

SINGAPORE

home concepts

LIVE IN INSPIRATION

BIG IDEAS FOR SMALL SPACES



LIVING IN A CRANE, LIGHTHOUSE AND BOAT

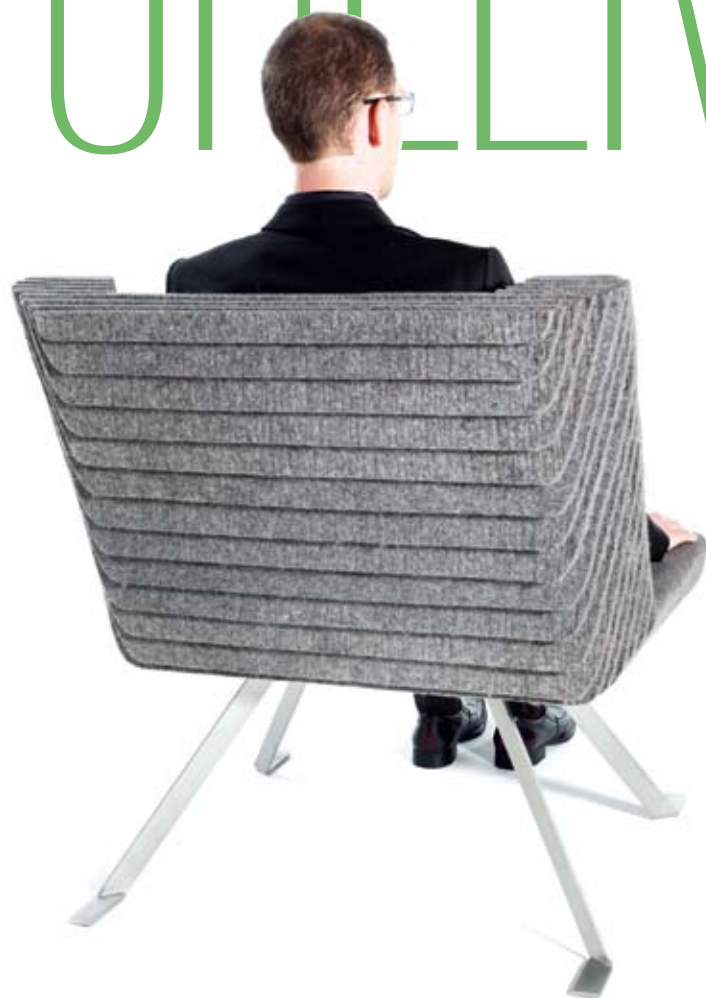
ON SHOW! 100 WORKS OF VERNER PANTON

5 GREAT HIDDEN STORAGE IDEAS

MAY 2009 / \$6.00



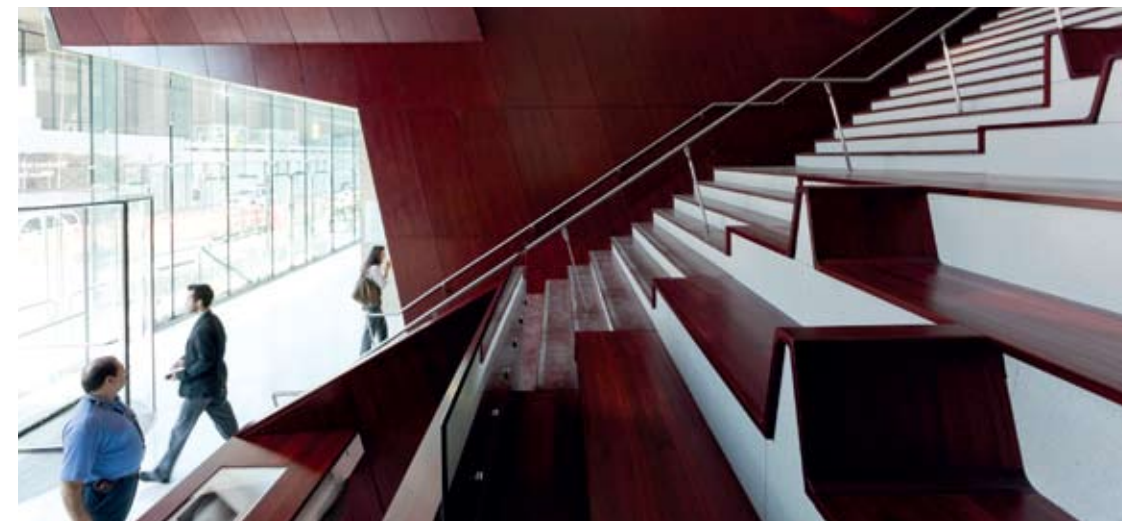
GENERATION GREEN



YOUNG ARCHITECT-SLASH-DESIGNER BEN K. MICKUS, WHO'S JUST RELEASED HIS FIRST, RIGOROUSLY EDITED FURNITURE COLLECTION, TYPIFIES THE UP-AND-COMING GENERATION OF INTELLIGENT GREEN DESIGNERS WHO VIEW THEIR DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO BE AS NATURAL AS BREATHING

