that there’s a carefully judged aesthetic balance that they can just buy into. The taps, showers, furniture and ceramics are all part of the same design language, the same atmosphere.

**How would you describe the mood of the collection, what feelings are you trying to evoke?**

Solidity and permanence. The art is to do something that feels contemporary without being of the moment. These products will go into a house and they’ll stay there for 20 years or more. You want it to feel fresh and new but you can’t afford to make it about fashion. The appeal of something novel is great but you don’t want to be tired of your avocado suite or whatever in five years’ time.

I wanted these objects to feel like they’ve always been there but to be sufficiently different from other things on the market and to live in the modern world. That’s the balancing act.

**Are you going to have some of the pieces at home?**

Yeah! Though maybe not the urinal – I live in a female household.



**Designer Profile**

Tom Dixon is a British designer whose work is represented in the collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Centre Georges Pompidou.

Forging his reputation with welded salvage furniture in the 1980s, he went on to establish the Tom Dixon brand in 2002 while working as creative director of Habitat. Specialising in furniture, lighting and accessories, the brand is now represented in 90 countries with hubs in world cities including London, New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Beijing.

Tom Dixon is heralded worldwide as a significantly original talent. His aesthetic is intrinsically inspired by the brand’s British roots and his works are recognised for their pioneering use of materials and techniques.



“My fascination remains the possibilities of craft or industry; I really like knowing how things fit together and seeing if I can find a new angle to challenge some of the received wisdom of what a machine can or can’t do.”

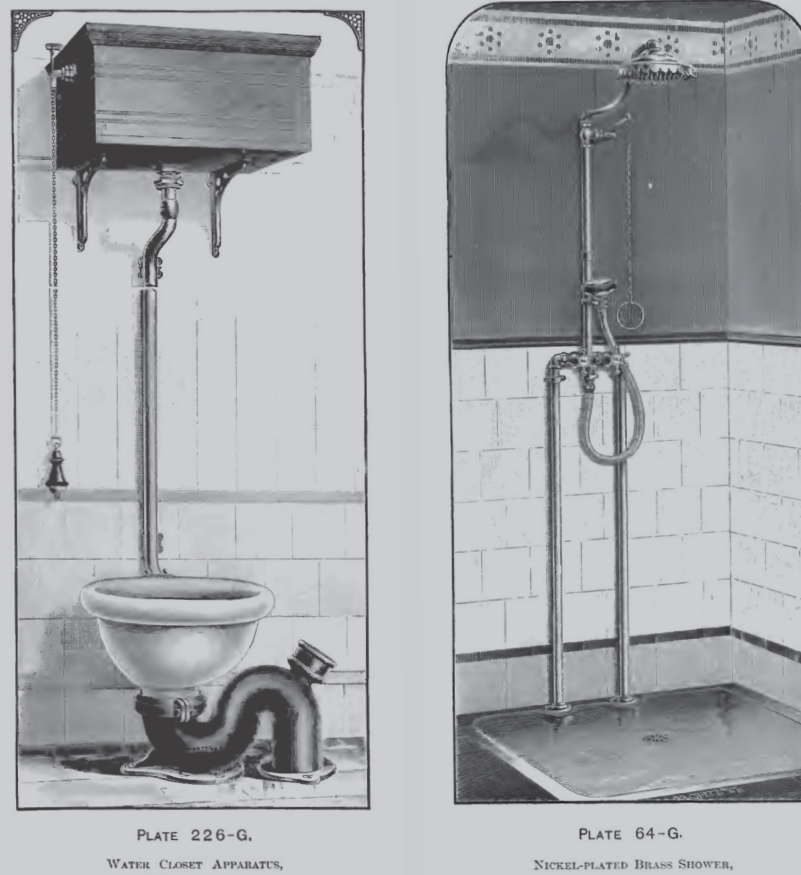
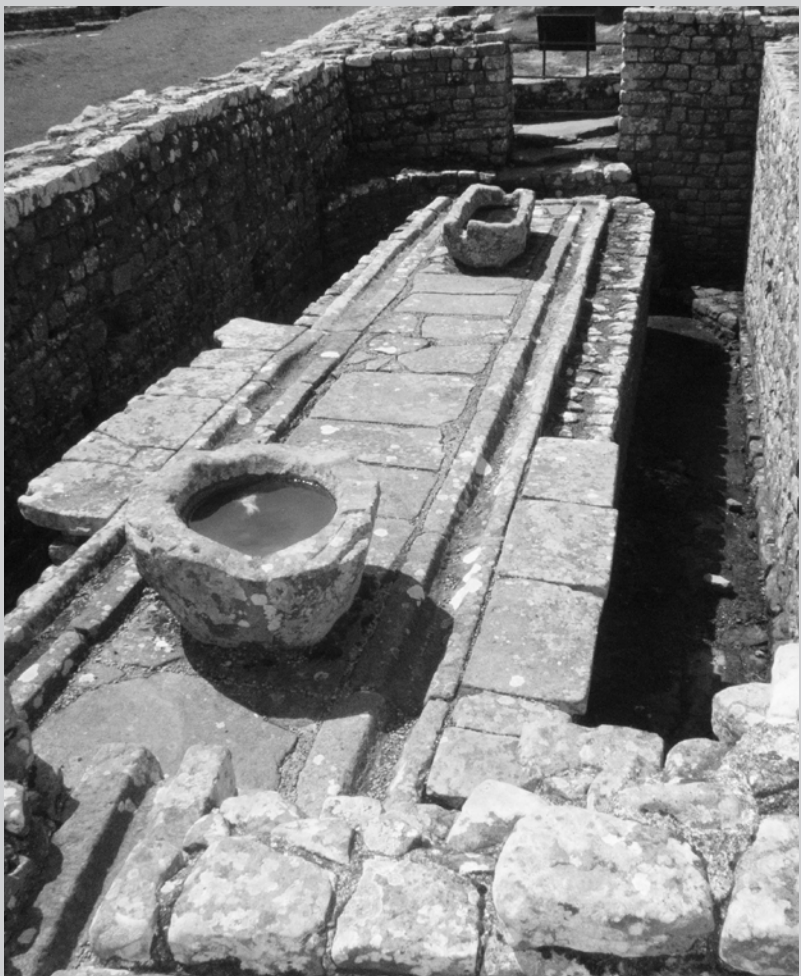




