

## RE-ESTABLISHED

Many of us that work in design and its related industries have an abiding affection for Established & Sons. Maybe it's because it represents an idea of British design that is much needed in a time of confusion about what it means to be British – vigorously international in its outlook, creative, irreverent and eccentric but with an underlying framework of knowledge and expertise. Perhaps it is because we recognised in its approach an unusually pure belief in the vision of designers, upheld above all else, and how unique that was. Perhaps it is just because Established & Sons always held the best parties. If you're very lucky, it might be because you own a piece from its first seven years – a piece of furniture that was rebellious and brave when you bought it and is now seen as an icon.

We all hoped that the new products would be good, that Established & Sons was truly back. Well, they are and it is. But this is not the same Established & Sons – it has evolved. There is great strength in the legacy of its early years, and the best of that has been retained, the pieces edited into a clearer and more succinct range, this journal revived in a new format. But returning Design Director Sebastian Wrong has brought in new perspectives from his time away from the brand, and new ownership is helping make Established & Sons a sharp and savvy operator.

The new collection represents the same celebration of design quality, design freedom and design patronage that has always been the hallmark of Established & Sons, but with a new focus on the practicalities of modern living. Each of the five pieces is an exercise in innovation and the perfection of imperfection. It has been a privilege to help develop a new way to tell the stories behind these objects, and I hope you get as much enjoyment out of them as I have.

Anna Winston  
Editorial Director

## SELECTED CONTRIBUTORS

### Giovanna Dunmall

A freelance journalist and editor based in London, Giovanna Dunmall writes about design and architecture for publications such as Wallpaper\*, 1843, the Guardian, Azure, Metropolis, DETAIL and the South China Morning Post. She is fluent in Italian, which made her the perfect choice to interview the designer Mauro Pasquinelli in his own home in Scandicci, northern Italy (p.40).

### Liv Siddall

Working across print, digital and radio, Liv Siddall is a writer, editor and content producer. Formerly the editor of Rough Trade Magazine and host of Rough Trade Radio, and also online editor and features editor at It's Nice That, Liv is now freelance and a contributing editor of Riposte Magazine. She has just launched her own podcast, Redundancy Radio. In this issue of the EST Journal, Siddall examines the relationship between illustration and design (p.58).

### Will Wiles

Londoner Will Wiles is an author, editor and journalist. His first novel, Care of Wooden Floors, was published to wide acclaim in 2012 and was followed by The Way Inn in 2014. His third novel is due for publication early next year. He is currently architecture and design editor at Port magazine, a columnist for the RIBA Journal and a contributing editor to Icon magazine. Wiles has written a unique short story for the EST Journal (p.36), set in east London, the spiritual home of Established & Sons.

### Laura Houseley

Laura Houseley is editor-in-chief and founder of Modern Design Review, a magazine that covers "the best of the product, people and theory at the effervescent tip of contemporary design". Formerly the editorial director for Established & Sons and design and architecture editor of Wallpaper\*, she curates the annual Ready Made Go exhibition during London Design Week and is also a freelance writer, editor and consultant. She explores the design inspiration of Swiss designer Dimitri Bahler on p.20 of the EST Journal.

### Peer Lindgreen

Peer Lindgreen is a Danish photographer, based in London, who has created imagery for some of the world's leading designers, publications and brands. He moved to London in 1992 to explore emerging technologies, culture and music, after completing a photography degree in his home country. Since establishing his practice in the 1990s, he has been awarded both Gold and Silver in The Association of Photographers Awards and a D&AD pencil. His atmospheric photographs of the new Established & Sons collection, shot in east London, can be found on p.26.

## EST Journal 2018

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# FILIGRANA LIGHT

06 As design director of Established & Sons, SEBASTIAN WRONG has plenty on his plate. Juggling direction, production and design roles, in the past year, he has overseen the development of five new pieces for the collection, including his own FILIGRANA LIGHT.

Sebastian Wrong is a man with a mission. Since rejoining Established & Sons in 2017, he has been tasked with figuring out what this much-loved, eccentric, experimental British brand might be able to offer to the wider world that isn't already being delivered by other design brands.

Wrong was part of the team that launched Established & Sons back in 2005. He oversaw a heady period, where new and established talent flocked to a brand that was willing to take risks and knew how to throw a good party. His vision, mentorship and excitement for new manufacturing techniques helped build the company's unique identity. But, more than a decade later, the world is not the same, and the expectations of a design brand are very different.

Older, wiser, but with the same dedication to creative collaboration and production, Wrong opens up about the challenges ahead and his own product for the new collection, Filigrana Light, which brings a 16th-century glassmaking tradition bang up to date.

EST: The name of the Filigrana Light is a direct reference to the Venetian technique used to make it, but this is a decorative style that hasn't been fashionable for quite a while.

WRONG: You see it usually in more historical environments in this slightly old-world, faded-grandeur kind of space, so the idea was to take this feeling and translate it through a contemporary object to draw attention to the purity and the beauty of glass filigree: the symmetry and the randomness. It is a special, magical technique.

EST: The technique involves adding canes of white or coloured, white-cored glass to the already molten glass before it is blown, and it has to be done by hand. Why did you decide to go down this route?

WRONG: I've designed lighting for years, but I've also nurtured a growing interest in glass manufacturing and the Italian Venetian techniques that are still very alive. Historically, for the Venetians, glass was a commodity, and this veining technique had intrinsic value – it was a currency. Filigrana was part of the process of glass making that was unique to this area and was very sought after. On Murano, they maintained a secrecy around its production. Objects made using this filigree were of really high value, and I like the idea of interpreting that for a contemporary context.

This slightly spiral, candy cane effect evokes childhood and memory. So I have applied this to core basic shapes with very little design around it. Each light is unique because of the way it is made. It's a celebration of colour and technique.

EST: Normally, you'd see this filigree used with clear glass. Why did you decide on a different finish?

WRONG: We're doing three colours, black, red and white. White is very subtle, black is also muted but a more distinct effect. Red is very full-on and of course puts a colour tint into a room. To have these colours with the white canes, and then an acid-etched finished that makes it super matt and quite soapy, makes it much more contemporary.

Visually, it's very dreamy. I find the application of the colour and the variations of the lines very calming and quite hypnotic. It has a slightly other-worldly feel to it.

EST: Some of the other brands you've worked for have had a focus on high-volume sales, which wouldn't allow for a hand-made product like Filigrana Light. Is that something you're interested in replicating at Established & Sons at all?

Words by Anna Winston  
Photography by Peter Guenzel



WRONG: No. Established & Sons is absolutely not that kind of brand. What I'd like to bring is a renewed clarity and definition for what this brand is going to be in this new chapter.

EST: What does that definition look like?

WRONG: The way I work is very intuitive and instinctive. So, I tend to avoid the kind of big manifesto, or the big picture, and rather focus on what we can do in a relatively tangible period of time. So, we're considering what the collection has been historically and what the collection has become today and how to then build a collection for the future and what our next steps should be. It's a combination of past, present and future and an incremental development of the collection.

We need to protect the freedom for expression of creativity, but also ensure that the products are accessible, that they have a real purpose and can become part of people's lives. We have a duty to deliver a product that is made to a particular standard with a prominent character. That's really our DNA.

EST: How do you balance being design director and the curation and development of this kind of collection with actually designing products? Is the thought process very different?

WRONG: The balance between the two is something that I'm not always comfortable with. Very often in the role of design director I would just see a gap in the collection that I could fill. Sometimes it was right, sometimes not.

We are lucky to have, let's call them contemporary icons of design – they are important pieces. And I am also really lucky because I was part of the evolution of those from day one. That means I'm not coming in with that legacy hanging on my shoulders and having to work out how to manage that in the right way. I don't have that guilt.

But I don't have a clear answer to your question. Over the course of time, perhaps it will become clearer, this whole issue of how to operate on a number of different levels. I don't exclusively design for Established & Sons now, so I am opening up and this is a different approach, being much more pragmatic, and working to a brief. We still want to give our designers huge amounts of freedom and we have an open mind, but at the same time, we are much clearer than we used to be about how we want to evolve and what that means for the collection.

EST: One of the founding principles of Established & Sons was to work with respected names – the 'established' – and with new talent – the 'sons'. Putting any product into production is a risk, so how do you select the young designers who you think can deliver?

WRONG: Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I like to work with people who I think are doing great pieces which will stand the test of time. We are always trying to find and develop an icon. To get a piece that you would love today but also your kids would really enjoy. That is an achievement.

EST: A lot of brands have become very risk-averse in recent years.

WRONG: Yes, absolutely, because the world is increasingly controlled by numbers and that means everyone is going to try and work out what's the least risky – to try and guarantee a winner every time. Perhaps that is the advantage of Established & Sons in this particular moment, that we've got this legacy of products that are very loved, but we also have an opportunity to do something different.

# IN VENETO



The making of  
FILIGRANA LIGHT



In the 16th century, the filigrana technique was closely guarded by the artisans of Murano. The Venetians used glass as a form of currency, and the highly skilled process behind the spiralling filigree stripes gave it even higher value. Today, the old wood-burning furnaces have been replaced with gas equivalents and production is no longer limited to Murano, but many of the same traditions – and some of the same air of secrecy – still exist. Here, photographer Matteo Cuzzola reveals a rare moment behind the scenes at the glass workshop in Treviso that creates the Filigrana Light for Established & Sons.

