

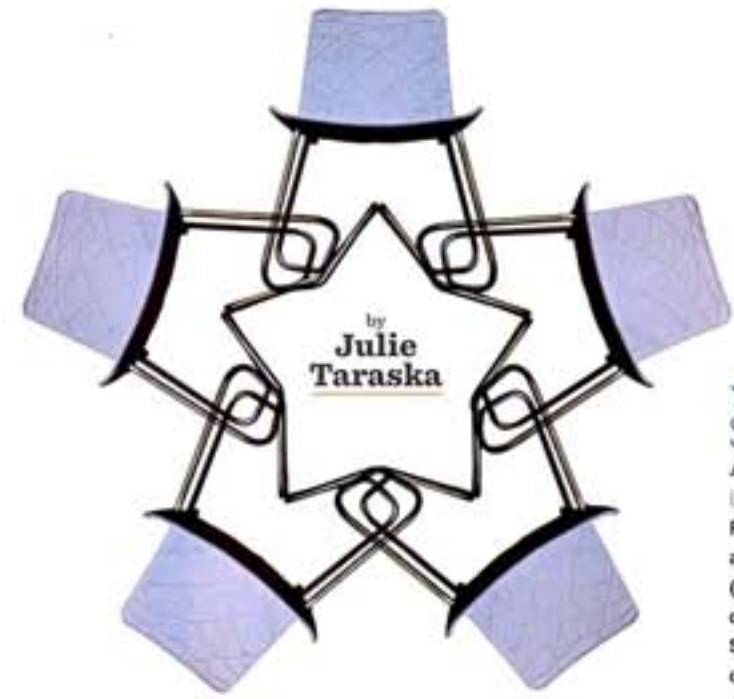
Is the
**DEATH OF
 AMERICAN
 DESIGN**
 Greatly Exaggerated?



★
Lockwood 2009
Misewell
 Milwaukee
 Combining wood and powder-coated steel, this chair offers a fresh twist on traditional materials and manufacturing techniques. Made by the brothers Paul and Vincent Georgeson (a.k.a. Misewell, www.misewell.com), the Lockwood comes in two woods and three colors.

★
Drake 2009
One & Co.
 San Francisco
 The Drake's welded frame supports a subtly curved cantilevered seat, while its playfully splayed legs provide exceptional stability. It is produced by the San Francisco-based furniture company Council (www.councildesign.com).

Spirograph photo, Petar Hull



★
Spirograph Lounge 2009
Alexander Purcell
 Los Angeles
 Purcell, creative director of the furnishings-and-interiors company Apro Design (www.apro.com), draws on L.A.'s network of machinery shops to manufacture the Spirograph Lounge. The chair is made of a customizable Corian seat perched on a bent-aluminum base.

Sure, the residential market here is conservative and industry opportunities are scarce. But a strong turnout at ICFF suggests that contemporary-furniture design is alive and well, thank you.

Pity the American contemporary-furniture designer. His international peers deride him, saying that not since the 1940s and '50s, when the Modernist giants George Nelson and Charles and Ray Eames roamed the earth, has a notable talent emerged from the States. Domestic manufacturers won't hire him, since furniture companies are either so large that they can't support a niche offering or so small that they only want a sure thing. The American public doesn't see the value of his work, preferring a cheap Wal-Mart chair to the one that he thoughtfully constructed. There are no national programs to support our designer. And the American press—well, they keep ignoring him, too. (Damn those shelter magazines, too busy coordinating window treatments and throw pillows to look critically at product design!)





★
1/2 Nelson 2009

Misewell
Milwaukee

A marriage of wood and metal, this café table references the Midwest's industrial heritage and helped its makers earn the 2009 ICFF Editors Award for new designer.

humble materials like powder-coated steel and solid walnut, and it nods to the Midwest's industrial heritage; it also earned the duo the fair's New Designer award. Or take the Divis table, by Californians Mike and Maaike. Created for the San Francisco furnishings company Council, it features a rectangular top split by supporting legs, creating a surface trapped in a perpetual state of tension. Or even look at hometown hero Jason Miller. His Tints tables—colored laminate placed between two sheets of glass—are a witty take on the aviator sunglasses favored on *CHiPs*, while his conceptual Woolly, a mammoth chair made of industrial felt, polyester, and bison hide, elicits an immediate visceral response.

