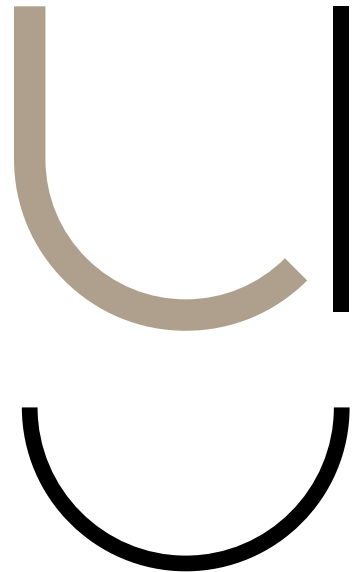
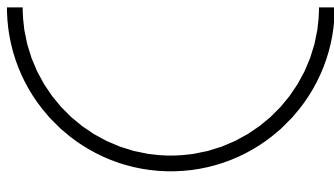


Designers

Max Lamb
Terence Woodgate
Marlène Huissoud
Raw Edges
Jasper Morrison Studio
Tomoko Azumi
Sebastian Cox
Studiomama
Martino Gamper
Dallas-Pierce-Quintero

Commissioners

Maria Balshaw
Alex Beard
Ian Blatchford
Iwona Blazwick
Tristram Hunt
Kwame Kwei-Armah
Amanda Nevill
Hans Ulrich Obrist
Tamara Rojo
John Sorrell



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In any creative collaboration, great design solutions come from a successful relationship – between the commissioner of a design and the designer. There has to be chemistry, as well as a good idea. And, of course, a good story.

The *Legacy* project not only brings together highly creative thinkers, it gives an insight into the story of each of our commissioners, their roles as leaders of some of the capital's most influential cultural institutions and their everyday lives and environments.

The brief – for a group of leading cultural figures to nominate a design of professional or personal relevance that they would like to pass on to their institution or family – has a strong resonance for us all in the design community. With global environmental challenges very much in our minds, any new objects we create should be enduring. They should also be beautiful, each in their own way, so their appeal stands the test of time. Using the sustainable hardwood American red oak, our group of brilliant designers, partnered with cultural leaders, have brought to life a collection of imaginative and wholly unique designs that will, we hope, be used and admired for generations.

Good design is also about innovation, and this project presented an opportunity to explore the qualities and potential of a natural material that has such a distinctive grain and colour variation. Dedicated to pushing the boundaries of its production capacity, our *Legacy* partner, the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC), found the perfect collaborator for experimentation in Benchmark, a British company set up by Sir Terence Conran and Sean Sutcliffe to marry sustainable design with exemplary levels of craftsmanship and creativity.

The designs produced for *Legacy* will be presented in a dedicated public exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of the seventeenth London Design Festival, marking our eleventh year of collaboration with the V&A as a partner and our official hub.

London Design Festival promotes diversity and excellence in design, and brings together ideas from an international community of designers in the capital. *Legacy* is a celebration of partnerships, and the chance to engage with a core theme that touches all of our lives in some way.

We hope you enjoy the wonderful outcomes on the pages that follow. Our sincere thanks to all those who have taken part to realise them.

Sir John Sorrell CBE
Chairman
London Design Festival

People are drawn to wood for its warmth, tactility, smell and, increasingly, its impressive sustainability credentials. As a raw material, it can be transformed into beautiful and functional furniture, objects and architecture that last for generations and lock in carbon for even longer. Yet there is an aspect of the timber story that hasn't been told, and which is needed to bring it firmly into the twenty-first century. This is the part where we think more deeply about how we use this vital natural resource.

It may sound odd or even sacrilegious to write this in an age of resource scarcity, but it is precisely because of wood's unique environmental benefits that we need to be using much more of it now, and in the future, in applications that go beyond furniture and ornamentation. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly urgent that we focus on those timbers that are less popular or fashionable, yet widely available and highly renewable.

The *Legacy* project was conceived to convey this powerful message of sustainability in multiple ways. On one level, it explores the value of an object – be that a beehive, a bookstand or a bench – as something that is passed on to loved ones or to an institution to provide pleasure and usefulness for decades to come. In our fast-moving, globalised world, where products have become highly disposable and built-in obsolescence the norm, longevity is a hard-won goal. But brilliant design should last for generations.

On another level, this project unites commissioners from leading UK cultural institutions with the best minds in design and experts in woodwork. This approach differs from the way commercial design usually works, and allows for innovation and experimentation, ultimately creating something that is a lot more interesting. There is an element of surprise and risk, as you never know what the outcome will be, what you will discover or learn.

The most important aspect of *Legacy* is arguably its celebration of an abundant species of hardwood. An expanding resource in North America, red oak regenerates naturally and in vast volumes. It has alluring warm tones, a uniquely open and porous grain and can be milled and steam bent to distraction, yet European audiences, designers and brands have tended to favour lighter coloured oaks over this interesting and prolific timber.

We address and counter these preconceptions and market-dictated fashions, to show what American red oak is capable of and just how versatile and beautiful it can be. We started by asking renowned furniture-maker and craft workshop Benchmark to test the working properties of red oak, white oak and European oak and compare notes. The results surprised almost everyone involved: red oak performed as well or better than the other oaks in nearly all of the key processes. We then asked some of the most inventive and skilled designers and craftspeople in the country to explore and experiment with the timber outside the confines of the commercial market, to bring to life the unique vision of their cultural 'commissioner'.

