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Laccio table by Knoll. ©Federico Cedrone

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Design Re-evolution: 9 defining objects that changed the game

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Some objects transcend their function as furniture to become cultural manifestos, redefining the way we live and interact with the world around us. This curated selection of nine icons traces the history of design through some of its most daring breakthroughs: from Michael Thonet's pioneering mass production, mastering the art of steam-bent wood and inventing the very first flat-pack, to the industrial revolution of Marco Zanuso's Lady armchair, the gravity-defying curves of the Panton Chair, and the democratic transparency of the Plia chair.

Each piece stands as a testament to the idea that true innovation arises when creative thinking disrupts established industrial processes, transforming technical constraints into groundbreaking opportunities. We explore systems that brought a new sense of order to the home, such as the modular precision of USM Haller and the global ubiquity of IKEA's Billy bookcase, alongside the engineering mastery of the Tizio lamp and the modular fluidity of Mario Bellini's Camaleonda, the true forerunner of contemporary modular seating.

This non-exhaustive journey culminates with Kartell's A.I. chair, opening a new chapter where algorithms and human intuition collaborate to optimise both matter and form. These objects did more than challenge the laws of physics or market conventions; they offered a visionary answer to a timeless question: how can design truly enhance our daily lives?

Tizio

1972

Camaleonda

1970

A.I. Chair

2019

Billy

1979

Panton

1967

1859

Thonet: the chair that invented modern design

The No. 14 chair marks the precise boundary between elite craftsmanship and the birth of modernity. The world's most famous bistro chair is the manifesto of a vision that learned to tame nature through the power of steam. Michael Thonet did not simply design a successful piece of furniture; he applied industrial logic to design before anyone else, and with remarkable effectiveness.

To bend wood, one must "outsmart" it or rather tame its two primary components: cellulose, which provides tensile strength, and lignin, which provides compressive strength. To manipulate this natural material, both components must first be softened. The secret lies in saturating the wood with pressurised steam. This process makes the cellulose more elastic and the lignin more pliable. Once the wood becomes ductile, it yields its resistance and can be bent along the direction of the grain. After drying, it returns to its original stability and strength, permanently retaining its new form.
His true stroke of genius, however, which set him apart from every other cabinetmaker, was the introduction of a metal tension strap clamped to the wood during bending. This strap absorbed the tensile forces, preventing the outer fibres from shattering. Once dried in moulds, the wood regained its rigidity, permanently retaining its new and unmistakable silhouette.
Thanks to this patented technique, it was no longer necessary to rely on master craftsmen for complex individual pieces or small batches. Chairs, armchairs, tables and stools could finally be mass-produced. Thonet was the first to bring furniture manufacturing onto a truly industrial scale. The emblem of this revolution is the No. 14 chair, later renamed 214 to celebrate the first two

Every piece of furniture can be individually tailored to meet specific needs: a unique Thonet piece can be configured at any time.

centuries of its life. Produced in millions, it is widely considered the most successful industrial furniture product of all time.

It represents the “year zero” of modern furniture: a system of standardised parts in which nothing is superfluous. The backrest forms a continuous curve, while the reinforcing ring stabilises the legs, translating mechanical resistance into linear elegance.

As the first flat-pack product in history, the 214 rewrote the rules of global logistics. By replacing glued joints with simple screws, Michael Thonet was able to pack thirty-six disassembled chairs into a crate measuring just one cubic metre. From Vienna to Paris and across the Americas, the chair quickly began furnishing cafés in every corner of the world.

A disassembled Thonet: the original flat-pack archetype. On the opposite page, a detail of the new Dark Melange canework designed by the young designer Jan Christian Schulz.

The wood used for the 214 chair comes from sustainably managed forests. Thanks to its exceptional quality, it is also extremely durable, and repairs can easily be carried out at any time. ©Philipp Thonet

The longevity of a piece of furniture lies in its versatility. Thonet’s functional design moves naturally across different environments, from large-scale contract projects to the intimacy of residential spaces.

1951

THE TIMELESS DIVA

The story of the Lady armchair, designed by Marco Zanuso in 1951, marks the birth of modern industrial design in Italy: a technological revolution that brought automotive innovation straight into the living room.

It all began in 1948 when Pirelli approached Marco Zanuso, a brilliant young architect, to explore the potential of new plastic materials for upholstery. While the Antropus chair was the first result of this research, it was with the Lady that Zanuso perfected a radical new approach to furniture production. Until then, armchairs were made using traditional handcrafted methods: wooden frames, jute webbing and horsehair, making production slow and expensive.

Zanuso realised that Pirelli's new elastic, mouldable materials such as foam rubber and expanded polyurethane could fundamentally transform the entire manufacturing process. Instead of shaping the padding directly onto a finished frame, the individual components, seat, backrest and sides, could be manufactured and upholstered separately before being assembled onto an internal skeletal structure.

Originally designed for Arflex, the Lady armchair was reissued in 2015 by Cassina within the I Maestri collection. ©De Pasquale+Maffini

The use of foam rubber turned suspension and padding into a single, unified system, transforming the armchair from a collection of handcrafted parts into a true industrial product.

Beyond its aesthetics, there is more: the Lady armchair pioneered the use of elastic suspension in upholstered furniture thanks to its system of reinforced elastic straps. ©De Pasquale+Maffini

This was the assembly-line principle, borrowed by Zanuso from the automotive industry. A suspension system of reinforced Nastrocord elastic straps ensured a superior level of comfort. This new manufacturing method allowed each element of the chair to have a different padding density, precisely calibrated to the pressure the body exerts on different parts of the seat. Beyond providing unprecedented comfort, this technique drastically simplified mass production, marking furniture's decisive entry into the industrial age.

The Lady was the first armchair produced using a serial moulding process, reducing labour time while achieving a level of precision beyond the reach of traditional upholstery. Presented at the IX Milan Triennale in 1951, it immediately won the Gold Medal, becoming the symbol of modern comfort and of Italy's post-war industrial rebirth.

Today, produced by Cassina as part of the prestigious I Maestri collection, it is part of the permanent collections of some of the world's greatest museums, including MoMA in New York. Over its seventy-five-year history, the Lady has reinvented itself many times, from sophisticated velvets to bold textures, through a constant evolution of materials.

A wide range of fabric and leather coverings enhances the beauty and comfort of this enduring icon. ©Courtesy Cassina

USM HALLER:
ARCHITECTURE AS A MODULAR SYSTEM

1963

The iconic Modular System, originally created for the offices of a Swiss company, has evolved into a global symbol of efficiency and rationality. Its uniqueness lies in its open architecture, a system defined by an unprecedented inverse scalability that defies obsolescence through total compatibility between past and future.

In 1961, Paul Schärer, grandson of USM's founder, decided to transform the family's hardware factory into a modern industrial powerhouse. To do so, he commissioned Swiss architect Fritz Haller to design the new production plants and headquarters in Münsingen, Switzerland. Haller delivered a modular architecture based on steel frames, a flexible system capable of expanding according to the company's needs.

The partnership deepened in 1962 when Haller and Schärer began developing an office furniture system based on the same principles of modularity and versatility as the new building. It was furniture conceived not as individual pieces, but as a system of adaptable and reconfigurable steel modules.

The heart of the system is the elegant and ingenious ball joint, patented in 1965. Its six threaded holes allow chrome tubes to be connected in three directions, creating a lattice structure onto which painted metal panels are snapped. The result is a system without a fixed form, ready to evolve over time.

This open-ended approach transcends the concept of obsolescence. Every component produced today is technically identical and fully compatible with those from sixty years ago, turning the manufacturing process into a virtuous and continuous flow.

For the first time, a company developed not only the product, but also the logic of assembly and disassembly. A unit can be dismantled and reassembled into a different configuration without losing structural rigidity, which is nothing short of an engineering miracle. This process innovation shifts the product's value from physical ownership to its potential for transformation. You are not buying a finished piece of furniture, but the industrial capacity to reshape your space whenever necessary.

Originally intended for exclusive use within USM offices, the system caught the attention of the Rothschild Bank in Paris, which ordered 600 workstations in 1969. This marked the beginning of mass production and the global rise of USM Haller as a world-renowned furnishing system.

"I never designed a furniture system. I designed construction systems for entire buildings, and the USM Haller system is simply the miniature version of that structural idea"

Fritz Haller

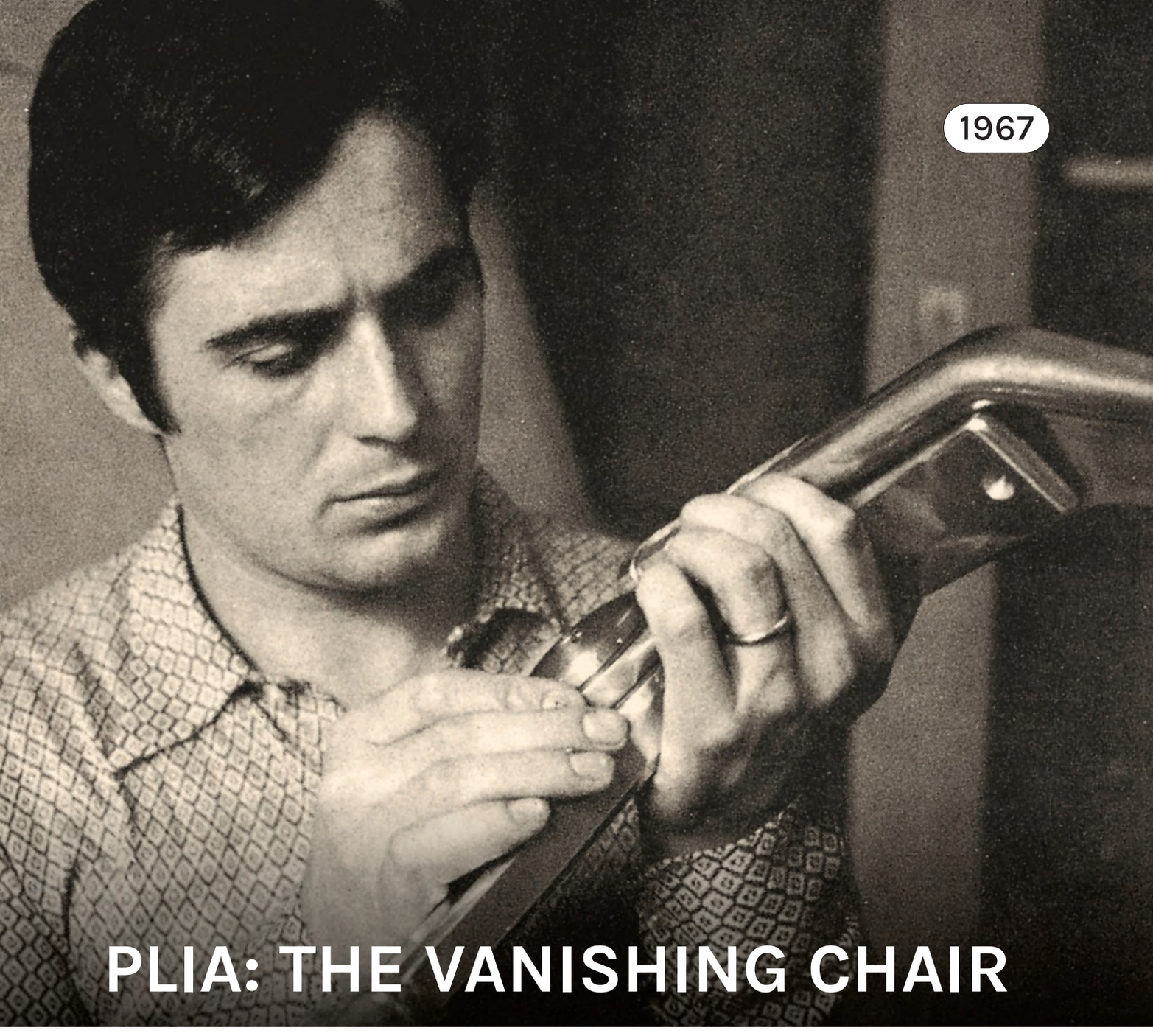
The new USM Haller Soft Panel introduces a soft, playful dimension to the USM product line.

A close-up of the elegant, ingenious ball joint, patented in 1965

In 2001 it entered the permanent collection of MoMA in New York as a true construction system. To this day, every USM piece is meticulously crafted at the historic Münsingen plant, just outside Bern, Switzerland. Here, production is an art form governed by an uncompromising commitment to safety, energy efficiency, and near-total recyclability at every stage. The state-of-the-art powder-coating process is entirely solvent-free and devoid of heavy metals, ensuring that beauty never comes at an environmental cost. A pioneer in sustainability, USM was awarded Greenguard certification in 2008 and the prestigious Cradle-to-Cradle® mark in 2018, milestones on its ambitious journey toward becoming a 100% circular enterprise by 2030.

To celebrate the system's 60th anniversary, the company released a lookbook featuring 100 original configurations, a testament to its inexhaustible versatility: custom wardrobes, nursery furniture, home office solutions, vinyl storage, and domestic bar units. Every configuration is an exercise in creativity that reflects the essence of the system: modular freedom, durability, and essential beauty. The collection's most recent evolution introduces the USM Haller Soft Panel: these thermoformed polyester felt panels are designed to optimize acoustic performance, merging structural precision with a new sense of softness.

On the opposite page, USM Haller modules at the Spotti showroom in Milan, ©Emil Kuliev



1967

PLIA: THE VANISHING CHAIR

How three steel discs and a sheet of plastic redefined democratic design and the art of saving space.

Before Plia, folding chairs were often clumsy and purely functional. Then came Giancarlo Piretti's stroke of engineering brilliance: a lightweight alloy joint made of three interlocking steel discs that allow the frame to fold with remarkable precision.

«I was asking myself very simple questions», Piretti recalls. «How can I make a chair transparent? Can it be foldable and yet incredibly slim?».

The answer lay in a material typical of the era: Cellidor, a cellulose acetate originally used for luxury sunglass frames. Once reinforced and refined, it became the first transparent plastic used structurally in furniture design.

The true innovation of Plia lies in its mechanism: a hinge that allows the chair to fold while also making it stackable.

“Objects are usually chosen for their aesthetic impact. People look at the style first, and only then consider whether it is comfortable. The Plia was designed for sitting an hour or two at most, but in the end people choose with their eyes and not with their backsides”

Giancarlo Piretti

When it was unveiled at the Salone del Mobile in Milan by Anonima Castelli, Plia left the industry speechless. It was light and unobtrusive and, thanks to its clear Cellidor seat, seemed to float in mid-air. The enthusiasm of the crowd was so overwhelming that by the end of the first day several prototypes had vanished from the booth, carried off by visitors fascinated by its ingenious mechanism and the novelty of transparent plastic.

However, when Anonima Castelli attempted to launch the chair in the United States, they encountered an unexpected obstacle: American consumers were not accustomed to such radical transparency. «From that day on I felt that marketing is the enemy of designers, at least for me», says Piretti. «It took years for it to catch on, but eventually it enjoyed enormous success in America».

Once that initial scepticism faded, Plia became an object of desire for urban dwellers, for whom every inch of space was precious. Its clean aesthetics made it a staple of high-fashion photography and avant-garde homes of the 1970s.

Plia sparked a silent revolution: a transparent, folding and stackable chair, perfectly suited to a new philosophy of living.

Plia has never been a showy icon. It has remained discreet, almost anonymous, as if its strength lay in being used, lived with and shaped by time.

Its ultimate recognition came with its inclusion in the permanent collection of MoMA in New York, where it was celebrated as a landmark of functional Italian design.

In the 1980s minimalism turned it into an icon. Mila Schön ordered thousands for her runway shows. The 1990s and 2000s saw its popularity rise again as transparency became an increasingly important architectural theme.

Today Plia is a global classic seen in millions of homes, from modern kitchens to refined studios. It proves that when a mechanical intuition is flawless it becomes timeless.
Its true strength lies in what might be called its “technological humility”: transforming the mundane act of folding a chair into a moment of pure engineering elegance, bringing a new sense of freedom to living spaces worldwide.

1967

The Impossible Curve: Verner Panton and His Legless Chair

The brief history of the cantilever chair that defied the laws of physics, becoming one of the most scandalous and photogenic silhouettes of the twentieth century.

Many before him had attempted to create a one-piece plastic chair. Eero Saarinen and Charles Eames are the most famous examples. But it was Verner Panton who ultimately succeeded. The idea of a cantilever chair moulded from a single piece of plastic and entirely without legs seemed like engineering suicide. Vitra accepted the challenge, but it would take years of experiments and failures before a viable solution emerged.