For all the lamenting the dire state of American contemporary-furniture design, the rumors of its death seem greatly exaggerated. True, American talents are grossly underrepresented on the world stage. And unlike in industrial or graphic design, they lag behind their international counterparts in terms of flamboyance and poetry. But design—and particularly residential-furniture design—is a product of culture. It is meant to mirror how we live and is shaped by history along with practical concerns, including manufacturing resources and finances. Make no mistake: there is innovative contemporary furniture coming out of America. Its progenitors are just working below the radar and outside the mainstream. How they are producing their pieces, and their future both here and abroad, say as much about their tenacity and ingenuity as it does about this country's creative opportunities.

The irony, of course, is that the United States is among the world's largest producers of residential furnishings. For example, the St. Louis, Missouri-based company Furniture Brands International—owner of Broyhill, Lane, Thomasville, Drexel Heritage, and Hickory Chair, among others—had net sales of \$1.74 billion in 2008. (By comparison, during the same period the Italian powerhouse Poltrona



★
Tints 2009
Jason Miller Studio

Brooklyn, New York
Inspired by aviator sunglasses, the maple-framed Tints table (www.millerstudio.com) is topped by a piece of colored plastic laminate sandwiched between two sheets of clear glass.

The irony, of course, is that the United States is among the world's largest producers of residential furnishings.

With all these factors conspiring against American designers, how then to explain their strong showing at this year's International Contemporary Furniture Fair? Consider the brothers Paul and Vincent Georgeson of the Milwaukee-based studio Misewell. Their debut line of chairs and tables was created from

★
T-No.1 Table 2008
Todd Bracher

Brooklyn, New York
Bracher took a skeletal approach with this table for Denmark's Fritz Hansen (www.fritzhansen.com). Using the minimal amount of material possible, he supported a slim work surface with ribs mounted to C-shape aluminum legs.





Divis 2009

Mike and Maaiké

San Francisco

Interactive, automotive, and furniture design—this Bay Area duo does it all. The top of their Divis table, for Council, comes in solid black-stained ash or natural poplar that's split to offer a peek at the exquisite joinery underneath.



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Dome Lamp 2008

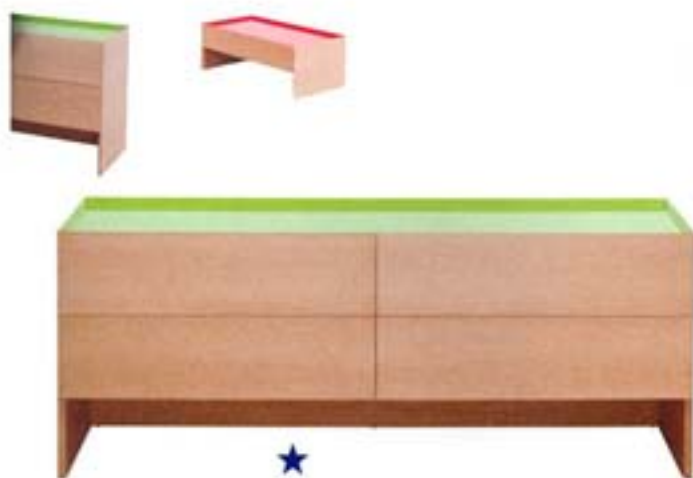
Todd Bracher

Brooklyn, New York

The phases of the moon, along with the contrast between light and shadow, served as touchstones for this artisan-made lamp, which Bracher produced for the Copenhagen-based retailer Mater.



"That's the mass market, and the best parallel is Hollywood," Jerry Helling says. "Your odds are much better making Terminator or X-Men 2, 3, and 4 than they are making Frost/Nixon."



★
F.U. 2008
Nick Dine

New York

Dine is the former creative director of Dune (www.dune-ny.com), a New York retailer known for its support of American furniture designers. It was for the store that he created this white-oak-veneered dresser, which features a high-gloss polyurethane top.

Curriculums here prepare students to become a cog in a company rather than an independent entrepreneur.

★
Area 2009

Marc Thorpe

Brooklyn, New York

These exquisitely crafted solid-walnut occasional tables—which boast near-invisible joinery—play with positive and negative space. They are manufactured by Bernhardt Design (www.bernhardtdesign.com) as part of the Global Edition collection.



Frau Group, which includes Cappellini, Cassina, Alias, and others, netted \$461.7 million.) But for a designer looking to get his new piece manufactured, the vastness of the American audience is misleading. "That's the mass market, and the best parallel to it is Hollywood," says Jerry Helling, president of Bernhardt Design, the contemporary arm of Bernhardt, which is based in North Carolina. "Your odds are much better making *Terminator* or *X-Men 2, 3, and 4* than they are making *Frost/Nixon*." And how would that translate to a sofa? It means something "soft, comfortable, overscaled, beige, and not particularly formal," Helling says. "It reflects our Dockers- and sweatpants-wearing society. That is 95 percent of the market."