TEXT HUANG NICKMATUL

PHOTO COURTESY OF IWAN BAAN



WE FOUND BEN K. Mickus when we were looking for Relief; but you can all take your minds out of the gutter because it's his *Relief Chair* we're talking about! Our curiosity had been piqued because the chair had been generating quite a lot of buzz, especially after having scored a place in the Smithsonian's Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum's *Fashioning Felt* exhibition even though it was Mickus' very first chair ever from his first furniture collection under his label Mickus Projects. One glance and we stuttered head over heels down its staggered felt back into toe-curling lust. With the rest of the stringently edited collection – *Floor Perch* and *Refill Pillow* – being equally drool-worthy, we decided we had to talk to the designer.

Based in New York with his wife and daughters, Mickus is currently working as an architect with Diller Scofidio + Renfro and has also been designing and building furniture independently for 12 years now. Apart from the Cooper Hewitt exhibition, his works have been exhibited at Spot at *DesignPhiladelphia* and *Beyond Media* in Florence, Italy. He founded Mickus Projects in 2006 for his furniture designs. What well and truly got our attention was that Mickus Projects has proudly declared sustainability to be one of their foremost considerations in the work that they do.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP THE RELIEF CHAIR; IMAGES OF MICKUS' WORK ON THE EXPANSION OF JULLIARD – THESE SHOW THE LOBBY

PHOTOS OF CHAIR COURTESY OF ROBERT BEAN

WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A DESIGNER AND WHY?

By the time I was 8 years old, I had discovered the joy of building, and working with my hands to create things. The idea of a concept starting on paper – or on a computer screen – and becoming something real and tangible has always fascinated me. My passion for design has outlets in furniture design, architecture and various project types in between.

DID YOUR STUDIES SHAPE YOUR WORK, AND DOES IT STILL DO SO TODAY?

Very much so. I studied with a 'learn-by-doing' approach throughout my undergraduate programme at Cal Poly, and an intense focus on digital design and fabrication tools in graduate school at UCLA. I also studied abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark for a year doing undergraduate work, where the programme was very collaborative and completely engaged with the surrounding city. I seek a balance of all these ingredients in my current work.

IF YOUR WORK IS INFLUENCED BY YOUR STUDIES, WHO OR WHAT INSPIRES YOU?

In the architecture world, I'm inspired by UN Studio. Their work relentlessly pushes the boundaries of building design through the use of digital technologies. To walk through any of their projects is awe-inspiring.

In the industrial design world, I'm inspired by Arne Jacobson, who was also an architect. He embodies the idea of the 'gesamtkunstwerk', the complete and integrated piece of art. In some of his projects, he was able to design everything from the building down to the ashtrays. Many of his designs remain appealing and relevant in today's market. I give great respect to designs with longevity.



PHOTO COURTESY OF IWAN BAAN



BOTH PHOTOS
COURTESY OF ROBERT BEAN

In the art world, I'm inspired by Joseph Beuys, and specifically his work with felt sheets, which gave me the idea of sculpting a solid block of felt into an evocative object.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT YOU CITE AN ARTIST AS ONE OF YOUR INFLUENCES, BECAUSE THERE ARE LOTS OF ARGUMENTS ABOUT THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN DESIGN AND ART. WHAT IS YOUR TAKE?

I enjoy taking visual cues from art – for materials and the processes of creation mostly. I think the most critical difference between design and art is that great design achieves its greatness through touching and using, not just from its looks. Great art is most often accompanied by a 'don't touch' label.

YOUR DESIGNS ALL HAVE A STRONG FOCUS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY. WHY SO? WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A 'GREEN DESIGNER', FOR LACK OF A BETTER TERM?

Sustainability and new fabrication techniques are inherent in the Mickus Projects M.O. [modus operandi]. I search for clever ways to minimise the environmental impact of our products by calling attention to a sophisticated logic and intrinsic beauty.