Panton spent much of the 1960s in a near-obsessive quest, searching for a manufacturer brave enough to share his vision. He travelled across half of Europe with his prototype. Eventually he arrived in Basel, where Willi Fehlbaum, the founder of Vitra, was immediately struck by it. Thus began a long period of trial and error, testing dozens of resin and plastic blends. The challenge was purely physical: how to support the weight of a person without the chair snapping at its point of maximum stress.

After years of failed prototypes, the Panton Chair finally entered production in 1967. It was the world's first chair to be moulded entirely from a single piece of coloured plastic. The world had never seen anything like it. It was fluid, sensual and seemed to arrive from a future where gravity no longer applied. It immediately became a favourite of fashion photographers and science fiction filmmakers.

Panton insisted on a wide palette of colours, believing that «one sits more comfortably on a colour one likes», a fitting philosophy, as this year marks his centenary.

The Panton Chair's cultural consecration came in 1970 thanks to a Vogue cover that fused cutting-edge design with the spirit of sexual liberation. Originally produced in glass fibre reinforced polyester, it was later manufactured in polyurethane and today is made from recyclable

The never-ending story: Verner Panton and Rolf Fehlbaum, head of Vitra (centre), along with Manfred Diebold and Josef Stürmlinger, discussing a prototype of the Panton Chair in the mid-1960s. ©Verner Panton Design AG

polypropylene. This versatility allows it to inhabit many environments, from the dining table to the poolside, while maintaining its timeless space-age allure.

In the 1970s the oil crisis and technical issues related to material durability led to a halt in production, turning the Panton Chair into a rare collector's item. But like a phoenix rising from its ashes, the chair returned to mass popularity in 1995 thanks to a legendary Vogue UK cover featuring a young Kate Moss posing nude on a flame-red Panton chair. The picture was so impactful that it convinced Vitra the world was ready for its return.

Thanks to new, more resilient and flexible polymers, the chair was reintroduced in 1999 in the polypropylene version we know today: light, durable and almost indestructible.

Today the Panton Chair is everywhere: in museums such as MoMA and in the kitchens of those who love pure design. It proves that when an idea is strong enough, it can bend even the laws of physics. Its true power lies in demonstrating that a chair does not need four legs to stand, opening up entirely new possibilities for future designers.

"One sits more comfortably on a colour that one likes"

Verner Panton

1970

CAMALEONDA:
BORN AHEAD OF ITS TIME

Camaleonda is the true ancestor of today's modular seating. As early as 1970, Mario Bellini understood that the home is not a static place, but a fluid environment. Through a system of cables, hooks and rings, he allowed the user to become the architect of their own comfort, rearranging modules in countless configurations.

Camaleonda is more than just a sofa. It is an idea of freedom. It was born at a time when interior architecture was shedding the rigidity of the 1950s to embrace the experimental energy of the post-boom era.
The 1970s marked a powerful decade for avant-garde design, and Bellini created the Camaleonda for B&B Italia (then C&B), imagining a sofa that could be moved from one house to another as easily as luggage. In a rapidly changing world, furniture evolved into a lightweight, adaptable companion.

The name is a perfect neologism combining two ideas: the chameleon, for its ability to adapt to any context, and the wave (onda), evoking the fluidity of the sea.

One technical detail often goes unnoticed, yet was carefully refined by Bellini: the support system. Instead of traditional legs, the Camaleonda rests on small spherical feet that barely lift it off the ground. This subtle detail creates the illusion that the sofa is floating, reinforcing a sense of wave-like lightness despite its generous volumes.
The structure consists of 90 × 90 cm modules that can be endlessly combined, but the heart of the project lies in the system of cables, hooks and rings that wrap around each unit. By unhooking the tie-rods, the sofa can be dismantled, allowing a linear configuration to transform into a lounge island or several individual armchairs in a matter of seconds.

The designer Mario Bellini. ©Albert Greenwood

“Camaleonda doesn’t have a shape; it contains potential, and no one wants to give up potential”

Mario Bellini

The Camaleonda rose to prominence in 1972 when it appeared in the landmark exhibition Italy: The New Domestic Landscape at MoMA in New York. Its bold and flexible design quickly became a global symbol of Italian innovation.

Production ceased after only nine years, turning it into one of the most sought-after pieces on the luxury vintage market and one of the most frequently copied in design history. Figures such as Stella McCartney, Marc Jacobs and Elsa Hosk spent years searching mid-century galleries and online auctions to secure original 1970s modules, driving vintage prices to extraordinary levels.

The 2020 reissue is far from being a simple replica. The padding was completely re-engineered by the B&B Italia Research & Development Centre, making it even more comfortable than the original. Its “sandwich” structure is composed of layers of recycled or recyclable materials, designed for easy disassembly so that each module can be separated and recovered for recycling at the end of its life cycle. The upholstery is also crafted from recycled polyester fibre derived from recycled PET, the same material used for everyday plastic bottles.

Across these pages, the Camaleonda sofa unfolds in all the eclecticism of its modular configurations. ©Federico Cedrone

In 2020, B&B Italia reissued the Camaleonda. Save for minimal adjustments to comply with 21st-century safety and environmental standards, the design remains unchanged. ©Courtesy B&B Italia.

1972

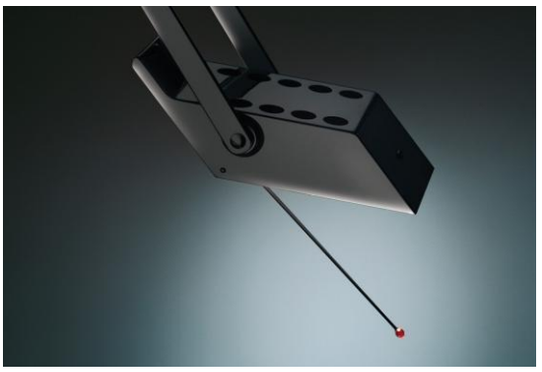
Light in Balance

Richard Sapper reinvented the desk lamp by eliminating cables and defying gravity through an architecture of pure precision.

The concept for the Tizio lamp took shape in the early 1970s through a dialogue between German designer Richard Sapper and Ernesto Gismondi, the founder of Artemide. They were united by a shared passion for sailing and a rigorous vision of design. Sapper, accustomed to working late into the night, felt constrained by the desk lamps of the era, which were often bulky and ergonomically inadequate. He wanted a light that could be adjusted with a single touch, illuminating the workspace without glare and, above all, maintaining its position without the joints loosening over time.

After an extensive research phase on forms and mechanisms, Sapper arrived at a balanced-arm structure, a sort of miniature crane that, in its agility, recalled an articulated toy or a marionette. The heart of the project lay in an invisible technological revolution that overturned the conventions of domestic electrical design.

The counterweight system in the first prototype used jam jars. Richard Sapper filled and emptied them with water until he found the exact weight needed for perfect balance. ©Peter Fehrentz



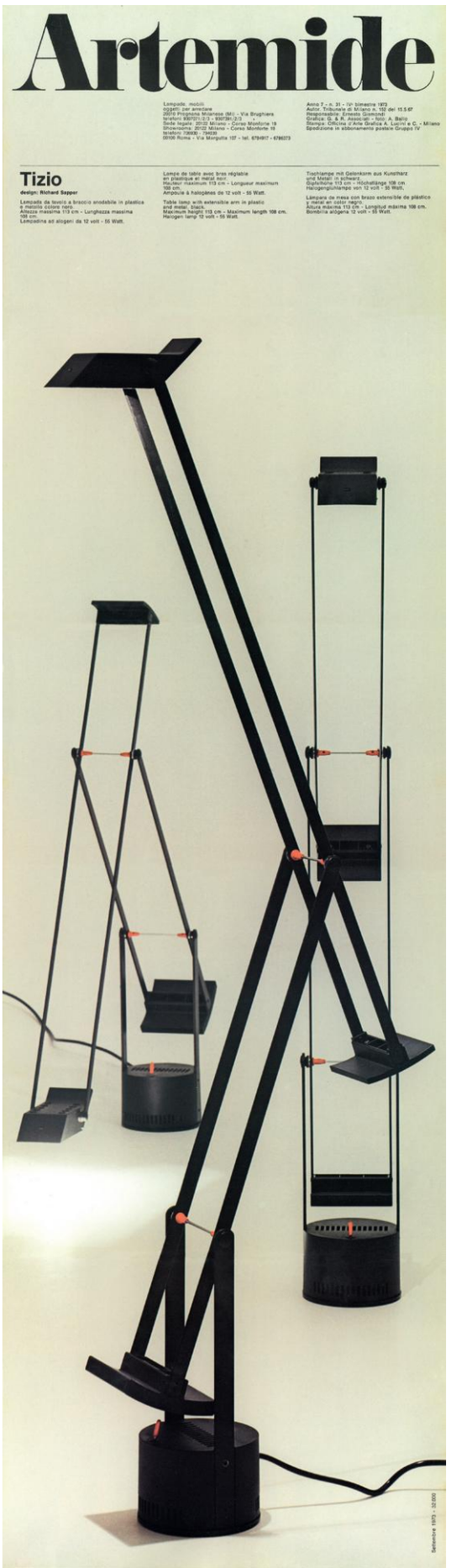
The rod with the red ball was later added for the Danish market to prevent the lamp head from touching and scorching the table surface.

Sapper realised that to preserve the purity of the design he had to eliminate the clutter of external wires. He adopted a technology that at the time was largely confined to the automotive sector, the low-voltage halogen bulb, and made his most audacious move. He transformed the arms of the lamp themselves into electrical conductors.

The industrial challenge was unprecedented: running 12-volt electricity through the structure's joints and counterweights without causing a short circuit.
Thanks to a transformer hidden in the base, the current travels through the metal rods, making visible cables unnecessary and giving the Tizio a naked, almost aeronautical appearance.
Gismondi, recognising the project's potential and imagining future variations, suggested the name Tizio, taken from the Italian idiom Tizio, Caio e Sempronio, equivalent to "Tom, Dick and Harry". He hoped to convince Sapper to design "Caio" and "Sempronio" to complete the family.

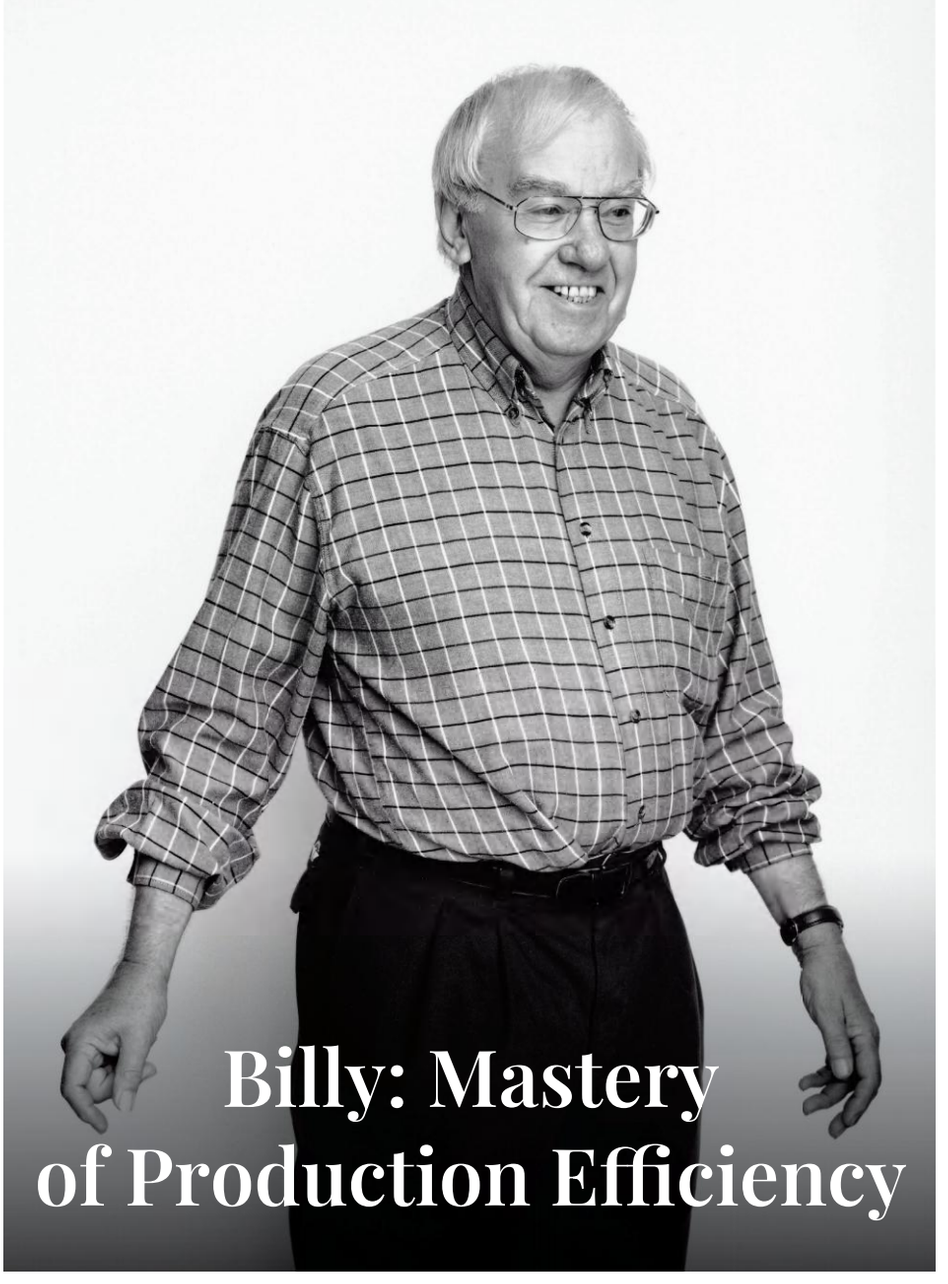
Introduced in 1972, the Tizio immediately stood out for its functional aesthetic. There are no springs and no tightening screws. Instead, it relies on a system of counterweights. The two mobile arms are so perfectly balanced that wherever they are moved, they remain fixed in the chosen position. This fluidity made it the perfect tool for architects, surgeons and designers, professionals who require millimetre precision and free hands.
The lamp requires no mechanical maintenance, with durability built into its design.
International acclaim followed with its inclusion in the permanent collections of MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it was celebrated as a masterpiece of high-tech design. As the first lamp to fully integrate structural and electrical functions, the Tizio has stood the test of time, becoming one of the most iconic and best-selling products in design history. Its dynamic nature allows it to inhabit almost any space while maintaining a sculptural precision that never ages, despite changing generations and evolving light sources.

Today Artemide's Tizio remains a benchmark for the entire industry. Seen in creative studios and collectors' homes alike, it proves that when a production insight is flawless, it has no need to change. Its strength lies in having transformed a routine gesture like turning on a light into an experience of perfect balance between human gesture and machine precision.



The Tizio lamp as seen in a vintage publication

1979



Billy: Mastery of Production Efficiency

Gillis Lundgren, the designer of the Billy bookcase.

Sketched on a paper napkin in 1979 by Gillis Lundgren, Billy is far more than just a bookcase. It is a modular system that helped bring order to the modern home worldwide. In its ultimate simplicity, it represents the “degré zéro” of design, where function does not merely follow form, but defines it.

Every five seconds, somewhere in the world, a Billy rolls off the production line. It is the best-selling piece of furniture in history, but to understand why we must go back to 1956. Gillis Lundgren, IKEA’s fourth employee, was photographing products for the Swedish catalogue. He was trying to load a leaf-shaped table, the Lövet model, into his car, but the legs made it impossible to close the boot. That was the “Eureka” moment. He decided to saw them off and tuck them under the tabletop.

At that moment Lundgren realised that “shipping air” was a waste of money for the company and an inconvenience for the customer. If people took over the “last mile”, delivery and assembly, prices could fall dramatically. Two decades later, Billy would become the ultimate expression of this vision.

The logic is simple: if furniture travels flat, it costs less to produce, store and transport. The customer becomes the final worker on the assembly line. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Lundgren refined this concept. The modern home needed order, but most people could not afford custom-made furniture. The world needed something standardised yet flexible.

The breakthrough came during a trip to Romania in 1975. While visiting factories that produced various shelving units, IKEA engineer Arne Hall had an intuition: the new model had to be universal, functional for both manufacturer and user. Gillis Lundgren captured this insight by sketching the first Billy on the back of a napkin. As he later put it: «That was often the way we worked. Ideas are perishable, and you have to capture the moment as soon as it arrives».

IKEA periodically reissues its iconic classics in ultra-limited editions, such as the bold green version of the Billy bookcase.