# The search mission

Good design ideas flow from non-judgmental collaboration. That’s why Vitra’s new collections are nurtured in a shared space of enquiry, research and review.

IMAGE KEY  
1 – Jeff Koons, Balloon Dog (Yellow), 2,3,4,7 – Product prototypes (© Vitra). 5,6,8,9 – Inspiration references





# Life on the edge



Erdem Akan (right) with Boğaç Şimşir, Innovation Director.



As Tom Dixon's first bathroom range, the stakes were high. Here Erdem Akan, VitraA's Design Director, talks about Liquid's collaborative process.

## Is Tom Dixon a collaborator who's been on VitraA's wish list a while?

For VitraA there is really no wish list – it's all about the projects and the ideas. We're open to collaboration, and we enjoy co-designing and thinking together with established parties – from research institutions to companies to designers. Having said that I do personally like Tom, because he's one of the most significant designers of our time and I admire his work.

## How did the collaboration come about?

It was a nice coincidence that brought us together. Initially Tom wanted to discuss some furniture-based ideas. But when we met and talked about his proposals and our capabilities, it struck us that we could be even more ambitious, could do a complete new bathroom collection together. So we started again on that basis.

## Is there a defined working process for VitraA's designer collaborations, or do they proceed depending on the personalities and ideas involved?

We keep it as open as possible intentionally. We try to define a solid plane, to establish some sort of conceptual bar. And then it's up to the designer how they interpret that, whether they go under it or over it. So the inventive space is largely created by the journey with the designer.

I see it like going walking in the forest. It's not a pre-determined journey but we do know that we're going to be walking for around 2–3 hours, it may rain, but whether we look at mushrooms or flowers or birds on that journey is total serendipity. It's important that all parties are open to discovery and surprise during the process.

Over the last seven years we've worked a lot to build up VitraA as a design leader in a sustainable way – not just in green terms but in not being trend-driven. We try to stay calm and close to the design ideas. It's a bit like cleaning a house and fixing everything that needs fixing and reducing noises. Now that the house is super tidy we can focus on new horizons. It feels like that's what we've been doing in this collaboration with Tom.

