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I.D.

What's Wrong With American Furniture Design?

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Turning the Tables
American furniture design recently came in for a flogging. Is the punishment deserved?

Moderated by Aric Chen

New York designer Stephen Burks's Pleats sofa for Modus, introduced last year at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair

The Panel

David Alhadeff, owner of The Future Perfect, a contemporary furniture store in Williamsburg, Brooklyn / Stephen Burks, New York-based furniture designer / Jerry Helling, executive vice president and creative director of North Carolina-based furniture manufacturer Bernhardt Design / Alice Rawsthorn, design critic of the *International Herald Tribune* / Rosanne Somerson, professor of furniture design at Rhode Island School of Design / Moderator: Aric Chen, New York-based writer on design, architecture, and fashion and a contributing editor at I.D. and *Surface*

In a March 16 *New York Times* article titled "Dearth of a Nation," Alice Rawsthorn, design critic for the *International Herald Tribune*, proposed that American furniture design had fallen far from its lofty mid-20th-century status and been overtaken by European practitioners and producers. "If I were to compile my list of the world's top furniture designers," Rawsthorn wrote, "it would include Jasper Morrison and Marc Newson in Britain, Konstantin Grcic in Germany, Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey in the Netherlands, and the Bouroullecs in France, but no Americans." These were fighting words, and I.D. invited Rawsthorn to expand on her views in conversation with a group of American design experts. The discussion was conducted by email over three days in March.

Let's start by defining the premise. I think it's safe to say that we're not in a heyday of American furniture design. Why is that? Are the institutions, values, and systems by which design is judged hopelessly Eurocentric? Or, if we are to assume some measure of critical objectivity, then what makes European, and perhaps Japanese, design superior? In the current, global context, is it even important or useful to talk about "American design"?

Alice Rawsthorn: My *New York Times* column sprang from many conversations with friends in the U.S. design scene over the years. What interested me as a non-American was that so much U.S. design is flourishing. Look at graphics, new media, games, typography—America sports world-class designers in all of those disciplines, as well as Apple as an exemplar of corporate design management, and One Laptop Per Child as a stellar example of humanitarian design. Why wasn't the U.S. achieving the same high standards in furniture?

I do not believe that the answer is Eurocentric Americaphobia. That certainly wasn't the case when the Eameses, Bertoia, and Nelson emerged in the postwar era, and it isn't impeding other areas of U.S. design now. Also, many of the most influential tastemakers in international furniture design are based in the the States, from Murray Moss to Paola Antonelli at the Museum of Modern Art to James Zemaitis at Sotheby's. We need to look more closely at how furniture designers are educated and nurtured in the U.S. and at their relationship with industry.

Rosanne Somerson: I actually see a lot of success for young designers, so I wouldn't paint the picture as bleakly as Alice did in her article, but I still think her overall assessment is fair. There are essentially no systems to assist young designers in this country. While lip service is given to the notion of a "creative economy," there is no cultural agenda for acknowledging, let alone supporting, furniture design—no organizations linking design with manufacture, no help with licensing and patenting. In countries where design is part of the economic base, that kind of assistance is more available.

In some cases, U.S. schools are serving a supportive role, but they can't do the follow-through. At RISD, we help our students with exhibition opportunities, say, at ICFF or the

Milan Furniture Fair, PR launches, and information on intellectual property protection and on basic professional practice, but we can't guide a growing alumni base through the early stages of career evolution to the degree that's needed once they're out in the world.

Numerous efforts have been made to cultivate and nurture American design, especially by retailers such as the now defunct Totem and Sublime American Design in New York. Why have these efforts largely failed to gain traction?

Somerson: Design needs an audience. When we talk about the market, we have to look at who is supporting such enterprises. The majority of moneyed buyers in America still buy antiques. This is in part about education, not of the designers but of the public. Younger buyers who generally support such enterprises often live in small urban spaces; they're not in more permanent living situations that warrant investment in lasting things.

David Alhadeff: I agree that American furniture design is not in its heyday, but there are successes. I've worked for almost five years now as owner of The Future Perfect. We've carried and launched products from numerous American (especially Brooklyn) designers. And I'm proud to say the store has grown both in reputation and profitability every year. We could discuss why I've gained traction while Sublime and Totem failed. But I'd rather just point out that more than anything else, American design needs a PR overhaul.

Stephen Burks: Let me jump in here as the only American designer of our group. What can I say? I was both offended and interested by what you wrote, Alice. I've been working officially since 2000, when I showed my first commercial piece of furniture—the Display shelving system—at the Milan Furniture Fair. I've worked with some of the best companies, including Cappellini, Moroso, B&B Italia, Boffi, and Zanotta.