Photography by Matteo Cuzzola

The ovens operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The days are dedicated to blowing glass, and at night, there is a shift where people prepare the raw glass for the following day. I arrived at 7am. It was a very cold day with snow outside, but when I entered it was like being in California – about 25 degrees and people were wearing shorts and T-shirts, working near the big ovens.

There are only a small number of Maestri Vetrai, or glass masters, in Italy. The man in the red T-shirt in my photographs is a glass master, and he handles the piece of glass just in the final, most important part of the making, rotating the glass continuously while he blows it to create the final shape.

The atmosphere was quiet. They are very calm because everyone knows what to do and everyone has a particular role. For example, there is an expert who only works with the small pieces they add to create the filigrana. It's a very slow process, and every piece they create is unique in some way.

They are not used to having strangers in the workshop. No one is comfortable having their photograph taken by a stranger while they work, you have to talk to them and become, not exactly friends, but more familiar. But there is another reason that they are a little bit guarded with strangers. This is an old art we have in Italy, and every day someone tries to steal this unique technique. They don't want other people to learn the secret. So I feel very privileged to have been allowed in.





# BARBICAN

- 16 KONSTANTIN GRCIC discusses the process behind the BARBICAN sofa, why minimalism doesn't have to be the bare minimum and the importance of working with manufacturers who understand collaboration.



Much has been written about Konstantin Grcic and his work over the years. Since founding his studio in 1991, the Berlin-based designer has won international acclaim for his unique design language, which brings together practicality, materiality and a gentle humour. His characterful furniture designs are part of the permanent collections of a swathe of the world's top design and art museums and are also commercial hits.

Seven years ago, Grcic created his first industrially produced sofa, the Cape for Established & Sons, which features a draped cover that can be changed to match the mood of the season, like a person changing their clothes. Now Grcic is rekindling his relationship with the brand to once again tackle the idea of the sofa – one of the hardest-working furniture pieces in any interior.

The result is Barbican, a bold design statement with a strong geometric form, use of colour and a compact footprint, configured either as a chaise or a corner sofa. The idea, explains Grcic, is a response to the reality of the smaller spaces and changing relationship with the sofa in contemporary homes and offices. But it is also rooted in a unique approach to minimalism. Here, over a crackly phone line on a grey, wintery day, he talks about the genesis of the Barbican sofa.

EST: Barbican doesn't look like a traditional sofa. How did this form come about?

GRCIC: When Sebastian approached me, the first idea was really to revisit the Cape sofa and expand its possibilities. I have always liked revisiting existing projects – it is actually an opportunity that a lot of companies are missing out on because we're always focused on doing new stuff. So I found that idea very tempting. And then we realised it wasn't that easy: what we did wouldn't make the existing sofa better, it just made it more complicated or even diluted the strength of the original design. Nowadays, sofas can be landscapes and have different formations and constellations, and that is what we wanted to get to. This realisation made this new kind of sofa happen. Then it was a process of learning and making decisions, and looking at how the different elements play together and where they lead. Kind of like fine-tuning a little system.



EST: Is this kind of collaborative process with a manufacturer important?

GRCIC: People like Sebastian, they are the reason why we work with certain clients because we want to work with people that we trust, where there is kind of mutual interest, passion, understanding and a chemistry. The best partnership is always with someone who does not always agree with you on everything. That creates a discussion, a dialogue and a search for something. I find projects boring when the solution is obvious.

EST: How did you develop the key design elements of Barbican?

GRCIC: The Cape sofa is kind of a base sofa with a cover. This new sofa was also conceived as a base, a firm volume with a loose cover. That loose cover then turned into what I call the 'jumper'. We chose a very particular fabric from Kvadrat called Galaxy, it's a very stretchy fabric so the cover has a different kind of fit, like a jumper.

So we had this firm foam volume, the cover, and some loose cushions – the kind of box-shaped cushions that so many sofas have. Something didn't feel right about it so we turned the cushions into pillows and then created the toppers. In American Hotel beds you have a mattress and a topper. I don't like them in that context, it makes the bed too soft, but for a sofa, I thought that would be really nice – this thin layer of extremely comfortable material became really interesting. These two elements, the pillows and the topper, are really the interface for the user, and allow us to play with the sofa in terms of colour. Beautiful fabric is expensive, and so this has also become quite an intelligent way of using the material.

EST: That combination of fabrics and block colours in the pillows and toppers makes it feel very bold...

GRCIC: It gives it a lot of character. We deliberately made it something quite fashionable. Maybe in five years you would choose completely different fabric. There is a strange kind of notion that furniture shouldn't be fashionable. Furniture is of course a much slower industry than fashion, but why shouldn't furniture be fashionable, especially when it is something that is upholstered and uses fabric? You are dressing a piece of furniture.

EST: How does Barbican relate to your other work?

GRCIC: It isn't exactly what I am most known for, what people would say is very typical for me, doing this sofa. The design





EST: How did the name come about? Does it relate to the Brutalist building in London?

GRCIC: I can't remember what the German word was that I was looking up in the dictionary that then suggested Barbican. I didn't actually know that Barbican has a real meaning in the English language [the outer defence of a city or a castle]. For me, it was just the name of The Barbican Centre, the building in London. But this meaning must have been why the architects or planners chose that name for that site.

The idea that the people would not only sit on the sofa but in the sofa was important. The sofa becomes a space and not just a support like a chair. It is your own territory. So the sofa is not an homage to The Barbican Centre, and I don't think it reflects anything of what the Barbican Centre stands for. But, somehow, the kind of melody of my sofa has a bit of the melody of The Barbican Centre. I think it works well.

process I described to you reflects that. But I think it is still minimal, in that it kind of breaks a sofa down into elements. Maybe the true minimalist would leave the pillows and the toppers out. You could still sit on it. But I think minimal is not necessarily the minimum. Minimal to me is breaking down an object into something really essential and finding a logic in it. Minimalism can be terribly dead and unhappy, but this sofa has these layers that allow us to be bold and playful and colourful.

EST: Do you think our relationships with our sofas are changing, that we can be more fluid with these kinds of pieces?

GRCIC: Furniture always changes, because we are also changing in the way we use furniture and what we use furniture for. And I think the sofa is a good example of one of these pieces that have really changed. It has moved into offices and workplaces, and that was probably unthinkable 20 years ago. At home it has taken on a bigger role, because people are really living on their sofa, doing all sorts of things like homework and work, watching television and eating, which was also unthinkable. You had dinner at the dinner table and then move on to the sofa to watch television. Everything has changed and therefore the sofa needs a new approach. It has many new lives.

In its simplicity, Barbican allows exactly that kind of variety in use and interpretation by whoever owns it and uses it. It is not complicated. A kid can do 50 things with it, and an adult can do other things with it. It is an open platform and that is nice.

EST: There's been a lot of discussion recently about the fact that homes are getting smaller as well. Has that had an impact?

GRCIC: The illusion that we all have huge lofts and endless space for big sofas is wrong. Space is really an issue. We made Barbican as small as possible, while still being comfortable and big enough to sit in it and not just on it.

The limitation of the traditional sofa is really its orientation. It would normally stand in front of a wall. Barbican doesn't necessarily have that clear orientation. And I think that is a much more contemporary way to design.

Words by Anna Winston

Photography by Matteo Cuzzola

# LIGHT

22 DIMITRI BÄHLER is a name to watch in design and the latest emerging talent to join the Established & Sons roster. Laura Houseley, editor-in-chief of Modern Design Review, explores Bähler's design language and the inspiration behind LIGHT LIGHT – a lamp that appears almost impossibly lightweight.



# LIGHT

Tradition and technology come together in Light Light, a poetic light by Swiss designer Dimitri Bähler. A Washi paper shade meets a carbon structure in a design that is delicate and modest but at the same time considered and contemporary, a perfect expression of Bähler himself, a multi-faceted young designer.

Bähler's output since graduating from ECAL (University of arts and design in Lausanne) in 2014 has been diverse and includes arts-led installations, an extensive and celebrated series of ceramics and plenty of investigative projects involving process – such as a current collaboration with a Japanese origami expert – and expression, like the Urban Legends projects focused on transitioning communities in Burkina Faso. Here is a designer whose approach is untethered to notions of industrial or studio production, instead sitting somewhere in between. The result is that wherever there is rigour and technical prowess in Bähler's work, you will also find whimsy and beauty.



"The most important aspect of the Light Light lamp is the poetic element: The relationship between the natural material, the soft Washi paper, and the unnatural, artificial, material, the carbon, interests me very much," says Bähler. This seeming disparity between something engineered and something unrefined is exaggerated throughout the design.

The carbon elements are clean and minimal. Bähler has played up to the strength of carbon fibre by choosing the thinnest and longest section possible, just 6mm in diameter, for the reed-like stem of the light. The carbon-fibre elements are standardised, industrially produced components. The floor plate is minimal, while the shade and stand connect via clean magnetic elements, simply clicking into place without the need of screws and bolts. So far so technological.

Yet the shade that Bähler mounts onto this industrially-built structure has altogether different associations. "Washi paper is a traditional material for diffusing light and structure in construction, for the sliding doors and windows of traditional Japanese architecture, and for lamps too – although sadly this seems to be dying out," explains the designer. The paper lantern is a simple form, the inspiration for which Bähler attributes to a familiar Japanese children's game: "Kamifusen is a game in Japan where a small paper bowl is inflated through the process of playing with it. In the same way, the shade for the Light Light can be gently inflated by the user, we recommend that it is blown into, or I hope people might play the Kamifusen game too."

