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THE GAME CHANGER

Words by Kerstin Zumstein

# American

A 23-strong movement wants to return US design to its glory days, before commercial factors became the bottom line

■ When you hear “American Design”, you probably think of classic Eames. Even the American Design community itself is aware that since Herman Miller in the 50s and Knoll in the 60s, the movement has fallen far behind the creative output of Europe. To make it as an American Designer means to work with a European company. “Made in Italy”, they call the internationally renowned. But there is a movement erupting in New York that has set out to change this dynamic. Its 23 proponents are named on the page opposite. And we spoke to two of them, Jeffrey Bernett

and Brad Ascalon, along with America’s answer to Cappellini: the Bernhardt Design president Jerry Helling. We also chatted with Chris Adamick, a promising newcomer to the scene, about the state of design in the US.

So why is the individual designer’s voice less evident today than in America’s classic era? Helling believes it’s because the companies got too big. “Having to answer to stakeholders will crush the entrepreneurship Knoll and Herman Miller were so famous for. Changing creative director every three years means there is no continuity,” he says.

Others such as Bernett think it is part of the American DNA to focus on the commercial aspect – and that as a consequence companies often put the needs of the corporation and the brand before the needs of the design.

This model is common throughout America, especially within office giants from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and it stands in stark contrast to the classic Italian practice of elevating a signature designer above the product. And sure, when you go to NeoCon and ask a sales rep who designed a certain product, you get a look of bewilderment, whereas in Milan journalists queue to catch a quote from a designer the same way film fans stand in Leicester Square to get a picture of their favourite movie star at a premiere.

Of course the starchitect and design ego phenomenon of Europe is largely down to a media circus that many have felt dilutes the purpose »

# Designer



# Brad Ascalon

of design and creates oversized ego projects, a development that Jasper Morrison, together with Naoto Fukasawa, tried to rally against with their Supernormal exhibition in Milan two years ago.

But in the States design isn't even part of public awareness. "If you say you're a designer, they think you mean fashion," says Adamick, an ex-surfer from Los Angeles who together with his design partner Piotr Woronkiewicz, from New York, has shown immense promise working for biggies like Haworth and Bernhardt – but has yet to break into the European market.

For Adamick, culturally this boils down to the "Yankee ingenuity – it doesn't matter who made it, just what it does for me". Furniture and product design is still a subcultural niche that doesn't appear on the public radar.

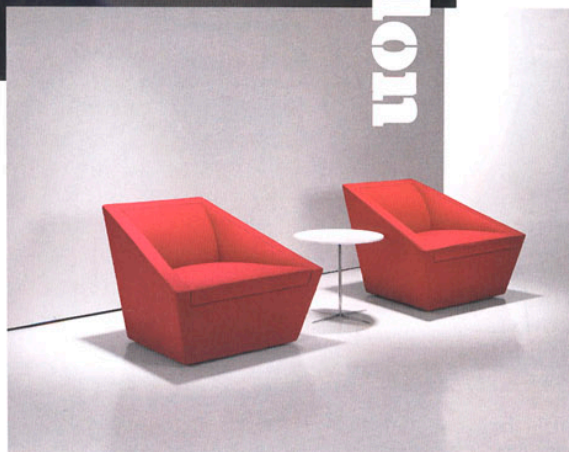
That is in part down to the lack of informative media reporting in the US – in contrast to the large number of design titles in Europe. Perhaps in Europe the media create the design personas, and become obsessed with the story behind the story. But slowly interest is growing in America: The New



Far right Designer Jeffrey Bernett feels it is in America's DNA to focus on commercial imperatives ahead of the aesthetic needs of design

Above Bernett's Metropolitan swivel reading chair, created for B&B Italia

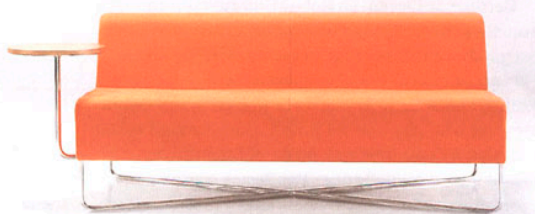
Right Bernett's Balance Sofa in orange



York Times publishes two design supplements a year and a handful of journals in the city are trying to push design into the limelight – as Wallpaper did in the 90s.

For Ascalon, this state of American Design is not about the public, but is a chain reaction that began with the manufacturers being too risk averse. "Decisions are made by committees, agendas, market research and focus groups," Ascalon says. "In the end, design is watered down, a safe compromise which in turn has a cyclical effect on designers, manufacturers and the public. Since the American public is less exposed to contemporary design, they tend to desire what they know – it's the design equivalent to comfort food." So a design lethargy? Corporation obesity?