I'm constantly asked the annoying questions of why there aren't more American designers in furniture, or what happened to the great Eames tradition, and my answer is always the same: That was then and this is now. In the mid-20th century, America was developing products for a new generation based on the successful technologies of the war effort, including molded plywood. As we all know, the Eameses had a diverse career and were perhaps the first corporate industrial design consultants. But they are far more successful now, after their deaths, than they were 50 years ago, when they barely produced one piece a year, albeit each one a masterpiece.

More history: Postwar America's focus quickly turned to the workplace by way of IBM and the creation of the personal computer, as well as through an array of office systems and office chairs. Today we are the world leaders in communication and information systems, driven by companies like Steelcase, Apple, and Microsoft. Postwar Europe, on the other hand, focused on tools for living, especially in economically depressed countries like Italy and Germany. Technology went into lifestyle-driven products by companies such as Kartell in plastic home accessories, Alessi in stainless steel, and B&B (formerly C&B) in upholstery.

Fast forward to today. We in America live with antiques and bad, overstuffed La-Z-Boys. Europeans live with B&B Italia. We all use Macs and Aeron chairs.

Somerson: Just pointing out that there is more than one American furniture designer in this group…

Jerry Helling: One topic that can't be ignored is the structure of the furniture industry in the States. This industry is very large and it's geared to a homogeneous market. You have the megacompanies in residential, which are centered in North Carolina, the contract companies based in the Rust Belt, and now the mass retailers like Crate & Barrel and Pottery Barn. These are publicly owned companies, which in order to survive have to cater to Wall Street. They have to sell a great deal of product, and that usually means embracing the Hollywood factor: It's about opening weekend box office and pleasing the masses with the least risk involved rather than trying to create something good. I assume the Europeans will start facing this problem to a greater degree as the EU market matures and more companies have common ownership. This market limits opportunities for American furniture designers, but there are a number of other elements that play into the equation.

I believe there is a subtle bias working against American designers, particularly in America. Confidence fluctuates for certain industries, and in furniture design we're going through a rather lengthy period of insecurity. We see the success of many European designers—or at least the appearance of success—based on the media attention they receive, and it reinforces our fears that we might not quite measure up. I've experienced this firsthand. When I launch a new collection, the media is much more interested in publishing the French product designer I'm introducing than the American one.

That said, I'm not sure if I were a young designer I would be rushing into the furniture industry in the United States. There really aren't role models. I'm not sure how one could even become a Ross Lovegrove, Arik Levy, Antonio Citterio, Jaime Hayon, or Patricia Urquiola in America. Here, the press seems to focus on the product stylists or celebrities in the residential world. Therefore, designing tennis shoes, computers, and MP3 players might seem a lot more inviting.

One more point: Apple is amazing as a design culture, and I think we're all proud that it's an American company. However, in many ways, Apple is simple, elegant packaging that supports a wonderful technological infrastructure. Take the technology out and would we respond to an Apple sofa or barstool in the same way? Would we consider the clean,

"It's fiendishly difficult to design good furniture," says Rawsthorn. Two of her favorites: The Bouroullec's Alcove sofa for Vitra (2006) and Konstantin Grcic's Miura bar stools for Plank (2005)

beautiful sofa good design, or would we say it was boring and not progressive?

Rawsthorn: Despite the obstacles everyone describes, from a European perspective, American furniture designers do have a great deal going for them. There are fantastic support structures: receptive museums like the New York and San Francisco MoMAs, Los Angeles MoCA, Cooper-Hewitt, and Art Institute of Chicago, and empathetic retailers like Dave Alhadeff and Murray Moss. For designers interested in producing limited editions, there are additional benefits in that many of the most influential collectors are based in the United States.

As Stephen and Jerry have explained, designers have difficulty engaging with mass-market American manufacturers and retailers, but most European designers would make similar complaints. It's also worth pointing out that the handful of European manufacturers which work intelligently and sensitively with designers—such as Vitra, Magis, and Plank—trawl the world for talent and don't necessarily collaborate with designers from their own countries.

Thanks to digital technology, designers don't need to be in or near the factories where their work is produced, and they have far greater control over prototyping. That's why British furniture design has flourished in the last two decades after a very long drought, when it was hampered by the poor quality and lack of imagination of British manufacturers. The first wave of successful British furniture designers, like Jasper Morrison, worked principally in other countries before securing commissions in Britain, and they didn't have government grants to help them.

There's no reason, in principle, why gifted American designers can't do the same. If the Campana brothers can make their mark on international furniture design from São Paulo, Brazil, what's to stop designers in New York or Chicago from doing so?

