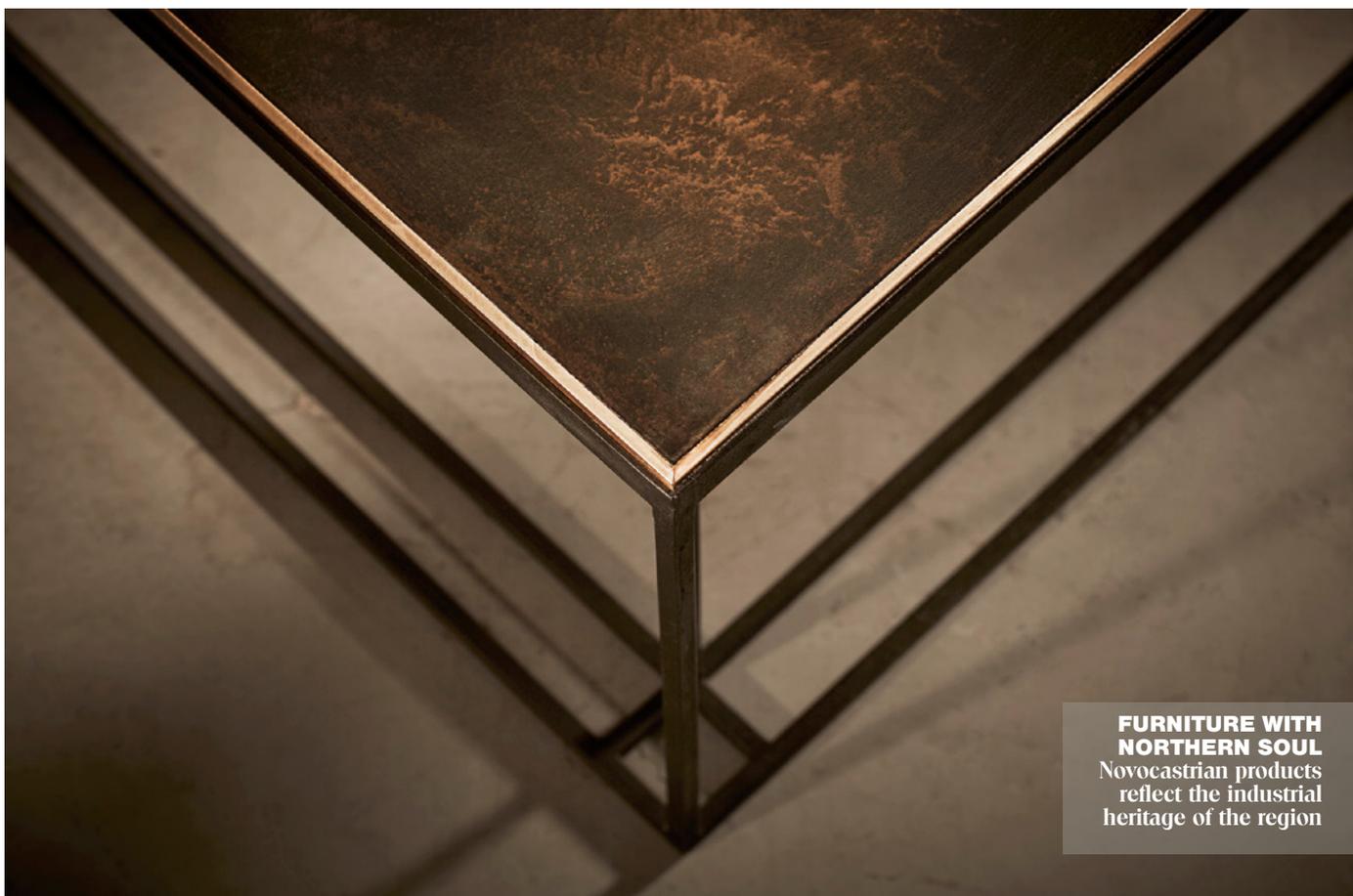


A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark blazer, blue jeans, and brown shoes, sits on a dark grey sofa. He is looking directly at the camera with his hands clasped. In front of him is a black metal coffee table with two shelves. The background features a large, round, gold-colored mirror on a light-colored wall. The floor is made of light-colored stone tiles.

