The present day London, Ron Arad’s Chalk Farm studio is an essential stop on the international design circuit: a cavernous space befitting of a world-renowned designer with a career that stretches back to 1981. On Christmas Day of that year, he sold six of his recently designed Rover chairs to one Jean Paul Gaultier for £99 each.

In the intervening years, the Rover has come to be seen as a museum piece that defined a moment, exhibited at The Design Museum in London, the Pompidou Centre in Paris and Moma in New York. Back then it was an idea brought to life using a red leather seat from a Rover P6 and a curved steel frame made from Kee Klamp scaffolding tubes, both of which were obtained by its creator from a north London scrapyard not far from where he now lives.

Having graduated from the Architectural Association in 1979, the young Israeli-born Arad had little option but to source his own materials and then make and sell his work himself. A self-starting outlook was essential because there was not really any other way for a designer to make waves in London, with Milan, Barcelona or Tokyo seen as the places to go to build a reputation.

Terence Conran always said that the reason he started his first Habitat store was because he couldn’t persuade anybody else to stock his designs here in the 1960s. And even as far along as the 1980s, you had Tom Dixon teaching himself how to weld and then persuading Joseph Ettedgui to put one of
his chairs in the window of his Brompton Cross fashion shop.

But that has now changed. Over the past two decades, London has built up all the interlocking elements that it needs to be taken seriously as a global capital for design. It has become a place known not only for producing new talent, but also as a showcase and a marketplace for that talent. The likes of Arad and Dixon have done their bit to bring on a generation of designers that has followed in their footsteps; not just by setting an example for what a design studio could be like, but also as teachers. Our city now has enough depth in education, manufacturing and exhibiting to set a virtuous circle in motion.

The top two design schools in the world are in London — the Royal College of Art and the University of the Arts, which includes Central Saint Martins — along with other well regarded former art schools such as Kingston and Goldsmiths. They attract gifted students from around the world. At the Royal College of Art, where Arad ran the design products course for more than a decade, almost two thirds of the students are from outside the UK.

It was here that the designers Michael Anastassiades, Martino Gamper, Yael Mer and Shay Alkalay — respectively from Cyprus, Italy and Israel — all studied. All of them stayed to open their own studios when they graduated. And they stayed because there is the scope to show and to discuss their work here, as well as a diverse audience for it. That audience ranges from the buyers at the design auctions at Phillips, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, to talent spotters looking for new designers to work with manufacturers that may be from China, South Korea, Turkey or Thailand.

In addition to this, there are of course now many design galleries in London. David Gill, who can legitimately lay claim to being first, opened 30 years ago, and now shows limited editions ranging from Zaha Hadid’s spectacular acrylic tables to Fredrikson Stallard’s sculptural work. Carpenters’ Workshop, the London flagship for a network that now includes galleries in Paris and New York, came soon after. Gallerie Fumi, with Paye Toogood and Study O Portable, and Sarah Myerscough, with Peter Marigold, are significant players too.

Then sitting somewhere between a manufacturer and a gallery is Established & Sons, which is producing work ranging from Amanda Levete’s Drift bench to Terence Woodgate’s all but invisible carbon fibre table, as well as its design director Sebastian Wrong’s Lucio armchair. And over the years, Sheridan Conklay’s company SCP has shown that Britain is still a place that can manufacture contemporary design in quantity. Matthew Hilton and Jasper Morrison both got their start with him, and more recently he has worked with Philippe Malouin.

The best thing about the design landscape in London is that it is large enough to cover every conceivable version of what design can offer. There is no one London look, which is what gives it its strength. Design is about the glossy and the angry, the recycled and making a statement. Design in London can take the form of co-operative community work, such as the Assembly Collective, which mixes activism with art, architecture and design.

It is a city where you will find Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg working on a radical reassessment of the damage that designers themselves are doing to a planet that is in danger of disappearing under a mountain of single-use plastic; where you will find Martino Gamper practising and promoting what he calls ‘making as a means of thinking’; where you will encounter the exquisite shape-making of Anastassiades, who defines his work simply as ‘creative’ rather than as design or art.

And at the same time, London designers are important to mainstream mass production. Both Gamper and Anastassiades also work in this field: the latter making beautifully engineered lamps for the Italian company Flos and furniture for Molteni. Sam Hecht and Kim Colin’s studio Industrial Facility has worked for Muji and the American industrial giant Herman Miller. Jasper Morrison designs for Vitra; Tom Dixon with Ikea.

All of these designers, galleries and manufacturers are reinforced by London’s ability to show contemporary design to big audiences which few other cities can match. London has the Design Museum, with two million visitors and counting since it opened in its new home in Kensington. The V&A is building a new outpost in Stratford.

The city also has the London Design Festival and the Design Biennale. Taken together, and alongside London Fashion Week, they form the most visible and attention-grabbing part of Britain’s design economy. According to research by the Design Council, the design sector (understood, narrowly, to encompass digital, graphic, product and fashion design) in the UK is the second-largest in the world. It brings between £71.7bn and £86.5bn to the economy each year. That puts design ahead of agriculture, transport and hospitality.

But just because London has been riding high as a design centre doesn’t mean that it will stay that way forever. Other cities are eager to take over London’s role, both as a cultural and an economic force in design. A recent study from Oxford Economics suggests that the creative industries, which include design, are going to be particularly hard hit by the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, estimating a loss of 300,000 jobs from the UK design sector total of 1.7 million, and a big hit to its contribution to the national economy.

Arad used to say that his job at the RCA was to make his students unemployable. Partly he was suggesting that his course would give graduates the independence to set up on their own, and become employers themselves. But he was also conscious of the realities of life in a world in which the traditional idea of big industrial clients looking to hire designers no longer applies. His students had to be able to make their own way. It’s an ability that makes design skills so useful because they remain relevant in any context. As we look for ways to climb out of the economic emergency that the pandemic has plunged us into, it’s important to remember all that design has to offer and to put it to work.