Burks: I can tell you it's extremely difficult (or fucking hard) to be American and work with manufacturers in Europe. Or, I should say, it's much easier if you're in Europe. To be successful in Europe, you basically have to be an independent entrepreneur with lots of time on your hands to work for free (designing on speculation), with enough disposable income to fly to Europe four times a year and the time to do the work (making your own prototypes and doing your own research).

Very few of us can afford that kind of lifestyle, including me, which is why very few of us are in it to win it.

Jerry, I liked your point about a hypothetical Apple sofa and whether such a "nondesign" would stand out in the furniture world. Do you think American design only makes sense when it expresses pragmatism and simple ingenuity—the hallmarks of American style?

Helling: I do wonder what types of products would allow us to say that our country is a design leader on a par with the Europeans. Is it all the things you see in Milan—the unconventional products, the intellectual or conceptual products, the fashion-oriented products? When I went out on a limb and developed Ross Lovegrove's Go chair a few years ago, the critical response in the States was less than enthusiastic. Though the chair is in museum collections throughout the rest of the world, it isn't in a single American museum; one museum even announced it wasn't going to acquire any product from "a company that makes beds with carved pineapples" (a reference to Bernhardt Residential). Ultimately the Go chair didn't sell in the States because the market considered it too futuristic.

Alice mentioned Murray Moss as an "empathetic retailer," but Murray, for all his brilliance, influence, and foresight, is hardly known as a champion of American design. You, Jerry, on the other hand, have tried to be. Can you tell us about it?

Helling: ICFF Studio is a program I launched two years ago to provide young furnishings designers with a platform to reach manufacturers and the media. In the early stages I wanted it to be only for American designers, but I had to back away from that idea because of the "I" in ICFF [International Contemporary Furniture Fair]. This turned out to be fortunate as the majority of the American entries have been, well, not the best. Which is to say, many have been ill conceived, unusable, unmakeable, and surprisingly not very mature. I'm still not sure why. I keep thinking that, unlike Europeans, maybe our young designers aren't familiar with this sort of platform and we aren't getting their best work.

Somerson: It's important to bring the craft tradition, or better yet, the "making" tradition, into the discussion. In countries with design traction, such as Italy, Japan, or the Netherlands, there's a connection between concept and realization. In this country, there's a big divide between the two. Industry isn't there at that table, so it's up to the designer to find a way to create the dialogue independently. As a result, there's a lot of badly realized design in exhibits and publications. CAD is changing this to some degree as manufacture becomes easier to customize, but at the conceptual stage, if materials and their manipulation aren't understood, that shows in the work.

Burks: The world's top designers are all working with a sophisticated studio structure that includes lots of cheap interns and very savvy assistants. I've personally struggled to build a team in New York because the majority of students I interview have no clue about the international industry and market and therefore lack the sensibility to design for it, despite all the media coverage. I can't really afford more than two people anyway, and I don't have time to train and supervise interns. Most up-and-coming American designers are just trying to survive out there (they may even have other jobs) and can't invest in the infrastructure it takes to compete.

Overall, the international design scene—including the press and museums—follows and supports the same crop of designers year after year. No disrespect to the very accomplished international five, but good work leads to good work; opportunities lead to opportunities.

I would add that the European model of the designer as auteur is difficult to adopt in America, where the designer is much more likely to be a corporate tool or in-house stylist. To be like Yves Béhar and work for corporations, you have to present yourself as a part of that culture—appear on the cover of *Fast Company*, do projects for Hewlett-Packard—and only then can you get the ear of Herman Miller.

In terms of quality of work, I defer to European economics and free education. For the most part, American students

Another crowd favorite: Hella Jongerius's Polder sofa for Vitra (2005) go into debt to get an education, and the schools are increasingly geared toward training for employment rather than experimentation. In Europe, students are even paid to do nothing when they graduate. Add to the leisure and financial support a myriad of design magazines hungry for content, and every talented European designer is turned into a household name. Think of the Dutch designer Joris Laarman, whose work I admire. Never has a single radiator produced such a career.

Rawsthorn: I've seen some American furniture that I consider to be good in recent years, and a lot that's mediocre, but the same is true of every other country. After all, it's fiendishly difficult to design good furniture, and ferociously so to design the great stuff. Only a few pull it off. So what makes their work great? While I take the point about how perceptions—especially media perceptions—of "interesting design" are often skewed toward the shocking and experimental, that's not what I mean by great design. Nor is it doomed to be made in small quantities, despite all of the challenges of mass production.