Production originally began with a 90 cm standard module. However, by 1982 IKEA was on the verge of removing it from the catalogue because the shelves tended to sag under the weight of heavy books. The solution was simple: narrow the module. Billy went from 90 cm to 80 cm, alongside a 40 cm slim version. The result was stronger and far more versatile.
Standardised 32 mm hole spacing was introduced, an industry benchmark that allows maximum shelf modularity. The recessed plinth allows the unit to sit flush against the wall, regardless of the baseboards.

Today Billy is produced in the tens of millions and in countless variations. To keep up with demand, IKEA developed a fully automated production process where human intervention is minimal and waste almost non-existent. Every sheet of melamine is cut to minimise offcuts, an efficiency we would today describe as a circular economy ante litteram.

Financial Times columnist Tim Harford included Billy in his book Fifty Things That Made the Modern Economy, alongside the iPhone, radar and antibiotics. In its absolute simplicity it reminds us that innovation is not always revolutionary. Often it lies in the constant refinement of an idea. «In the modern economy», Harford writes, «Billy is a symbol of how innovation is not only about high-tech breakthroughs, but about boringly efficient systems».

Billy is so ubiquitous it rivals the Big Mac. While The Economist uses McDonald's burger as a global purchasing power benchmark, Bloomberg preferred the IKEA bookcase to create the "Billy Bookcase Index".

From the first pine models to modern versions, Billy has adapted to the changing needs of our homes, proving that good design does not need to be reinvented, only refined.

2019

The First Chair Designed by an Algorithm

The story of Kartell's A.I. chair is the chronicle of a radical experiment that redefined the boundary between human creativity and computational calculation.

It all began in 2017, when Philippe Starck, driven by his endless quest for the "degré zéro" of design, approached software giant Autodesk with a question that was almost philosophical: is it possible to conceive a chair capable of supporting the human body using the absolute minimum amount of material?

In Autodesk's research labs in Toronto, Generative Design took centre stage. Unlike traditional software, where the designers draw what they already have in mind, here the designer defines a set of boundary parameters: the maximum weight to be supported, the points of contact with the ground, resistance to stress and, crucially, the physical constraints of injection moulding, a technique in which Kartell has excelled for decades.

A.I. is the first chair designed using artificial intelligence. Generative design software produced the chair's structure based on parameters defined by Philippe Starck.

«Every year Kartell explores new technologies and materials. We wanted to be the first to harness this innovation in the furniture sector, bridging generative design, industrial technology and environmental responsibility»

Claudio Luti

The A.I. chair is also available in an outdoor version, produced with recycled materials designed to withstand the elements while maintaining its organic aesthetic. ©Margherita Bonetti

The algorithm then generated a process of accelerated evolution, producing thousands of iterations and discarding those that proved structurally inefficient.

The dialogue between Starck and artificial intelligence lasted around two years. During this phase, the designer rejected solutions that were too “alien” or technically impossible to manufacture, pushing the machine to refine its search. It was a process of mutual learning. The algorithm learned the limits of technopolymers, while Starck learned to consider forms that his mind might never have conceived spontaneously.

After numerous iterations, the system produced a structure reminiscent of human bone morphology or the branching of a tree. This outcome is hardly surprising. Nature itself works through extreme optimisation, removing matter where it is unnecessary and reinforcing the points where loads are concentrated.

Kartell then faced the final production challenge: mass-producing a chair with variable structural sections using, for the first time, a material made entirely from recycled industrial waste.

Presented at the Salone del Mobile in Milan in 2019, the A.I. chair immediately became a landmark case study.
«The A.I. chair proves that it is possible to reach the market faster with eco-friendly products without sacrificing beauty or functional performance», explains Claudio Luti, President of Kartell.
Its organic aesthetic demonstrates that artificial intelligence does not replace human creativity. Instead, it expands it, enabling designers to develop objects that are lighter, stronger and more sustainable.

Artificial intelligence is not a substitute for the designer’s creativity, which remains central to the project. Rather, it acts as a tool capable of accelerating both prototyping and design development, significantly shortening the time required to bring a product to market.

A.I. represents a balance between minimalism and functionality, demonstrating the evolution of intelligent design. ©Sara Magni

Elective Affinities

The 1976 Citroën 2CV Spot, the first in a long line of special editions based on the iconic utilitarian car born in 1948.

An avant-garde nonconformist, the Mezzadro stool entered production with Zanotta in 1971 and has since never ceased to represent a perfect synthesis of irony and design precision.

First Parallel: Brutalist Honesty

In 20th-century design history, few objects embody pure functionality as uncompromisingly as the Citroën 2CV and Zanotta's Mezzadro stool. In both cases, inspiration came from the observation of rural labour and its blunt efficiency. They are the manifesto of one disruptive idea: beauty is not the goal. What matters is a functionality so direct that it leaves no room for the superfluous.

DM explores five silent dialogues between objects that, despite coming from different worlds, share a common vision.

The Flos Arco lamp is architecture on a domestic scale. Born from the observation of a streetlight, it sheds every decorative element to reveal its essential form. This same purity defines Chef Niko Romito's signature "Broccoli Leaf and Anise": a side dish elevated to its highest expression, served in its rawest form and reimagined as something entirely new.
Consider the Moleskine notebook and Breuer's Laccio table: objects that have simply become indispensable, where form follows function with absolute clarity. Similarly, the Zanotta Mezzadro stool and the Citroën 2CV stand as monuments to honest efficiency, favouring radical pragmatism over mere aesthetics.
Another parallel emerges between Erwan Bouroullec's Music Studio for Samsung and the wooden trays by Geckeler Michels for Woak, both acting as vibrant yet understated companions to our daily lives. Finally, matter itself challenges its own nature: in the fluid architecture of the Guggenheim Bilbao, as weightless as a pair of titanium Silhouette glasses designed to vanish in the light.

In 1936, Pierre-Jules Boulanger, then head of Citroën, realised that rural France needed a new way to move. According to his legendary brief, the vehicle destined to motorise the nation had to carry two people and a fifty-kilogram sack of potatoes or a small keg of wine, travel at sixty kilometres per hour and consume just three litres per hundred kilometres. The ultimate test was this: it had to cross a ploughed field without breaking a single egg placed on the seat. During World War II, engineers refined the concept using lightweight materials such as aluminium.
When the 2CV debuted at the 1948 Paris Motor Show, the public and the press were stunned. Aesthetically it was the antithesis of luxury: exposed bolts, hammock-like seats and a canvas roof. Yet the 2CV became a runaway success thanks to its ingenious suspension system, which provided remarkable comfort on almost any terrain. At one point the waiting list stretched to five years. Over time the "peasant's car" became a symbol for rebellious youth, artists and backpackers. It allowed people to explore the world on a budget and was famously easy to repair.

Similarly, the Mezzadro stool challenges conventional seating. Instead of sketching a new form, Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni used a ready-made object: a 1920s tractor seat. They mounted it on a spring steel bow that serves as both support and shock absorber, overcoming the typical rigidity of metal. As with the Citroën 2CV, comfort here is the result of precise engineering rather than decorative form.

In the 2CV nothing is redundant: removable tubular seats and a lightweight canvas roof reduce weight and material. In the Mezzadro the structure consists of only three elements: the seat, the steel bow and the wooden crossbar that ensures stability. There is no padding, no luxury, only the clarity of function.

The Mezzadro hides nothing. Every bolt remains visible, echoing the exposed bodywork of the Citroën. Both represent the triumph of design honesty over aesthetics for aesthetics' sake, solving practical needs with the greatest economy of means.
Even today they remain powerful manifestos for anyone wishing to design with a sense of responsibility, reminding us that beauty is not an absolute value but the natural consequence of constructive truth.

«It is, quite certainly, a magical cross between Pegasus and a food mill»

Jacques Wolgensinger
Citroën Communications Director

With only 1,800 units produced, the Spot remains a highly coveted collector's piece today.

A detail of the Arco lamp's shade, characterised by its signature cooling holes. ©Courtesy Fondazione Achille Castiglioni

The Shape of Substance

How the Ordinary Becomes Iconic

In design, as in haute cuisine, perfection is a strategic game of subtraction. A masterpiece is achieved not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is absolutely nothing left to take away. This philosophy bridges the gap between two icons that, at first glance, seem worlds apart: the Arco lamp, designed by Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni for Flos in 1962, and Broccoli Leaf and Anise, the signature dish by three-Michelin-starred chef Niko Romito.

Broccoli leaf and anise: a signature dish by Niko Romito, the three-Michelin-starred chef of Ristorante Reale, in Italy. ©Andrea Straccini

The Arco lamp, featured in the 2022 Milan exhibition “1962 blocchi di marmo manici di scopa e altre storie”.
©Francesca Ferrari/Fondazione Achille Castiglioni.

Arco was a direct response to a mundane yet complex problem: how to bring overhead light to a dining table without the permanence or structural constraints of a fixed ceiling point. The result is pure function turned into poetry. Every component is laid bare: the marble block, the telescopic stem, the perforated shade. Each has a precise role to play. There is not a single superfluous detail or decorative veneer to soften its raw honesty. The solid block of Carrara marble is far from a luxury flourish or a display of wealth. It is the essential counterweight that anchors the arm as it reaches two metres into the room. Even the arm itself, crafted from three sliding U-shaped sections, is a brilliant piece of industrial engineering. It conceals the electrical wiring while allowing the user to precisely adjust the light’s height and reach.

Niko Romito operates according to the same logic with Broccoli Leaf and Anise. He strips away garnishes and traditional plating tropes until what remains could almost be described as pure vegetal architecture. The raw ingredient, poached in brine, develops a new, almost meaty texture. The leaf is then glazed with a dense reduction of broccoli florets, a drizzle of oil, and a few drops of concentrated anise extract.
This pairing heightens the vegetable’s natural balsamic notes while amplifying its mineral depth, reaching an unexpected intensity. The final dish is served in its purest form, entirely unadorned. Through a radical technical gesture, the ingredient transcends its status as a simple vegetable or side dish and becomes an object of gastronomic design.

«If you aren’t curious, forget it»

Achille Castiglioni

Both examples take the ordinary and elevate it to the extraordinary through the power of a single idea. For the Castiglionis, design was never about inventing whimsical shapes. It was about solving real problems using the vocabulary of what already existed, even if that meant repurposing hardware-store components into a high-end lamp. Romito shares this ethos, taking a humble staple of cucina popolare and treating it with the same reverence a designer might reserve for marble or steel.

Ultimately, these works endure as icons not because they are made of rare or precious materials, but because someone had the vision to recognise profound potential where everyone else saw only the familiar.

Titanium Beauty

What does Frank Gehry's masterpiece, with its more than 33,000 titanium panels, have in common with a pair of rimless glasses? Behind the organic fluidity of the Guggenheim Bilbao's curves lies extreme engineering complexity, made possible through aerospace design software. In the same way, the formal purity of a Silhouette frame is the result of more than one hundred quality checks and a manufacturing process that combines high technology with artisanal mastery. In both cases, technology is never an end in itself, but the means to achieve a kind of weightless perfection in which technical complexity disappears, leaving only visual clarity.

The Silhouette Refined collection features an innovative hinge integrated into the temple, blending technical ingenuity with weightless comfort.

In design, as in avant-garde architecture, perfection is reached when matter seems to defy its own nature and evokes pure emotion. For the Guggenheim Bilbao, Frank Gehry envisioned a fluid architecture that broke away from the rigidity of classical modernism, creating a form that interacts with light and with the city's post-industrial landscape with the organic grace of a living organism.

To achieve this, he turned to tools that were unprecedented at the time: aerospace design software capable of calculating the complex curving surfaces of thousands of titanium plates. Without this technology, mapping and cutting the 33,000 titanium panels with millimetre precision would have been impossible. Titanium proved to be the ideal material for capturing Bilbao's light, shifting in colour with the weather and giving the structure a vibrancy that concrete or steel could never replicate. It is an architecture that moves with the observer, a sculpture that appears to defy gravity.

Inspired by the pure geometries of architecture, the Refined line is shaped from cold-formed S-Titanium™: a material that combines extreme durability with a nearly imperceptible lightness on the face.

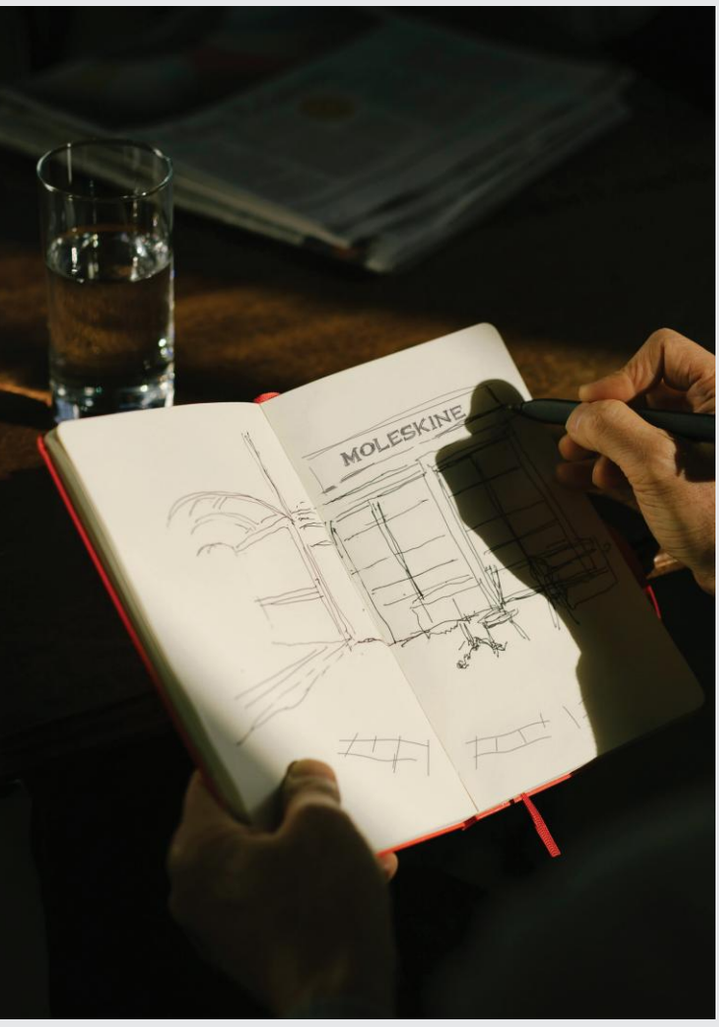
While Gehry uses titanium to create a monumental yet ever-changing presence, Silhouette employs it to make its glasses almost invisible, a natural extension of the body that neither weighs it down nor restricts it. The heart of their craft lies in a manufacturing process that remains eighty percent handmade in Linz, Austria, where every frame undergoes more than one hundred quality checks. The choice of high-tech titanium and the absence of screws or hinges, pioneered by the Titan Minimal Art collection in 1999, ensure a level of flexibility and comfort that allows the wearer to forget the glasses even exist. In the Refined collection, ultralight titanium is sculpted to provide impeccable stability, demonstrating how a high-tech material can be transformed into wearable design, following the contours of the face as naturally as the Guggenheim's curves follow the urban skyline.

Both projects stem from the desire to elevate a technical material through the intelligence of design. Gehry transforms titanium into an urban icon that interacts with light, while Silhouette turns it into a precision instrument that interacts with the human face. In both cases, sophisticated technology is not an end in itself, but a means of achieving a formal purity that appears effortless, despite the profound engineering complexity that sustains it.

«The new collection reflects the same harmonious tension found in Gehry's revolutionary works. It is a living, organic design, intended to be worn with absolute ease»

Roland Keplinger
Design Director at Silhouette

Designed by US architect Frank Gehry, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao building is a large sculpture made of titanium, limestone, and glass, and has become the most recognisable icon of the city. ©Courtesy Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



The Moleskine notebook stands as a contemporary pop culture icon, a sanctuary for thoughts and sketches, representing a continuous creative baton pass.