But for that 5 percent that we're talking about, the avant-garde stuff that gets trotted out in Milan, Paris, and London, is there an American style? Helling thinks not. Don Goeman, Herman Miller's executive vice president of research, design, and development, disagrees. Contemporary North American furniture, he says, "is more practical in its use of materials and has a higher degree of manufacturability than its European counterparts." U.S. design's twin obsessions are traditional craftsmanship and its industrial past; it often relies on indigenous substances like steel and wood. But beyond that, it's a grab bag of styles and aesthetics, just like the melting pot in which it originates.

Also problematic is that unlike their midcentury predecessors, today's contemporary-furniture designers are surviving by working outside the industry's mass-market infrastructure rather than within it. It's quite a cultural step for a designer educated in the States,



★
Excel 2008
Rich Brilliant Willing

New York

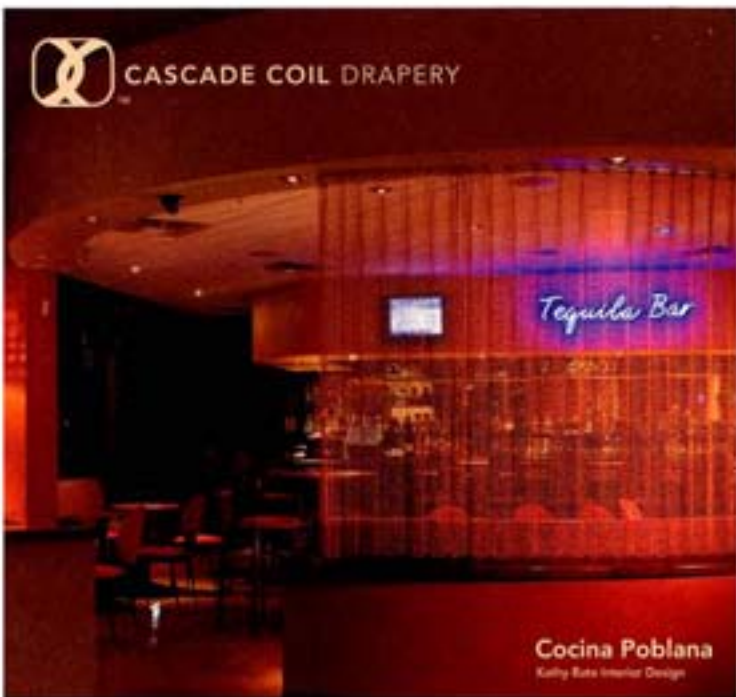
RISD grads Theo Richardson, Charles Brill, and Alexander Williams (www.richbrilliantwilling.com) charged onto the scene last year with the Excel floor lamp, which has an adjustable silk shade; a fabric cord; and a base that recalls lashed-together pickup sticks.

as curriculums here prepare students to become a cog in a company rather than an independent entrepreneur. For example, when Todd Bracher, who has created pieces for Fritz Hansen and Zanotta, graduated from Pratt Institute in 1996 with a degree in industrial design, there were two employment options: "Go work for Nike or for a firm like Frog," he says. "People didn't strike out on their own like they do in Europe."

Both the stock-driven economy and the American furniture industry's setup have forced that **continued on page 92**



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change. In their quest for growth and higher quarterly earnings—you've got to keep the shareholders happy—most large U.S. manufacturers have gobbled up the competition, so now only the mammoth and miniscule remain. (Offi and Blu Dot are rare exceptions, as are contract brands like Bernhardt Design and HBF, which offer crossover products.) Vertically integrated, these big entities own their equipment, which lowers costs but makes them slaves to their tooling. (European companies, in contrast,

"If you look at the economics of it, it's similar to what the Italians do," Jason Miller says of the sweet spot, which requires relatively modest numbers to be financially viable.

use a network of outside vendors for production, giving them the flexibility to experiment readily with a new procedure or material.) Furthermore, being publicly traded rather than privately owned makes American manufacturers less free to follow a singular vision. Bracher describes it this way: "In the U.S., I'll talk about the product with the head of design, someone from marketing, and the technical lead before I get to the president. I'll have less influence over the final outcome. When I work for Cappellini, I'll sit down with Giulio [Cappellini] and the technical guy. We'll talk about what we are going to make and then do it."