This book tells the story of what happens when designers and makers are brought together to share knowledge, strategies and successes. If the design world is to be environmentally conscious, it seems clear that the material palette should be widened to explore potentially more ecological options. In the same vein, consumers should not be coerced into buying a certain material; they have to be excited by what they are seeing. *Legacy* aims to generate that excitement around timber in general, and red oak in particular, and amplify it far and wide.

David Venables
American Hardwood Export Council

What is American red oak?

American red oak is the dominant hardwood species in the United States and grows naturally in the country's eastern mixed hardwood forests that stretch from Maine in the north down to Mississippi in the south. In fact, it is not a single species; there are many subspecies. The timber is generally straight-grained, coarse-textured and distinctive, and it can also vary in colour. In North America, it is widely used for furniture, flooring, joinery and cabinets.

Have these hardwood forests always been there?

Historically there was natural mixed forest from Louisiana in the south right up to Maine and Vermont in the north and into Canada. When the settlers arrived in the seventeenth century they removed a lot of the softwood and hardwood trees to make way for cities, railways, farms and mines. By the 1900s a lot of these eastern forests had been almost entirely depleted. Over time, and because of trade and the movement of people, these big mixed forests have naturally regenerated. In Pennsylvania, for example, the original forest cover went from about 78 per cent of the state before the settlers arrived to less than 10 per cent, but is now back up to 70 per cent.

So the forests aren't planted but are they managed?

Hardwood trees in these eastern forests don't grow in lines because they aren't planted by man; mostly they grow wherever squirrels bury the seeds or where the wind distributes them. Once trees have been harvested, the forest needs to be managed for the sake of wildlife and biodiversity, as well as to nurture high-value timber for the future. This means selectively harvesting in fifteen- to twenty-year cycles. Normally you remove the mature and less healthy trees, though you might leave a few of the former as they are good for wildlife and seed dispersal. Selective harvesting brings light into the forest so that the younger trees can grow.





Is red oak a sustainable resource?

For long-term sustainability you have to strike a balance by not removing more trees than the regrowth. Over the past fifty years, hardwood growth in the United States has exceeded annual harvest, with the total stock of hardwoods in these forests increasing by over 90 per cent.

What colour is the timber?

The 'red' of the name refers to the colour the leaves turn in autumn rather than the colour of the wood. The diversity of site conditions means it can, and does, vary in colour from light brown to a light pinkish brown, as can the hue of other woods, depending on where and how the trees grow.

What else is special about its appearance?

As a temperate hardwood it has seasonal growth rings which are visible to the eye. It is ring-porous wood, which means that large xylem cells are distributed during the springtime growth, creating a distinctive layering effect when viewed from the end-grain. This is the major difference between red oak and white oak.

What is unique about red oak?

Its growth rings are so open and porous that you can blow through the wood. That is why you wouldn't use it to make wine barrels or outdoor furniture, unless treated, but also why it absorbs oils, stains and colour really well and can easily be made to resemble other darker species when smoked or finished.

Why isn't red oak more popular in Europe?

Traditional consumer tastes are often governed by familiarity, which is why Europeans have in the past preferred their own oak. Across Europe, red oak has suffered from preconceptions, mostly to do with its name and colour. Market trends play a role. Finally, there is the misconception that all hardwoods are

scarce, which data from years of tracking rates of growth, harvest and removal disprove. The American Hardwood Export Council has visualised this data on its website in the form of an interactive forest map that can be viewed on a national level, by species or individual states and counties.

Does red oak perform well as a timber?

American red oaks are very strong and machine easily. The wood is hardwearing and has excellent steam-bending capability. As it is stable when dry and easy to finish and stain, it is ideal for furniture and flooring. It can be fumed with ammonia to make it darker, scorched to blacken it and reveal its texture, oiled or stained to emphasise or change its colour, or even injected with dye using compressed air.

What's the most remarkable thing made from red oak?

There are some memorable architectural interiors and pieces of furniture made from the timber. A notable example is Kroon Hall, Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, designed by Hopkins Architects. Its interior panelling was partly harvested from the college's own forests of American red oak. There is Foster + Partners' extraordinary 'vortex' foyer in Bloomberg's European headquarters in London, which is lined with red oak from floor to ceiling. Red oak has enviable structural potential, as demonstrated by Timber Wave, a seemingly impossible, spiralling 12-metre-tall structure designed by AL_A, which framed the main entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum during the 2011 London Design Festival.



**Maria Balshaw
(Tate)**



Max Lamb



Valet

Dr Maria Balshaw CBE was appointed Director of Tate in 2017. She is the first female director of the institution, which comprises of four galleries, the United Kingdom's national collection of British art, and international modern and contemporary art.

A normal week for me consists of meetings all day then openings in the evening and sometimes dinner after that. I am in and out of the galleries and generally have to get changed around six o'clock. At the moment, I hide my dresses in a cupboard down the hall but there's nowhere to put my shoes or store my make-up. I couldn't describe the object I was after exactly so I told Max Lamb I needed 'a hanging-mirror-screen-storage-help-me-get-changed-unit'. He came back to me and said, 'What you need is a valet.' That made me laugh because a nineteenth-century travelling gentleman would have had a travelling valet, which was a kind of wardrobe-cum-suitcase-cum-mirror, and I am not a nineteenth-century travelling gentleman! But a valet also used to be a man who looked after another man, and having someone to look after me is sort of what I was talking about. Since *Valet* is just as good at holding a shaving kit as a make-up box, it is going to be there waiting for the next director, whatever gender, or genders, they might be.