Washi papers are made from wood pulp, they are translucent, malleable and tactile, warm to the touch. Their appealing textured surfaces and strength are the reason why they have been used for over 1000 years as a material with which to build and make. The length of the fibres in Washi paper give it its strength. These are pounded and stretched, rather than chopped, during the making process. Washi has a resistance to tearing that means it can be used like cloth, rather than paper. It is often stitched or used to sculptural effect, exploiting its strength, durability and ability to hold its shape.

Although the carbon fibre and Washi used in Light Light are seemingly contradictory materials – old and new, hard and soft, high tech and low tech, linear and rounded – they share important characteristics. Despite appearing delicate or fragile, both have deceptively inherent structural strength and flexibility, provided by those extra-long fibres in their make-up.

Of course, where the materials differ dramatically is in Washi's translucency. This characteristic is what has made Washi a natural choice for lighting for centuries. What followed the decision to use this evocative centuries-old material in Light Light was a lengthy investigation into the best type of Washi. "Sebastian (Wrong) and I both wanted to find the paper which filled all the requirements; the practical needs for strength, cleaning, the right diffusion, fire restrictions," remembers Bähler. "We looked at all the different possible materials and, in the end, we chose one that was very similar to the first I trialled."

The Washi used in Light Light is softly crumpled and delicate in appearance – its physical softness is a fitting metaphor for the softness of the light it filters. The play between light and dark, illumination and shadow, and perceptions of space and form is a theme in Japanese architectural theory that Bähler acknowledges. He references the influential essay *In Praise of Shadows* by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, which explores and lingers on the importance of darkness and subtle light

("Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty"). Light Light is an atmospheric light, designed to illuminate but to also enhance mood and inspire sensitivity. "The stand is so thin that from a distance you might think that it was suspended," says Bähler. "I like this idea that you don't really see its support, you just see the simplest essence of a light."

Washi weighs much less than other papers of equal thickness. This was an important detail for Bähler as the light-weight shade, coupled with the slender carbon tube, allows for movement. As the Light Light gently catches in the breeze it rocks and bends, instantly adding an element of theatre and conjuring images of naturally occurring structures like tree branches and grasses blowing in the wind. Bähler first put carbon fibre and paper together for a commission in 2016 that asked of a performance between objects and actors, and also cites watching parades with lanterns being carried down the streets as another influence on Light Light. "I wanted to design something that related to lanterns, light and movement," he says.



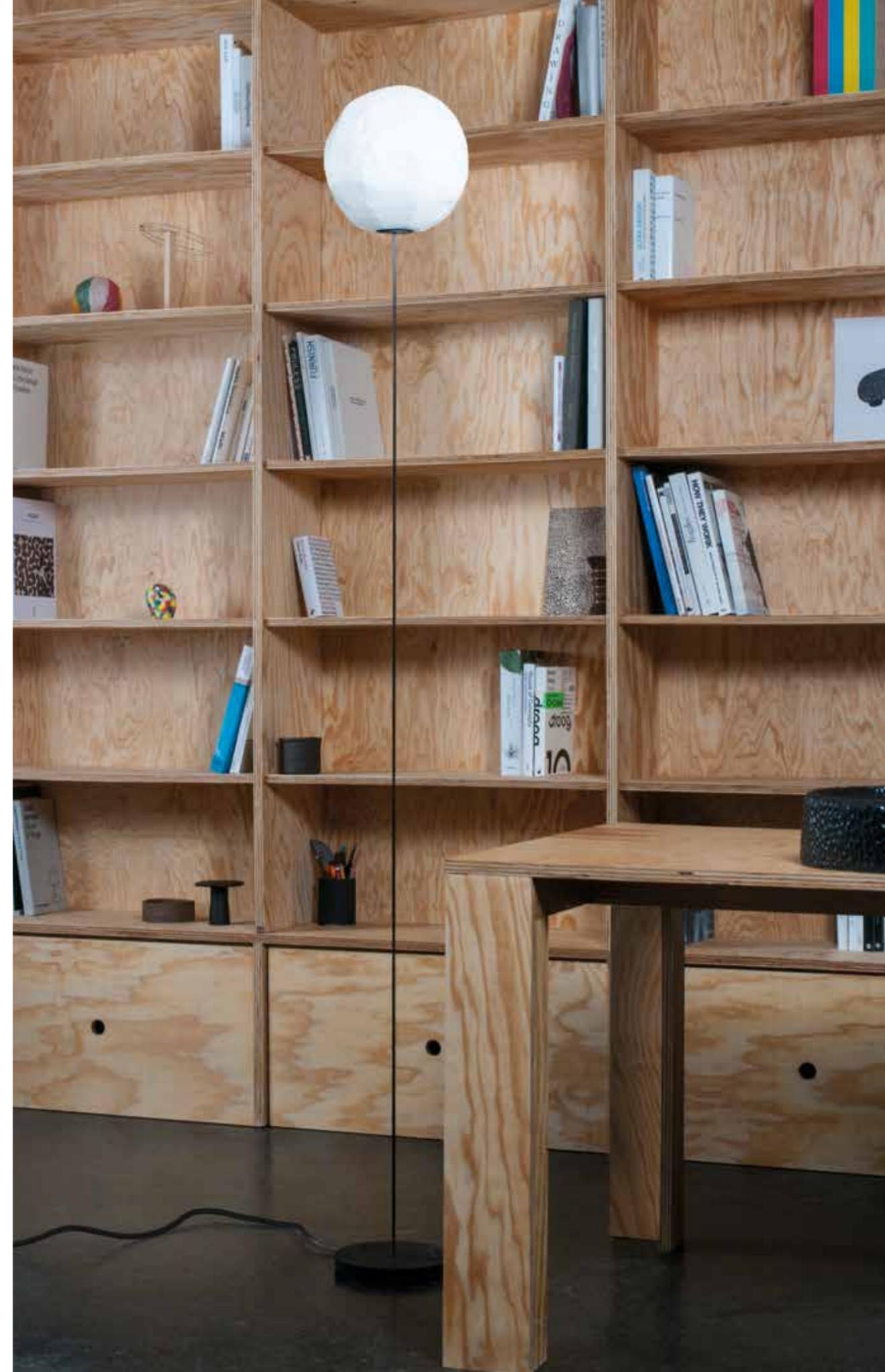
A distinctive characteristic of Bähler's work is his ability to transform modest, humble forms into something other. A thoughtful approach to volume, the play or balance between different elements and a bold sense of proportion, are signatures that were especially obvious in the VPTC collection of ceramics from 2016. Here, Bähler explored methods of creating shapes with the explicit purpose of receiving a pattern or texture through three different processes. The result is a collection of objects that plays with different variations of volumes, patterns, textures and colours to create a kind of dictionary. Volume, and the tension between elements and materials, is something Bähler notes as behind his respect for the work of American-Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi. "I am a big fan of Noguchi's work, his lanterns in particular," says the designer. "I am in love with his volumes and shapes, the mix of materials both heavy and light. This was a direct reference for Light Light."

As much as Bähler's choice of materials and sensitive contemplation of the relationship between them is carefully considered, there is an element of improvisation to his work too. "In this instance putting these two materials together was a mixture between what I wanted and what I directly had to hand," notes Bähler. "The pairing of the materials was like proposing a 'ready-made', as I had the carbon tubes in the studio from a previous project and so I just took them and found the thinnest and most stable. The paper was easily available from an art shop. This idea of the spontaneous 'ready-made' seems to appear a lot in my work."

This speaks of the ease with which Bähler works and his independent approach to material research: "Generally, I do everything by myself at the beginning and make all the tests alone. That is important to me and how I work. In this instance, though, I had to rely on the Washi experts as I don't know how to make the Washi myself, but, I think in this instance it is good to have some distance."