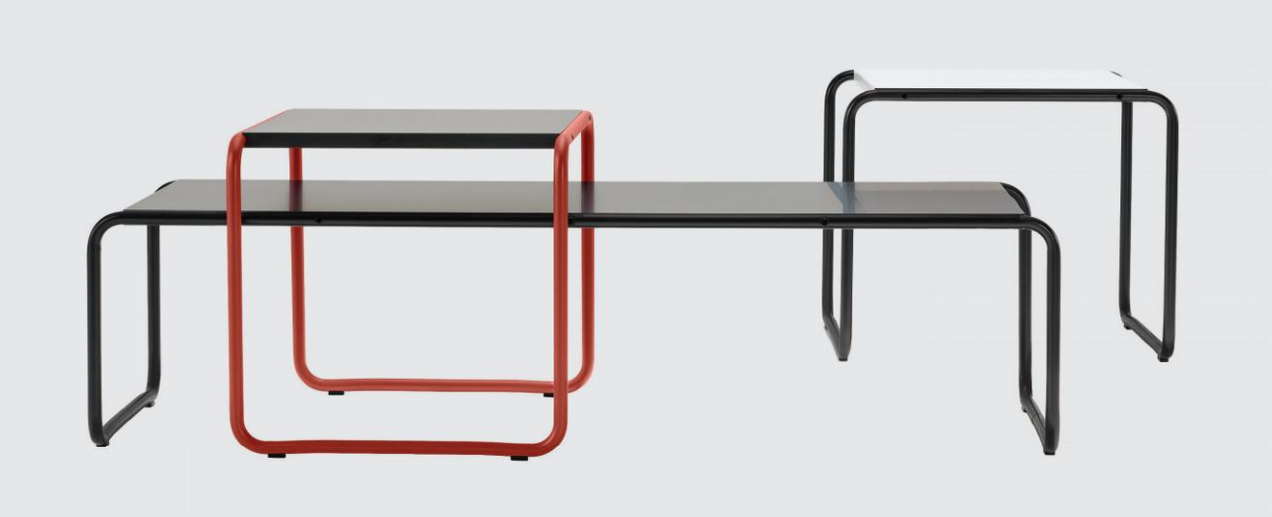
As a Bauhaus apprentice in 1925, Marcel Breuer conceived the Laccio table as a companion to the Wassily chair, the first tubular steel design based on the tubed frame of a bicycle.
©Federico Cedrone

Incidental Beauty: The Naked Logic of Design

Design at its most raw: some objects transcend mere utility and become something more, stripping away decoration so that pure function can take the lead. The Moleskine notebook and Marcel Breuer's Laccio table for Knoll are masterclasses in this philosophy. Here, beauty is not the objective; it is the inevitable by-product of a design that is honest, uncompromising, and reduced to its absolute core.

«Architecture must first of all be useful. If I had the choice between something neutral and useful and something that is novel or beautiful but useless, I prefer the first»

Marcel Breuer



In 2024, Knoll reissued the Laccio table with a palette of ultra-matte colours: white, onyx, and an archival dark red rediscovered by the Knoll design team. ©Federico Cedrone

For over a century, a small black notebook with rounded corners and an internal pocket was the anonymous treasure of a modest French bookbinder supplying the stationery shops of Paris. It carried no grand name. It was simply a practical tool for those who wished to put their thoughts on paper, among them Hemingway, Picasso and Van Gogh.

When the last family-run factory in Tours closed in 1986, Bruce Chatwin, a near-obsessive user, lamented in The Songlines: «Le vrai moleskine n'est plus». The real moleskine is no more. It was Chatwin who gave it its name, referring to the black oilcloth cover that echoed the texture of moleskin. In 1997, the Milanese publisher Modo&Modo resurrected this timeless tool. The Moleskine was reborn almost unchanged: devoid of logos or superfluous ornament, defined only by its black elastic band and ivory pages.

Similarly, Marcel Breuer's Laccio table presents itself exactly as it is. Designed in 1925 after Breuer observed the handlebars of his Adler bicycle, the Laccio uses tubular steel without masking it behind coverings or upholstery. The structure is direct and honest, composed of continuous lines that define space with surgical precision.

In the Laccio, a single continuous metal line defines the entire structure. In the Moleskine, it is the elastic band that holds the pages together. This is design that does not seek to appear luxurious, but rather to become indispensable.

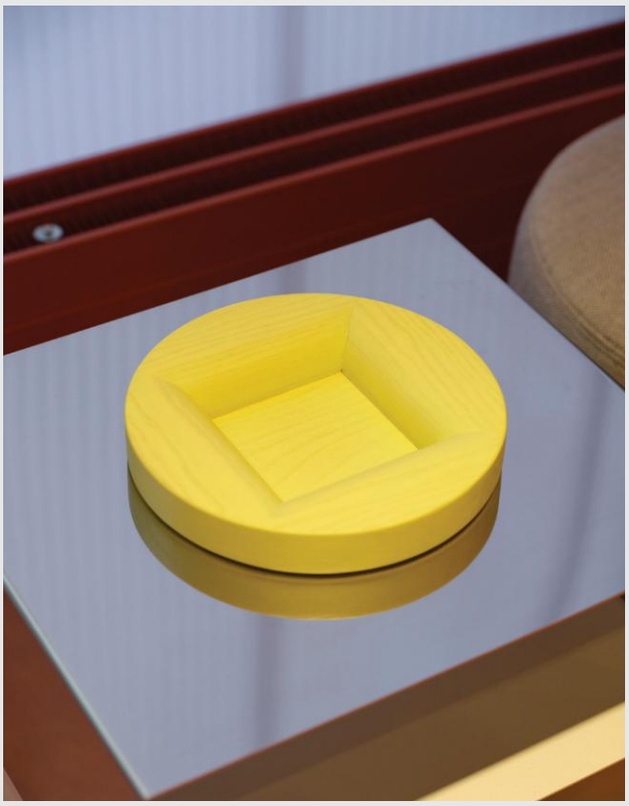
Both objects solve practical needs, capturing thought and supporting everyday objects, with the utmost economy of means. The Laccio's profile is elegant because it is efficient. The black cover of the Moleskine is iconic because it is practical. Both remind us that the most enduring design is that which serves the user first, allowing form to emerge naturally from substance. Even today they stand as examples of an incidental beauty that emerges when form has the courage to remain naked, direct, and above all true.

Music Studio 5 and Music Studio 7 are Wi-Fi enabled speakers that deliver powerful sound and remarkable clarity, making them suitable for a wide variety of domestic settings.

What do a solid wood tray and a high-end speaker have in common? At first glance, very little. Yet place them side by side and the connection becomes immediate.

Quiet Resonance

We are talking about the Signet collection by Geckeler Michels and the Music Studio audio system by Erwan Bouroullec for Samsung: two projects rooted in a shared philosophy, designed to harmonise with everyday life without ever compromising aesthetic rigour.



Signet is an accessory collection featuring solid wood trays and wall mirrors designed to bring quiet order to everyday spaces.

The boundary between technology and craftsmanship is far more blurred than it might appear. Signet, a collection of solid wood trays and wall mirrors designed by Geckeler Michels for the Bosnian brand Woak, feels like the natural companion to the Music Studio system by Samsung. What connects them is not a simple aesthetic coincidence, but a shared design logic.

For Geckeler Michels, Signet's rectangle acts as the essential frame that brings order to space. Bouroullec, instead, works with the circle, the universal archetype of sound, linking the Music Studio to the formal language of the acoustic cone. Yet what is the common thread connecting these two distant geometries?

Both projects gained depth during their development phase, almost out of constructive necessity. Geckeler Michels worked by subtraction, carving into the wood to create the optical illusion of a recessed rectangle. Bouroullec's speaker, initially conceived as flat, gradually acquired volume as it responded to the physical demands of acoustics. Signet's frame emerged to better capture the light, creating an illusion of depth, while the body of the Music Studio expanded simply to sound better.

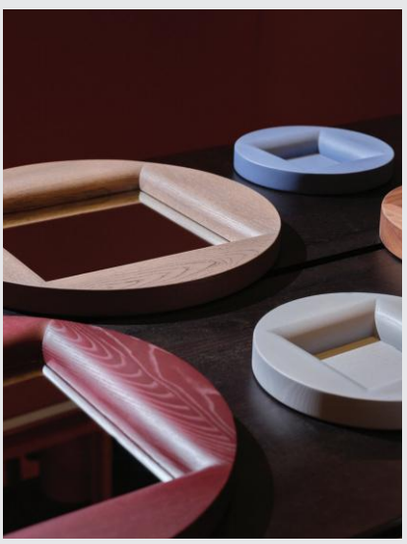
The most striking similarity, however, lies in their search for a quiet, understated presence within the home. For Bouroullec, a technological object should recede into its surroundings much like a tray. It should become a "friendly companion", capable of moving from the kitchen to the living room without disturbing the harmony of the domestic space.

Music Studio 5 and Music Studio 7 are designed to coexist naturally with interiors, operating flexibly within a connected system and adapting to the way people actually inhabit their homes. Both projects shape our daily rituals. They are not isolated objects, but catalysts for interaction. Signet is designed to cradle the small objects of everyday life, while Music Studio alters the atmosphere of a room through sound. Both reject the idea of elitist or overly complex design, opting instead for a seamless integration of the old and the new, where the object becomes an essential part of everyday living.

Music Studio 5 and Music Studio 7 by Samsung are designed to coexist naturally with interiors, operating flexibly within a connected system and adapting to how people actually inhabit their homes.

«I believe that colours and patterns can easily picture a kind of music: the darker and colder tones would to my point of view evoke jazz, or a very elaborated electronic music, while a very repetitive pattern with brighter schemes would possibly figure something more pop and energetic. But for sure all of this is depending on one's imagination and culture»

Erwan Bouroullec



The sculptural character of Signet is defined by a refined interplay of simple geometries. A generous radius fillet on the inner edges of the frame creates the illusion of recessed rectangles, giving the objects a subtle trompe-l'œil effect.

DESIGNING THE INVISIBLE

Formafantasma (Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin) in their Milanese home. In the photo, the Sesann sofa, designed by Gianfranco Frattini for Tacchini, and the Noctambule Floor 3 lamp by Konstantin Grcic for Flos. ©Claudia Zalla.

Talking to DM, Formafantasma explain why the object is only the visible fragment of design.

Behind every finished object lies an invisible landscape of forests, mines, logistics and chemical processes. Designing the invisible means shifting our focus from the final product to the system that produces it, turning responsibility into a new aesthetic standard.

In this interview with DM, Formafantasma's Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin explain why design can no longer be limited to defining form. Instead, it must act upstream, intervening in industrial protocols, extraction policies and supply chain dynamics. This approach defines a new kind of avant-garde, essential for protecting our fragile ecosystems: a form of design that is unafraid to be less visible if it means being more transformative, operating in the shadows where true systemic change takes root.
Through landmark collaborations, such as their wild birch research for Artek or the use of waste wool for Tacchini, Formafantasma champions an approach where beauty is not an isolated quality, but the natural result of transparent ethical and technical choices. The interview outlines a fresh perspective on ethical responsibility: one that does not necessarily chase the new, but offers a critical and operational overhaul of the existing world, turning design into a powerful engine for systemic change.

The Formafantasma method represents a powerful paradigm shift: the object is no longer the endgame, but a tool for decoding the complexities of the world around us. Through their lens, design moves beyond pure aesthetics to become a form of investigation, capable of mapping the ripple effects of a single screw or a lone textile fibre. In this conversation, the duo invite us behind the scenes of production, revealing that today's true creative act lies in negotiating new ground rules with industry, transforming ecological constraints into an unprecedented kind of design freedom.

As you often say, design is never just form. If the finished object is only the tip of the iceberg, forests, mines, logistics, labour, chemistry, how does the idea of beauty change? Can responsibility become a new aesthetic?

For us, beauty is not an autonomous quality of the object. It is the consequence of a series of decisions that happen long before form stabilises. If we truly think of the object as the tip of the iceberg, then form becomes almost a side effect. Before it comes extraction policies, material selection criteria, labour conditions, environmental regulations, logistical infrastructures and available technologies.
In this sense, beauty changes because what we consider relevant changes. It is no longer only a question of proportions or harmony, but of coherence between what we see and what the object implies.

If a product is formally elegant but originates from an opaque or destructive system, there is a fracture that makes that beauty fragile, almost decorative. Responsibility can become aesthetic only when it affects the underlying parameters of a project. When you modify an industrial criterion, when you decide to include rather than exclude part of the raw material, when you design for repair rather than obsolescence, the formal outcome inevitably changes. Not because you want to show responsibility, but because responsibility has altered the rules of the game.

Your approach seems to make readable what normally remains outside the frame. How do you decide what to make visible, and with which tools, without turning complexity into spectacle or guilt into language?

The risk of turning crisis into scenography is very real. Today it is easy to aestheticise complexity and turn it into a recognisable visual language. We try to avoid this by always starting from research, not from the image.

Our work begins with a very concrete phase of study: conversations with technicians, foresters, chemists and producers; analysis of data; direct observation of processes.
We never begin with the question "how do we tell this story?" but rather "which part of this system produces real consequences?"

Making something visible does not mean exposing everything. It means identifying those points where a shift in perspective can produce a practical change. Sometimes this happens through an object, other times through an exhibition, and sometimes through adjustments in industrial protocols. Our ambition is not to spectacularise complexity but to make it workable and translatable into decisions.

"Making something visible does not mean exposing everything. It means identifying those points where a shift in perspective can produce a practical change."

With the Oltre Terra exhibition in Oslo, Formafantasma investigates the complexities of wool, tracing its journey through farming, distribution, and the very animals at the heart of the process. ©Gregorio Gonella

With the Flock project, Formafantasma introduces a more sustainable and nature-based process for manufacturing Tacchini's iconic designs, featuring a technique inspired by antique mattress production that uses surplus sheep's wool to replace industrial foam. ©Andrea Ferrari

The Five to Nine daybed is available with natural latex and wool padding. ©Andrea Ferrari

Gianfranco Frattini's Lina armchair for Tacchini, reimagined as part of the Wool Collection ©Andrea Ferrari

Using "natural materials" responsibly is not enough. The dynamics of extraction must also be questioned. What are the most frequent blind spots when you analyse a supply chain?

The most common misunderstanding is the equation between natural and sustainable. It is a powerful narrative shortcut because it reassures. But nature is not a quality label. It is a complex ecological and political system. When we analyse a supply chain, one of the most frequent blind spots concerns selection criteria. What is considered quality? What is excluded? Industrial aesthetic standards often generate enormous amounts of waste even when the material itself is perfectly functional.

Another blind spot is the separation between matter and governance. Materials are often presented as neutral, but in reality they exist within a very specific regulatory and economic context.
Extraction is not only a technical act but also a political one. Questioning it means examining the logic that defines value, price, risk and responsibility.

"But nature is not a quality label. It is a complex ecological and political system."

On the occasion of Milano Design Week 2023, Formafantasma introduced a more sustainable and nature-based production process for four of Tacchini's iconic designs: Le mura, Costela, Five to nine (pictured) and Lina. ©Andrea Ferrari

The Forest Collection, a collaboration between Artek and Formafantasma, promotes a more responsible use of wood. By introducing “wild birch,” the series celebrates organic imperfections – like knots and insect trails – as unique aesthetic features.

With Flock for Tacchini you replaced polyurethane foam with surplus wool. Is this what true avant-garde looks like today?

We do not believe that the avant-garde necessarily coincides with the idea of the future as radically new technology. Often the most significant innovation is a critical revision of what already exists.

In the case of Flock, the issue was not simply replacing a synthetic material with a natural one. The real question was the normalisation of polyurethane foam in the upholstered furniture industry. Wool is an ancient material, but integrating it into a contemporary production chain requires technical research, industrial adjustments and dialogue with suppliers and manufacturers. It is not a nostalgic gesture. It is an attempt to realign material availability with production logic.

If there is an avant-garde today, perhaps it lies in the ability to question established industrial habits, even when they appear inevitable.

Some of the most-loved Artek products, including Stool 60, Chair 66, Chair 69 and a selection of Aalto Tables and Benches, have been selected for the Forest Collection to ensure the greatest positive impact.

An unlimited anniversary edition, Stool 60 Villi has joined Artek's standard collection.

Each product displays the marks that appear during the tree's natural life. This makes each stool unique.

With Artek and Stool 60 you redefined the idea of waste in the timber supply chain. Where did you begin, and which parameter proved the hardest to dismantle?

The collaboration with Artek went far beyond a reinterpretation of Stool 60. That stool was simply the first visible outcome of a broader systemic reflection on the relationship between the company and the forest.

We did not begin with form. We began with the question of what kind of forest makes the Artek catalogue possible, and how that forest is managed, studied and classified.
We studied Finnish forestry practices, analysed birch selection criteria and spoke with multiple actors across the supply chain.

It became clear that a significant portion of wood was excluded for aesthetic reasons: pronounced knots, colour variations, traces of insects. These were not structural defects but deviations from a standard of uniformity.

The Stool 60 Villi project introduced the concept of "wild birch", accepting these characteristics as an integral part of the material. This required revising quality parameters and redefining the idea of perfection. The most difficult parameter to dismantle was precisely uniformity as a synonym for excellence.

But the collaboration did not stop with a single product. It opened a broader reflection on how Artek might think of itself not only as a furniture producer but as an actor with direct responsibility toward the forest it depends on. Extending the concept of wild birch across other products in the catalogue, and opening dialogue around durability, warranty and resource management, shows that this is an ongoing process rather than an isolated episode.