I expected Max would come back to me with something geometric that had compartments, but he has given me a large amorphous screen, a kind of ghost creature with various elements that are a bit like limbs. Each piece slots into another in a very satisfying way and the large pores of the American red oak are stained in a teal blue, one of my favourite colours. I was interested to work with Max because he is a maker who has had a strong presence in a gallery environment. His practice isn't something that I would naturally gravitate towards, it is very elemental; he works with sometimes exaggerated forms whereas I have a stereotypical, Danish modernist, pared-back aesthetic. That was the best thing about this commission – the journey. I have learned a huge amount about how Max approaches a material and how an object can meet a brief, and have ended up with something I could never have imagined and yet which is absolutely perfect in terms of meeting my needs and requirements.

I love the way wood can take form and hold history. I love beautifully made wooden furniture. A wooden object in my life that comes to mind is my father's hammer. It was a small hammer he used for domestic jobs and through my childhood it would be brought out when something needed tapping in or fixing. He made me a rocking chair with it and continued to use that hammer for sixty-five years – it holds the history of his life and has become shaped to his hand. That is what legacy objects are about.



Max Lamb is a furniture and product designer and maker known for his exploratory approach to materials. In the past he has experimented with pewter, polystyrene, granite and waste wool, among other materials, and applied techniques that range from the digital to the ancient.

What were you asked to make by your commissioner and why?

Maria Balshaw asked me to focus on her office environment at the Tate. She is in and out of the office during the day, and in the evening, may have to go to a fundraiser, a meeting or a private view. Her office is almost an extension of her home and she needs somewhere to keep clothes and get changed.

What approach is your studio known for and how does that translate into this piece?

Normally I would be both designing and making the piece myself in the studio but this project is different in that Benchmark are the makers. A lot of the design and development in my work happens during the making process through material experimentation and testing techniques. It was essential for me to start the design process by making samples and doing colour tests with the American red oak because I knew from the beginning that Maria was interested in colour.

What was your starting point for the design and how did it evolve?

The dressing screen began with the idea of hanging a garment. Almost immediately I wanted this thing to have a human quality that would work well with fabric. I started with soft forms and shapes, with hooks and protrusions made from pieces of the material. I wanted the piece to be free-standing rather than attached to the wall,

so making it three-dimensional and with a foot was also important. This piece has a personality, it's almost like a person standing in the room handing Maria her clothes to put on.

What were the technical aspects of the piece?

I started with quite complicated articulating forms, which required either bought hinges, which I didn't want to use, or making my own more complicated version of a hinge. I wanted to simplify the piece as much as possible and liked the idea of slotting components, taking the idea of the flat-pack but transforming it beyond what most of us today consider to be flat-pack. That worked well with the softness that I was incorporating into the red oak by putting a generous bullnose detail on the edges.

How else did you transform the wood?

One of the unique characteristics of red oak, and one of the main differences between red oak and other woods, is the open porosity of the material, the growth rings, which make it very receptive to colour. I wanted to see how I could change the colour of the timber but still maintain its natural hue. I applied colour to the surface of the wood and pushed it deep into the pores, letting that dry and then sanding back the wood so that the colour is present in the open pores but not the main surface and it doesn't disguise the natural colour of the red oak.

What does wood as a material mean to you?

People often ask me whether I have a favourite material and my answer is no, I don't, I like all materials and I don't discriminate against any particular one. With this project, however, I am moving away from how I have used wood in the past. Probably one of my most significant projects in timber was *My Grandfather's Tree*



from 2015: I cut down a 187-year-old ash tree on my grandfather's farm in Yorkshire and celebrated that specific tree and material by doing as little as possible to it. The resulting stools, tables and chairs are pieces of a tree rather than pieces of wood.

What makes an object a legacy piece?

A legacy piece is when the user, or owner, develops a relationship with the piece. It doesn't matter what it is, or how precious it is, it is not about financial value, it's about a sentimental appreciation or connection. The typical approach to design is to make an object that you think people might want but you don't really know if that will be the case. The way this project started, with direct communication between commissioner and designer, makes it almost impossible for this not to become a legacy piece, because the process is driven by a real understanding of what one person needs.





- ← With its mirror, hooks and shelf, Valet is a multi-functional dressing station.
- ↑ Having been cut on the CNC machine, the edges of the screen are cleaned up and any unwanted bits removed using a jigsaw.
- Craftspeople at Benchmark use Max Lamb's CAD drawings of the components to select the best parts of the red oak boards and to programme the CNC machine.





- ↑ Colour is incorporated into the design to reflect Maria Balshaw's taste. Max Lamb experimented with dyes before choosing teal blue.
- ← The porosity of red oak makes it ideal for absorbing colour. Pushing dye into the open grain gives it a subtle hue and accentuates the pattern of the grain.
- *Valet* is completely free-standing. Its flat-pack components slot together with no need for nails or screws.



Alex Beard
(Royal Opera House)



Terence Woodgate



Duo

Alex Beard CBE is Chief Executive of the Royal Opera House. Last year saw the completion of a £50m revamp of the building, including the creation of a 400-seat auditorium and a reconfigured ground-floor lobby.