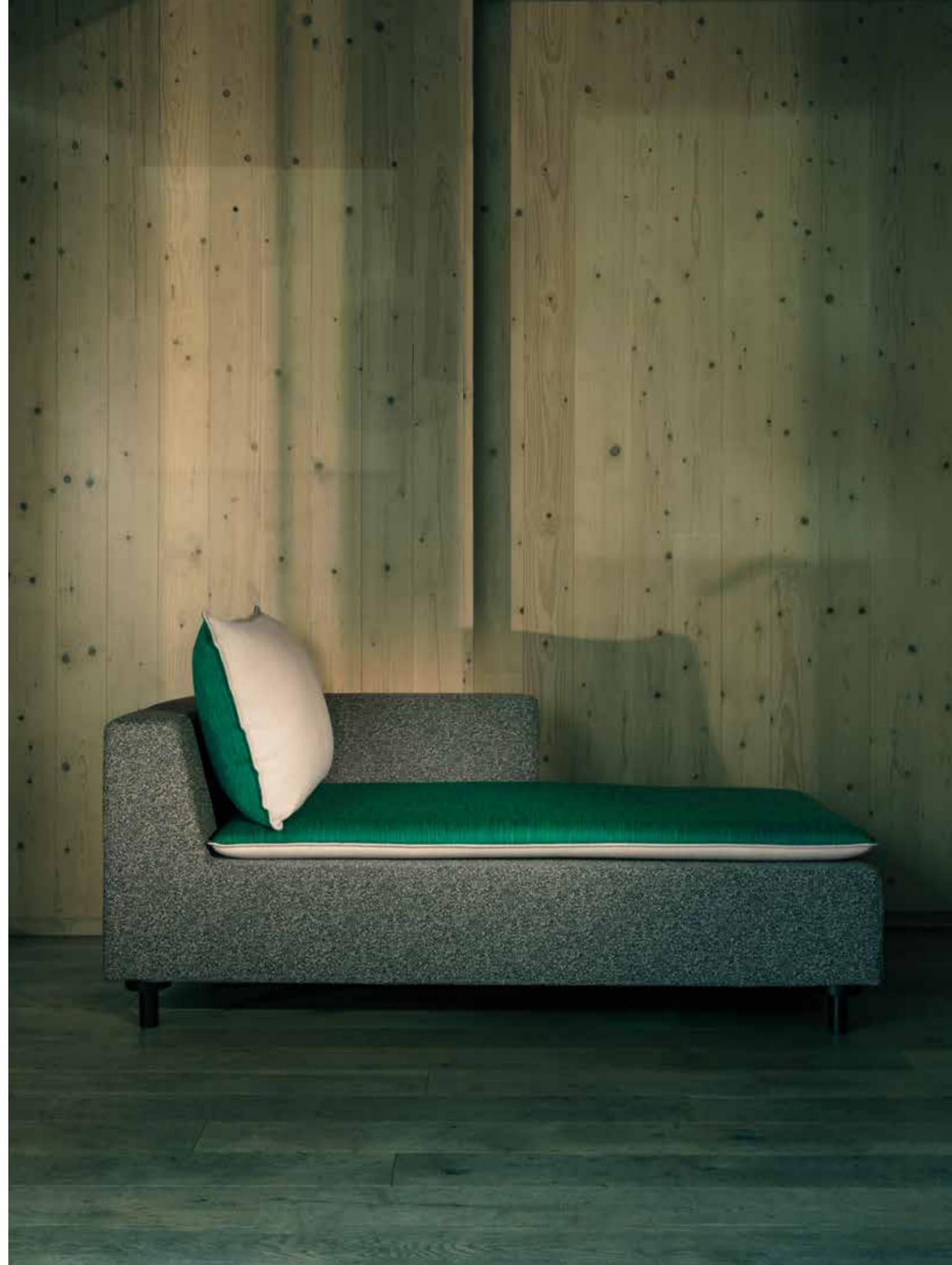
When describing Light Light, Bähler uses adjectives like simple, minimal, soft, balanced. This is a tender and subtle design and, in turn, offers a gentle approach to lighting. There is generosity too. The design is comfortable and intuitive – although fixings and joints are well thought out they are reductive and discreet to the point of invisibility. The light can be dismantled and mounted in seconds, the light shade is replaceable and easy to clean. But ingenuity aside, it is spontaneity, playfulness and poetry that are the additional features unobtainable except by virtue of character and mindset, which set Bähler's past, current and, undoubtedly, future work apart.

Words by Laura Houseley  
Photography courtesy of Dimitri Bähler















A couple of weeks after I moved to Bow, I ran into Jess again. I was looking for furniture to fill the flat I was renting in the Mile End Old Town. The new place was warm and clean, but although it had been carved out of a pleasant Victorian terraced house, the landlord had been pitiless in purging it of character. Not so much as a skirting board survived his apocalypse of white paint and oatmeal carpets. Just filling the space wasn't enough – I had to bring something of myself in as well, or I'd be fighting anonymity with anonymity. Or, at the very least, I had to bring in something of someone else.

## AU RA

"Jess?" "I don't believe it." Before standing, she carefully slipped the cotton-tip into a protective plastic sheath, and dropped it into a bag that lay beside her feet. I caught a glimpse of many identical plastic containers.

We embraced, and set about the business of bridging the gulf between now and the last time we met. I had always liked Jess, and this was precisely the kind of place I would have expected to find her. She was a problem solver, and a restless individualist, uncomfortable in large organisations and rigid hierarchies. When we had studied together, she had been dissatisfied with the prospects available to her in material science. Though she loved to learn about the composition of the world around her, she did not fancy working in industry, refining new plastics. It surprised no one when she instead turned her hand to antiques, and to developing new ways to conserve and restore old pieces of furniture.

"How's Iain?" she asked. I grimaced. "I'm afraid we're no longer together. As of about a month ago, in fact." "I'm sorry to hear that," she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "These things happen," I said. "It's why I'm here. I've got a new place. The house was always more Iain's than mine." "Found anything you like?"

I nodded in the direction of the stool. "Yes and no. I'm finding it a bit disheartening. You know, you're supposed to do this with someone else." "Maybe I can help," she said. "I have my own shop now."

"You're not working here?" "No, no." She laughed. "Andreas just lets me get samples from his stuff. Come with me. It's just around the corner."

The shop lay just a little way up Lauriston Road. It was small – far smaller than I would have thought possible for somewhere that sold furniture. It was hardly wider than one of those hole-in-the-wall places that sell batteries and colourful covers for your smartphone. But there was no flashing neon and no photocopied ads for phone cards. A painted sign above the glass door bore a single word: AURA. The place's own aura was completely divorced from what I might have expected, more the feel of an expensive beautician than a furniture store, a suggestion of cleanliness, icy LED lights and glossy white floors.

"Come on in," Jess said, opening the door for me. There was no furniture inside. There was no room for any. A narrow counter, topped with hammered zinc like a French bar, ran through the middle of a space little wider than a corridor. Behind the counter was a floor-to-ceiling rack of shelves, supporting thousands of small glass bottles in a rainbow of colour. I was reminded of the boutiques that sell coffee pods, or perhaps a vape store for the Made in Chelsea set, done up in chintzy macaroon hues.

Jess had walked around to the other side of the counter, and leaned on the zinc proudly. No other merchandise was on display, just those thousands of little bottles. A potted succulent stood next to the till. That was it.

"Where's the furniture?" I asked. "I didn't say I sold furniture," Jess said with a smug smile. I must have scowled at her in confusion, because she laughed, and made an apologetic sweep of the hands. "I'm sorry. There's no furniture. What we do here is help you love the furniture you already have. Or that you've just bought." She lowered her eyes to the little wooden stool, which I was holding by one of its legs.

Reading her gaze, I lifted the stool onto the countertop and Jess studied it. "Does it need a little love?" she asked. "It looks fine to me," I said. "Sturdy." She nodded. "Andreas doesn't sell junk. I meant, would you like to love it a little more?" "Why not," I said, with a shrug.

She turned to the neat wall of shelves behind her, and browsed the bottles for a moment, before taking one down. It was only a little larger than my thumb, and had a pale blue label on which was printed a single word: Handmade. A clear liquid sloshed within. Jess removed its chrome cap to reveal a spray nozzle.

"Perfume for furniture?" I asked, my heart sinking. I was saddened that Jess, such a practical and intelligent person, could involve herself in such a trite and pointless business. "Not at all," she said. "It's odourless, actually. Would you like to try it? Free sample. Just take the bottle and spritz a little onto the stool. A couple of squirts."

I did as she said. As Jess had promised, the liquid smelled of nothing. And nothing of note happened. "What is it supposed to do?" I asked.

"You should now have the impression that the stool was made by hand, rather than mass-produced, and that should make it seem a little more special to you."

I stared at the stool. The folly of the exercise was immediately obvious – the spray was redundant. The stool was handmade, it was one of the things I liked about it – its imperfect, rustic quality. There had to have been some reason I picked it up, and that was it. "I'm afraid you've picked a bad example," I said. "This was definitely made by hand. It's a one-off."

She smiled, slipping her hands into the front pocket of her dungarees. "Are you sure about that? Or have you only just come to that conclusion now?" With those words, the strangest sensation came over me – my perception of the stool the shape it made in my mind, seemed to lurch and double. When had I formed the conclusion that it was handmade? In the shop? Because now that

I thought back to finding it, I remembered being most impressed by its low price, and its unpretentious functionalism. It was less than fifty years old, and had clearly come out of an institutional setting, a school or a library. Could it have been individually crafted? The whole notion now seemed dubious, but my conviction that it had been lovingly brought into the world in an atelier was undimmed. I flipped it over – a small metal stamp on the underside of the seat read Rex-Lite Furniture Supply Inc., which didn't sound at all atelier-ish. "This is ... weird," I said. "What have you done to me?"

"Nothing!" Jess said. Looking immensely pleased with herself, she picked the little bottle off the counter and replaced its cap, examining the label. "Perhaps it was a mistake to use a contradictory association – giving an industrial piece the aura of handmade. It works smoothest when you go with the grain, of course. I got the idea when I was approached by these guys who run a place in Bethnal Green, in one of those big railway arches. They didn't want furniture restored – they wanted new stock to be given the patina of old stuff. Spray-on artificial ageing."

I examined the stool. It was unchanged, I was sure of that – the spray hadn't browned it or aged it. It had worked on me, not the furniture, creating an uncanny ... knowing of a truth that could not be the truth. The dissonance was too much. I took the stool off the counter and put it on the floor, where I wouldn't have to look at it.

"They seemed a bit shady to me, but 'distressing' is hardly new in the antiques game," Jess said. "It got me thinking, though – why do people want vintage furniture at all? Why do they want handmade things, unique things, things that have a story attached? Because all these intangible qualities bring value to a possession, quite apart from its cost. We love even humble things if they came to us from loved ones, or if we associate them with a happy time – if they have a history, either personal or in the world."

"And that's what I sell here," she continued, with a shrug. "I found a way to synthesise those associations and bottle them. It's a little like fragrance, I guess – those candles that give you the scent of a wood fire, or Christmas, or whatever. But that's a very crude way of setting up an association. My technique is more precise."

She turned to put the bottle back on the shelf, and brought down two more in its place. They too had blue labels, but in progressively darker shades, one an intense navy that was almost black. "Perhaps you'd like to try a slightly stronger association? They have higher price points to match, but as you're a friend ..."