We are particularly proud that this dialogue is already producing concrete effects. Artek will soon make an important announcement regarding its commitment to the supply chain and its direct relationship with the forest. For us, this represents the true result of the collaboration. It shows that the project is not an aesthetic gesture but a shift in position and responsibility.

"Extending the concept of wild birch across other products in the catalogue, and opening dialogue around durability, warranty and resource management, shows that this is an ongoing process rather than an isolated episode."

Wood is a living material that features natural variations such as knots, colour fluctuations or insect trails, increasingly frequent due to climate change.

The SuperWire collection includes table, suspension, and floor models.

What real impact is this project having on the supply chain, economically, materially and culturally?

The most significant impact is cultural and procedural. Changing selection criteria changes the way materials are classified and valued. This can reduce waste and optimise the use of resources, but above all it reshapes how we understand quality.

Working on an icon also means working on a cultural infrastructure. Icons establish standards. If a standard shifts, even slightly, the surrounding system is forced to renegotiate its habits.

The table version consists of a single 45 cm module topped with a hexagonal glass cover.

SuperWire by Flos combines refined aesthetics with environmental commitment: the LEDs inside the lamp can be easily removed for repair or replacement.

With SuperWire for Flos you worked on reversibility. What does longevity mean to you today?

Longevity is not only about material durability. It is also about the possibility of intervening on an object over time. A product may be built from resistant materials yet remain effectively disposable if it cannot be repaired or disassembled.

With SuperWire we worked on reversibility as a structural principle. Every component can be removed, replaced or updated.
This is not only a technical aspect but also a cultural one. It communicates that the object is not monolithic and that the relationship with the user can evolve. For us, longevity is a balance between physical durability, repairability and the ability of an object to remain meaningful over time.

“Longevity is not only about material durability. It is also about the possibility of intervening on an object over time.”

The floor lamp (also shown on the opposite page) pays homage to the iconic Luminator designed by the Castiglioni brothers.

What is the next challenge you are interested in tackling?

Today we see great potential in working on decision-making protocols.
Materials exist. Technologies exist as well. What is often missing is a revision of the criteria through which decisions are made: how risk is defined, how quality is assessed and how responsibility is distributed along the supply chain. Intervening at the level of protocols means acting upstream, in a zone that is less visible but far more transformative. That is where systemic change can truly happen.

Maui wall textile wallcovering from the Luce collection by Rubelli, developed under the creative direction of Formafantasma. In the foreground, a pouf upholstered in Vitrail jacquard chenille, also by Rubelli.

In the background, Sunrise damask; armchair upholstered in Cloudy Ruggine jacquard chenille. All by Rubelli.

“Intervening on protocols means acting upstream, in a less visible but more transformative zone. That is where systemic change can be generated”

Chair upholstered in Spotlight jacquard fabric from the Luce collection by Rubelli.

Bio

Founded in 2009 by Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin, Formafantasma is redefining the role of the designer on an international level, transforming it into that of a researcher capable of navigating the complexity of industrial production and the fragility of natural ecosystems. Their research is not focused on the form of the finished object but on the invisible production processes of which we are often unaware (hence the choice of their name) from a perspective of genuine sustainability. The duo collaborates with some of the most prestigious design and fashion companies in the world: Rubelli, Artek, Tacchini, Prada, Fondation Cartier, Lexus, Flos, Fendi, Max Mara, Hermès, Droog, Nodus Rug, Cassina, Bitossi, Established & Sons, Maison Matisse, Bulgari, Samsung, Rado, Jil Sander, and Tiffany, among others.

formafantasma.com

©GregorioGonella

ROOTED IN THE FUTURE

Knud Erik Hansen, CEO and third-generation owner of Carl Hansen & Søn since 2002

Carl Hansen on apprenticeship, craftsmanship, and the quiet rebellion of doing things slowly.

In the heart of Gelsted, on the Danish island of Funen, there is a place where time is measured by the scent of timber and the precision of a chisel. More than a simple workshop, THE LAB is Carl Hansen & Søn's radical response to the disappearance of highly specialised craftsmanship. In an age dominated by digital acceleration and automated mass production, this slow apprenticeship, spanning three years and nine months, shapes the next generation of master cabinetmakers.
They learn to listen to the wood, respecting its grain while mastering the hand-woven seating that has defined design history.
THE LAB represents a rare industrial paradox: investing in slowness in order to remain competitive in an ever faster global market. After all, a piece of design can only be truly eternal if the knowledge required to build it is passed down.

Within THE LAB, senior instructors pass on the mastery of fundamental gestures. Apprentices begin with the absolute basics: sharpening tools, understanding the structural nuances of different timbers, and executing hand-cut joints long before approaching a machine. This slow education stands in deliberate counterpoint to modern manufacturing. The instructors, often veteran artisans with decades of experience, emphasise that the goal is not merely to produce a chair, but to cultivate a specific kind of intelligence: the ability to solve problems through tactile feedback. From this perspective, a mistake is not waste. It is a necessary step in understanding the material's limits and possibilities.

For Carl Hansen & Søn, sustainability is intrinsically linked to longevity. Apprentices are taught that a tree that has grown for 150 years deserves a product that lasts at least as long. By mastering traditional finishes, from soap treatments to oiling techniques, they learn that furniture can be repaired and restored for generations.

THE LAB also functions as a restoration hub for the brand's heritage furniture

«We have a duty to teach. If we don't bring the young people into the factory, if we don't show them the beauty of the shavings and the smell of the oil, this profession will die. And once it's gone, it's gone forever»

It takes at least eight weeks to create a single KK44880 English Chair, including two full weeks of painstaking hand-weaving for the French cane details

The most compelling aspect is the invisible thread connecting past and future. When an apprentice recreates a complex joint designed by Kaare Klint, they engage in a silent dialogue with the master himself. Yet THE LAB is no museum. It is a testing ground where traditional craftsmanship meets modern ergonomics. The insights gained by these young creators often influence industrial production lines, creating a virtuous circle in which artisanal precision elevates the quality of large-scale manufacturing.

It is a testament to the belief that high-level design cannot exist without a deep and radical commitment to craft. By transforming the factory into a space of active pedagogy, the brand ensures that the "Made in Denmark" label remains a synonym for substance, not just style. Ultimately, the legacy of THE LAB lives in the hands of its graduates. As they leave the workbench to become the cabinetmakers of tomorrow, they carry with them the conviction that excellence is a habit, and that our most sophisticated technology will always be our capacity to create.

Both renowned design classics, the KK55761 Spherical Bed and the KK44880 English Chair are the most complex pieces in the entire Carl Hansen & Søn collection. ©Yellows.DK

How is the apprenticeship structured, and what core principles are passed down to the next generation?

At Carl Hansen & Søn, our apprenticeship is designed as a modern, fully comprehensive programme that combines tradition, innovation and hands-on craftsmanship. The training spans three years and nine months and alternates between three key environments: THE LAB apprentice workshop, our production facilities, and structured study programmes at the technical college. This ensures that every apprentice develops both deep craft expertise and a broad understanding of contemporary furniture production.

All apprentices begin their journey in THE LAB, our dedicated workshop within the factory in Gelsted. Here they are introduced to the traditional methods and techniques that have shaped Danish cabinetmaking for more than a century. These fundamentals include handcrafting joints such as the iconic dovetail joint, extensive tool training, and instruction in machinery and safety.

From the beginning, apprentices work on full projects, managing them from concept to completion. They learn to create a range of joints, restore vintage furniture, and build commissioned pieces. As they progress, apprentices rotate through our production departments, from the joinery and table workshop to upholstery, weaving and surface treatments. This gives them a 360-degree understanding of how high-quality furniture is made at scale while maintaining a consistent focus on craftsmanship.

In addition to their practical training, apprentices attend technical college six times during the programme, totalling 30 weeks of formal education. Their training culminates in the journeyman's exam, where they present a masterwork. These pieces are exhibited at the factory as a celebration of their achievement.

The intricate intarsia that defines the KK55761 Spherical Bed – a true masterpiece of cabinetmaking without equal

The KK44880 English Chair is made exclusively to order, available in the customer's choice of wood and upholstery

How do you teach a young apprentice to truly "feel" the wood, to recognise that precise moment when a chair transcends its form as an object and begins to possess a soul?

Teaching an apprentice to "feel" the wood is not something that can be learned from a manual. It comes from time, repetition and a deep respect for the material. At THE LAB, this begins by letting apprentices work with wood through many different processes, so they gradually understand how it behaves: how it responds to tools, to changes in moisture, and to being shaped, bent or joined. Over time, they develop an intuitive rhythm with the material, a sense of when it yields and when it resists. That routine creates familiarity, and familiarity becomes sensitivity.

We also take them out to the sawmills so they can follow the wood's journey from raw log to finished furniture. Much like a "soil-to-table" philosophy, apprentices learn to see the entire lifecycle: how the tree has grown, how the grain runs, where knots sit, and how each board is best used. A central part of their training is learning to sort and match wooden components, a task machines cannot do. Only the human eye can judge which pieces will sit harmoniously together in a chair or table.

Ultimately, what the apprentices discover is that the soul of a chair lies in the craftsmanship itself. It is created through the hands and eyes of the maker, in the details that only human sensitivity can interpret.

Which heritage pieces do your apprentices study and practice on today?

Two of the most iconic works the apprentices study are Kaare Klint's Spherical Bed and the English Chair, both exceptional examples of the precision, creativity and material understanding required of a skilled cabinetmaker.

The Spherical Bed is one of the most technically challenging designs in our collection. Its sculptural, organic form demands a deep mastery of complex joints, precise shaping and advanced woodworking techniques. For apprentices, it is an invaluable lesson in how craftsmanship and design innovation intersect, teaching them how to translate a visionary form into a perfectly executed piece of furniture.

The English Chair gives our apprentices hands-on experience with some of the most refined techniques in traditional cabinetmaking. The chair's construction requires precise shaping, exact joinery and advanced intarsia work, teaching them how to use wood both structurally and decoratively. Through the English Chair, they learn to apply the same craftsmanship principles that define Kaare Klint's legacy, and our own.

Apprentices are taught that a tree that has grown for 150 years deserves a product that lasts at least as long

«We cannot rely on machines to feel the wood. The Lab is our commitment to the future: it is about ensuring that the next generation has the soul of a craftsman in their hands, not just a manual in their pockets».

Knud Erik Hansen

Is there a 'renowned mistake' in your workshop's history that has since evolved into a fundamental design lesson?

We often say that errors are an important part of the journey, they are a way of learning.

One of the places where these lessons become especially clear is in our refurbishment and repair service, all of which is handled in THE LAB. When apprentices restore a chair or table that is 20, 40 or even 60 years old, they gain a rare insight into how furniture was made in earlier decades: what worked beautifully, what aged well, and where past cabinetmakers struggled.
They see firsthand how joints respond to time, how wood behaves after decades of use, and how small decisions in craftsmanship echo through generations of wear. These restorations teach them what we do better today and what we still need to refine.

Apprentices work from Kaare Klint's original drawings, engaged in a 'hand-to-hand' encounter with the master's vision.

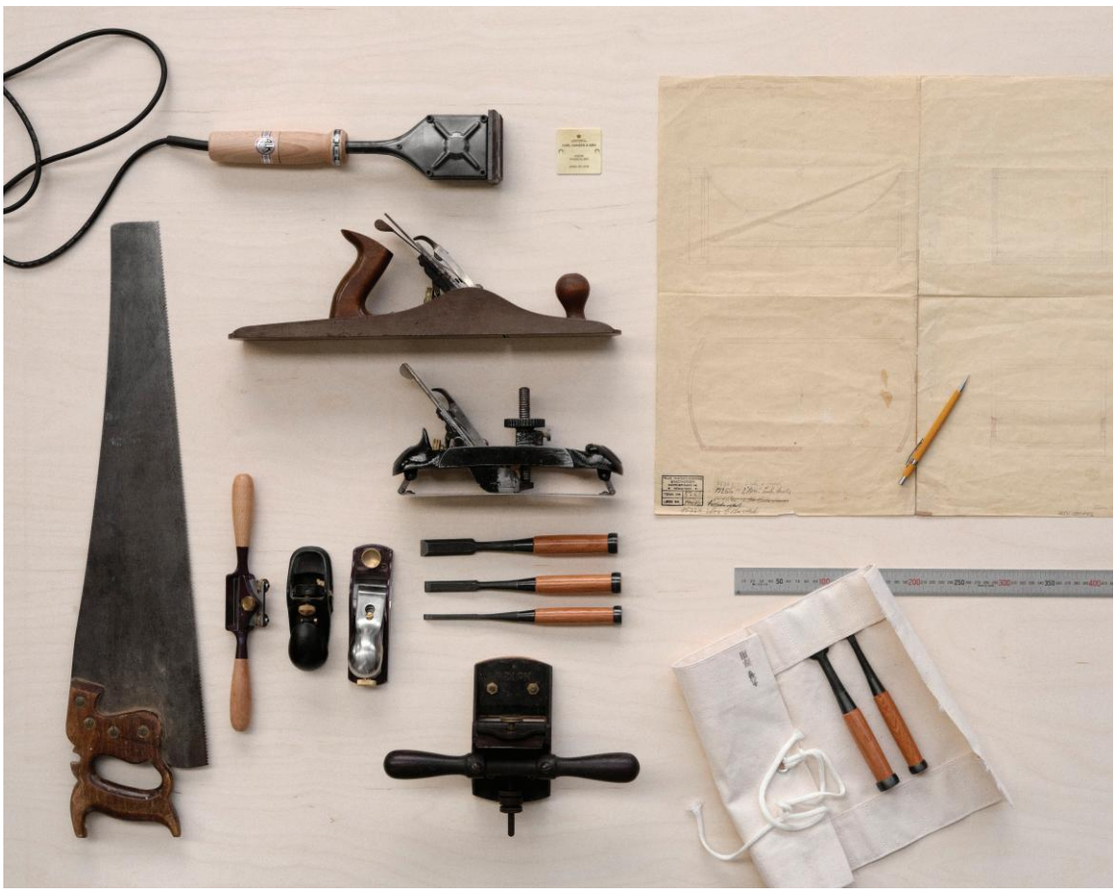
Originally conceived as a single bed, the KK55761 Spherical Bed has been reintroduced as a double, with its dimensions updated to suit contemporary proportions.

What is that singular detail that only the trained human eye, refined by years of practice, can discern, something that remains invisible to any machine or AI?

It is the combination of hand and eye that makes the difference. This sensitivity comes from years of working with wood: knowing how the grain should flow, sensing an uneven millimetre, or recognising when a shaped component needs one last refinement to fit perfectly.

A machine cannot feel the tactility of a backrest, see subtle variations in the grain, or judge whether all parts of a chair harmonise as one coherent whole. Even tasks like spotting excess glue with UV light or applying surface treatments rely entirely on human judgement.

These small, precise decisions, rooted in routine, experience and craftsmanship, are what give each piece its character, and what we dedicate ourselves to teaching our apprentices.



The tools of the modern cabinetmaker remain rooted in tradition: templates, band saws, and planes. The work is still done by hand, demanding hours of absolute, unwavering dedication.

What are today's apprentices truly seeking in such a timeless, hands-on craft?

Today's apprentices are seeking something deeply tangible and meaningful, something far removed from the digital world many of them come from. A large number have previously worked in offices, academia or other professions, and they reach a point where they want to create something physical, something they can see, touch and take pride in.
Cabinetmaking offers that in a very pure form.

They are drawn to the experience of working with real materials, following a process with their hands from start to finish, and learning a craft that has remained essentially unchanged in its essence for generations.

Bio

The story of Carl Hansen & Søn began in 1908 in a small artisan workshop on the Danish island of Funen. Since then, the brand's identity has been built around two fundamental pillars: an absolute dedication to fine craftsmanship and visionary collaborations with the greatest designers. The turning point came in 1949, when Holger Hansen took a chance on a then-unknown talent: Hans J. Wegner. From that gamble, a series of legendary furnishings was born, including the iconic Wishbone Chair. Today, the company remains the world's leading manufacturer of Wegner's designs, produced strictly in Denmark.
The catalogue also embraces Mid-century masters — such as Arne Jacobsen, Poul Kjærholm, and Kaare Klint — preserved with fidelity to the authors' original visions. Collaborations with contemporary talents like Strand + Hvass, Anker Bak, Tadao Ando, and EOOS continue to push production toward new limits where innovation marries sustainability.

carlhansen.com

PRECIOUS REMAINS

In conversation with DM, Shahar Livne reflects on plastic, waste and the future geological stories hidden inside the materials of our time

While twentieth-century design focused primarily on the production of objects made from “noble” raw materials, the research of Israeli designer Shahar Livne moves in the opposite direction, toward excavation, layering and memory. Her work occupies a frontier territory between science, speculation and craftsmanship.

