



ANTHONY VRAHIMIS
Design Consultancy

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Tucked away just off Holloway Road is a leather workshop which specialises in designing and producing custom made handbags and other leather goods. One of their handbags can cost hundreds to thousands of pounds and they take as long as three months to make. The clients are definitely top end, although Anthony Vrahimis, who set up and runs the workshop, won't say who they are.

Currently working on producing architectural leather interiors for a series of mulberry stores, the studio often works with top designers. Asked about fashion world prima donnas, Mr Vrahimis would only say "You sometimes have to deal with some pretty colourful characters".

To Mr Vrahimis, the production process is as important as the products. He is much more forthcoming about the workings of his Tollington Way studio, which has grown into a training ground for designers.

"We try to help young designers gain the skills and experience they need to start their own businesses. When they have just left university, they owe a lot of money and the start up cost of the machinery is very expensive."

Designers who work in the studio rent the space and operate as freelancers, but much of their work comes from Mr Vrahimis, who also helps train them to use the machinery. More than 500 people have gone through this apprenticeship, and many have since gone on to work for top designers like Nicole Fahri and Alexander McQueen. The studio has a strong supportive ethos and designers often share ideas and work. Suzanna Hall, 44, who left her admin job last year to learn handbag design, said: "There are variants of experience and people specialise in different techniques, so you can troubleshoot pretty much everything. It's inspirational."

Katie Harding, 28, who also works in the studio, stressed the importance of employers taking on a training role. "There are only two colleges in London which teach this course, it's all been outsourced," she said. "It's a shame. The craft is dying."

Given the fashion industry's cut-throat reputation, such a collective outlook stands out, but while this studio appears to thrive, Mr Vrahimis doubts many others will emulate his example. "It takes a certain type of character to run such a venture," he said. "When people come here, I give them a lot of attention. It could be emulated across the board but people would have to change their attitude first."

Mr Vrahimis hopes to move into a bigger studio which would allow him to expand his teaching and rent more space to young designers. He has applied for government funding to subsidise his teaching, but he stresses such a move wouldn't take him out of the area. "We have ties here and people know who we are," Mr Vrahimis said. "That's important." In the meantime, he plans to open a new shop at the front of his studio before Christmas. The shop will act as a showroom for the business, but also boost the profile of the workers' in their own projects. Mr Vrahimis added: "We hope to act as a springboard for designers. The idea is to equip them with skills so they can succeed themselves."

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