To choose a few recent examples, Konstantin Grcic's Miura stool for Plank, Hella Jongerius's Polder sofa for Vitra, and the Bouroullecs's Alcove sofa, also for Vitra, are all formally elegant, beautifully resolved pieces that are genuinely innovative in terms of the design concept and the way they were made. They also reflect broader changes in how we live and relate to objects. You could write a chunky cultural-history essay on each of them. All three pieces were extremely difficult to develop and, being unconventional, represented a considerable risk for the designer and manufacturer. Yet they've all had a significant influence on mass-market products, and they've all been commercially successful in their own right—much more so than was originally expected. The Miura will become the default barstool of the next few years, just as Jasper Morrison's Air Chair for Magis already pops up in every other café.

> **It's extremely difficult to be American and to work with the manufacturers in Europe.**
> **—*Stephen Burks***

Helling: Alice's three examples of good design make me wonder if we have further to go than I might imagine. I have great respect for all three products, and Konstantin's barstool will probably see some good success in the States. But I'm pretty sure the other two products will have a difficult time being relevant in this market. In general, Vitra has had a very difficult go of it in America.

I strongly agree with Stephen that we don't have the media infrastructure in the States to create the careers we admire when it comes to European-designed furniture (or radiators). Product designers just don't get the coverage they need to appear significant to potential clients and to achieve recognition among the design-oriented public. We don't have a single publication in this country that supports our designers the way *Intramuros,* edited by Chantal Hamaide, supports French designers. Chantal has had a major influ-

ence in launching or at least cementing many careers; thanks to her, there are 15 French designers I'd like to work with.

On a more positive note, I think the emergence of the limited-edition market may help American designers and producers in ways we aren't completely aware of yet. I know art furniture or design art, or whatever you choose to call it, is a controversial topic, which still needs to sort itself out with regard to what it will become when it matures (or fades away). But it could provide the opportunity to create interesting works even though they might not be commercially viable in the American market.

Burks: Getting back to the Miura stool for a moment, when you consider that it takes quite a bit of investment for a company like Magis or Plank to tool up for an injection-molded fiberglass-added polypropylene chair, the question becomes: Who would you bet on? A complete unknown or Konstantin Grcic? The reality is that it's very difficult to break through with any manufacturer, not to mention the best, if you're relatively unknown. I began working for Moroso under the recommendation of Patricia Urquiola. My first project was a series of stools with steel frames and leather tops. The low stools, like ottomans, had rocking bases, and all were intended for contract or residential use. Moroso showed the first unfinished prototypes in 2003, the second, more finished, prototypes in 2004, and by 2005 the stools still weren't available on the market, even though I had a hotel in San Francisco eager to buy 100 of them. This was a huge disappointment, not just because I had invested a huge amount of money and time flying back and forth, but also because I realized that there was limited space for new products that any of these companies would produce, and you could be squeezed out at any time depending upon the potential salability and publicity of your work.

This is why I still consider this business a hobby and not a career. I love it, but even after eight years, I make very little money at it and am still relatively unknown. If I haven't been able to break through in all this time, imagine how difficult it must be for today's generation.

Somerson: In fact, I've been very surprised by the enthusiastic reception that many young American designers have gotten. Josh Owen, Dan Michalik, Brodie Neill, Leon Ransmeier, David Wiseman all have hit a strong chord with good, new ideas in well-executed work. David Alhadeff has helped launch a couple of other young designers. And the trade shows have been powerful connector points for many starting out.

Fame is different from success as a practicing designer. The media attention is important to a degree, but it can be present without the reality of a good career. In 30 years of practice, there were periods when I got great coverage, won wonderful awards, had work purchased by museums and important collectors, and exhibited around the globe, but these were not necessarily correspondent to the years when my studio produced the most income or the best projects. It comes down to the work—the consistency of cranking it out, finding the right audience. The studio's success allowed me to take risks with completely new kinds of work manufactured elsewhere in other ways. Fortunately over the long run, things balance out nicely. But it takes a long time to reach that balance, and young designers need to have the ability to ride it out.

So I don't think things are so bleak. I just don't think the dots are connected. If one were to curate a show of American designers, would any of the names I just mentioned have come up?

Alhadeff: Here are other American (born or resident) designers to consider: Ron Gilad, Dror Benshetrit, Alissia Melka-Teichroew, Cucumber Lab, Kiel Mead, Jason Miller, Scrapile,

> **Design needs an audience. When we talk about the market, we have to look at who is supporting such enterprises.**
> ***—Rosanne Somerson***

Ross Lovegrove's Go chair for Bernhardt Design (2005). "Ultimately the Go chair didn't sell in the States because the market considered it too futuristic," says Helling.