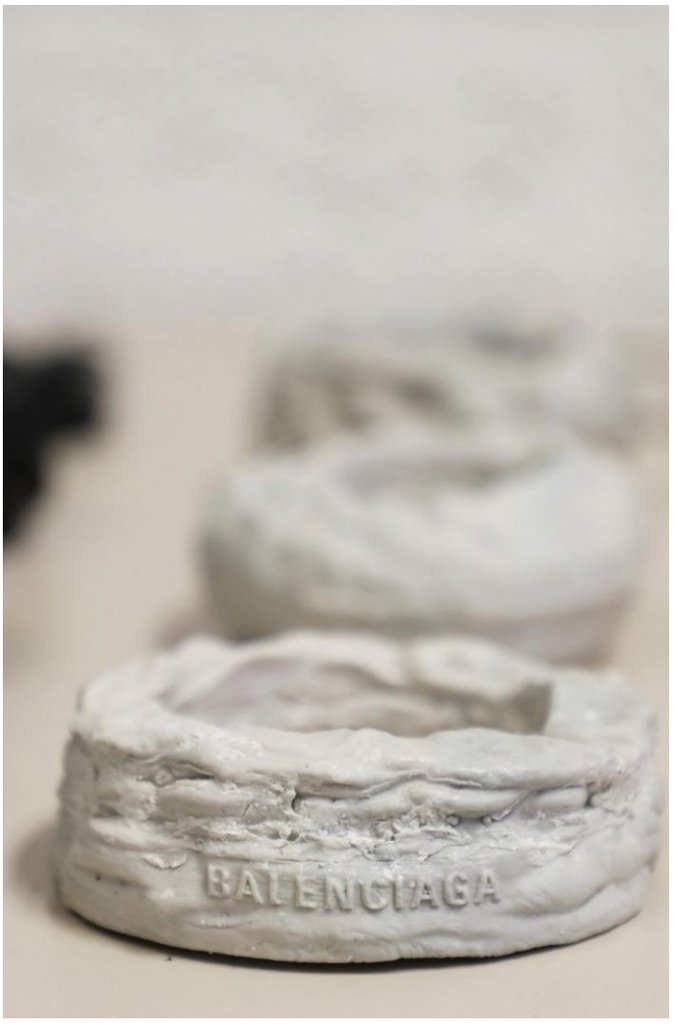
How will plastic appear in thousands of years, after being transformed by the pressure and heat of the Earth’s crust? By combining marble dust with oceanic plastic residues, Livne creates Lithoplast, a compound of plastic and marble dust that simulates the metamorphic processes of rock and can be moulded like clay.

By challenging the boundaries between the natural and the synthetic, Livne forces us to look at plastic and new meta-materials with the same reverence we have long reserved for marble or granite. From the geological jewellery created for Balenciaga to the use of animal blood as both pigment and structural binder, Livne invites us to give new meaning to what we once called waste. This is because the beauty of an object, a beauty that is sometimes unsettling, is no longer measured by the perfection of pristine raw material, but by the richness of the stories it carries.

You are often described as a "future archaeologist". Was there a particular moment when you realised that design could shift from simply producing the new to exploring what we have already created: our residues, our traces and even our excess?

There was not a single "aha" moment for me. During my studies I realised that I could turn my passion for material storytelling and material culture into a working methodology. This became clearer while I was developing the Metamorphism project, my graduation project at Design Academy Eindhoven and my first public project in 2017. Environmental awareness became an important topic for many designers over the past decades, and it also shaped my own direction. I began asking myself what our role as designers might be within this global responsibility. The aim is not to point a finger, but to open a discussion.

At the same time I am cautious about how easily terms such as sustainability, circularity and biodegradability are used. I often say that when we talk about sustainability we are often describing a very self-centred and anthropocentric way of sustaining ourselves and our comfort as humans. My interest in the relationship between design and extractivism comes from the need to shift perspective. Instead of seeing the planet as a kind of hardware store for parts, we should start recognising it as a living network to which we belong, whether we like it or not.



Livne's jewellery for Balenciaga is crafted to endure for decades or be reused forever, celebrating the natural aging of materials as a refined aesthetic statement.

Lithoplast is a new material developed by Livne: similar to clay, it is composed of landfill-bound plastics, coal mining waste, and marble scraps.

Lithoplast feels like a material shaped by geological time, yet it is made here and now. Can you take us inside the process? What do you mix, how do heat and pressure act on the compound, and what kind of "metamorphosis" were you trying to emulate?

Lithoplast is a speculative material investigation. In speculative design, creating physical manifestations of possible futures helps open critical perspectives and discussion. That is why Lithoplast looks the way it does. It is a physical visualisation of what a geological process called metamorphism might do to plastics in our environment over thousands of years. Simply put, metamorphism is the geological process that transforms one type of rock into another. It is the combination of heat and pressure that turns limestone into marble, for example.

Lithoplast is not made of plastic alone. It also contains natural materials from geological environments, such as limestone, which in nature can mix with microplastics that accumulate on the seabed. The result is a material that visually resembles veined stone.

What does that contradiction open up for you, both technically and emotionally, in the way an object is formed and perceived?

It is about what I call temporal friction. There is a profound contradiction in using the ancient, almost primal language of hand-working clay, a relationship with the earth that goes back thousands of years, to shape a material born from the highly synthetic and industrial moulding of modern plastics.
Emotionally, this creates a bridge. It takes a material usually associated with cold, high-pressure machines and brings it back into the realm of human touch and craft. It is also a reminder that plastics, even though they are man-made, ultimately come from natural sources such as fossil fuels. In that sense it is about reclaiming the material, touching it and treating it with the same kind of reverence that early potters gave to the first pinch pots of the Neolithic era.

An object made of Lithoplast, a new material created through a process called Metamorphism, the same process that, in nature, transforms limestone into marble. ©Alan Boom

The Alchimia tapestry series utilises animal sources such as blood, collagen, and milk; mineral sources such as hematite and aluminium; and botanical elements such as oak gall and the flowers and roots of the Rubia tinctorum plant.

Plastic is widely demonised today, yet you have suggested that we may need to learn to live with it as if it were a new granite or marble. What changes when we stop treating plastic as a temporary mistake and begin acknowledging it as a lasting geological presence?

The moment we stop treating plastic as a temporary mistake and begin acknowledging it as a lasting geological presence, we trigger a radical shift in how we think about its value.

At the moment we are living in a period that could be described as “waste colonialism”, where the Global North exports much of its plastic waste to poorer nations in order to keep it out of sight. But if we fast forward to a future where virgin petroleum-based plastic becomes scarce or even banned, those landfills and ocean sediments will suddenly become the only remaining sources of this material. In that sense, today’s polluted sites could become the new Carrara.

The places we have spent decades treating as global dustbins may one day turn out to sit on the world’s most concentrated deposits of what I call Lithoplast. Acknowledging plastic as a geological material is therefore not only an aesthetic position. It also means recognising that we are currently rearranging the mineral wealth of the future in a messy and largely accidental way.

“The aim is to trigger a realisation through the material’s own weight and presence, rather than through the loud voice of a designer’s ego”

You have said that materials carry a “meta” meaning beyond their physical properties. For you, what lies in that layer: memory, politics, desire, guilt, mythology? And how do you translate those meanings into form without turning the object into a manifesto?

For me, the “meta-layer” of a material is its unspoken biography. It includes the politics, the memory and sometimes even the guilt that already exist within it before I touch it. But my role is not to be a preacher or a protester. As a designer I try to act as a discursive and relatively neutral voice, not someone who imposes a solution or a fixed opinion.

I avoid turning the object into a manifesto because a manifesto tends to close the conversation. It presents an answer. Instead, I use form and material to create a kind of neutral territory where these complex themes can be approached and explored.
When I translate those layers into a physical object, I am essentially archiving a set of conditions. By remaining relatively neutral, I allow viewers to confront the material’s history, its mythology or its politics on their own terms.

In that sense the object becomes a discursive tool. It is not there to declare that plastic is “bad” or that blood is “taboo”. It simply presents them as facts of our existence. The aim is to trigger a realisation through the material’s own weight and presence, rather than through the loud voice of a designer’s ego.

Designed for Riso Porcelain and decorated in the Arita porcelain style, the Amakusa tableware collection draws inspiration from an unexpected source: the veins found within the kaolin rocks of Amakusa Island, Japan.

Many brands today are struggling with questions of end of life and responsibility. When you speak with industry, what do you feel they still hesitate to admit about waste, especially when it becomes visible, tangible or even beautiful?

There is still a tendency for many brands to sanitise production and hide waste. Yet the luxury sector is uniquely positioned to do the opposite. Luxury has always been built on storytelling. For centuries that story revolved around the most pristine, unblemished materials from the earth, used to signal rarity. But as our ecological reality changes, the very meaning of rarity is also shifting.

This is where my work as a conceptual material designer becomes relevant. I do not simply upcycle materials. I try to analyse the complexities of our time, our geopolitics, our material culture and our behaviours, and translate them into physical form. When I transform materials into what I call hypernatural artefacts, I am not only creating a new object or material. I am contributing to a new material culture.

For luxury brands this approach offers a different kind of exclusivity. The complex history of a material becomes the centrepiece of the object. Visible ageing, fossilisation and the narrative of transformation become the new bespoke qualities. They strengthen our relationship with the world around us and invite the user to become part of that story. By embedding these deeper layers directly into the material, I offer luxury houses a way to explore post-extractivist ideas. It allows them to open a more sophisticated dialogue with their audience and to show that the highest form of value today does not lie in what we can blindly extract, but in the stories we can tell about how we transform what is already around us.

"The complex history of a material becomes the centrepiece of the object"

Memento mori, ceramic artifacts presented on the occasion of the Movimento exhibition at Camp Design Gallery. ©Opfot

Born from an artistic residency in Arita, considered the cradle of Japanese porcelain, Melting Pot is the collection of Japanese porcelain created by Shahar Livne. ©Barbara Medo

If the designer is becoming a kind of archaeologist, what are the tools of this new practice? Research, chemistry, storytelling, ethics. What must designers learn today in order to work in a world of remnants?

If we look at design through an archaeological lens, the primary tool is not only research or production. It is the ability to construct a kind of stratigraphy, to build layered worlds of meaning. An archaeologist digs through physical layers of earth to understand a civilisation. As a designer working with that perspective, I reverse the process. I build layers of meaning into an object so that it can be "excavated" by different audiences at their own pace.

The first layer is purely sensory. It is an immediate aesthetic surface where anyone can be drawn in by a material's tactile beauty or unusual texture without needing any prior knowledge. Beneath that lies the material and scientific layer, where the object reveals its technical reality to industry, scientists and makers. Finally, for those willing to dig deeper, the object opens up its discursive and philosophical core. This is where the meta narrative and the ethical questions emerge, prompting conversations about extraction, geopolitics and the idea of hypernature.

My role is to act as a kind of mediator between these layers. I do not force the audience to absorb the entire philosophy at once. Instead, the ethics of the practice lie in allowing people to enter the narrative at whatever level they are ready for. Someone might simply see a beautiful piece of jewellery, another person might recognise a fascinating chemical composite, while someone else may read it as a reflection on society. Ideally, the design object is able to hold all of those truths at the same time. In that sense, the ultimate tool of the designer-archaeologist is the ability to archive the present in material form while leaving its meaning open to interpretation.

The representation of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an accumulation of debris transported by ocean currents. ©Oscar Vinck

At the Devil's Milk symposium you presented research on rubber. What drew you to that material now, and what did the investigation reveal about extraction, durability and the stories we attach to so-called useful materials?

Rubber has shaped empires, fuelled industries and transformed landscapes, yet it also carries a dark and often forgotten legacy of colonial violence and ecological destruction.
My research for the project The Devil's Milk explores the tension between rubber's everyday accessibility and the complexity of its history. In the Amazon and in parts of Mesoamerica, indigenous communities treated rubber as a relational material that connected humans, forests and spiritual worlds through deep ecological knowledge.

Under industrial demand and colonial regimes, however, rubber was violently transformed into a global commodity. From the so-called Rubber Terror in the Congo to Dutch plantations in Indonesia, entire landscapes and ecologies were reduced to interchangeable sources of raw material.

The project was recently presented through a symposium and will soon evolve into a design collection. What fascinated me most is the contradiction between rubber's role in building the modern world and its own material fragility. Rubber is in many ways a difficult historian. Unlike stone or metal, it dries out, cracks, melts and eventually turns to dust. It resists permanence and is extremely difficult for museums to preserve.
This leads to an unsettling realisation. Much of the machinery of the modern world, from tyres to telecommunications infrastructure, was built on a material that cannot reliably preserve its own history. It forces us to rethink how we archive our material culture when the materials themselves slowly disappear.

The nat-2™ x Shahar Livne Blood sneakers are crafted from a new artisanal bio-leather and dyed using waste bovine blood, following the "Nose to Tail" philosophy, which advocates for utilizing the animal in its entirety. ©Alan Boom

Using blood in the design was a very conscious decision because it is such a loaded symbol. It represents life, energy and vitality, but it is also the raw and unavoidable sign of death and violence, something society constantly tries to sanitise and forget. The market today is full of vegan and plant-based alternatives, yet these can sometimes allow consumers to avoid confronting the enormous amount of industrial residue, such as the millions of gallons of discarded blood that result from large-scale animal slaughter. My project suggests that we cannot afford to be ethically pretentious or too squeamish to face these material realities.

The intention was never simply to shock. The goal was to create a productive tension between two opposing forces: the undeniable appeal of a beautiful and luxurious finished object and the instinctive discomfort associated with the material it is made from. By transforming a low-value, ethically charged waste product into a desirable object, the project challenges the complacency with which animals are often treated as disposable inputs. Using blood to produce beauty introduces a necessary discomfort. I believe that this conscious discomfort can be the first step toward a deeper awareness and, hopefully, toward meaningful change in the way we consume materials.

In Blood Sneakers you used animal blood as a pigment and material base. Do you believe contemporary design should stop trying to be reassuring and instead act as a trigger for awareness, even discomfort? And can beauty emerge from what we usually label as taboo?

The whole Meat Factory project, which eventually led to the Blood Sneakers collaboration with nat-2™, started from the "nose to tail" principle: using every part of a slaughtered animal out of respect. During my research I was honestly shocked to learn that animal blood, fat and bones, which are powerful biological resources, were in some cases simply being thrown away.

That discovery became the starting point for developing the blood bioleather used in the sneakers. The material deliberately incorporates other industrial animal residues such as fat and bones, but the blood that would normally be discarded is used in two ways. It gives the leather its deep natural colour and also acts as a binding agent. In that sense the process reverses the usual logic of leather production. Instead of relying on traditional tanning and hides, it strategically uses different slaughterhouse by-products such as bones and blood itself, which invites a critical look at the entire industrial system through which animals are processed.

"Using blood in the design was a very conscious decision because it is such a loaded symbol. It represents life, energy and vitality"

The Meat Factory project was established with the goal of promoting the use of alternative raw materials to bovine leather and the recovery of production waste. ©Charlotte Kin

Your collaboration with Balenciaga brought your hybrid composites onto the runway. How does the luxury world react when what is considered "precious" no longer comes from a mine, but from sediment, plastic, dust, pressure and time? In your view, how is the very definition of value changing?

When Balenciaga approached me to use Lithoplast for their Fall 21 jewellery line, it felt like a natural match. We wanted to imagine a future world in which the ageing of materials becomes a desirable aesthetic.
The pieces combine ocean-sourced plastics with calcium carbonate, a residue of the marble industry that also plays a role in the fossilisation of organic matter. I shaped the material by hand and the pieces were finished using artisanal goldsmithing techniques. The project shows that this new idea of preciousness does not have to come from a pristine gemstone. It can emerge from many different materials, including futuristic, semi-natural composites.

In this sense, value begins to shift from the rarity of the raw material to the deeper geological and cultural story it carries. I think this is something we are starting to see across a number of brands such as Loewe, Hermès and even Lexus, where materials and narratives become new points of connection with audiences.

The jewelry created for Balenciaga combines recovered and cleaned ocean plastic waste from Oceanworks® and upcycled plastics from recycling plants, blended with calcium carbonate.