Handmade by an old friend, said the label of the paler bottle. The navy one read: Handmade by an old friend, not long before he died.

"That's pretty macabre," I said. Jess nodded. "But think how special that stool would be if that was true. Fancy giving it a go?"

The bottles glinted under the intense LED lights in the shop. I didn't doubt their ability: the effect of their sibling still echoed in my mind, mismatched edges of fact and fiction rubbing up one another. But for all my curiosity as to how the trick was achieved, I was strongly disinclined to even touch them. To meddle with a mind in that way – it augged ill. "Doesn't it strike you as dishonest?" I said.

"Oh, come on!" Jess replied, with a roll of the eyes. "People fill their homes with all kinds of rubbish that looks like it came from a craft fair but actually came off a production line in China, there's no harm in that, where's the harm in this? Perhaps we just haven't found the flavour that suits you." She returned her attention to the shelves, selecting more bottles from far and wide, in shades of green, pink, orange.

A chocolatey brown label with a verbose label caught my eye. "Found in junk shop, cost £5, cleaned and repaired at home," I read from it.

"That's a good one!" she said. "You see, it's not about how much something costs, positive associations can come from the cheapest things – we've got Found in skip somewhere here, nice yellow shade. It's the story that sells it."

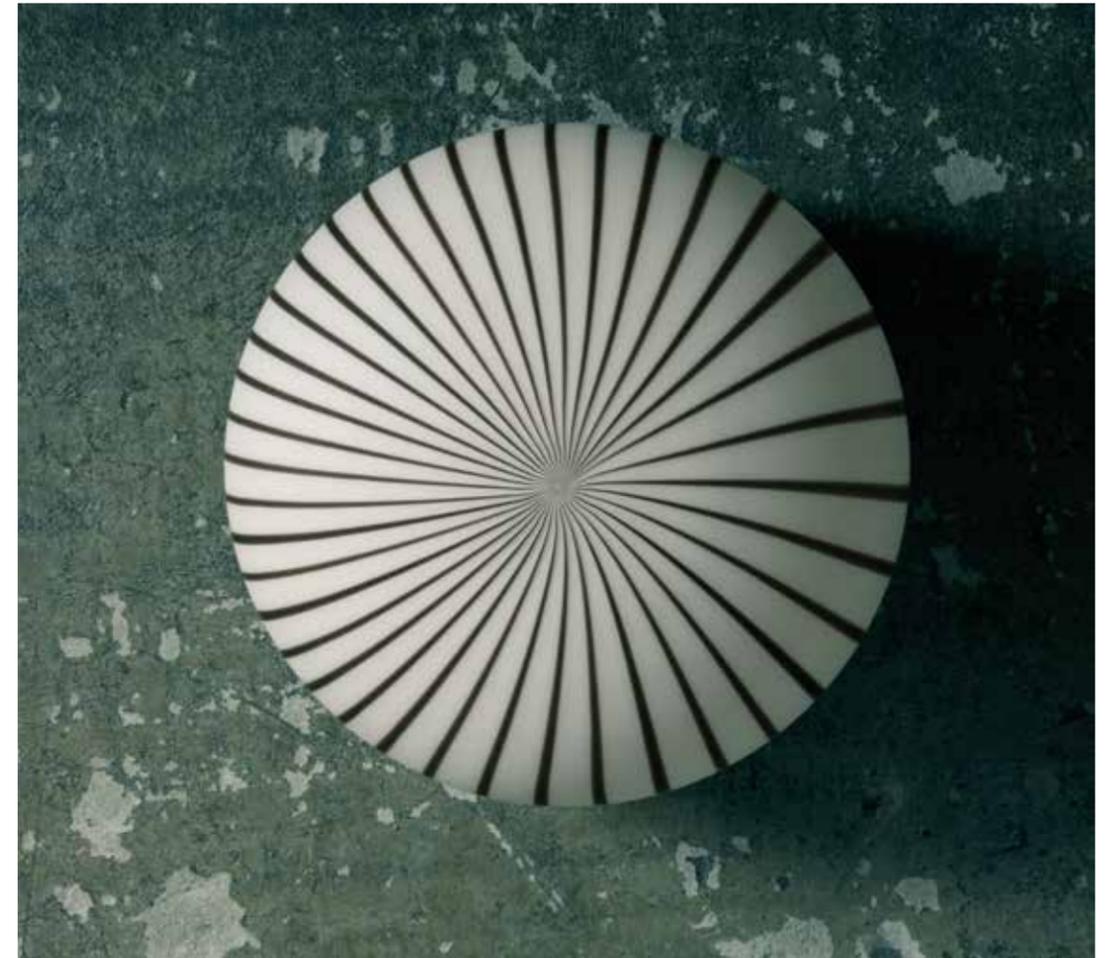
"Wedding present," I said, reading from a white bottle. She plucked it from my hands. "Sorry. Forgot about Iain."

I had moved on to two bottles in close shades of plum. "Inherited from aunt," I read. "Oh, and Inherited from favourite aunt." There was a third in the same colour-group, and I went to it, interested to know how Jess could improve on a favourite aunt. "Inherited from disliked aunt who left conciliatory note in will, causing complete reversal of feeling."

"The complexity and ambiguity there make it top of the line," Jess said. "But I have the perfect thing ... here. My gift." The bottle was sea green. The label read First nice thing bought after end of relationship. I weighed it in my hand. "I'm not sure that's the way I feel about this stool," I said. "It could be," Jess said.

I was never given the opportunity to answer. While we had been speaking, a van had drawn up outside, darkening the shop's narrow front. Its driver was now struggling backwards through the glass door of AURA, carrying a heavy-looking polythene-wrapped pallet with both arms. I stood back

## AU RA



and held the door open for him and he nodded to me, before greeting Jess. "The new lines you ordered," he said cheerily. "And a load more 'Owned since childhood', you said there'd been a run."

He executed a 180-degree turn, a tricky manoeuvre with the large, unwieldy pallet in the confined space of the shop, and started to walk towards the rear. But the pallet, wider than a large pizza box, blocked his view of the floor, and of the small piece of furniture I had left there. I saw the danger only a second too late – my handmade stool! – and time seemed to slow.

The man's foot caught the underside of the seat and he tripped, kneeling forward in a heavy, ugly movement. To avoid dropping the pallet, he jerked it to one side, so that it skidded onto the narrow zinc counter. Jess was moving, darting in to help the driver, but he was already on the floor.

Instead she found herself trying to catch the pallet as it overbalanced and started to fall on her side of the counter. It was too heavy to catch nimbly, and it deflected to the side, pranging one of the shelf supports with a terrible, multiplied clink of glass on glass, before crunching onto the floor. A thousand bottles wobbled and sang, then came to rest.

Picking himself up, the driver shot an accusing look at me, before leaning over the counter to check on Jess. "Did it ...?" Jess was lifting the pallet from the ground. It moved with a sickening grind of glass edge against glass edge. A thin trickle of liquid ran from a crumpled corner, splashing onto Jess's overalls and the shop floor. "Oh no," was all she said.

I didn't linger. After Jess rebuffed my offers to help clearing up, I fled with a muttered apology. The next time I passed AURA, the sign on the door said closed. Inside the shelves were bare.

Feeling responsible, I sought Jess online, and called her. She told me not to beat myself up – an accident of that sort was inevitable, and she blamed herself for not foreseeing it. Very little was damaged – the problem was contamination. She was simply too attached to her stock to sell it.

"I'm working on a neutralising agent," she said. "But for the time being, I could no more sell this stuff than I could flush my mother's wedding band down the toilet. I overdosed on attachment."

For my part, I still had the sea green bottle she had given to me. I didn't need it, though. That little stool had enough of a story to tell as it was.



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MAURO PASQUINELLI,  
a forgotten master of Italian  
design, on how he became one of  
the most prolific 20th-century chair  
designers and the background  
behind the MAURO CHAIR.

CHAIR

Mauro Pasquinelli created his first seat aged just 10. He is now 87 and still working in Scandicci, outside Florence. Over the course of his career, he designed more than 50 chairs and worked for some of the most important companies in the Italian design industry.

The Mauro Chair is a versatile and practical timber dining chair designed to last a lifetime. The prototype was created in the 1970s but was too challenging to produce at scale due to the technical requirements of its shape. Its accidental rediscovery by Established & Sons' design director Sebastian Wrong during a factory tour has led to not only the realisation of the chair, thanks to CNC technology, but also the international recognition of a designer who should be celebrated alongside other 20th-century giants.

Inviting us into his home, Pasquinelli shares his surprising history, offers timeless advice for young designers and explains why the chair is the most difficult piece of furniture to design.

EST: When did your fascination with designing and making things out of wood begin?

PASQUINELLI: My father was a carpenter in Florence. He was a brilliant artisan who worked for some of the best architects in Italy such as Carlo Scarpa. I spent a lot of my time in his workshop during the summer holidays and during the war because the bombing made it hard to go to school. I learnt all about varnishes and different types of wood. One day a friend of my father's, an art teacher, asked me if I liked drawing. I said 'yes, it's the only subject I really like'. He said I should go to the Art Institute in Florence. I did, for eight years, and got my diploma in 1951.

EST: What was your first piece of furniture?

PASQUINELLI: A bench I made at the Atelier degli Artigianelli, a craft workshop in Florence that my father sent me to when I was around 10. We learnt what it was like to work with wood and how to make dovetail joints. At art school, I also made five or six chairs. Once I made a table that could be folded down into the size of a suitcase.