Metal gurus

ARCHITECT RICHY ALMOND
Novocastrian was awarded Best New Designer
at the 2015 Northern Design Festival



**FURNITURE WITH
NORTHERN SOUL**
Novocastrian products
reflect the industrial
heritage of the region

Inspired by a North-East tradition, Novocastrian makes metal furniture that's cutting-edge cool. Sarah Millington meets the friends behind it

VISITING the website of Novocastrian, a company specialising in bespoke metal furniture, it's hard not to be impressed.

The style is sleek and contemporary, perfectly encapsulating the brand, and the furniture itself – though not abundant – is beautifully simple.

“Architectural” and “graphic” are common descriptions and Novocastrian’s designs are often likened to those of Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The latter comparison makes Richy Almond, also an architect and the company’s co-founder, smile.

“It’s a huge compliment because I’m a massive fan of his stuff,” says the 29-year-old. “Inevitably, studying in Glasgow (at Glasgow School of Art) has rubbed off. We’re a product of our environment and our education.”

For around 18 months, Richy has run Novocastrian with his childhood friend, 31-year-old graphic designer Mark McCormick. The pair grew up together in Burnopfield against a backdrop of heavy industry and Richy’s father went from being a shipbuilder to starting the sheet metal manufacturing firm Almet, which remains the family business.

Though he took an academic route, the grind of the factory was always in Richy’s blood and he

