

lc: New furniture - understanding innovation in contemporary furniture design

Much of the book's emphasis is on technical and functional innovation, but a great deal of the most popular contemporary furniture is predominantly visually original, or at least that is its most 'accessible' trait. As a consequence, the revolutionary use of a process, material, structure or function is largely ignored in mainstream discussion; aesthetics in furniture design will always be the most prominent and celebrated characteristic. For many consumers (even designers), the most useful semantic differential available to describe a piece of furniture would be somewhere between 'beautiful' and 'clever'. For those interested in what lies beneath, beauty is important, but without material, structural or functional expertise, many designers would consider this attribute to lack importance. Of course, the boundaries between technical and visual innovation are blurred; therefore, the furniture designs in this section have been grouped with some subjectivity in terms of the areas in which each piece excels.

Since the designer decade of the 1980s, design has become more internationally ingrained into mainstream culture. As a result of the developed world's burgeoning interest in and broad acceptance of design, there is more design activity taking place now than at any other time in history. This is partly an impression created by the vast amount of design activity communicated through the Internet, but it is also a reality fuelled and inspired by this same resource. Allied to this, the first decade of the twenty-first century was significant in heralding an exponential increase in the number of leading-edge designers, design philosophies and design methodologies. Despite the resulting plethora of new designer furniture and the significant back catalogue of design classics, there was still an expanding market and (surprisingly) continuous innovation (although this progress was and still is more subtle than in preceding decades).



Opposite: **A Pile of Suitcases**,
Maarten De Ceulaer, for Gallery
Nilufar, 2008.

Below: **Satellite Cabinets System**,
Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby,
for **Goudes**, 2006

Some of the following groundbreaking work is visually, technically and functionally eloquent in equal measure, but the majority clearly excels in one category. The subsequent section identifies and discusses significant (although not necessarily commercially successful) and useful examples of visually and technically innovative furniture as a way of identifying strategies and approaches for new designers.



Visual language

Composition

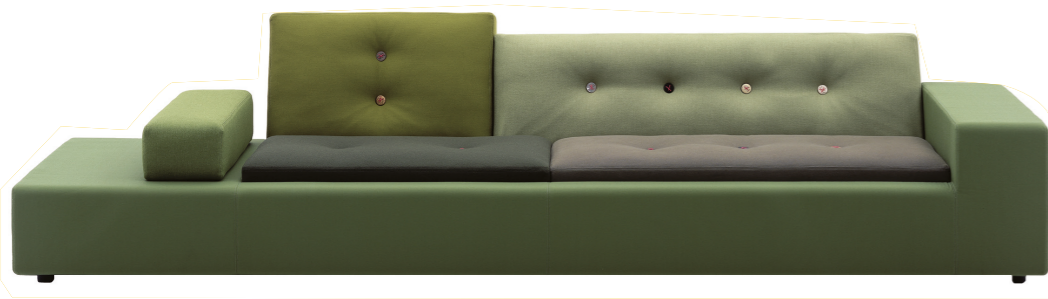
Composition and proportional relationships are key factors in furniture design. The use of the ‘Golden Section’ and other ‘divine’ proportions is much less widespread than often supposed, with many designers instinctively approximating such proportional relationships in their work the majority of component arrangements and dimensions are decided through intuition and the interpretation of user needs. Barber Osgerby Associates’ (BOA) modular, reconfigurable Satellite Cabinets System is described by its creators as: ‘An exercise in graphic composition and organized volumes...about proportion, modularity and purity with character...a series of ideograms.’ Although a great many furniture designs could be as loosely described as ‘ideogramatic’, i.e., representing an idea, most of BOA’s statement succinctly express the system’s compositional character.

Several modular combinations of Satellite are possible, although these are decided at purchase rather than being reconfigured by the customer. The cabinets themselves are not remarkable, yet the way that the leg frames obviously support the cabinets and their stark geometric contrast, elevates this system into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The carcasses and doors

are lacquered MDF and the leg frames are an assembly of two aluminium castings and tubing. The doors have cut-through, recessed handles with differently bevelled inside edges.

As much a lyrical piece of installation art as it is a piece of furniture, Maarten De Ceulaer’s Pile of Suitcases is one of a series of suitcase-composed modular systems produced for Gallery Nilufar in Milan. Casamania is industrially producing a more economic, machine-made version using recycled leather called Valises. The freely arranged units, manufactured by the Brussels artisan Ralph Baggaley, are exquisitely and traditionally detailed. Their beauty could be said to supplant the need for more practicality – of course Valises could have shelves and be more structurally connectable, but the hanging rails are pure enough – any further interventions would erode the work’s simplicity and visual power.

As with Satellite and Stack from Shay Alkalay, colour plays a significant role. Perhaps if the suitcases were an unremarkable brown, it would be easy to miss the significance of De Ceulaer’s work, or perhaps it would simply be a pedestrian design. Such musings prove that there is value and meaning in being first, i.e., designing the previously unseen or unnoticed can appear profound.



Polder Sofa, Hella Jongerius, for Vitra, 2005.

While many designers’ work is multidisciplinary, few have made such a broad impact as the Dutch designer Hella Jongerius. Along with her textiles for Maharam, her work for Vitra has been highly influential and has undoubtedly changed the way many designers approach aesthetics and material detailing. Named in figurative reference to the low-lying Dutch landscape, her Polder series of sofas uses traditional upholstery materials and techniques. The design was a radical aesthetic departure from tradition at its launch, but in the years since then, it has become possible to view its detailing, arrangements and colour palettes as heralding a new strand of aesthetics.

Polder is imbued with Jongerius’s textile and ceramic design sensibilities and includes a button design with a large number of asymmetrically arranged threading holes. These create a range of thread patterns that also use different colour threads. Such attention to fine detail means that Polder is experienced very differently close up than at a distance. At the latter, Polder becomes an essay in composition and proportional relationships.

Milan-based multidisciplinary designer Patricia Urquiola has also had significant prominence since the 2000s, and in 2010 she was commissioned by Moroso to create an armchair and sofa system. The

result was the Silver Lake project, which was inspired by the area of Los Angeles of the same name and famous for its Modernist architecture and, latterly, for its counterculture.

The range represents a new geometric investigation in the prolific Spaniard’s work and is comprised of three sofas and two armchairs. The sofa and armchair are visual and material tours de force, although the chair without armrests is less visually successful, and seems to lack a clear systemization rationale. Nevertheless, the Silver Lake Sofa’s convergence of materials, components and form is highly successful and original. The frame is constructed from hardwood, ply and steel and covered in variable density polyurethane foam. The optional arm cushions (not shown here) are filled with polyester fibre, while the armrests and leg frames are made from folded lacquered steel.



Silver Lake Sofa, Patricia Urquiola, for Moroso, 2010.