

The Struggle is Real

Angharad Summers writes about the morality of making furniture in today's world of 'too much stuff'.



When I decided to study furniture design I knew I wasn't picking something that would lead straight to a graduate job at a good company with reasonable pay. But I knew that I loved it and that I would make it work. After all, I come from a family of strong-willed and resourceful people that are quite determined to persevere.

I enjoyed my time at university, learnt a lot and our lecturers made us feel excited and dangerously optimistic about the future. Skipping forward took me to the post-degree era where I worked a job I hated and tried to focus on design projects after work. I started to think more and more about what the hell I was doing. It may have been prompted by a harsh friend remarking, 'the world doesn't need more f#@king chairs', when I said that I still wanted to be a furniture designer. But I thought I had an argument and as I reflected more on what he said, I started to doubt myself and wonder if he was right.

There is already too much stuff in this world – unnecessary stuff, cheap stuff, bad quality stuff and various versions of the same thing. What do I have to contribute that is new, yet necessary? Or at the very least not using brand-new materials that are simply contributing to the never-ending consumer (waste) cycle.

There are designers that create beautiful things – but at what cost? I can't justify this indulgence to myself. There are designers like Hella Jongerius who agree there is too much 'useless' design, and instead focus on textiles because that is a more sustainable way of reviving an already existing furniture piece.

I would like to find this sweet middle spot where I can make beautiful and functional furniture pieces without feeling guilty that I'm part of the wider problem our world has.



Non-egocentric or ecocentric design

I decided to look into non-egocentric design, or what one could also call ecocentric design. That is, design which is selfless and altruistic, design which puts the needs of nature before those of the designer and consumer. The best way of achieving this is to start with focussing on material use. You can buy secondhand timber, find old pallets and other 'rubbish' on the side of the road, use offcuts from other projects, use an old furniture piece to create a new one and so on.

One example of this is *Edge*, a side table made from various rolls of discarded veneer edge banding, an offcut of solid timber and old decking planks. The world may not need another table but if I would like to make one, I can do so from such materials without harming the environment anymore. Ashley Eriksmoen's AFDA winning chaise lounge *The Dream*, or: *the view from here is both bleak and resplendent* also illustrates this point. With discarded timber furniture she aims to critique the vicious cycle of producing, consuming and throwing away.

Another example is London-based, Australian designer Brodie Neill's *Recoil*, a table made from over three kilometres of veneer offcuts or *Longitude*, a bench made from timber floorboards salvaged from a renovated hospital. These furniture pieces raise the bar for upcycled design, showing how fine it really can look when taken seriously. This is a huge leap from the DIY pallet furniture people tend to picture when they hear the word upcycled.



Opposite: Ashley Eriksmoen, *The Dream*, or *the view from here is both bleak and resplendent*, winner of Australian Furniture Design Award 2022. Photo: David Paterson, Dorian Photographics

Above: Brodie Neill, *Longitude* (2022), reclaimed Rhodesian mahogany from floorboards. Photo: Angela Moore

Left: Angharad Summers, *Edge table*, repurposed factory discards and offcuts. Photo by the maker

Another way of achieving ecocentric design is to focus on the furniture piece conveying an important message. It may just be 'another chair' at a first glance, but if the chair has a story to tell and provokes a conversation between people about an important issue then it is doing more than just fulfilling its function.

When you look at South African artist Porky Hefer's work you may think at first that it's a designer's giant



Left: Ashley Eriksmoen, *Fell* (2023), a sculptural statement made from salvaged domestic furniture parts. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and displayed at the 2023 NGV Triennial. *Photo by the artist*

Below: Designed and built by Revival Projects, *The Melbourne shoe-box* was made from one large piece of timber salvaged from a roof structure in South Melbourne – the site of Revival's first Zero Footprint Repurposing hub. *Photo: Tom Graham*



egotistical project, made just for fun and probably wasting virgin materials; however, it is quite the opposite. Hefer's *Endangered* collection is a set of seating spaces in the form of endangered species and are made of eco-friendly and recycled materials.

The question is – is it possible to sustain this design practice one hundred percent of the time? And will people pay for it? Found materials are generally cheaper but the work time is longer due to having to source, machine the timber more, remove nails etc.

And if you make something from found materials, should you still charge the customer for what the material would have cost new? I would say not. It feels morally wrong, although talking to an experienced furniture design business owner they thought the opposite.

If you need to make more than one piece and don't have enough existing material you will have to buy new material and you can't suddenly charge different prices for the same thing. It is a good point but deep inside I struggle to think in this purely business sense. Do I have to change or does the system have to change?

I do believe that a different future is entirely doable for us. Revival Projects is a Melbourne based organisation led by Robbie Neville that rescues existing materials and repurposes them for new building and furniture projects. They offer material consulting services for the construction industry, an app where people can access free, rescued materials to use for their own projects, a

furniture range and commission-based service and various initiatives and workshops to involve more people in the local community. The manifesto on their website is straight to the point and you can see they're getting stuck into the difficult yet important work that needs to be done. The more people that get on board with this, the more it will become the new normal.

In 2023, Maryam Moghadam, Carl Broesen and myself organised *Pop 'round: one person's junk is another person's chair** for Melbourne Design Week. The exhibition featured 17 works from 13 designers. All the pieces were made from recycled, repurposed or reclaimed materials, excluding only fastenings and hardware. This year Tait hosted an exhibition for Melbourne Design Week whereby students from Hester Hornbrook Academy used scrap materials from Tait's factory to create furniture pieces. It's encouraging to see the theme continuing.

There are a lot of unanswered questions but I am left feeling optimistic and motivated to continue working in this vein, confident that it is the path to a better future for us all. I hope I've convinced at least some of you to lean more towards eco than ego.

* *The exhibition 'Pop 'round: one person's junk is another person's chair' was featured in AWR#121, December 2023.*



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