As soon as John Sorrell told me about the project, I knew my design had to be two sofas for the room where I hold most of my meetings. It's a relatively small space where the Royal Opera House senior team gathers once a week and where I meet one-on-one with incoming conductors, artists and supporters, so comfort, alertness and a sense of togetherness are really important. The room overlooks the piazza in Covent Garden and is full of light and pictures from the Royal Opera House collection, including photos of great artists such as Darcey Bussell and Anthony Dowell, posters of iconic productions and a portrait by Christopher Wood of Constant Lambert.

I wasn't expecting to work with a designer of Terence Woodgate's calibre. I'm a great admirer of the Slow sofa system he designed as part of the refurbishment of the Barbican Centre in 2006; he brought a visual clarity and confidence to that iconic structure. There is a rigour to his work but also a refined beauty and elegant articulation to his forms – his pieces just make sense. American red oak is not a timber I knew about but I immediately liked its rich, warm colour. You need only look at the expansive use of North American black walnut in our new foyer and auditorium, or the dark stained cherry in the historic auditorium, to know how important wood is to the Royal Opera House. Wood is resonant but it is also tactile, it is warm and it weathers. Wood is a perfect material for a theatre as it is flexible, sensual, it can be bent, formed, crafted; it has personality.

I don't really think in terms of legacy pieces but there is one object in my life that has outlived its original owner and means a lot to me, and that's my father's Leica M2. He took the most amazing pictures with this camera and I vividly remember helping him develop them in his darkroom. He died when I was seventeen, and has been an important influence in the background. I treasure this camera because of those memories but also because it's just the most fantastic piece of design, it looks beautiful and works brilliantly. I still use it and my daughter does too.

The Royal Opera House stands on a site where there has been a theatre for almost 300 years. This particular theatre has been here since the mid-nineteenth century, and the institution since 1947. Threads of those histories are with us. It's exciting that these two sofas will be the home of conversations that will help shape and inform the institution's future. Who knows where that will lead?



Terence Woodgate is an industrial designer with a reputation for stripped-down, elegant and innovative furniture and lighting products that reveal an obsessive attention to detail. He initially trained as a design engineer but later studied furniture design.

How did you approach the design of this piece?

I went to meet Alex Beard at the Royal Opera House and observed the way he sat and how he interacted with the furniture in the meeting room. I noticed that the seat height of the sofas was quite high, the same height as the chairs in the room, whereas a lot of sofas are generally lower. This created a different dynamic in the room, everybody seemed to be at the same height rather than some people slouching. What was required was something softer and more comfortable than the original idea of a bench, but slightly higher than a regular sofa.

What was your inspiration?

I am inspired by geometry, that's what directs me, informs me. I like texture but I don't like decoration for decoration's sake. I am more interested in subtraction than addition, so there's a certain subtraction to the form of this piece.

How did American red oak steer your design?

One of the constraints was to show the wood and make it very much a feature of the piece. I like that as an idea because wood is very tactile, it is enjoyable to stroke it, rest on it, so it seemed that it was really appropriate for the arms of the sofas to be made entirely out of the wood. Quite quickly the design of the arms became the main feature. I wanted the arms to look very light so I used a technique I have used before to chamfer away the edges and make it soft. The seats have been upholstered on the seating side in a beautiful tan leather that looks natural.

What challenges did the project present?

The speed that I had to work at was a challenge. I didn't have much more than a week to gather the ideas and plans and that was quite terrifying. Sometimes a design comes together right at the beginning, the geometry falls into place. Other times it fights you from the outset; you have to rework it and rejig it or even scrap it and start again. I was pleased that it flowed quite nicely this time.

Have you ever designed a seat like this, with this structure?

No, and certainly not in timber. My background is in engineering so I have a pretty good idea of structure, but I always like pushing the design, trying to make it more interesting, so that when someone looks at a piece they are fascinated by how it works and goes together. This piece doesn't look strong, it looks delicate, but in fact it is quite robust. There was a long debate about the making at Benchmark; where the panels should fit and how the joint should be celebrated rather than hidden. Those details are really important. There is a radius around the edge of the wood of just 2 millimetres too, which is very subtle and runs throughout the piece.

What is your hope for the future of these sofas?

Longevity. I'd dread this piece being recycled. No-one would contemplate recycling a Chippendale chair. I always try to design in a way that transcends fashion. I hope that by using materials that age beautifully, these sofas will last a long time. Wood might pick up marks and scratches but it handles that well, whereas certain materials just look poorer as they get older.

Is there an object in your life that has significance beyond economic value?





I have an old Danish cast-iron bottle opener and there's no real design to it, but it's just an incredibly tactile piece: it fits in your hand, it has weight, it has mass. Every time I open a bottle of beer with it, it's a joyful moment. When I look in the drawer I always choose that bottle opener and so does every other member of my family. Those sorts of things intrigue me. I have some forks designed by Ettore Sottsass and I have never come across a fork that you can eat linguine with in quite the same way; it twiddles in your hand perfectly. It has balance: it looks great but is not a slave to style. I love that.





- ↑ The rectangular arms are machined by CNC to create a curved chamfer detail.
- ← A mock-up of the sofa is made in the workshop to test the strength and proportions of the structure.
- The backrest is slightly tapered from bottom to top to lighten its visual appearance.





Ian Blatchford
(The Science Museum)



Marlène Huissoud



Beehave

Sir Ian Blatchford is Director and Chief Executive of the Science Museum Group, the largest group of science museums in the world. The Science Museum was founded in 1857.