Even a Modernist force like Herman Miller is not immune to the pressure. Despite its storied residential designs, the manufacturer, which posted \$1.6 billion in sales in fiscal 2009, sees itself foremost as a service provider. "We are in the business of solving problems for customers," Goeman says. "Design is an integral part of it, but we are not a design boutique." The stance reflects Herman Miller's decision in the 1970s to begin focusing on the more lucrative workplace and institutional markets instead of the home, a strategy also adopted by that other great Modernist manufacturer, Knoll, practically if not officially. (Some 40 years later, the legacy of that shift is that American contract furniture tends to skew contemporary, while residential remains more traditional.)

With few midsize companies to turn to—the type of outfits that form the backbone of Italy's furniture industry and "have the time and resources to take risks without going belly up," according to the Museum of Modern Art's senior curator of architecture and design, Paola Antonelli—America's avant-garde designers are forced to cobble together a network of local manufacturers and put their furniture out themselves. It's not a new strategy: that's how Tom Dixon and Ron Arad got their start in England. In the '80s, during one of that country's worst recessions. It's no surprise that resourceful Americans are adopting the tactic, too, especially during a similar economic downturn. Take the brothers Georgeson. Misewell's pieces are made by machinery shops in Minnesota and Wisconsin that are "willing to take on more challenging projects like us" rather than have their equipment remain idle, Paul Georgeson says. Likewise, the Los Angeles-based firm Apro Design, which also launched at ICFE, enlists the city's prop houses, set builders, and body-finishing shops for pieces like their Corian-and-aluminum Spirograph Lounge. Apro's creative director, Alexander Purcell, notes that those vendors, accustomed to the movie industry's boom-and-bust cycle, "have long been open to working with artists and designers" to fill downtime. Theo Richardson, of Rich Brilliant Willing—formed in 2007 by three Rhode Island School of Design grads—says his firm's products, such as

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the sculptural Excel floor lamp, are shaped as much by the existing manufacturing options near the trio's New York studio as they are by aesthetic choices. And next May, Jason Miller, who has had his own studio since 2001, is launching a Brooklyn-based lighting company that will use primarily American vendors. "There are some opportunities in the U.S. that have not been exploited," says Miller of the project, noting that he will rely on profit margins from upper-mid-range products—rather than the company's size or volume—to succeed. As such, the business model falls between America's two manufacturing extremes: the mass-producers (which have low profit margins and depend on huge sale volume) and the art galleries (which have high profit margins but low volume). "If you look at the economics of it, it's similar to what the Italians do," Miller says of the sweet spot, which requires relatively modest numbers to be financially viable.

This brings us to audience. Why should American contemporary-furniture designers make anything if no market for their work exists? Signs do point to a slow but discernable shift in interest, both domestically and globally. Thank Target for the former. With its Michael Graves teakettles and Thomas O'Brien end tables, the retailer has introduced modern design to the Dockers-wearing masses. That's the first step toward creating a supportive climate for new talent. "The general American population is not very interested in design because they don't understand it or see value in it," says Richard Shemtov, owner of the New York store Dune and an early champion of local furniture talents Harry Allen and Nick Dine. But through pop culture and media exposure—everything from Brad Pitt's Design Miami/Basel shopping sprees to Bravo's *Top Design*—the public is getting educated. "U.S. consumers will eventually search for their own individual tastes and preferences, which will lead to greater demand for good design," Shemtov says.

As we wait for his prediction to become a reality, there's always the international market. It's inconvenient, far away, and requires a huge financial and time commitment, but it can be broken into—even if you are American. "I was in Europe eight times last year, and four times already this year," says Miller, who's currently working on a second line of products for the Italian brand Skitsch. "From the get-go, you have to be willing to put in that effort. It's an investment in your future." Bracher, who went on to study interior and furniture design in Copenhagen, then spent a decade working in Milan, London, and Paris, echoes the importance of presence. "It's more than just sending over JPEGs and expecting that they are going to hire you," says the native New Yorker, who was recently named creative director of the Danish brand Georg Jensen. "To do the work, there's this whole culture you'll have to understand," he says, including a manufacturer's history, psyche, and way of life. "The only way you can do that is by living there."

But to be realistic, not every American designer has the money or opportunity to set up camp abroad. For those who choose to tough it out on their home turf, Council founder Derek Chen offers words of encouragement. Although his aims for the company are modest—Chen is looking to "eke out a living" rather than become the next Herman Miller—he has been amazed by the amount of international attention Council has garnered during its two-year existence. "I thought it was going to be the hardest thing. We are this upstart contemporary American design company. Who would pay attention to us?" he says of his initial expectations. "But outside the U.S., people really seem to want to see an American company do this. I feel a lot of support. If you do the right thing and make the right products, the support comes." ○/✱



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