## If you had to identify one thing that you learnt from working with Tom Dixon what would it be?

I learnt a lot of things. He talks very seriously but what he's saying has a lot of fun in it too. I'd say I learnt how to be bold. I know how to think bold but how to stay bold is a slightly different thing. From the very beginning of the process to the end he stayed on his course. It's not that he's stubborn, in fact he's flexible, he just didn't compromise on boldness. That was very inspiring and it's not an easy path for a designer to tread. Another thing that struck me is that, whereas many designers use colour as a symbol of boldness, Tom had the boldness to do all his ceramics in white.

## Did you prepare a brief?

We did put together a little book after our very first meeting, recording the key ideas like the pure geometry and sense of permanence. It meant there was always something on hand to remind us of our core purpose.

It was also about setting out VitraA's design DNA to Tom Dixon Studio. I always think of it like building a wardrobe of clothes. If you get the core pieces right, you can create

combinations and potentials – creating more with less. I think design should always increase the potentials, should lead to limitless options rather than ending up in a dead end. It was about showing Tom what we already have in that wardrobe.

## Did the pandemic situation change the way you had to work?

In some ways it did but like everyone else we just had to get used to communicating in a different way. Tom visited us here in Turkey a number of times but the pandemic made it challenging, and one thing I regret is not being able to take him to a hammam. Design collaborations are very relationship-based and it takes time, whether online or face to face. You can't force it; it has to happen slowly and naturally.

## Can you describe the working process?

In reply to our brief book, Tom brought back lots of ideas and proposed multiple alternatives for each item. These were explored in mock ups

rounded, solid aesthetic, I had to think about it for a while in terms of things like material use and transportation. Then I realised that it is sustainable in its own way because the pieces are so strong and could last 100 years. It's another way of looking at sustainability.

I see the fat lines as being expressive of an engineering heritage – to me they're like infrastructure. There's a timelessness to them but also a romance, creating a connection between object and subject, or product and user.

## Another aspect of the collection is expressive and easy to understand controls – the immediate emotional connection of how you use a tap, for instance. Did this take a lot of prototyping to get right?

Yes, getting the brassware right was a bit more of a challenge. What Tom was asking for isn't super easy in terms of production because it goes beyond the norms of diameters and standards. We made a lot of prototypes; it was an iterative process that I enjoyed a lot, and

Bathroom design has some very specific challenges. It's not about stand-alone objects, you're working with walls and plumbing. Tom has an instinctive understanding of that."

and prototypes with the team at the Innovation Centre. Then we all came together again with Tom and his team to evaluate the objects in sets, assessing the feelings evoked while thinking about production challenges and the VitraA DNA. That's how we converged on the final collection, and it was a very clear, smooth process. Tom is a confident decision maker, so the momentum was always onwards.

Bathroom design has some very specific challenges. It's not about stand-alone objects, you're working with walls and plumbing, and creating an atmosphere with a network of objects. Tom has an instinctive understanding of that.

## Tom Dixon has talked about the expression of 'fat' lines in his work in general, including in this collection with its very soft and rounded edges. Was this difficult to achieve technically, in the manufacturing process?

It wasn't so much that it was technically difficult – we're very experienced – but what was interesting for me was going against the grain of industry norms, and a long-term preoccupation with making things ever thinner and lighter. When Tom came along with his very different characteristics, the very

I'm extremely pleased with the result. It's very sculptural, very solid.

## He's also talked about how the toilet bowls and basins in the collection may look monolithic and simple on the outside but are actually highly complex on the inside – very technical to manufacture. Can you give me an example of this?

Actually the complexity in this area is not so much in the manufacture but at design development stage, getting the physics and calculations behind the fluid dynamics right. The geometry on the inside is generated by the external form, so you have to go from inside to outside over and over again with the design to get the flow right with the minimum of water usage.

The pieces are humanistic, expressively simple – to get that right in terms of function takes quite a bit of fine tuning. It's a bit like bridge architecture, it needs to be engineered to last a lifetime while looking good.

Thanks to Tom I think we've succeeded in defining a new direction in the bathroom – and that is the magic of this collaboration.



# The inside out

In this 'behind the scenes' photoshoot, we observe the team in action creating the collection's key imagery in a warehouse outside London on one of the hottest days of the year.