One of the things we are working on in the museum is a new permanent gallery about the future of agriculture, and for that project I have been visiting some of the top research centres in Britain. Rothamsted, just north of London, is the oldest continuous scientific experiment in agriculture in the world. They use radar tracking to work out the habits of bees and understand how they source nectar. They are trying to answer one of the great mysteries and threats of our time, the decline of bee populations. So bees are on my mind, and when this London Design Festival opportunity arose, it seemed like a provocative and surprising idea to present a beehive to the public in the new gallery. You expect to see lots of machinery in a science museum but not something so profoundly organic.

Being an Englishman, I immediately associate wood with oak trees, with honesty and strength. Wood is a very romantic thing in the British mind. I also associate wood with my family and memory because at home I have rather beautiful Georgian furniture inherited from relatives. Trees could well be an enormous part of our response to climate change and one thing I hadn't realised about American red oak was how abundant it is. There is powerful scientific evidence about the fact that we need more trees, but also different types of trees and trees that are managed in certain ways. It's not as riveting as some of the grand climate interventions, perhaps, but it's incredibly important for our future.

The moment Marlène Huissoud and I spoke we bonded over a mutual love of the natural world, organic materials and particularly bees. The briefing process with a designer is often so formal, but within our first conversation we were finishing each other's sentences.

Marlène doesn't just use the obvious materials you associate with bees, which are honey and wax; she looks at a deeper level, particularly at the resin, which is vital to their survival. In some of her past work she has treated the resin from beehives almost as a form of liquid glass, and it seems to me that the audacity of the way she experiments with materials is surprisingly scientific as well as artistic. In comparison to the research institutes looking at advanced materials for sustainability and energy consumption, what I liked about this project is being reminded of extraordinary things that already exist.



Marlène Huissoud is an artist and designer with a studio in Paris. Her research-focussed work explores ways in which insect-made materials might be used and developed. By challenging conventional ideas about what can be done with natural resources, she hopes to get industry and the design and art worlds to question how we consume today.

What did your commissioner ask you to address in your piece?

Ian Blatchford didn't want another bench for the Science Museum. He knew a bit about my work and that my father was a beekeeper. He wanted a piece that would join the museum collection and open up a dialogue around biodiversity and sustainability.

What is the inspiration for your work?

I grew up in the French Alps close to the border with Switzerland. When my dad was eighteen, he left school and dedicated his life to bees. He has been a beekeeper for forty-five years. Nature is a part of who I am; I feel most myself when surrounded by nature. Everything I do now is a celebration of my upbringing.

What is typical of your approach in this piece?

My work is very sensorial and most of my pieces have a distinctive smell that helps the audience understand that it is not a product made out of glass or ceramic, as you might think when you first see them. In *Beehave* you can smell honey bee bio-resin as we varnished the log-shaped hive inside and out with it to say 'welcome home' to the bees.

Tell us more about the beehive? It's quite unlike any beehive most people have seen.

I wanted to break down the traditional model of the beehive as a little human house. This type of beehive was created in the nineteenth century to increase honey production as it contains frames that the beekeeper can easily take out to harvest the honey. I wanted this insect habitat to reflect nature. This hive looks like a log and harks back to one of the oldest techniques for beekeeping that exists, because it is also a refuge for wild bees, somewhere they can make a home in the wild. I didn't want it to be all about making honey – this piece is about helping bees to live.

What was the making process like?

It is a very personal piece and therefore essential for me to be involved. We started by carving the wood and then we scorched it to emphasise the beauty of the marks and human gestures. I have never really made anything out of wood before; I am usually much more interested in new materials. But when I was carving, I felt so connected to the piece, as if anything was possible, and that I could express all the things I wanted.

What challenges did you encounter?

One of the most challenging parts of the project was knowing when to stop. With the angle grinder in my hand I could have carried on carving for hours and hours. It was very hard to say, 'Now it's ready.' In the end, it was complete when I felt the piece come to life. Most of my work is a bit alive I would say. In fact, throughout the making process at Benchmark I noticed that a lot of people wanted to hug the piece.

What do you hope will happen to the beehive in the future?

I hope it can stay as long as possible in the museum premises, inside or outside. I hope it can create





a dialogue between the museum staff and the visitors. I also hope bees can live inside it because it's very comfortable.

What does the idea of legacy in design mean to you?

We are in a huge ecological crisis. For me it's very important to use design as a tool to communicate a strong message to a large audience, to talk about new possibilities for making and to change the industry's understanding of waste. I don't make chairs because I don't think we need another chair. Well, actually that's not quite true – I am making a chair for another project for London Design Festival, but it's for bees.





- ← Marlène Huissoud and her team in Paris spent 100 hours engraving the surface of the beehive with a pyrograph.
- ↑ The red oak is burnt with a blowtorch. Scorching blackens the surface without compromising the strength of the timber.
- Propolis, a dark resinous material produced by bees to seal gaps in the hive, is applied to the exterior to protect the timber and attract bees with its scent.





Iwona Blazwick
(Whitechapel Gallery)



Raw Edges



Wooden Hinge

Iwona Blazwick OBE is Director of the Whitechapel Gallery. Founded in 1901 to show modern and contemporary art in east London, the Whitechapel Gallery doesn't have its own collection but produces exhibitions and commissions new work by artists.