I lived in Copenhagen, Denmark from 2000 to 2001, and during that time, my eyes were opened to a culture of sustainability which manifested in everything from the preservation of urban parks and pedestrian space, to thoughtful indoor-outdoor relationships in buildings, to innovative uses of materials and technologies to conserve energy. It was then that I embraced 'green design'.

COULD YOU ELABORATE ON WHAT YOU MEAN BY "THOUGHTFUL INDOOR-OUTDOOR RELATIONSHIPS IN BUILDINGS"? WHAT CRITERIA DO YOU THINK SHOULD FEATURE IN A THOUGHTFUL RELATIONSHIP?

In Copenhagen, I visited several community housing developments, mostly built in the post-WWII period – nothing architecturally acclaimed but all well-planned and well-used over the decades, especially in their consideration of indoor-outdoor connections. There was a typical development style of single-level flats with shear glass walls opening onto private yards for each unit, and the yards faced a public garden corridor in between. It was a simple idea, fitted into a compact parcel of land, where everyone had a range of options for using their indoor and outdoor spaces. This gradient of indoor to outdoor and public to private is my criterion for a thoughtful relationship between spaces.

SO WHEN DESIGNING A BUILDING, WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR YOU TO KEEP IN MIND?

It is so easy to get wrapped up in specific details of construction during the often long design and construction phases. At times like these, it is most important to step back and make sure each detail has an idea, and that each detail is somehow linked back to the big picture of the project as a whole. Keeping a large project aesthetically and conceptually cohesive is the most important task throughout the process.

DO ANY OF THESE CONCEPTS AND IDEAS FIGURE IN YOUR FURNITURE AND PRODUCT DESIGN AS WELL?

In my furniture and product design – although I have not

yet designed any outdoor furniture – I keep in mind a gradient of uses for my designs, from public to private space. I also try to design elements that work as stand-alones or as grouped systems, creating a gradient of layout options for the pieces. Both the *Floor Perch* and *Refill Pillow* are good examples of this.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE AS A DESIGNER TODAY?

Trying to expand the boundaries of my design work, and take advantage of new opportunities created through science, technology and the increasing degree of global 'closeness' between any two people or societies. On the practical side, as any design project becomes multi-disciplinary and collaborative, it can be difficult to set up effective working relationships between all parties involved (and difficult to receive enough fees to make a living).

SO HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR DESIGN PHILOSOPHY?

I create objects whose details mix function and flirtation. A look-at-me attitude of form-making is imbued with a broad agenda for what I think design can do today, through the integration of sustainability, technology and affecting the senses. My products harness the sensory experience created by the interplay between unique materials. My passion is craftsmanship enhanced by digital technology.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR DESIGN PROCESS? HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT?

My design process is set up around a Venn diagram of research, collaboration, and experimental design. I begin each project with a deep investigation into materials and form, and develop designs in collaboration with specialists and local craftsmen.

IT SEEMS REMARKABLE THAT YOU EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY SO WARMLY! TO WHAT EXTENT DOES TECHNOLOGY FEATURE IN YOUR WORK? WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE EFFECT OF TECHNOLOGY ON DESIGN IN GENERAL AND ON YOUR OWN DESIGNS?