EST: When you finished school you got a permanent job in a company that built waste disposal plants?

PASQUINELLI: I didn't want to go and work for my dad as his workshop was small and we had very different ideas. So I got a full-time job, which allowed me to make a living and do what I really loved in my spare time. Initially, I was operations manager for the company but then I became the in-house architect when they realised I could draw. I designed the buildings and the industrial ovens and I even designed a claw grab once. It turned out really well!

EST: And your colleagues never knew about your other life as a designer?

PASQUINELLI: No I never told them because I was scared that they would talk and that I would be fired. By then I had bought a plot of land and was having a house built, I had financial commitments. When I retired I gave two managers who had always got on my nerves an envelope with clippings of the publications my work had been shown in. There were over 300, including Domus and Abitare. They were so surprised their jaws fell to the floor!

EST: In a strange way you really were a designer for the sheer love of it.

PASQUINELLI: Absolutely! After my wife went to bed in the evening I would go up into my study and draw until one in the morning. During my holidays I would travel to show producers my models. I would go see the late film at the Gambrinus cinema in Florence and then take the overnight train at 1am to Udine. I would always bring a prototype, never drawings. I wanted to show the product in its completed form. I never got tired because designing furniture was a passion for me.

EST: Your economic security meant you had the freedom to say no.

PASQUINELLI: Exactly. I walked away from a meeting with Cassina once. Snaidero also asked me to do an office chair and I told them: 'I don't like office chairs and I don't have any experience of making them.' People have asked me to design lights too, but I don't know how to design a light and I don't actually want to.

EST: When did you start getting some recognition?

PASQUINELLI: It was my wife who encouraged me to enter some competitions. The first I took part in was organised by the Trieste Furniture Fair in 1961, it was one of the most important prizes of its kind in Italy and I won a prize for a chair I designed as a homage to Gio Ponti's Superleggera. I won two more prizes at Trieste in 1962 and 1963. The second I won while I was on honeymoon!

EST: You worked for various companies and producers such as Calligaris and Snaidero (and brands like Thonet and Herman Miller put some of your chairs in their catalogues) but the person who most understood and championed your work was Giuseppe Pallavisini, who owned a company in the chair-making triangle of Friuli Venezia Giulia in northeastern Italy. How did your relationship with him begin?

PASQUINELLI: It was 1967 and I went to the Salone del Mobile in Milan because I wanted to buy four chairs by the designer Alfredo Simonit for my house, a chair that was being produced by Pallavisini. So I went to their stand in the fair and they laughed and said: 'We sell in batches of 500 not four'. That's when Pallavisini arrived on the scene. He was a good person and immediately offered to send me the chairs and asked for my name. When I told him he said: 'But you're that designer who won the Trieste prize.' It had happened a few years before but he still remembered. Next thing I knew he was coming to visit me in a white Porsche at my home in Scandicci and we started working together.





EST: What was your first chair for him?

PASQUINELLI: The Hoppis. It was a very simple chair, but a bit uncomfortable because at the time I didn't have much experience. Soon after I made a chair called the Eva with Pallavisini and he had to outsource production because he only had 20 employees. At one point 10,000 Eva units were being sold a month. That chair was widely copied in Italy and abroad. So was the Cactus clothes stand I designed. You can see it in a scene of Pulp Fiction by Quentin Tarantino.

EST: You tried to work for other producers too, but not always successfully.

PASQUINELLI: I think Pallavisini was always worried that I would leave him for someone else and I did try to, many times. He was very clever when it came to choosing collaborators but quite destructive in other areas of his life and I

was worried about the company's stability. I always ended up coming back to him though. He was a natural when it came to colour and finishes. He intuitively knew what good design was.

EST: You worked in the Manzano chair district of north-eastern Italy during its heyday. What was that like?

PASQUINELLI: In the 70s there was a factory every few metres. Someone would start to work in one factory and after five or six years they would branch out and open their own. The people there were such hard workers. They used to work six or even six-and-a-half days a week. And, my goodness, did they know how to drink!

EST: You have said a chair is the most difficult piece of furniture to design.

PASQUINELLI: It absolutely is because it has to be resilient, comfortable and come in at the right price. There are certain parameters that I respect in every chair in terms of inclination and height of the backrest or height of the legs and width of the seat that make it comfortable for almost anyone. I never sacrifice comfort. When architects come and tell me all sorts of things to justify their wacky chairs, I say: 'the chair is an object, it isn't a work of art.'

EST: One of your recurring concerns as a designer is simplicity and clean lines.

PASQUINELLI: Yes I always try to eliminate the superfluous, what is not necessary, and that is so difficult. Often leaving the superfluous in costs much less money.

EST: Tell me about the Mauro Chair.

PASQUINELLI: Sebastian [Wrong] and his colleague Federico came to me last summer with a chair that I had made in the 70s for a company called Malobbia in Manzano. I don't have regular working relationships anymore, so it was a wonderful surprise. I immediately said to them: 'I developed the ideas behind that chair and have another prototype upstairs.' When they saw the prototype they said 'ok let's do this one'.

EST: How has the chair been modified from the prototype you showed them?

PASQUINELLI: We reduced and lightened the legs and made the seat cleaner. The original chair for Malobbia had small wings underneath the seat to support it. I had removed those in the later prototype but now that you have CNC routers you can get rid of things like that entirely. Those machines can do anything!

EST: This chair will be an opportunity for your work to be better known abroad.

PASQUINELLI: My chairs are known abroad, but perhaps less than here. Do you know why? Probably because I worked for people who worked for third parties, for factories, instead of for brands. But I also did three chairs for Calligaris.

EST: Maybe you'll become a design celebrity?

PASQUINELLI: No, not at my age! But there's always time!

EST: Do you still draw and make furniture?

PASQUINELLI: I am 87 now and have so many health problems. But as soon as I wake up in the morning I start drawing. I have a large board with a ruler and triangles and a screwdriver and a saw and I draw and make things. I buy wood and use leftover cardboard tubes that I cut up to make models and prototypes. I do everything by hand.

Right now I am working on a chair that might just be the best thing I have ever done. It is composed of four elements, two legs, a seat and a backrest. It's very comfortable. If you saw it you wouldn't think it was possible.

EST: What advice do you have for young designers starting out today?

PASQUINELLI: If you don't know the material you can't design with it. You can design something new. But something new will only give you 15 minutes of fame – a good chair should last decades or even centuries.

Words by Giovanna Dunmall  
Photography by Matteo Cuzzola



# MAKING MODERN



Tradition, technology and serendipity: the unusual history of the MAURO CHAIR





A versatile, hard-working design with inimitable style, it's hard to believe that only a year ago, the prototype for the Mauro Chair was being used as a work chair in a plywood factory. Giovanna Dunmall uncovers the story of a master designer, a brand willing to take a risk, and the legacy of one of Italy's most important manufacturing regions.

The Mauro Chair is a stackable timber chair with plenty of character and a very unusual back story. Created by Italian designer Mauro Pasquinelli in the 1970s it has been rediscovered by Established & Sons and its alluring old-school aesthetic and futurist aspirations given a sculptural 21st-century makeover.

The chair had not previously gone into production due to its challenging geometries and curves, explains Sebastian Wrong, design director for the brand: "When it was originally designed you could never have made a sophisticated chair like this at a competitive price point, simply because the technology for chair-making in volume didn't exist in factories as it does today. Nowadays you can use CNC routing systems that cut into solid wood and make complicated and compound curves, sections, joints and alignments that could once only be done by a craftsman."

But the tale of the Mauro Chair is not just about a brand, a designer and the possibilities of technology. It is also about the expertise and know-how of a specific district in Italy, the chair-making triangle located in and around the tiny town of Manzano in the north-eastern province of Udine, in northern Italy. And about chance.

A year ago Wrong and his colleague Federico Gregorutti were visiting a plywood factory in Manzano when they spotted a chair that seemed special. It wasn't being carved by a machine or in the hands of a craftsman, "it was just one of many chairs on the factory floor that had been there forever and was used randomly by employees who needed to sit down to do something," says Wrong. "In their eyes it was just a comfortable chair they used to carry out certain tasks, it had become invisible."

Intrigued, Wrong and his team embarked on a search for the designer of the chair. Eventually, they tracked it back to Mauro Pasquinelli, a once prolific but relatively little-known designer based in Scandicci outside Florence, and discovered that it had been produced by a Manzano-based firm called Malobbia.

Pasquinelli is 87 and in poor health now but still draws and makes things every day from a makeshift studio set up in the basement of his house. Part of a generation of Italian designers that helped shape the way furniture and chairs evolved in the 20th century, he created over 50 chairs and several pieces of furniture for various manufacturers during the course of a career spanning at least half a century. "I still design chairs every day," he says. "It is greater than me, it's my passion."

A self-confessed perfectionist, when Wrong and Gregorutti visited him for the first time, he immediately told them about a prototype in his attic that he considered to be an evolution and improvement on the chair they had seen. The sculptural backrest on this later chair featured sophisticated curves, the seat was lighter, the legs were more defined and there were elegant chamfered edges on the backrest. This is the chair that was to become Established & Sons' Mauro Chair.

When designing a chair Pasquinelli's focus has always been on simplicity, stackability and versatility. His elegant Giulia chair has been used in auditoria, hotels, restaurants and lecture theatres for instance, and was made with and without armrests, side tables and upholstery. The 50,000 units sold also pulled manufacturing company Olivo, based in the province of Udine, out of near-bankruptcy in the 80s. The Nodo, designed in 1975, could be demounted using an innovative metal joint on each side that connected the seat, leg and backrest.