The design community in New York, many of them Helling's protégés, are bored of hearing how US design lags behind its European equivalent and have started a movement that climaxed in the MunNY exhibition this year. For the first time >>



Above Pillar upholstered lounge chair with optional swivel base, designed by Brad Ascalon for Bernhardt

Above left Ascalon is among the 23 designers who have set out to challenge the notion that US designers must work for a European firm to be successful

Below left Ascalon's Pillar chair in red



# Jeffrey Bernett

## Chris Adamick



Right Jerry Helling, the driving force behind Bernhardt Design

Left Chris Adamick, an ex-surfer who has garnered much attention as an up-and-coming designer

Right Adamick's stacking chairs in ABS and steel, released in 2007 by Bernhardt as part of the 'Global Edition' range



## Jerry Helling

in US history, people were queuing round the block to see the work of a contemporary group of designers. Each had put their own design on the "blank canvas" Kidrobot MUNNY doll at the Ace Hotel during New York's design week.

Is this the start of a change in attitudes? Helling certainly thinks so: "They're a posse!" he jokes. "They may be competitors on a commercial level, but they've grouped together to create an American Design scene, to gain recognition in their home country."

Karim Rashid, Bennett, Todd Bracher, Stephen Burks (all of whom have featured in **onoffice**), have all "made it" according to the usual American Design paradigm – that is to say they have worked for a top European brand such as B&B Italia, Boffi or Ligne Roset. But their aim is to make US history and bring design to the forefront of 21st-century American culture.

Ascalon, who is part of the NY gang, knows the shift is not going to happen overnight, however. He says: "Culturally, American companies have a difficult time letting the artistic aspect of design play a pivotal role. I believe we are on the verge of a resurgence in America ... but for this to truly happen here, it needs to be supported and nurtured by American manufacturing. Without the proper support, we're more likely to see a continuing insurgence of American Designers in Europe than an American Design resurgence here. I, for one, would like to see both."

One example of a company that is getting it right in the eyes of American Designers is Bernhardt Design – and it is no exaggeration to say that is down to one man, Helling. Celebrated as a design visionary, he is famed for discovering talent and giving up-and-coming creatives a platform to show what they can do. And not just American Designers, also continental newcomers such as Hans and Franz – after all, everything comes down to good design. But the educational programmes he champions, such as the new American Design



Honors awards or ICF Studio scholarships certainly propel American graduates to an unprecedented level of exposure.

All the American Designers I speak to agree that Helling's impact on contemporary American Design is huge. One could argue it's because he follows the previously proven model of Italian/European design brands that prize a good relationship between designer and manufacturer. "Yes, the communication is vital, we don't give designers a brief," Helling explains. "We have a conversation." And indeed most products are a result of chance encounters, where Helling met a designer and liked them. "The first thing I look for in a designer is sincerity. There are so many designers to choose from, you might as well work with someone who is nice." It sounds very straightforward but many designers agree that good products come from a successful collaboration, a healthy relationship which Ascalon, for instance, describes as simply: "Chemistry!"

Bernhardt Design's Global Edition collection, launched two years ago was an experiment to put design above market requirements. Helling chose a group of international designers (including Shin Azumi, PearsonLloyd and Yves Béhar) and without knowing who else was on board, they were all asked to design a contemporary piece of furniture as part of a worldwide range. The result was an astonishing collection in which every piece seemed to fit together, proving that there is a global level of

sophisticated 21st-century design. "What was interesting was that none of them pushed for using new experimental equipment, they all made do with traditional ways of working with materials, which to me shows that often obscure things are done for the sake of it – not for the sake of good design," says Helling.

Bernhardt's cash cow remains office furniture. Here, Helling is fully aware of the need to put design needs behind the reality of outsourcing. Interestingly, the office sector is one of the few design sectors that is "nationalistic" as Bennett describes it, especially when it comes to systems. "Seating is more global," Bennett concludes, "but systems are driven by real estate, how power and data flow, and there are big differences between Europe and America."

Helling worries that the US market is running into the European desking solution of bench systems, as seen at NeoCon, just as Europe is beginning to reconsider the repercussions those solutions have on privacy. But looking at Bernhardt's office products, large wooden desks that only sell in the States or to expats, there still is a big divide in workplace aesthetic. "The future is a landscaped office but the industry is slow moving," Helling explains.

But for American Design it's exciting times. It's not often you get to talk of a movement and when the creatives group and create omentum, for us journalists at least, there are good times ahead. ■