



Intelligent design

La vida local: Diamond jeweller Eoin McDonnell's Project 51 in Dublin's former garment district is a collective of Irish designers, craftspeople and artisans with a retail and studio space. **LUCY WHITE** discovers the benefits of buying local



According to figures compiled by Dublin City Business Association, for every €100 spent in a multinational store only €14 goes back into the Irish economy versus €45 through an Irish-owned shop. Irish jeweller and entrepreneur Eoin McDonnell decided to take control by launching Project 51, a retail space-cum-working studio on South William Street, where 16 homegrown fashion designers, milliners and jewellery and accessory makers are creating local things for local people.

Eoin, how would you describe Project 51?
We're a collective, which puts us in the unique position wherein jewellers and fashion designers – who traditionally work independently, and use very different methodologies – can bounce ideas off each other. Everyone's working to a high standard so you know that when you ask someone their opinion you're going to get honest feedback. It's an inspiring, creative hub.

Have any collaborations emerged?
Yes, milliner Martha Lynn and jeweller Eily O'Connell (this year's RDS National Crafts Award winner) have started working together. And the group insisted I do something with diamonds that they can all afford...! Martha and Eily have work benches on site, and we're finding customers really like to see that what we're doing is real and

tangible – that we're not creating conceptual things manufactured by far off fairies, that it's made by ourselves. We also have an artist in residence programme so international designers can live and work with us. Project 51 also offers a bespoke service so people can come in on a one-on-one basis to discuss what they would like made. It's an open door for ideas, basically.

It's also a base for stylists, and has an exhibition space. What's showing now?
It's currently a Movember shop, with a menswear section and also works by artist Michael Penston who has taken images of celebrities and painted each one with a moustache. In December we're using it as a Christmas space – our jewellers are creating a collection called The Creative Quarter and drawing inspiration from this area of the city. So much is happening here, with new businesses. and we want to reflect that.

It's a tough time to start a new business. What challenges have you faced?
Mostly it has been difficult to select who comes on board. Recently we had 23 applications for just three places and it was heartbreaking to decide who to let in. You'd love to have 100 designers in the one building. And in three to five years we would like to open a Project 51 in London. But first of all it's about showcasing our designers and making sure what we offer here is perfect. There's strong movement in the UK at the moment about 'buying British' and it's starting to happen in Ireland. People are becoming wise to buying local.

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PRODUCT PICS FROM TOP: Silver cufflinks by Precious's Eoin McDonnell; Aesop's Fables necklace by Saba's Geraldine Murphy; Silk guys & dolls scarf by Lisa Ryder