I love books and have collected them all my life. Books are things of great beauty and very important to my work at the gallery, as we produce exhibition catalogues and anthologies on the big themes in contemporary art. Books are also political; they disseminate ideas, they are windows onto worlds. In our digital age however, people have moved away from print and that's why I thought it would be a wonderful thing to have a display stand for some of the rare and extraordinary books that have been produced in the art world over the last century.

Wood as a material is warm, organic and has a different temperature and texture to any metallic or plastic surface. At a time when plastic is engulfing our environment, I am very drawn to wood because of its place in the wider ecology. It is also incredibly diverse as a medium. It has a grain that is never replicable, so each piece is unique. I love the idea that the tactility of a book – running one's fingers along the paper, turning pages that can be smooth or coarse – would extend to the bookstand itself. Wood is the perfect material, possibly the only appropriate material, for a bookstand.

In my head, I saw this piece in purely utilitarian terms, as a simple lectern on a single column with two angled flaps, but Raw Edges have come up with something completely different and taken it into the realm of sculpture. They talked about wanting to avoid the authoritarian connotations of the lectern as used by a politician or a preacher. I thought that was interesting; they wanted to make something more transparent, perhaps a little bit more ephemeral.

This object will be really important for the Whitechapel Gallery. We will use it when we host our annual Richard Schlagman Art Book Awards and produce new catalogues. I also think this display stand would benefit schools, colleges and public libraries. If you walk into a library, the books mostly face spine out, undifferentiated. I would love to see this bookstand distributed to libraries to encourage kids to explore the book as a form, to introduce new titles to students, to get people in public libraries to engage not just with their own favourites but to confront them with new titles, lure them in, seduce them. It has this other, political role to play.



Yael Mer (YM) and Shay Alkalay (SA) founded Raw Edges in London in 2006. The studio designs lamps, shelving, seating, flooring and museum installations – based on open-ended and relentless experimentation.

What did your commissioner ask for?

YM Iwona Blazwick came up with a very clear brief to design a stand for a large-scale art book that could be viewed at an angle. She wanted to be able to present a book and have a place to hang some gloves that you could use when looking through the book.

Did you know the commissioner before working on this project?

SA No, but of course we have visited the Whitechapel Gallery many times. Before we met, we read about Iwona and the gallery; she has worked with artists we very much relate to, artists who are driven by experiments with materials. We felt that this was very relevant to our work.

Could you tell us about the way you approached the design and how that dovetails with the work you usually do?

YM The starting point for this particular project was that it had to be all about the book. Our piece became a device to elevate the book and serve the book. We stripped the piece back, realising that it didn't need to scream. We made a modest, graceful and minimalist object.

SA This is something quite new to us because normally our designs are bold and if you put them in a space they grab your attention. But this time we wanted to make something pure and honest that just serves the book.

What does wood mean to you as a material in general?

SA The best quality of wood is that it is really environmentally friendly. It is also one of the most ancient of materials. What is really nice is the way it ages. You know that in twenty years' time it is going to look different, the colour will have changed, the texture will have changed. It is a living material and you can't say the same about many other materials.

YM There is something very manageable and accessible about wood too. In the workshop we make mock-ups with wood and play around with it, whereas if we need to experiment with glass, ceramics or even steel, we need to find people to do it for us. Trying and testing our ideas out for ourselves – rather than via an external specialist – makes a huge difference in our process.

SA Equally, when we make computer-generated images, it is quite easy to render plastic, steel, painted surfaces or glass, but rendering wood always looks fake because the appearance of wood, as an organic material, is unique and difficult to imitate.

So wood is the material you use to develop your initial ideas?

YM For me the design process starts with paper while for Shay it probably starts with wood. But timber is definitely the material we both use to make prototypes and from which an idea evolves into a real project.

Has the whole piece been made from American red oak or did you use any other materials?

YM Benchmark had the brilliant idea to collaborate with a bookbinder, so the book will rest on a folding book cover made by a bookbinder. This book rest





will be made out of ply and covered with the sort of canvas textile that is commonly used to cover books. It works beautifully with the wood; the textures next to each other look great.

SA The bookstand folds and initially we wanted to use piano or off-the-shelf hinges, but when we started to develop the project we realised that we could actually use the red oak for the hinge as it is a very solid, reliable and rigid timber. We realised that if we machined the hinges as part of the structure then we wouldn't need any additional hinges made out of steel or another material. The hinge is the

core of the design and we find it very interesting that wood can serve as a hinge.

What does creating a legacy piece mean to you?

YM Generally speaking, we don't design things to last for a short period, they shouldn't be temporary. In that sense, we felt connected to the idea of something that would last for a long time. We designed this piece in quite a utilitarian way, there is nothing trendy about it. It is honest and clear, and we hope it will be aesthetically relevant far into the future.





- ↑ The bookstand's joints are made out of timber. The pivot joint at the top of the stand enables the rails to line up exactly when the bookstand is folded.
- ← Each component is turned and then chiselled by hand to scrape off any excess glue.





- ← When *Wooden Hinge* is open to 90 degrees the grain of the moving and stationary parts aligns perfectly.
- ↓ Origami-style folds create a snug fit for the book to sit in without slipping.



Tristram Hunt
(Victoria and Albert Museum)



Jasper Morrison Studio



Fugu

Dr Tristram Hunt has been Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum since 2017. The V&A was founded in 1852. In 2018 the first V&A museum outside London opened in Dundee, Scotland.