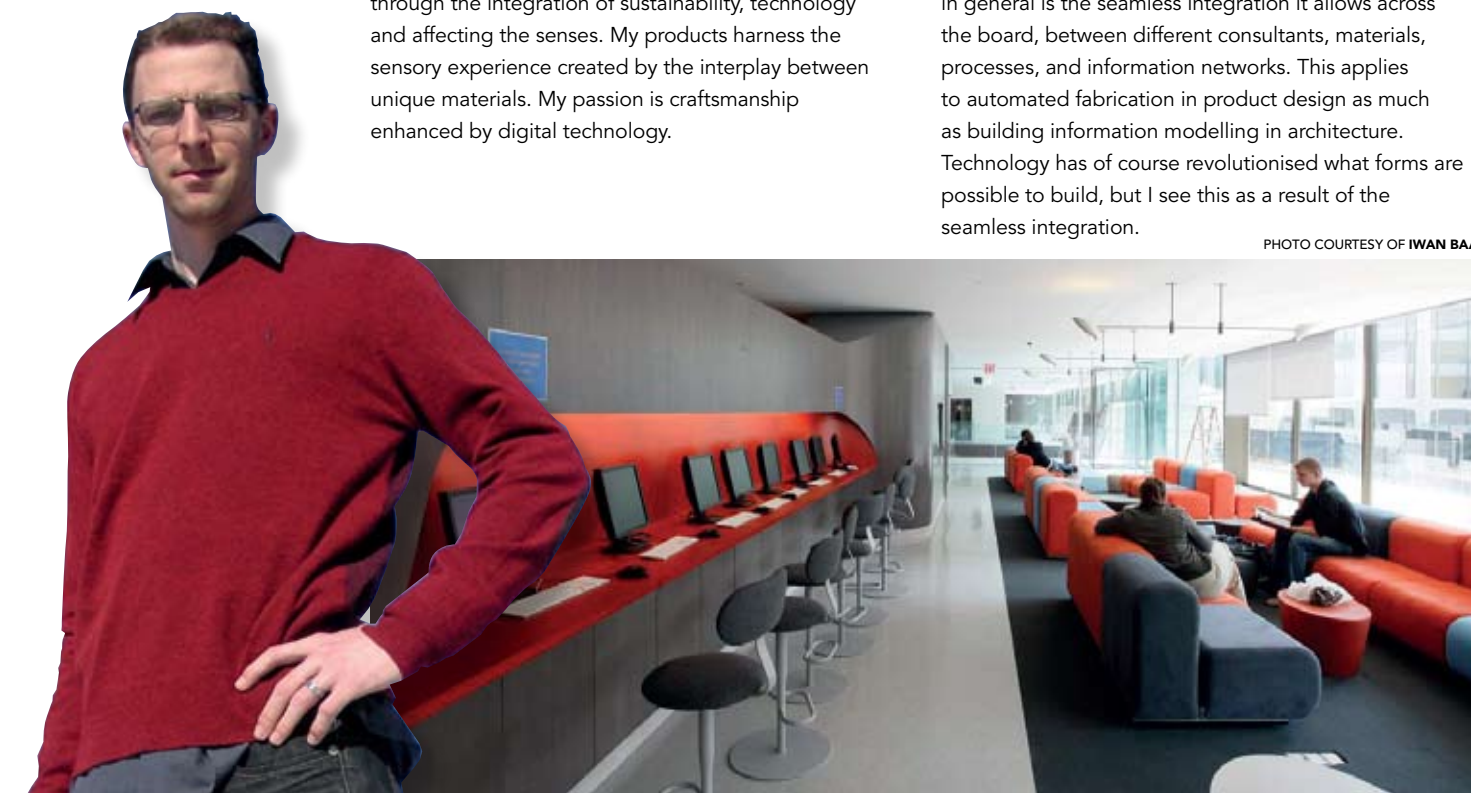
There is still no substitute for a sketchbook and a pen to engender a concept, but even the most simple idea benefits from the accurate three-dimensional resolution that a computer facilitates. My designs start with pen sketches and are developed through digital modelling, which opens up a whole new world of fabrication possibilities. It is in fabrication that I embrace technology most thoroughly, to bring forth new qualities and effects in materials.

I think the greatest effect of technology on design in general is the seamless integration it allows across the board, between different consultants, materials, processes, and information networks. This applies to automated fabrication in product design as much as building information modelling in architecture. Technology has of course revolutionised what forms are possible to build, but I see this as a result of the seamless integration.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IWAN BAAH



TOP THE FLOOR
PERCH CAN BE USED AS BOTH
SEATING AND AS STORAGE
RIGHT VIEW OF THE
EXPANSION OF JULLIARD



PORTRAIT COURTESY OF TARYN MICKUS

EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE EXPANDED LINCOLN CENTER – JUILLIARD IS ON THE UPPER FLOORS WHILE THE ALICE TULLY HALL CAN BE SEEN THROUGH THOSE GLASS WALLS!



PHOTO COURTESY OF IWAN BAAH

FOR YOU, WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE, AND PRODUCT/FURNITURE DESIGN BESIDES THE OBVIOUS ONES OF SCALE, AND USE?

One difference is the designer's position in the industry with architecture versus product/furniture design. With architecture, designers are often at the mercy of the client, and we need a client before we can build something. With product/furniture design, it is much easier to build something yourself (without a client) and take advantage of the international manufacturing and distribution networks to get your product on the market. I see the two disciplines as complementary: product design is like the appetizer and dessert while architecture is the main course. You need them both together for a complete and satisfying meal.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE OBJECT OR SPACE TO DESIGN?

I'm currently straddling the realms of architecture and product design – dealing with 'macro' and 'micro' simultaneously. I enjoy making objects that have the ability to transform into larger spatial devices. I'm working on a modular acoustic system right now, called the *Refill Pillow*. As an object, it is a simple, translucent pillow, filled with the felt scraps from other projects. But with zipper edges, the pillows can aggregate into a panel system which can sub-divide spaces, lending acoustic privacy while still allowing light to be transmitted.