Another major priority for Pasquinelli is comfort. His chairs respect a scrupulous set of parameters for inclination, radius, height of legs and backrest that make them some of the most comfortable on the market. "I don't make chairs to look at, I make chairs to be sat in," he says.

But despite his almost-obsessive approach leading to several international awards and huge sales for the manufacturers he worked with, Pasquinelli is not as well-known as he should be today. Catharine Rossi, a design historian and director of research in the School of Critical Studies and Creative Industries at Kingston University, says this is not unusual for a country that is home to so many skilled designers: "There are so many more Italian designers than the few that get celebrated."

But Pasquinelli is among those that should be remembered. "Few designers have been able to combine simplicity of form, an aesthetically pleasing product and excellent ergonomics as well as Pasquinelli was able to do," says Umberto Rovelli, Director of the Tuscan Design Museum and author of a book on Pasquinelli.

Pasquinelli's design history is indelibly linked to the manufacturers of Manzano. So it is fitting that this is where the updated Mauro Chair is being produced in a contemporary factory by Established & Sons. Still considered the chair-making capital of Europe, there was a time when the companies here produced 44 million chairs a year and one in three chairs sold worldwide was made in the district. "These figures are incredible considering the relatively small area and population involved," says Rovelli.

The area's chair-making history began centuries ago, during the Renaissance, when it began fulfilling orders for the Republic of Venice located 120 kilometres away, thanks to the abundance of oak and beech from the forests to its north and also east (in modern-day Slovenia and beyond). Production kept going up but mass production only really took off after World War II when big distributors, many from Germany, discovered the expertise in this area and started



buying in volume. “After the 1950s, the companies there, who had been making traditional chairs with woven straw seats, started working with people like Gio Ponti and other contemporary architects and making exciting new products,” explains Pasquinelli.

Manzano is a typically Italian phenomenon explains Rossi. “Italy didn’t industrialise the way the UK did. Manufacturing in Italy is characterised both historically and now by its division into different industrial and regionally specialized districts.” Furniture-making is found in a few distinct areas for instance, including Brianza to the north of Milan, Manzano in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region in the northeast of Italy and, more recently, in Murgia near the southern town of Bari.

The way the Manzano area operated – and still does to a great extent – was deeply collaborative. A number of small- and medium businesses and workshops, which are often family-owned, each carry out a specific part of the chair-making process so that several companies are involved in the making of one chair.

“It’s that classic niche Italian manufacturing scenario where one person dries the wood, another cuts it, another bends it, somebody else puts it together, then somebody finishes it and someone else puts it in a box, and they all live within a three-kilometre radius of each other,” says Wrong. “It’s a sort of micro industry, which is very effective and special.”

In 2018, Manzano and the chair district are not the powerhouse they once were. With competition from China and other countries where labour costs are lower, and with younger people leaving craft professions, orders are smaller, factories have closed or been consolidated, some have even outsourced some of their production to neighbouring countries. The area has nevertheless remained a hub for chair-making innovation and craftsmanship. “There have been notable efforts in Italy in recent years to talk about the value of craftsmanship and promote craft as something not focused just on the past and tradition but as an engine of innovation,” says Rossi.

These sorts of clusters of expertise are still vital for other reasons too. Being able to spend time with the people making the product and who have so much knowledge is something that is becoming increasingly rare and that designers crave, says Wrong. “The sort of support that exists there is increasingly difficult to come across in manufacturing. Often now you are sitting in a meeting room and you never get to meet the people who are actually making your product, who are the ones you really need to have a close relationship with to get the best results.”

Established & Sons launched in 2005 with, among other things, the aim of supporting both established names and new talent. With the Mauro Chair, this concept has been merged into one. Pasquinelli is an established Italian design master, a “career chair designer”, who hasn’t launched a chair for over a decade. His Mauro Chair has a distinctive history and provenance but has also been transformed into something brand new and unexpected. “For us to revisit something from the past and put it into production for the first time is very much in keeping with the philosophy and design DNA of the brand,” says Wrong.

The Mauro Chair marks a departure from previous launches by the company as it is less avant-garde and more commercial, but it is still quirky and eccentric enough to fit into the brand’s ethos of championing experimental design. “We’re not worried about taking risks,” says Wrong. “We are

putting this chair into our collection because we like it, because it is a special and serious piece of design, and because it is a design you won’t forget.”

With the Mauro Chair, the crafted quality and futurist ambitions of Pasquinelli’s original handmade prototype have been retained yet taken to another level with the help of CNC technology. The result is a sculptural yet functional chair that has the potential to become a design classic.

Words by Giovanna Dunmall  
Photography by Livia Lauber

53 RONAN AND ERWAN BOUROULLEC have rekindled their long-standing relationship with Established & Sons to create the welcoming but radical CASSETTE sofa. EST Journal talks to Ronan about how the project came about and the unlikely inspiration behind the design.

# CASSETTE



For fans of contemporary design, Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec need little introduction. The Bouroullecs are unbound by the conventional parameters of furniture design, extending out into exhibitions, installations, pavilions and small architectural projects. Each of their designs reflects an awareness of the use of space.

Over the past 20 years, the brothers have made a name for themselves with designs that express a carefully considered balance between the rational and the emotional – an approach that is perhaps reflected in their decision to maintain a studio in Paris and a workshop in Brittany, where they grew up.

This relationship is echoed in the combination of industrial materials, design languages and traditional craftsmanship in their work, or as Ronan puts it, the “elementary, almost ancestral, manufacturing methods which produce diversity”. Each design is an attempt to find something new, by revising an archetypal structure or through innovations in technology and manufacturing, and – despite usually knowing where they want to get to with a project – they embrace a kind of naivety towards their objects and spaces wherever possible.

“There never is a precise source of inspiration in any of our designs, even if obvious references can be found in each of them,” explains Ronan. “In particular, our diverse and common passions for Native American objects, American design, but also medieval design, and of course furniture by Prouvé, Perriand, Le Corbusier, architecture, and Japanese design.”

Today, the Bouroullec brothers are among a handful of names regularly cited by other designers around the world as a reference and inspiration. With their time stretched between manufacturers and clients all over the world, pinning the designers down for a studio visit can be hard work. But the relationship between the Bouroullecs and Established & Sons is not just work – it’s a long-standing friendship that has been built over ten years and three collaborations, developed in “absolute and total harmony” explains Ronan.

“In general, we work with very few furniture companies,” says Ronan. “With Established & Sons, we see that we share the same philosophy, the same passion for creative freedom, for constructive rigour, for a certain form of freshness, away from purely industrial and marketing criteria.”

For Established & Sons’ 2018 collection, launching at Milan design week, the brothers have created Cassette, a sofa that has been four years in the making. It is an evolution of a basic principle that was explored with one of those earlier collaborations, the Quilt sofa from 2009.

Now a 21st-century design classic, the honeycomb-upholstered Quilt grew out of the idea of creating a seat that was as welcoming as a duvet or a blanket. Quilt offered the best of two worlds in Erwan’s eyes: “There are two kinds of sofas: there are the Italian sofas; the design sofa which is quite often not so comfortable with a low back and flat surface. It is incredibly clean and it is for the white cube apartment. And then you see the local sofa; it is more comfortable, usually the form and the padding is bad quality but it will have a high back, a good profile. I think in the design world things can



become a little too formal and lost. We are more interested in bringing a particular comfort and creating something that at least will hold a lot of the body.”

At first glance, the relationship between Cassette and Quilt might not be obvious. Where Quilt has curves and is covered in plush, bouncy upholstery, Cassette has straight lines, with an entirely exposed structure and deep, rectangular cushions. But it offers a different kind of flexibility – Ronan suggests taking the generous cushions off the sofa and arranging them on the floor to create a bed – and there is no compromise on comfort.

“Between Quilt and Cassette, it is not obvious which one is the most comfortable,” says Ronan. “In French, a cassette means a small box in which to lock up something precious. A sort of case, a cocoon. This is our message with this sofa. To make it a kind of alcove, a sofa to gather on.”

“We first thought of the project four years ago, and it stuck in a corner of our minds, as is often the case,” he explains. “The idea with Erwan was to create a sofa, but most of all something new, very uncomplicated, very different, and that would look nothing like what we had done so far. Cassette is a complete and transversal object, a condensed precision.”

The Bouroullecs’ recent work has tended towards modularity in some form or other, but Cassette imagines something more elemental and permanent. The folded frame, made from powder-coated steel and wood panels, began life as a series of experiments with cardboard, folded in a variety of ways to examine different forms and possibilities. The potential austerity of the stripped back frame, with its rectangular structures, is mitigated by the generous cushions, upholstered in fabrics selected for their tactility.

“We imagined a simple, not to say brutal, structure,” says Ronan. “We played around with cardboard folds for the frame, but opted for maximum comfort for the seat, the backrest and the sides thanks to oversized and enveloping cushions covered with a voluptuous fabric. That’s what interested us about the project, working with a new form of rigor, with strong contrasts, and a clash between linearity and sensuality, between wood and wool. Contradictions that can nonetheless come together as one entity.”

“Our sofa is in fact a wooden and metal structure folded and assembled, a rather mechanical and austere construction where the entire structure is visible, which ultimately is warm, welcoming and simple.”

Although Cassette will be available in a variety of upholstery fabrics, for their ideal version of the sofa, the Bouroullecs have selected a fabric from Parisian textile house Pierre Frey. Called Louison, the material is a combination of wool and alpaca, and is a 21st-century update on a textile Pierre Frey first created in the 1980s.

