

FURNITURE... *We've all heard the backhanded malediction "May you live in interesting times." To call 2008 "interesting" is perhaps an exercise in understatement—"devastating" may be more to the point. Strangely enough, though, "hopeful" is another descriptor that comes to mind, as we head into the second half of 2009 and small signs of positive change seem to be sprouting all around us.*

The paradoxical nature of Life in the Aughts weighed heavily on the minds of Emeco development head Magnus Breitling, design consultant Josée Lepage, and Design Within Reach publicist Kimberly Oliver, as they looked through this year's furniture entries. The jury judged on the expected criterion of aesthetics, but also took into account the matter of ethics. What, the judges wondered, is the role of luxury in an age where outward

displays of wealth—even if tasteful—are not only increasingly unlikely but also unsavory? The silver-coated Periodic Table—One & Co.'s \$42,000 *objet d'art*—attracted the most debate on this front. The jury was ultimately unwilling to dismiss the role of fantasy and desire, even during these tough times, deciding that there was a difference between beauty and bling. The table made off with a Design Distinction.

In a seeming attempt to balance out Periodic's controversial inclusion, the jurors went on to cast their votes for a number of objects that were considerably more modest in both material and mien. This year's Best of Category is certainly a case in point. Art Center student Shelly Shelly's artful Loft chair, made out of more than 20 distinct pieces of solid walnut, is a study in platonic form that, the jurors agreed, could be the centerpiece in any number of settings. With its elegant angularity and relatively reasonable price of \$1,957, Loft provided calm in the aesthetics-versus-ethics storm.

Another theme this year can best be described as a move toward animating the inanimate. The 22 series of flush-mounted electrical sockets by Omer Arbel, for instance, transforms the normally dull domestic wall-cape into a field of smiley faces, while Peter Stathis's Link lamp charmed jurors with a goofiness that puts one in mind of Wall-E, the hapless robot. In both instances, the designers managed to imbue their products with compelling anthropomorphic characteristics that provide much-needed comic relief. After all, while we may all be tempted to cry at our desks over dour financial predictions and swine flu pandemics, at least our electrical outlets can keep on smiling.





 **BEST
OF
CATEGORY
LOFT**

"TALK ABOUT TIMELESS," said Lepage about Loft, an elegantly angular lounge chair designed by Art Center College of Design student Shelly Shelly in a studio course sponsored by Bernhardt Design. Loft's aesthetic versatility actually had jurors trying to imagine a context in which it would *not* fit—with little success. "You could put this in a loft with all sorts of sleekness around it, or in a brownstone with vintage furniture. It could even be in a commercial setting," noted Oliver.

The chair's versatility is due in part to the fact that it was created using both cutting-edge digital design programs and traditional woodworking techniques. As a consequence, Breitling points out, "the form is modern and

classic at the same time." Although Loft's designer mentioned that her creation resembles a tilted martini glass when seen in profile, the jurors made no such high-life associations. Instead, they marveled at the artful way in which the chair's traditional mortise-and-tenon joinery highlights its underlying structure as well as the varying textures of woodgrain in its component parts.

Given Loft's platonic simplicity, the jurors were amazed to discover that it was formed out of 22 pieces of walnut—a wood chosen by Shelly for its beauty and because it chips the least when being cut, leading to less material waste. While at \$1,957 the price is hardly recessionary, the jurors unanimously felt that the craftsmanship and attention to detail of this all-wood wonder was well worth the price of entry. "It's one of those objects you know you'll love and then pass on to the next generation," concluded Oliver.

Design Shelly Shelly (Art Center College of Design,
Pasadena, CA)
Client Bernhardt Design

Q+A: Shelly Shelly,
*student at Art Center
College of Design*

How did you get the idea for Loft?
Bernhardt has always been well-known as a great producer of American wood furniture, so I decided to research traditional woodworking techniques. I wanted to merge this beautiful craft with the simple lines of modern design.

You've said that Loft has a "martini glass" form. Did you have this in mind from the beginning?
I did a massive amount of sketching of simple shapes and lines. In the end, it turns out that Loft's basic shape came out of one of the smallest doodles in the pile of drawings. My background as a designer is in science and math, so I used basic geometry in developing the design's proportion and angles. If you look at the side profile of the chair, you can draw three perfect circles and connect all three center points of the circles to draw a triangle. The martini glass turned out to be a result of geometrical proportions, and Bernhardt's Jerry Helling was the one who pointed it out to me.

How does Loft merge new technology with traditional woodworking techniques?
All the design, sculptural elements, and wood joinery was created through 3-D computer modeling. I started off carving foams and woods, but in perfecting the joineries and the sculptural aspect of the design I had to borrow new technologies. I used laser-cutting machines to study the form and a CNC milling machine to perfect its sculptural elements.

Were you surprised at how much attention your student project got?
To be getting this award at such an early stage in my career is mind-blowing. I put my heart and my hopes into this piece, and it turned out beautifully. I'm extremely proud of this little chair. It's small, but loud—I guess it resembles me.

What are you working on now?
I just finished up a collaboration with the architecture firm Graft on a series of bathroom fixtures for the German company Kanera.