I commissioned two new chairs and a table for the Directorate Office at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in consultation with the team who work alongside me in this space. The office is where people wait for meetings with me, or where they come to have a chat with members of the team. We were looking for pieces that communicate how much the museum values contemporary design, the power of making and the importance of beauty, but that also fulfil functional requirements since they will be used on a daily basis.

Sometimes people waiting in this space are about to go into difficult or complicated meetings, and may be feeling nervous. Having a well-designed wooden chair that is both comfortable but also in a sense validating of their position seems to me important.

The vast majority of people who will use these chairs are colleagues, but we also have external visitors on a daily basis. Government ministers, ambassadors and generous donors; artists, designers and creatives from different walks of life. The chairs needed to be suitable for the range of people who interact with the museum, as they will all see the furniture and have a reaction.

The V&A divides up its collection of 2.7 million objects into geographies but also into material types such as iron, ceramics or wood. And wood, as an incredibly versatile material that can be both functional and shaped into objects of wonder, is enormously important to the museum. Wood has this capacity to centre and earth people, it connects us to a sense of nature and land.

What I have really enjoyed about working with Jasper Morrison Studio is the opportunity to reflect on how the V&A has played an important role in Jasper's development as a designer. He was one of 150 designers, architects, photographers, fashion designers and artists invited to contribute a page to our 150th anniversary album. On his page he recalled coming to this museum in the 1970s and seeing an exhibition on the great Eileen Gray, and how this convinced him to become a designer. In a sense, we have now come full circle as we have several of Jasper's pieces in our collection and he is making us a furniture set that will become a living and vibrant part of the museum.

One interesting aspect of this project is that it's not about a legacy in the traditional museum sense, because the pieces aren't going into the collection and so we don't have to wear gloves while handling them, or stop people from sitting on them. But in years to come people will remember coming in here and sitting in these chairs before an important meeting. They will become a part of the cultural memory of the institution.



Jasper Morrison Studio designs everything from tableware, kitchen products and furniture to lighting, electronics and appliances. The studio also manages a shop in east London that sells simple, useful objects chosen for their refined aesthetics and superior everyday performance. John Tree, interviewed below, has worked at Jasper Morrison Studio since 2001 and led the design for the *Legacy* project.

What did your commissioner ask you to make?

The brief from Tristram Hunt was to design two chairs for the guests who wait outside his office at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was a precise and clear set of instructions about how a lot of older people in particular come to meet him and need to get in and out of chairs with ease. We approached the design by visiting the space, speaking to staff who use his waiting area and taking into account considerations about different types of people. American red oak has such a strong character that we thought it would be nice to do a table as well.

What was your inspiration for the design?

The design is an extension of the Fugu chair that Jasper Morrison Studio developed for the Hiroshima-based furniture company Maruni: it comes in a low lounge version and a more traditional table-height version. We found that the *Legacy* brief required something a little bit in between – not so low that guests find it hard to get in and out of. The design faces the challenge of trying to make a very comfortable chair from a very hard material. The curves and shapes are an exploration of that problem.

How would you characterise the studio's work?

It is often mistakenly called minimal but that word tends to conjure up images of very straight lines and simple shapes, whereas the studio's work is

actually incredibly subtle and sophisticated, with a lot going on in terms of form and balance and proportions. The minimalism tends to surface through refined shapes, surfaces and curves that manage to dig in to the essence of what an object is about.

What does wood as a material mean to Jasper Morrison and the studio?

Jasper works with a lot of timber-based clients, particularly Danish and Japanese brands, so wood has been a thread throughout his career. Wood is a really interesting material; it is something that you can easily manipulate with a few basic tools. Jasper made some of his very earliest pieces out of wood with his hands.

What did you think of the red oak samples you were given at the outset of the *Legacy* project?

We were sent a sample tray with squares of red oak featuring different finishes and stains. The best piece of the lot was the tray itself, which was made from raw untreated oak. Red oak has this unusual strength to it and a redness, and we thought it would be nice just to leave it like that and showcase the material, rather than try to hide what it is. This chair is a great object to show off wood because it is solid and chunky but also extremely comfortable and delicate. You have the contrast of seeing it as a quite elemental piece of wood, and then, when you sit on it, appreciating the comfort from controlling the edges and forms very carefully.

How does your piece celebrate the wood grain?

Red oak has a particularly strong grain and we had to select quite carefully to ensure that the form wasn't interrupted by huge elements of grain or knots. But more than the grain, which is familiar to us as an oak grain, I think it is the richness





of the colour that is most interesting. It seems fresh, so there is this nice duality of a familiar thing that somehow also looks new and different and unexplored.

Could you tell us more about the idea of a legacy object and how it relates to your commission?

It's funny because at first we were told that the intention was to design a desk for Tristram, but then we discovered that his desk belonged to the original director of the V&A, so it isn't going anywhere. What's nice about that is that the desk has clearly had many, many people sit at it over the decades so it is very much symbolic of the idea of legacy. The route we took with our pieces was to avoid fashionable trends and to make something honest, designed for a purpose rather than for a particular moment in time.





- ↑ The seat and backrest are curved to provide comfort. They are glued together with a mortise and tenon joint.
- ← Individual components are made from boards that are glued together and CNC-machined to create a curve. The edges are sanded by hand.
- The large, untreated surfaces of the tabletop and chairs showcase the strong grain of the red oak. The grains are cleverly matched.