“This is the first time we’ve worked with maison Pierre Frey, and especially with such luxurious fabrics,” says Ronan. “The weave is very soft, and comes in white tones, ecru and neutral in a minimalist style that echoes the spirit of Cassette. Something extremely sensual, a bit animalistic too.”

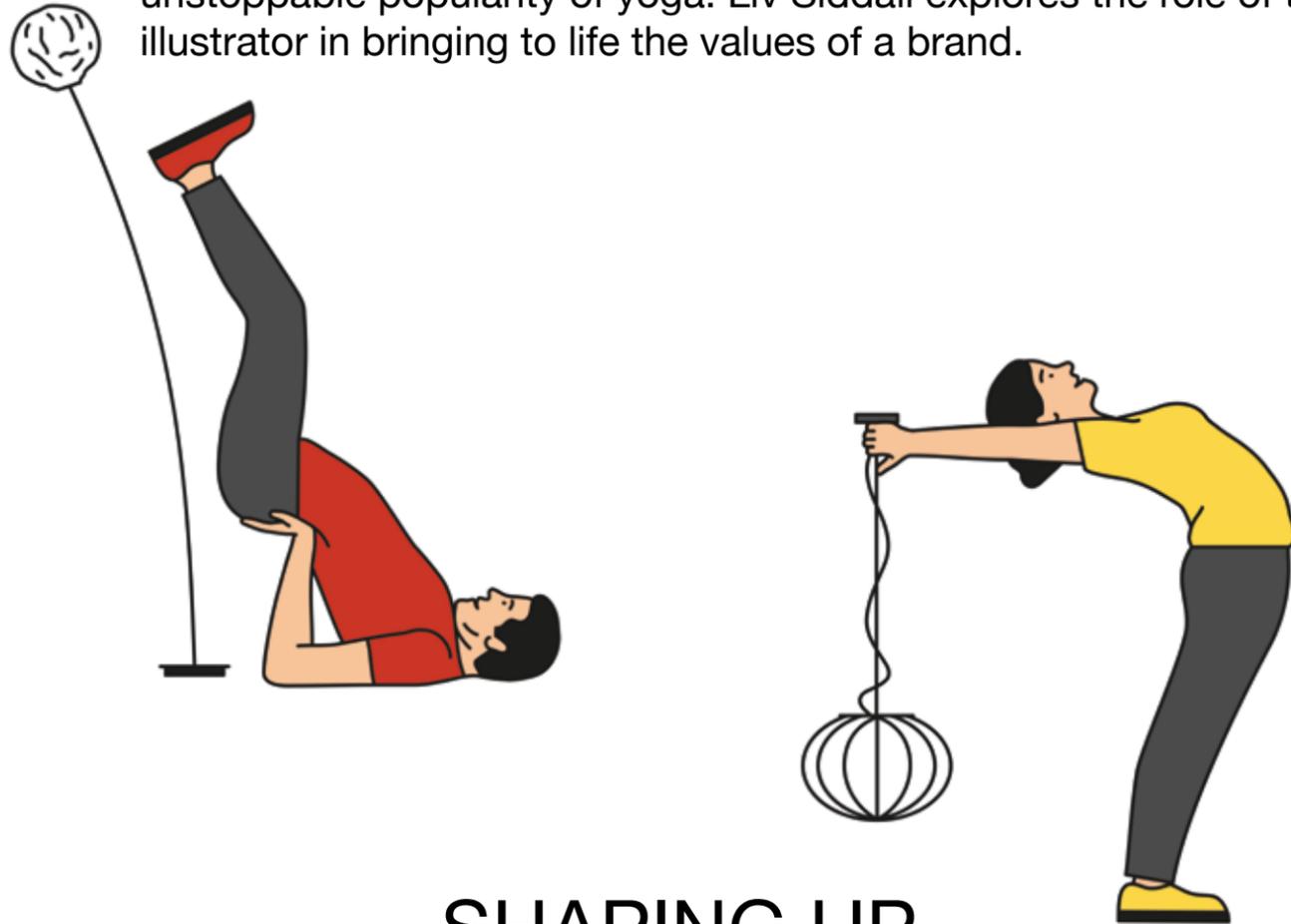
Cassette is a true partnership between the designer and Established & Sons. It reflects the brand’s new, more market-focused and practical approach, it is also an example of the experimental, unfettered openness to ideas that continues to make working with Established & Sons so appealing for designers.

Words by Anna Winston and Serge Leizes  
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Product photography by Morgane le Gall  
Sketches by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec

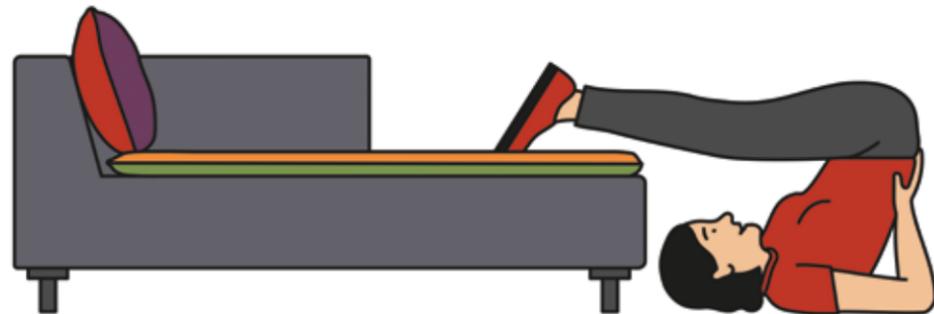




Shaping Up is a series of gently humorous ILLUSTRATIONS created by Barcelona-based ALBERT TERCERO for the new collection from Established & Sons, playing on the seemingly unstoppable popularity of yoga. Liv Siddall explores the role of the illustrator in bringing to life the values of a brand.



## SHAPING UP



In an age of endless screens, where everyone can be an amateur photographer with a platform, illustration has been enjoying something of a comeback. There's something reassuringly human about an inky brushstroke, an imperfect sketch, or a clever cartoon.

Illustration also offers a way to inject a sense of personality into design, in a way that photography simply can't match. For its 2018 collection, Established & Sons' Design Director Sebastian Wrong commissioned Albert Tercero to create a series of unexpected, playful illustrations showing the new furniture pieces being used as part of a yoga practice – a tongue-in-cheek reference to the lifestyle trends of social media and of east London, but also a subtle nod to the balance that the brand is creating in its new approach.

The aim was to create something a little bit out of the ordinary and revive some of the sense of Established & Sons as a "wonderful, experimental ideas factory", explains Design Director Sebastian Wrong. "Today, in order to experiment, you need to have a solid foundation to allow you to cover your costs of research and experimentation. That's what we are working on right now: trying to build a strong foundation for the brand to grow from for the future. Illustration was a way to express that balance."

"Albert came up with the yoga idea which was spot on," he says. "I asked him how he could play with the idea of human interaction and express some of the character of our pieces."

"From the beginning, we understood we wanted to approach these images as a play between furniture and an individual," says Tercero. "I like a brief that implies trust, as this one has. This is one of the things I value the most in a client."

The partnership grew out of a chance encounter with Tercero's work. Wrong knew he wanted to collaborate with someone outside of the world of design to bring in a fresh perspective. He came across the Barcelona-based illustrator's pieces on the popular art and design site It's Nice That and fell in love with them.

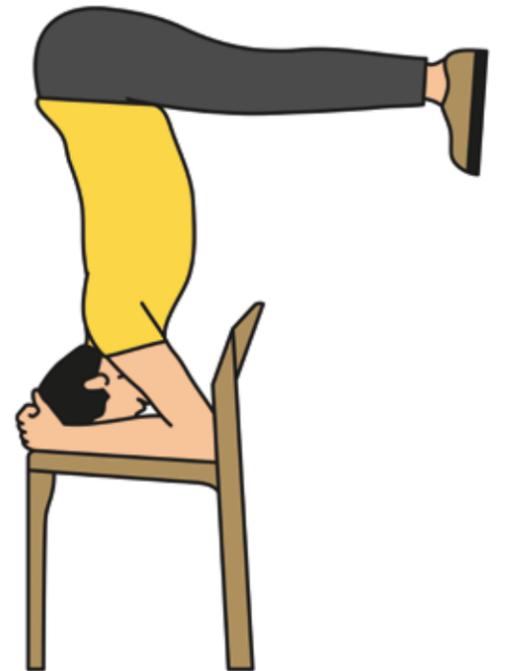
"I like the clarity of his visual language: it's simple, it's uncomplicated, it's humorous. It's also slightly European, which I really like," says Wrong.

Tercero's crisp, neat line drawings are often character-based, showing modern men and women in a variety of often slightly uncanny situations. They gently echo and subvert the old illustrations of in-flight safety manuals and retro children's books, with a gently incongruous humour.

The series has been dubbed Shape Up and will appear on tote bags during Milan design week – a treasured Established & Sons tradition.

"It breaks away from the industrialisation of the furniture, makes it a little warmer, a little bit more crafted," says Wrong. "Who wants to just go and see a collection of furniture in a cold, bleak environment? You want to be excited by it and remember it. So that's where his illustrations are really important for us. We're embracing character."

The decision to work with Tercero also reflects Wrong's desire for the world of furniture and design to be more open, daring and celebratory of the human relationships that make it all happen. Collaboration between different creative worlds – publishing, fashion, architecture, graphic design, illustration, furniture design – will lead to stronger work and better communication with any and every kind of audience.



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