# Seeking answers

We put Tom Dixon and Erdem Akan in the hot seat.

Do you have a favourite piece in the collection?

TOM

It's like favouritism and children, you are not allowed to choose favourites!

ERDEM

It has to be the ceramic stool. It's an iconic piece of design but what I like about it is that it gives me the option to spend more time hanging out in the bathroom, with somewhere comfortable to sit.



Can you describe the bathroom you grew up with?

TOM

Depends which part of my growing up. I moved from Tunisia to Morocco to Egypt in early childhood and can't really remember the bathrooms. I moved to Huddersfield when I was five and we had an outdoor bathroom there, which froze over in the winter, and in the kitchen a single sink with cold water, so our baths were in a tin tub. I remember that very well because it was a culture shock. We were in Huddersfield for a year, it was a place where my father, who was a teacher, could get a job by correspondence from North Africa. And then we moved to London when I was six, where bathrooms were now indoors again and that, I should imagine, was my first experience of a fitted bathroom.

ERDEM

The vision I have is of my grandmother's bathroom because my mother was working as a lawyer so my grandmother looked after me a lot. I was maybe three or four and I remember sitting on the toilet and waiting to be able to go and getting very bored. I remember looking at the floor, which was terrazzo, and beginning to see patterns in it, a bit like you can see shapes of things in the clouds. It was like a universe and after that I created stories out of it on every visit to the loo.

Do you have a favourite bathroom in art or history?

ERDEM

I closed my eyes to think about this question and I got three images. The first was a painting by Colombian artist Fernando Botero called 'Il Bagno' from the 1980s. It shows the back of a woman standing by a bathroom mirror surrounded by the rounded forms of a bathtub, toilet and basin. It's realistic in the sense that the bathroom is modest in scale but it feels intimate rather than claustrophobic. For me it's a powerful and emotional depiction of wellbeing, looking after yourself in a clean and ordered domestic environment.



The second image was of a hammam, an important part of Turkish culture that I grew up with. We borrowed the idea from the Roman Empire and it's a more public definition of the bathroom. The experience of visiting a hammam is a sort of convergence of space and time. Spatially it's a journey through vaulted marble tunnels to the clearing of the big bathing space, which is lit from above. It's very magical and your understanding of time is changed by the architecture.

The final image was a picture of nature itself – trees, a river, a landscape. If I ask myself what this means I can only think that the images must represent art, culture and nature – three aspects of the bathroom.

TOM

There are so many historical and art references. It's impossible to choose!





# Featured products



## Covers



2 + 10



2

## Learning curves

p2–7



3 + 1



1 + 3



2 + 14



4 + 2



10



2 + 10



8

## The inside out

p12–13



7 + 9



12



10 + 11 + 6



11 + 6



10 + 11 + 6



5



1 + 5 + 7 + 9



13

## Seeking answers

p14–15



2

## Credits


Design / Art Direction – foxallstudio.com  
Editor – Ellie Duffy  
With thanks to Tom Dixon Studio and Coal Drops Yard  
All images © Vitra, unless otherwise stated

The search mission (pages 8–9)

- 1 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thegirlsny/2599923366> (made grayscale, masked) – CC BY-SA 2.0
- 5 “Roman toilet” by guinet (made grayscale) – CC BY 2.0.jpg
- 6 Sandstone Holy Water Font , Rose Campbell-Gerke – CC0 1.0
- 8 Santa\_Maria\_Assunta\_Holy\_water\_font\_Morgex-1.jpg (made grayscale) – CC BY-SA 3.0
- 9 Both images: <https://archive.org/details/CatalogueG00JLMo/page/31/mode/thumb?view=theater>

For product information on the full range visit  
[vitra.co.uk/liquid](https://vitra.co.uk/liquid) or request a copy of the Liquid  
brochure by calling 01235 750990



A close-up photograph of a person's hand resting on the rim of a white, modern pedestal sink. The sink has a smooth, rounded design. The background is dark and out of focus.

Liquid — The new bathroom range  
by Vitra and Tom Dixon.

See the products at —

Vitra London  
64 Turnmill Street  
Clerkenwell, London  
EC1M 5RR

[london@vitra.co.uk](mailto:london@vitra.co.uk)

Vitra