OF ALL YOUR PRODUCTS, WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE SO FAR?

The *Relief Chair* is my favourite. It's the first time I've been able to accomplish the full integration of sustainable materials, digital fabrication, and a form I'm truly proud of. It's the first chair I've designed, but certainly the first of many.

AND WHICH OF YOUR RECENT ARCHITECTURAL PROJECTS ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

Since 2003, I have been working with Diller Scofidio + Renfro, a multi-disciplinary design and architecture firm in New York with significant projects in the US and internationally. The majority of my time at the firm has been spent on the \$1.2 billion redevelopment of Lincoln Center, the world's largest performing arts complex with 12 institutions and 22 performance venues on their

THE MSLK STUDIO – MICKUS SERVED AS THE OWNER'S REPRESENTATIVE FOR THEIR RENOVATION



PHOTO COURTESY OF MSLK

campus. The first phase, which includes a renovation and expansion of The Juilliard School and a complete renovation of Alice Tully Hall, will be completed this year. I am particularly proud of my work on Juilliard, because I was given the opportunity to see a major project from concept through completion. As a young designer, this is the best way to learn how to build – in addition to learning how to design. The project is also noteworthy for its progressive re-imagining of a modernist building – taking a very introverted complex and literally stripping away the walls to reveal the inner workings within each institution.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO BEGIN YOUR STUDIO IN 2006?

The launch of Mickus Projects was catalysed by the opportunity to have the *Relief Chair* displayed at the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum. The agreement was made over a year ago, when I only had a computer rendering of the chair. But it was enough to convince the Cooper Hewitt to include it, and enough to convince me it was worth starting a studio to build and sell my furniture rather than keeping it as the hobby it has been for the past decade. I was also encouraged by Paul Donald, founder of the sustainable design retailer, Branch, where my *Relief Chair* and *Floor Perch* are now available online.

WHAT'S THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING A DESIGNER?

The best thing about being a designer is the intellectual mobility it gives me to work across multiple disciplines while engaging, and solving problems on all scales.

WHAT'S THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING A GREEN DESIGNER?

It is one thing to design beautiful and functional objects, but as a green designer, I am taking on a larger responsibility to evaluate the impact of my work on the environment. It's a whole new problem-solving exercise for our entire generation, which is quite exciting.

WOULD YOU ALSO CALL YOURSELF A GREEN ARCHITECT?

The firm I am in now has not practised green architecture in the past, but with new projects coming into the office, we are definitely moving in that direction. Personally, green architecture has been an interest of mine for a long time and I'm looking forward to working on some green architecture projects soon.

IF YOU COULD CHOOSE ANY POINT IN TIME TO BE A DESIGNER, WHEN WOULD IT BE AND WHY?

If I could go back in time, it would be the post-WWII period in Scandinavia, when modernism was evolving, and yielding much more interesting work at all scales by architects such as Aalto and Jacobson. Advancing to the future, I would live in a time where the global priority is sustainability, and designers would be engaged in new ways of innovating solutions to global environmental problems – this time is not too far in the future I think.

WHAT OBSTACLES DO YOU SEE YOURSELF FACING AS A GREEN DESIGNER?

A major obstacle for me is to design objects with prices low enough to go mainstream. Good design, especially good sustainable design, comes at a premium price, whether discussing furniture or architecture. But as sustainability continues to go mainstream as a concept, I'm confident that sustainable products and design will continue to permeate the marketplace in all industries.

WHAT DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE HOLDING FOR YOU?

I read a maxim from designer John Maeda: "... if you persistently do good work, more work will naturally come your way."

That's my goal right now.

WHAT IS YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL?

A college professor once told me to "strive to be good – not great", which seemed like an underhanded insult at the time. But as I've thought about it over the years, I've realised how much there is to learn about design in order to be able to design something good. My ultimate goal is to always keep learning about advancements in the field, new materials and technologies, and to apply them in a way that people can develop a visceral connection to. That will make a good design in my opinion.**hc**

The Relief Chair and Floor Perch can currently be purchased from www.branchhome.com

THE MSLK PROJECT STANDS OUT AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR MICKUS BECAUSE HE REALISED THE SHEER NUMBER OF THINGS THAT COULD GO WRONG EVEN WITH A SMALL-SCALE PROJECT



PHOTO COURTESY OF MSLK