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Sarah Cihat, Harry Allen, Hiveminddesign, Matt Gagnon, Jonas Damon, Derek Chen, Reza Feiz, Boym Partners, Greg Lynn, Palo Samko, Patrick Townsend, John Wigmore, David Weeks, Lindsey Adelman.

There's plenty of talent in this country, but when we start the discussion comparing American designers with more famous Europeans who have greater opportunities to work with better manufacturers, the result is inevitably distressing and pessimistic. We must stop talking about what's wrong and start looking at what we can do as educators, curators, creative directors, and journalists to help define American design. Given financial support and a collaborative opportunity with a manufacturer who has the guts to produce work from Americans, I know an interesting collection would start to come together.

Somerson: Some things I would love to see happen:

An annual national juried design exhibition with industry and/or government support. This would of course be accompanied by a publication or catalog. Special events for media would also be a part of such an annual event, much like what happens in Milan.

An organization like France's VIA to ensure that the most innovative designs appear somewhere other than in beautifully printed books on our bedside tables.

A lobbyist helping to create systems for better intellectual property protection in this country. Current laws are inadequate and undermine design as a recognized profession and industry unto itself. This can make survival as an independent designer very difficult. Who can afford the legal fees for national and international patents on every new design?

Kohler invites artists to its Wisconsin factory to work with technicians, and Kartell does something similar in Italy. If an incentive were developed for specific industries to include design research fellows, innovation would be advanced. Through corporate-sponsored research projects with industry, our students at RISD have designed at least five products that are now being made. Students were paid for the intellectual property handover, and both sides have been very pleased. This is a great model, but shouldn't be restricted only to academia.

Helling: One additional element that might need to be addressed (and I'm not sure exactly how to accomplish it) is a broad-scale engagement of the manufacturing base. Without companies to produce the work, the improved visibility of designers won't accomplish all that we want it to. It could be that NeoCon, BIFMA, IFMA, Las Vegas, and High Point need to be targeted, in addition to ICFF.

Burks: I hope you all didn't mistake my realism for pessimism. Despite the difficulties we've encountered and described, this conversation (and hopefully the many more to come) is a step in the right direction.

Rawsthorn: I don't know of a single furniture designer—including Hella, Konstantin, and Jasper—who wouldn't relate to Stephen's difficulties. They all experienced similar problems and, of course, the overwhelming majority of European furniture designers still do so.

It's true, however, that although most European countries, including Britain, leave young designers to fend for themselves, others support them. The Netherlands is the one that ticks every box. Free university education. A great design school in Eindhoven. Cheap studio space on the outskirts of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Government grants to subsidize young designers after graduation. Well-funded, intellectually agile museums to generate intellectual debate on design. More government grants to finance cultural projects like books and exhibitions. One weakness is that there aren't any big Dutch furniture manufacturers on the same scale as Vitra. But Dutch designers are supported by sophisticated smaller companies, such as Moooi and Royal Tichelaar Makkum.

This support structure undoubtedly helped the fortysomething generation of Dutch designers, like Hella and Jurgen Bey, to achieve commercial success without having to compromise their intellectual ambitions. And it's now helping the next wave of twentysomething designers—Studio Job, Laarman, Demakersvan, and Maarten Baas—to do the same.

The furniture industry and the public have never been more receptive to young designers, which is how Joris, Maarten, and their peers have achieved so much so swiftly. There are numerous examples of gifted young designers emerging without the assistance of a Dutch-style support structure—take Jaime Hayon and Martí Guixé in Spain, where design isn't even recognized by the state education system. But the introduction of just a few of the measures that the Dutch have put in place would make life much, much easier for young American designers.

Somerson: Alice, that is a great recap of the kind of things that make a design culture flourish. And I quite agree with you on the fact that these difficulties exist everywhere. We haven't even touched the surface on horror stories of earnest projects with lots of development that go nowhere, "small" changes that destroy the spirit of a design, royalties never seen, etc. etc. These are all a part of it.

I live in a seaside town in New England where many people have boats—from working skiffs to large racing sailboats and everything in between. There are days that are really utopia here, when the river is like a sheet of glass or the ocean sparkles so brightly that the islands in Buzzards Bay seem to be floating in the air. But there are other aspects to boating, too. One day a friend was deep in the awful tedium of cleaning barnacles off the bottom of his boat, sanding horribly toxic paint, which covered the pores of every uncovered surface on his body, and sweating in the heat with hours of awful sanding ahead, and he looked up at me with a smile and said, "It's all boating!" There's a lesson in there, somewhere. ✶