Bio

Shahar Livne (Israel, 1989) is an award-winning conceptual material designer based in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. She graduated from Design Academy Eindhoven in 2017 and founded her design studio in 2018. Her work focuses on conceptual material research through a multi-layered methodology, creating objects and installations centred on materials as carriers of narratives. Her projects often explore unconventional materials such as blood, man-made fossils and crystallisation.
Livne presents her work internationally and develops new research projects as an independent designer and educator. She received the Creative Hero Award for Social Impact in 2019 and was a finalist for both the Beazley Design of the Year Award and the New Material Award in 2018. In 2019 she was named one of the 100 most influential creatives of 2018–2019 by Icon Design Magazine. She also received the Dezeen Award as Emerging Designer of the Year in 2020 and the Eco Coin Award for innovation in ecology and technology from Next Nature Network. In 2024 she was included among the 100 Best Product Designers in the World by Phaidon Press.

shaharlivnedesign.com

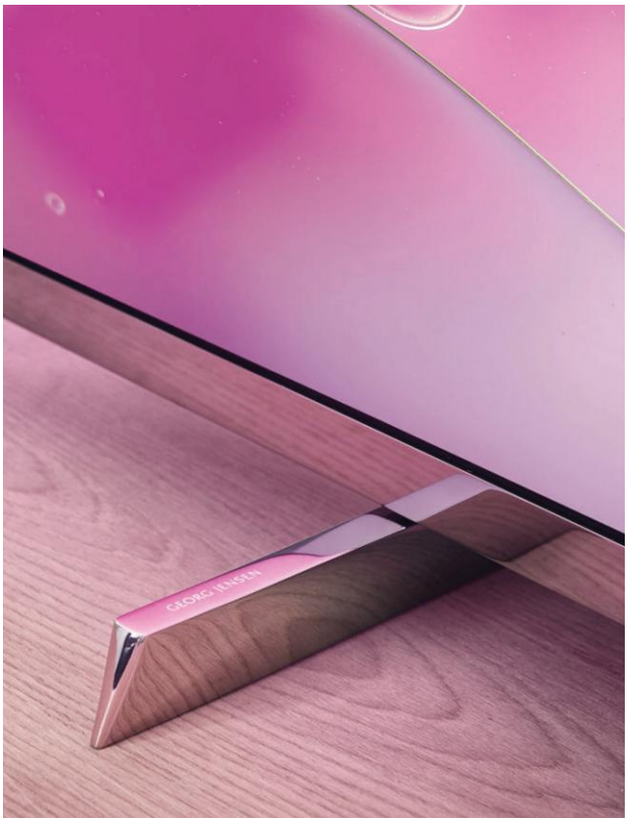
THE SCOTSMAN WHO SOFTENED TECHNOLOGY

A conversation with Rod White on materials, domestic technology and the changing relationship between people and everyday electronics.

Many technologies are experienced long before they are used. Before a button is pressed or a screen lights up, something has already clicked in the consumer’s mind. We have noticed the object. We have registered the material, the texture, the way it sits in a room, the atmosphere it creates around it. That first encounter often determines how we feel about a product. In that sense, technology does not begin with interaction. It begins with perception.

Born in Scotland and trained in furniture design in Edinburgh, Rod White began his career in Japan before joining Philips Design more than thirty years ago. After working across several international studios, he now leads the team behind Philips-branded televisions, audio systems, monitors and accessories, while also contributing to external projects developed through the studio's global collaborations.

In this captivating interview with DM, White offers a clear illustration of this idea. Over the past three decades he has worked at the intersection of industrial design, materials and domestic space, exploring how consumer electronics can move beyond purely technical expression to become objects that belong naturally within the home. In our conversation, he reflects on materials, cultural influences, sustainability and the evolving relationship between technology and the domestic environment.



Details make the difference: slender elegance, specially created with Georg Jensen, define the polished silhouette of this television stand.

In your work, you don't simply design the "box" of a product. You shape how it is perceived and experienced in an environment. When does a material, a texture or a finish become the true interface between technology and people?

One example I often think about is the work we have been doing over the last eight or nine years with Kvadrat, the wool fabric manufacturer from Denmark. We apply their fabrics to televisions but also to speakers and headphone products.

When you wrap fabric around a three-dimensional object such as a Bluetooth speaker, the perception changes immediately. From a distance it already looks different from the normal technical consumer electronics wrap. We deliberately choose a melange fabric where multiple colours come together. It creates visual depth.

Then when you get up close, the haptic feedback from the wool fabric gives reassurance to the user that this is real quality. It resonates with a sense of premium and it delivers on the brand promise.

Another example is light. Light signatures are used by many brands within the home environment. Normally we focus on single white LEDs so there is nothing too contrasting or negative such as flashing red lights.

In the case of our televisions and monitors we also have light spill on the back wall. Our Ambilight system spreads the colours of the TV content onto the wall behind the screen. It gives you a much larger immersion space. So the experience between user and product becomes product plus. It goes beyond the product.

Concept image from an A.D.O. research project exploring the future of premium air travel.

“The experience between user and product becomes product plus.”

While many consumer tech brands have pursued a futuristic aesthetic, your work has often moved in the opposite direction, making technology feel more domestic, almost as if it could disappear into the home.

Internally we have used the terms home fit as drivers for a long time. At the same time we also talk about objects of desire. When we can create a product that you want more like an object or like a piece of furniture, then we are getting somewhere.

If we go back twenty years, the push was for high gloss plastics and chrome metals. In the traditional audio space you also had brushed and radial spun aluminium. Finishes that attract light. We played that game for many years.

One driver that changed this was sustainability. We deliberately moved away from chrome applications because they are not good for the environment. With that we moved more as a brand towards finishes that are simpler, ideally with no secondary finishing, using tones and materials that create less contrast and fit better into the domestic space.

Previously, you’ve lived and worked in Tokyo, Singapore, Vienna and Eindhoven and you have spent a large part of the last decade in China. How did these different cultures reshape your understanding of comfort and domestic space?

Moving to Japan was probably the biggest shift in my learning. I moved from a European furniture starting point into a Japanese context where unspoken craftsmanship drives everything. The engineering quality is incredible and I learned a lot from that. I also learned about proportion and balance, which come from Japanese philosophy.

When I moved back to Europe I realised there is a lot of commonality between Northwest Europe and Japan. That is why the expression Japandi exists. The beauty of Europe is that there is not just one Europe. There is the more austere Northwest Europe but also the more playful and colourful South of Europe.

For a brand like Philips that is interesting because people across the world often do not know where it comes from. The British sometimes think it is British, the French sometimes think it is French. That allows us to leverage different aspects of European design.

Consumer electronics are gradually shifting from a purely technical language to a warmer, more home-oriented one. Where do you see this evolution taking us?

If you look back, televisions and radios were once pieces of furniture. Manufacturers used to make wooden cabinets for them. Then in the 1980s there was the peak of racks of silver or black technology, with too many cables and too many buttons.

Today the technology push is clearly towards bigger screens and more screens. At the same time wireless technology allows much less cabling and much more connectivity.

The other side of the change comes from people. While the basic needs of information, communication and entertainment do not change, people want to have that content where they want it and when they want it. Different generations within the same household are using different devices. Some are using screens, others headphones. So there is an opportunity to deliver objects that do not take up more visual space than necessary.

Together with Kvadrat, we create acoustic melange fabrics where multiple colours come together. It creates visual depth.

When technology starts behaving more like furniture within the home, the design team itself must evolve. What new competencies are you building around product development today?

The core design team is mostly product with CMF (Colour, Material, Finish), but we also have a sustainability officer and an acoustic engineer on hand as a core team. But then we can also reach outside. A lot of the designers are actually either coming from furniture like myself, but also automotive. So depending on the client that we're working for, we can extend the team whether it's on user experience requirements or motion study.

> "We probably spend more time designing remote controls than televisions"

I've read that you designed many pieces of furniture in your own home. Did that experience influence the way you approach appliances?

It did not really change things because furniture design was where I began. The need for longevity is consistent, and when the client is yourself you obviously have to deliver that. Applying CMF across the whole home palette was an interesting challenge, but the process was actually very similar to work. You define the target, the costing, the materials and the suppliers. So the similarities are quite strong.

High-end furniture is often designed to last for generations. How do you position yourself in the debate around planned obsolescence in consumer technology?

In the end brands are out to make profit, bottom line, and the consumer is out for a great product at a good price. Finding the space in the middle is where we need to operate and excel.

One of the good things about designing European products within the context of a European brand is that we also have to adhere to European legislation. As a Philips brand we were already studying sustainable solutions twenty-five years ago. Fifteen years ago we created the Eco TV,

Philips flagship OLED TV with integrated Bowers & Wilkins sound.

which used recycled aluminium, brown-box packaging and even the world's first Solar Remote Control. There have been many cases where interesting studies were done, but today Europe is demanding certain connectors for smart devices, less polystyrene and more sustainable materials.

By now our audio products and our monitors contain around eighty-five percent post recycled plastics. Increasing that percentage is a target we have across all our categories.

Sustainability is driving the company. It is not always the most profitable path, so there is not always an easy alliance between what is best for the planet and what works for the business. But if you can prove to consumers that you are more sustainable than the competitor, it is going to help.

There's a line that says: "objects should keep us company". Do you agree?

Sometimes even too much company. There is a growing realisation that handheld smart screens can become too much of a companion. People become addicted to scrolling, whether it is doom scrolling or something else.

That said, if products are designed well they can create strong emotional connections. Occasionally we see televisions or headphones where people become very passionate about them. They create websites around them, they talk to other people about repairing them and it becomes something of a cult.

For example, about forty years ago Philips created a youthful audio range with bright yellow colours and bold accents. It became something of a tribe. People wore the products on their shoulders at street parties. That kind of connection really struck a chord at the time.

We are living in an era of constant notifications and fragmented attention. Do you feel this pressure when designing home technology?

Human behaviour has changed. If you watch films from forty or fifty years ago the pace is much slower than it is today. People are able to absorb information much faster. Even in sports, high-level athletes are training with gaming devices to improve reaction times.

When we design products we assume that people of many different ages should be able to interact with them easily. For example we spend a lot of time designing remote controls. We probably spend more time on the remote control than on the television itself.

The goal is to simplify the interface. The basic functions should be immediately accessible. At the same time more advanced functionality can be available if the user wants it. In a way we try to mask the complexity of the technology until the user decides to access it.

Inspired by the iconic portable audio products of the past, the new Moving Sound Roller BT speaker reimagines the classic "ghetto blaster" aesthetic with a contemporary design and a bold, portable presence.

Philips: New design for the Philips Fidelio speaker.

A curated gift concept bringing together Bowers & Wilkins, Bowmore whisky, St. Conan's tartan and Muirhead Scottish leather.

Final question. How is the idea of luxury changing in consumer technology today?

The answer is quite complicated because luxury has become much wider.

Through our external client work we sometimes design products for extremely wealthy customers such as super yacht owners. Their expectations are very different from those of a normal consumer. At the extreme end you may find audio systems that cost several million euros. In those cases luxury is about exclusivity. But luxury can also mean something else entirely. Some people want a home environment where technology is almost invisible.

For mainstream consumers the situation is different again. The core technology has become much more accessible. Today many people can afford a sixty-five-inch television with a soundbar. From that point the experience can scale upwards depending on how far someone wants to go.
In that sense luxury has become broader. The possibilities are wider than they used to be.

Bio

Rod White is CEO and Chief Design Officer at Amsterdam Design Office.
In his role, Rod is fully responsible for all creative direction, design strategy, team development and leadership for the design teams based in Amsterdam, Taipei and Shenzhen.

The design team creates an all consumer touchpoint design experience, which starts with consumer behavioral research to identify potential new product proposals. These are then further validated together with the product category management to identify future range extensions.
In parallel they create annual Product Design Identities, online, in-store and exhibition space direction setting.

As part of the role, he is the face of TP Vision for all design related global media events and has been a design keynote speaker in Design events throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas.
Externally he leads A.D.O. providing design services and consulting towards several global consumer facing brands.

amsterdamdesignoffice.com

"When you wrap fabric around a three-dimensional object, it immediately stops looking like technical consumer electronics"

GJ portable audio range: a collection of objects designed to be seen rather than hidden, defined by honest materials and a calm, understated aesthetic.

The Printed House

How 3D printing is reshaping residential construction in Singapore

In an exclusive interview with DM, Park + Associates explores the origins of QR3D, Singapore's first multi-storey 3D-printed residence. Far from being a purely aesthetic experiment, QR3D represents a pragmatic response to severe labour shortages and rising construction costs in the post-pandemic era, positioning itself as an important regional benchmark for this emerging technology.

Imagine a building that isn't assembled brick by brick, but instead unfolds from a continuous flow of material deposited layer by layer.
As the first project of its kind in Singapore, QR3D offers a compelling response to the pressures currently facing the construction industry. In this context, robotic automation reduces material waste, shortens construction timelines, and significantly lowers the environmental impact of the building site by reducing noise and dust.
More than 90 percent of the primary structure was "printed" in concrete with millimetre precision through a process reminiscent of a giant robotic piping bag. This engineering achievement was made possible by a specially developed concrete mix, refined through extensive laboratory testing to achieve a delicate balance: fluid enough for extrusion, yet strong enough to support the weight of the layers above without deformation.
By moving beyond the traditional constraints of masonry, the architects were able to conceive space as a continuous sculptural flow.
Walls lose their static rigidity and become tactile membranes, undulating surfaces that modulate natural light through textures and curvatures that conventional construction methods struggle to achieve. Beyond the technical innovation, the project is also a deeply personal undertaking. The architect took on the dual role of designer and client, building his own family home. A dialogue between heritage and the future emerges in every detail, from the reinterpretation of the oculus, an element of local tradition essential to the home's environmental metabolism and passive ventilation, to the carefully selected vintage furnishings that soften the raw presence of the exposed concrete. The result is a project that intertwines environmental responsibility, sensory well-being, and the broader challenge of creating architecture that remains relevant for future generations.

The house, both inside and out, is defined by the same raw, primal imprint: surfaces are never polished, but left deliberately crude, tactile, and profoundly alive. ©Jovian Lim

As an architect, how does your perception of space evolve when you move away from the traditional modularity of the brick?

Honestly, it was invigorating, and may I say liberating. Moving away from the “logic of the brick”, we rediscovered how space can be shaped through flow and continuity rather than assembly. Reframing our understanding of space allowed us to treat walls not as boundaries, but as sculptural elements that capture light and shadow in ways a brick wall never could. This is why moving through QR3D feels more like a journey than a predictable sequence of rooms.

Did being both the architect and the client provide a unique vantage point or added value to the project?

It was certainly a privilege that came with a heavy responsibility. As the architect, I wanted to push for architectural innovation, encouraging my office and colleagues to think about and deliver architecture in new ways. As the client (and as a father), I needed a home that was warm, functional, and durable for decades to come. It could not become a technological monument, because the house is ultimately a commitment to my family and our future. This dual perspective forced the team to ensure that innovation served the living experience, rather than allowing 3D-printing technology to dictate our lifestyle.

Behind the QR3D project is the visionary mind of Lim Koon Park, founder of the firm Park + Associates, who chose to transform this house into his programmatic manifesto. ©Jovian Lim

The staircase is a sculptural volume that, like everything else, is born from concrete. ©Jovian Lim

QR3D is a collaborative masterpiece: which different expertises had to come together on-site to bring it to life?

As with any project, QR3D was a symphony of diverse expertise. In this case, it required close cooperation and coordination between design, technological, and construction disciplines. Constant exchange and regular site meetings were essential.
We were fortunate to work closely with CES_ InnovFab on the concrete printing. Together we refined the design, developed the appropriate concrete mix, and worked through logistics. We were also lucky to collaborate with a builder who was very open to rethinking conventional roles and construction methods.

Is there a different “spiritual energy” in inhabiting a home born from such pioneering technology?

I had never really thought about this, but now that you ask, absolutely yes. However, I believe this is not because of the technology itself. Instead, it is because the house reveals its making.
The raw, striated 3D-printed surfaces, especially around the oculus, are tactile reminders of process, light, and the passage of time. There is an honesty in the material and the construction process that quietly anchors everyday life here.
The concrete also creates a thermal and acoustic atmosphere that feels almost protective.
To me, it is a house that prioritises wellbeing and sensory delight.

“As the client (and a father), I needed a home that was warm, functional, and durable for decades to come”

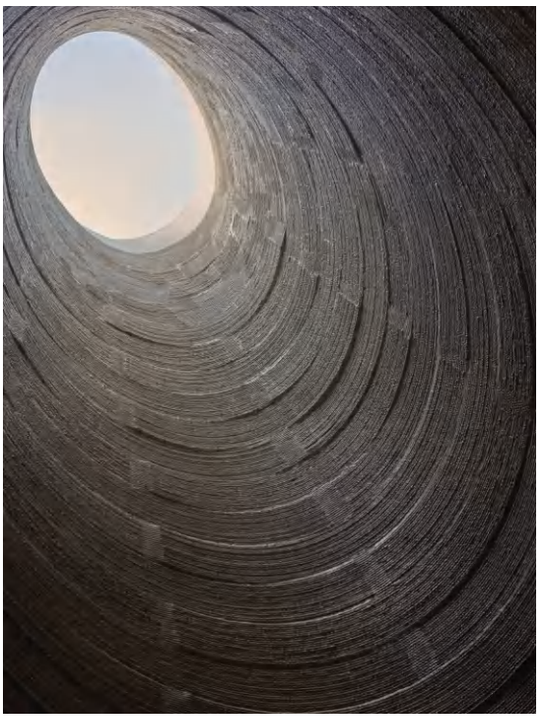
Beyond the aesthetics, how does this technology truly impact timelines and costs? Is it a viable path for the broader market yet, or does it remain an elite choice?