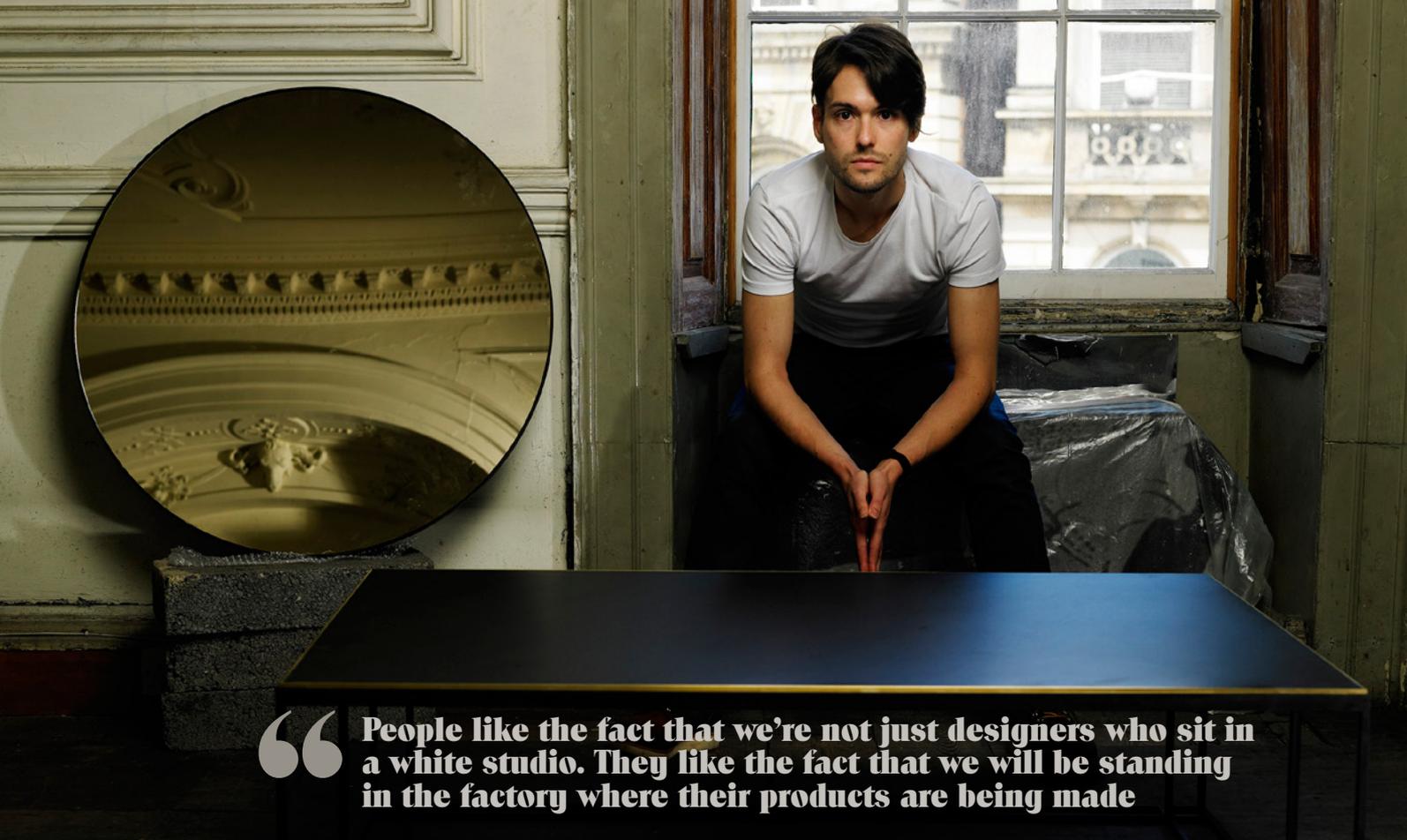


felt that he and Mark, with their complementary skills, would end up doing something together. Novocastrian – the name means native of Newcastle – was both spontaneous and inevitable.

“I’d been working in high-end interior design and high-end architecture in London and, quite often, the companies I was working for would have bespoke metalwork made,” says Richy. “One day, there was this project that we were working on – it was like a lampshade – and the quality was very poor and it was very expensive for what it was. I decided to ask my dad if we could do it and that was the first piece of metalwork we ever did.

“We started trying to make our own pieces – originally, a coffee table for my mam and dad’s house. The result was quite interesting. Between that and a couple of pieces of architectural metalwork, we realised there was something in it. I mentioned the idea of starting up as a company and Mark was really interested.”

Most of Novocastrian’s customers are London-based and as Richy lives there, he does most of the sales, while Mark, who is based in the region, looks after the visuals, including branding and the website. In terms of designing, it is very much a partnership, with both having input into ➤



“ People like the fact that we’re not just designers who sit in a white studio. They like the fact that we will be standing in the factory where their products are being made

every piece. “If one of us is more excited than the other, they grab it,” says Mark. “We Skype quite a bit. The beauty of having 3D modelling is one can do a bit and the other can pick it up.”

The relationship works well, with Richy, the more outgoing of the pair, representing the smart, professional face of the brand while Mark is more behind-the-scenes. The latter is modest about his credentials, which include having been instrumental in the visual redesign of The Guardian, Vogue Turkey and GQ Brazil.

Working mainly with metal, Richy and Mark take full advantage of Richy’s family business, with younger brother Dean making a lot of the products. Conveniently, another brother and a sister own a laser-cutting company, which also comes in handy. When other products and expertise are required, the pair prefer to source them locally.

“We use a lot of Cumbrian slate for our table tops and Raskl, a Newcastle-based company, for timber,” says Richy. “The debate that’s currently going on inside my brain is whether or not we keep our roots in specialising in metal but bring other materials in, or remove ourselves from manufacturing and say we are a design studio and work with lots of manufacturers to make products.

“People like the fact that we’re not just designers who sit in a white studio. They like the fact that we will be standing in the factory where their products are being made, so I think we should probably keep metalwork as our specialism.”

Having grown up with the industry, Richy has been saddened by the demise of steel-making in



Top: Graphic designer Mark McCormick, and the Novocastrian Radar table

the region. While he is realistic in terms of what he and Mark can do, he hopes that Novocastrian is at least helping to keep the tradition alive.

“The idea of repurposing an old industry is really interesting for us,” he says. “What I like about Newcastle is that instead of having a situation where industry has worn away, people think, ‘How can we take these skills and apply them?’ We’re really fortunate to have a story written for us that we haven’t necessarily had a great deal to do with, but it’s full of inspiration.”

This story is one which, initially, Richy and Mark took for granted and only now are beginning to use to their advantage. They are finding that by using terms like “Northern soul”, they can tap into a customer’s desire for authenticity and turn something as intrinsically working-class as metalwork into must-have pieces of art.

Keen to protect the brand while pushing

forward as a business, Richy is proceeding with caution. “The big thing for me is to get to the point where it employs us both on a full-time basis,” he says. “This year, we also want to employ another member of staff. I feel it’s a pivotal point. We’ve been speaking to a few people like Fenwick, but it’s whether or not it fits the brand. We’re getting advice from people in the industry.”

With so many options, it’s tempting to diversify into high street retail, but Richy’s gut feeling is to stick with what they know – producing authentic, bespoke pieces for a small, but discerning, client base. “The consensus so far seems to be just to concentrate on what we do and say, ‘This is our pricing’, then focus our efforts on finding people who want to commission these pieces,” he says. Based on current form, this shouldn’t be a problem.