QR3D was our first 3D-printed project. We were pioneering workflows, calibrating materials, and navigating regulatory uncertainties, so the construction did not deliver dramatic time or cost savings.
There were, however, significant reductions in reliance on on-site labour, waste, and some of the most annoying side effects of construction, such as noise and dust.
While concrete printing is not yet mainstream, once the technology scales it may well offer a path toward high-quality construction with greater efficiency.

Concrete is often at the heart of sustainability debates. How did you reconcile the idea of “long life” with the environmental footprint of a building designed to remain relevant for the next fifty years?

Concrete was certainly a concern we had to address. However, we believe sustainability should also be considered beyond upfront carbon (the emissions produced by materials and construction before the building is even used). For us, longevity and performance are key. The thermal mass of the concrete (helping interiors stay cooler by day and warmer by night), combined with careful design for daylight, natural ventilation, and cross ventilation, represents a long-term investment in thermal comfort and energy reduction.
The concrete serves simultaneously as structure, finish, and environmental regulator. By creating a home with strong architectural quality and spaces that evoke an emotional connection, we hope future generations will respect and want to preserve it.
That said, we must also be realistic. The average lifespan of a building in Singapore is significantly shorter than in many other places, due to the speed of urban development in the region.

A significant portion of the furniture, including the 053 Capitol Complex armchairs by Cassina, was brought over from the previous residence, creating a seamless bridge between past and present.
©Jovian Lim



In addition to figurative and emotional reasons, the oculus also serves as a passive cooling system, directing warm air upward and expelling it outside. ©Jovian Lim

The oculus acts as a bridge to the past. In terms of passive efficiency, how much does this aesthetic feature actually influence the home's overall "metabolism" and energy performance?

The oculus is the heart, but perhaps more accurately the lungs of the house.
While it began as a nostalgic nod to our previous home that stood on this site, the oculus has become a vital part of the building's environmental metabolism. It works as a thermal chimney: hot air rises naturally and is drawn out through vents at the top, assisted by an extractor fan. Combined with effective cross ventilation, this system significantly reduces our reliance on mechanical cooling, which is otherwise very common in our hot and humid climate.

What were your criteria for selecting furniture to complement the 3D-printed concrete? Were you seeking affinity or a deliberate contrast?

Many of the furniture pieces were brought from our previous home. In that sense, the concept we chose was one of memory and continuity.
It works well. The warmth of timber, fabric, and personal history contrasts with the raw textures of the 3D-printed concrete. It also proves that cutting-edge technology can coexist beautifully with our lived past.

The house is composed of over 90 percent 3D-printed elements, paired with bespoke furnishings designed by the owner himself, such as the dining room table. ©Jovian Lim

Do you plan to apply these same principles to future works, or will QR3D remain a one-off in your career?

The principles behind QR3D, process-led design, technology in service of inhabitation, and material honesty, will certainly continue within our studio. The project was very much about discovering how new tools can enrich architectural thinking. Every project is an opportunity for learning and improvement. Future works will build on what succeeded here, while also rethinking what did not.

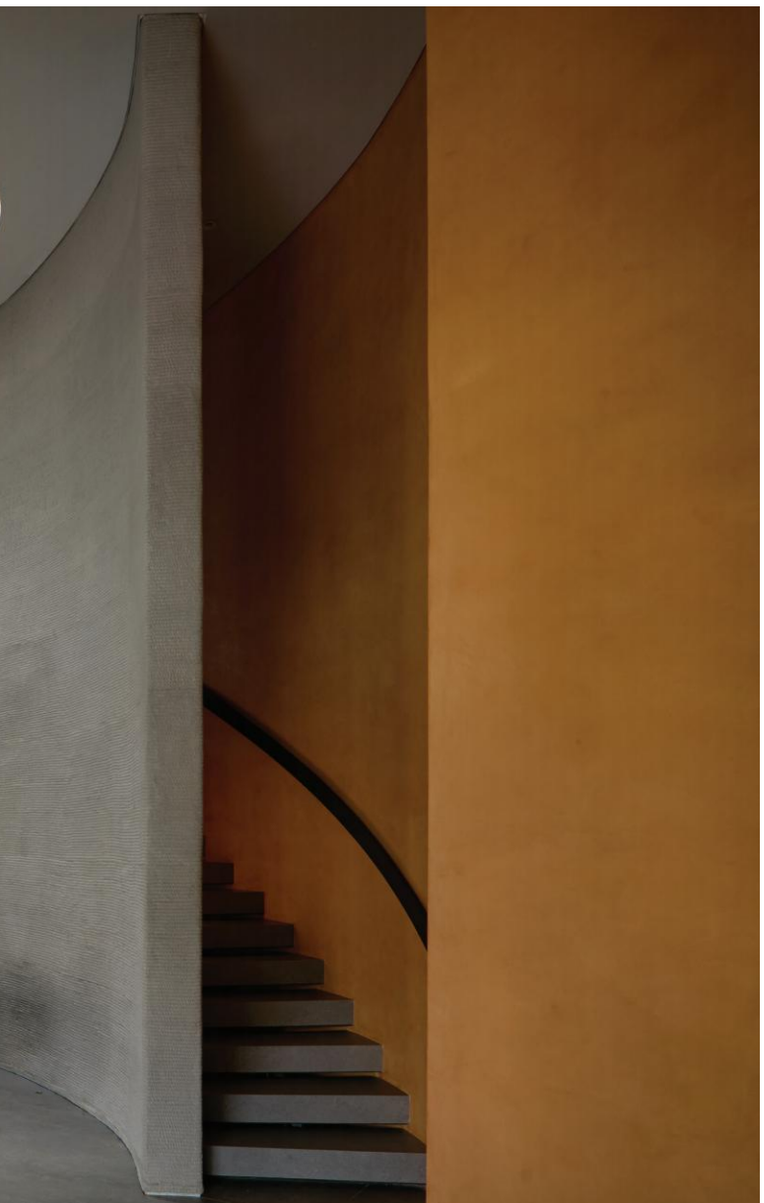
Looking ahead: half a century from now, what do you hope people will love most about this structure?

I hope they will see QR3D first and foremost as a family home, a place of memories, comfort, and a sanctuary, rather than as a relic of a technological moment.
Fifty years from now, 3D concrete printing will likely be commonplace, perhaps even outdated. But the quality of light falling through the oculus and the way the spaces make you feel, those things can remain timeless.

If you were to be remembered as an architect in a single sentence, what would it be?

An architect who championed clarity and beauty, built with conviction, and always designed for the human experience.

"Many of the furniture pieces were brought from our previous home. In that sense, the concept we chose was one of memory and continuity."



Bio

Established in 1999, Park + Associates is a Singapore-based architectural practice driven by a multidisciplinary team. The studio is distinguished by a rigorous approach that prioritises the human experience, aiming to transcend pure technical function to create spaces that resonate deeply with the individual. It operates through a collaborative, craft-oriented methodology focused on achieving aesthetic coherence alongside technological innovation. The result is an architecture of excellence, conceived as a necessary blend of sensory well-being and long-term sustainability.

parkassociates.com.sg

LESS SUGAR, MORE TRUTH

Jessica Préalpato reflects on “desseralité”, fruit-driven desserts and the quiet revolution of less sugar.

©courtesy Hôtel San Régis

Named World’s Best Pastry Chef, Jessica Préalpato has questioned the very idea of the sweet finale in fine dining. Through what she calls desseralité, she brings dessert back to raw ingredients, seasonality and producers. And she does so by subtracting rather than adding.

When in 2019 Jessica Préalpato received the title of World’s Best Pastry Chef at The World’s 50 Best Restaurants, it was not merely a personal accolade. It was the legitimisation of an idea that only a few years earlier might have seemed almost heretical: dessert can be less sweet, less decorative and less complacent. And it can still feel necessary.

The daughter of bakers, raised among the smell of bread in the oven and the sharp notes of sourdough starter, Préalpato built her language from memory. She interprets that memory not as nostalgia but as rigour. When in 2015 she arrived, almost by chance, to work with Alain Ducasse at the legendary Plaza Athénée, she found fertile ground to pursue that research.

It was there that desseralité took shape, later also explored in the book she authored. Desserts centred on fresh fruit, grains, aromatic herbs and roots, where sugar functions as a tool rather than as a coating. This is not a health crusade. It is rather a question of balance that gradually transforms pastry itself. In her desserts, sweetness converses with the bitterness of herbs, with the natural acidity of ripe fruit and with the toasted notes of seeds. Ingredients usually confined to savoury cooking enter the vocabulary of pastry. The result is not a dessert that renounces pleasure, but one that intensifies it. A dessert that does not ask the palate for justification, only for openness.

There is also a cultural position. In a time when desserts often become objects designed primarily to be photographed, Préalpato insists on substance. Beauty, if anything, arises from seasonality and respect for producers. It is a pastry practice that accepts the imperfections of the plant world and works with what exists rather than with what performs.

After international experience and a period in London, she now oversees the sweet offering at the Hôtel San Régis in Paris, where the ritual of goûter, the French afternoon snack, becomes a small gastronomic laboratory. What was once a simple sugary pause becomes a space for storytelling.

Spelt flour pancakes with forest honeydew, melilot scone (Northern vanilla), and anise sablé with toasted soybean flour. ©Jordan Sapally

“It is a pastry practice that accepts the imperfections of the plant world and works with what exists rather than with what performs”

Citron, pears, and eucalyptus with oat jus. ©Jordan Sapally

Fennel seed scones, dried verbena, chamomile and pollen. ©Jordan Sapally

How did you discover that pastry would become your path?

I was born into a pastry bakery in the southwest of France. I grew up surrounded by the smells of sourdough starters, chocolate and the flavours tied to this craft. Yet my first dream was to become a child psychologist.
After my baccalauréat I was afraid I might not succeed in pursuing psychology studies, so I changed direction and entered the hotel school in Biarritz. I quickly became attached to cooking, but with pastry I realised I could combine the useful with the pleasurable. It was never obvious. The passion for this profession developed over time and through encounters.

What influence did Alain Ducasse have on your path?

Mr Ducasse was a pioneer in the profession, especially through the concept of Naturalité. When I arrived at Plaza Athénée the restaurant had been open for less than a year, so we had to move quickly and follow a movement that was completely new and even contrary to the traditions of pastry. Very little sugar, strong respect for seasonality and no classic desserts. Instead, deep work on seeds, grains and fruits. That experience lasted seven years and it allowed me to discover my voice. The one I still love and that continues to guide my work today.

Where is contemporary pastry heading today?

Contemporary pastry is evolving. Less sugar clearly dominates. We remove, we adjust. There are also discussions in some countries about mandatory calorie labelling on menus. Yet I remain convinced that pastry will always remain what it fundamentally is: a convivial moment of tasting built around indulgence and pleasure.

Citron, pears, and eucalyptus with oat jus. ©Jordan Sapally

The San Régis “Goûter”, hosted within the “Les Confidences” tea room, set inside a lush, verdant winter garden. ©Jordan Sapally

“Yet I remain convinced that pastry will always remain what it fundamentally is: a convivial moment of tasting built around indulgence and pleasure”

What is the future of the sector?

The profession is going through a difficult moment. There are challenges in recruiting and in making young people in hotel schools or pastry programmes fall in love with this work.
But we must not give up. We have to believe in the emergence of future talents who will once again shake the codes. I also think the profession needs to regain a healthier balance between private life and professional life. Fair wages, fair working hours and fair prices.

How important is design in your work?

Design has never been the most important aspect for me. What matters first is taste, respect, highlighting the product and giving meaning to the moment of tasting. I do not create what people might call “Instagrammable” desserts. But I try to find other ways to make them visually appealing, for example through the setting around them.

Provençal almond tart with ancient grain flour, burnt vanilla, coffee, and star anise. ©Jordan Sapally

What types of desserts correspond most to your work today?

I still have great pleasure working with fruit, seeds and grains as a base.
But I have also opened the field to more singular flavours. I search for little-known spices, herbs, plants and flowers. For example marigold, which has a citrus-like pungency that can deepen summer fruits. Or chicory root, used for its bitter and toasted notes, sometimes as a substitute for coffee.

I enjoy testing new ingredients, experimenting with them and introducing them to guests. I have brought back some indulgence that I had partly lost at Plaza Athénée. But I still enjoy roughness and novelty.

Among your colleagues, whom do you consider references today?

Pierre Hermé will always be a reference for me. He is kind, humble and conquering at the same time. The perfectionism of his desserts makes him truly unparalleled.
I also greatly admire Claire Heitzler. It is not easy to remain faithful to one's path when speaking about small producers and economic sustainability. Claire does it with great delicacy and lightness. And when I want a comforting and perfectly executed pastry, I go to eat a dessert by Maxime Frédéric.

The point, perhaps, is not to remove sugar. It is to remove noise. In a final course that often tends to excess, Jessica Préalpato seeks to bring taste back to its centre, with fewer special effects and more truth. And design enters the picture precisely at the moment when dessert becomes good, honest and deeply connected to its ingredients.

Jessica Préalpato

Jessica Préalpato is among the most influential figures in contemporary pastry. Known for coining the concept of "desseralité," she creates desserts centred on naturalness, seasonality and producers, with an approach closer to cooking than to classical pastry and often less sugar-driven. Her work prioritizes depth of flavor and raw ingredients over social-media aesthetics.

In 2015 she was appointed to lead the pastry kitchen at Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée, where she consolidated her vision. In 2019 she received the title of World's Best Pastry Chef at World's 50 Best Restaurants. After a professional period in London, she returned to Paris, where she now oversees the sweet offering and goûter at the Hôtel San Régis. She has published the book Desseralité with Ducasse Éditions, a manifesto of her idea of dessert.

hotel-sanregis.fr

©Jordan Sapally

Glossary

A quick reference guide to some of the key concepts inspiring this issue of Homa's Design Magazine. They define some of the current and most interesting trends in the way we conceive our lifestyle today.

Brutalism
/ˈbruː.tə.lɪ.zəm/

An architectural and design movement that exposes structure, materials and function without ornament. From the French béton brut ("raw concrete"), it finds beauty in the unapologetic logic of construction.

Degré zéro
/də.ɡʁe ze.ʁo/

French expression meaning "degree zero", the point of absolute reduction where a system is stripped to its essentials. In design, it describes the moment when function alone defines form.

Deuche
/døʃ/

Affectionate French nickname for the Citroën 2CV (deux chevaux). A modest utilitarian car that proved ingenuity, not luxury, is what truly moves the world.

Desseralité
/de.sɛ.ʁa.li.te/

Term coined by pastry chef Jessica Préalpato combining dessert and naturalité. A culinary philosophy where sweetness recedes and the ingredient itself takes centre stage.

Hypernatural
/ˌhaɪ.pəˈnæ.tʃər.əl/

A concept describing objects or materials engineered by humans yet perceived as intensely natural. A paradox where design amplifies nature rather than imitating it.

Japandi
/dʒəˈpæn.di/

A hybrid design style blending Japanese minimalism with Scandinavian functionality. It balances restraint, craftsmanship and natural materials in calm, understated interiors.

Lithoplast
/ˌlɪ.θəˈplæst/

A composite material created by designer Shahar Livne combining marble dust with ocean plastic residues. It mimics geological processes, turning waste into a new stone-like matter.

Longevity
/lɒnˈdʒe.vɪ.ti/

The quality of lasting over time. In design discourse, it refers to objects conceived to remain functional, repairable and desirable across generations.

Luxury
/ˈlʌk.ʃər.i/

Traditionally defined as goods of exceptional rarity or craftsmanship. In contemporary design it increasingly refers to time, durability and meaning embedded in materials.

Oculus
/ˈɒk.jʊ.ləs/

In architecture, a circular opening in a dome or wall used to admit light and air. A simple void that allows a building to breathe.

Upfront Carbon
/ˌʌpˈfrʌnt ˈkɑː.bən/

The greenhouse gas emissions generated during material extraction, manufacturing and construction before a building is ever occupied.

Year Zero
/jɪər ˈzɪər.əʊ/

An expression indicating the beginning of a new conceptual system. In design history, the moment when a radically new production logic resets the rules of the game.

Homa

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