Kwame Kwei-Armah
(Young Vic)



Tomoko Azumi



Au

Playwright, broadcaster and actor Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE was appointed Artistic Director of the Young Vic in London in 2018. The theatre was founded in 1970 with the aim of nurturing young and emerging theatre talent.

The timing of this project is perfect because at the moment I am rehearsing a musical theatre piece called *Tree*, which is about legacy and communication through trees and their influence on a family.

When I was asked to take part, I was struggling for a week to find *the thing* I wanted to make. I wanted to be able to arrive and say 'I want this' but I couldn't, and I realised it was actually because I shouldn't do that, it was too transactional an approach. This had to be about the designer and me talking to each other and understanding each other. So, in our first session, I spoke about the things that mattered to me. I shared the book that changed my life when I was nineteen – the autobiography of Malcolm X.

I articulated the desire for my grandson, long after I'm gone, to be able to touch something that his grandfather and he had interacted and played with. I talked about the desire to have my energy in the wood so that future generations could touch that energy. A natural material can carry our vibrations for hundreds of years. Though I knew that, this project brought that into sharp focus for me. I found that surprising and joyous.

Bizarrely, when I think about wood I tend to think about it in the context of interiors; I think about how safe wooden doors make me feel, how comfortable wooden floors make me feel and how they make a home fashionable. Then I start thinking about the Caribbean and about wood outside of the home – just sitting on a stool outdoors or finding wood on a beach.

I didn't know Tomoko Azumi before this process but by our second meeting I understood the scale of her artistry. I was so moved by the quality of her listening and how she interpreted my ramblings and created something of substance. She came up with this beautiful seat that looks like a ship and has a centrally placed 'X' that is a reference to the crystal structure of gold but also to the profoundly influential autobiography of Malcolm X.

Wood and travel and ships mean something quite elemental to me. I am a diasporic African, we travelled from Africa to the Caribbean in slave ships. Later my parents came from the Caribbean to London on colonial ships. This piece is somewhere for me to sit, somewhere for me to remember, something that carries the huge framework of the last 500 years of my family along with the specificity of the literature that has moved me.



In 2005 Tomoko Azumi founded TNA Design Studio in east London. The multi-disciplinary practice works on everything from furniture, lighting and products to interior spaces and exhibition design and recently also started producing paper DIY kits of polyhedral models that people can make at home.

What is your design approach as a studio?

Analysing what the client needs and then simplifying it but putting a lot of attention into the details. Part of our process is analysing the strengths of the material and the strengths of the fabricator or maker, but we always try to make things visual and tactile.

What is important to you as a designer?

Beauty and elegance, it's an attitude and how I try to live. I also want to give some kind of contribution to the times we are living in.

What was the brief from your commissioner?

Kwame Kwei-Armah gave me a really open-ended brief, which was amazing. He wanted an ornamental object that was tactile and that he could pass on to his family. It had to be something iconic or majestic in appearance but it could be any object. We started by designing several different pieces; two of our initial ideas even incorporated sound. Eventually Kwame chose one, which was a boat-shaped garden seat.

What was the inspiration behind the piece?

Kwame's life story and his roots were the inspiration. The shape of the object came from the idea of the journeys made by his ancestors, but we also wanted to include some kind of icon in this wooden object. The seat's structure

represents the crystal structure of gold, which is known as a face-centred cubic system, and has atoms at each corner of the cube and six atoms on each face. This speaks to Kwame's origins, the continent his ancestors are from and where this precious metal is mined. It represents the precious part of his history.

Where does the object's name – *Au* – come from?

This refers to gold on the periodic table of elements and also to the sound *au*, which means 'to meet' or 'to see' in Japanese. This seat is a cosy hideaway for Kwame and his grandson, it will be a secret meeting point.

What does wood mean to you as a material?

The great thing about wood is that when good craftspeople make something out of wood, it's wonderful, but even when something quite crude is made out of wood, it still exudes a warmth. For me wood is one of the fundamental materials in life.

What techniques did you employ?

When I first saw the material at Benchmark and saw how the timber could twist and bend I knew I wanted to make the most of this characteristic. I like steam-bending because it minimises waste. If you start with flat boards then you would have to get rid of a lot of the wood to create the curved slats we used in this piece. That's why I use steam-bending in a lot of my projects.

How difficult was it to make the piece?

This sort of object requires precision. It looks simple but it was more complicated and fiddly than I imagined. A lot of strength went into making the piece too. It's a nice contradiction that to





make this calm and delicate object it required the combination of small chisels and the muscle power of two men who used their body weight during the steam-bending process.

Do you have any objects that have been passed down the generations?

I didn't really inherit many things because I am from Hiroshima. The city was burnt to the ground when it was bombed so my grandparents had nothing to pass on. But what I did inherit was an attitude towards materials, an enthusiasm for simplicity. I accept that an object is going to age and maybe break, but the owner can always repair or mend it. That is my idea of legacy. The seat we made for Kwame is an outdoor piece and it will weather and change colour. We covered it in yacht varnish but that will have to be reapplied every three years in order to conserve it and keep it for as long as possible.

So your idea of legacy is a way of approaching life?

Yes. For me the object is not as important as the memory of touching a piece. That's why I like the idea of Kwame and his grandson sharing the seat and it getting harder for them both to fit as his grandson grows up. As the space becomes squashed it will create a memory around the object that will stay with both of them forever.



- ← Steam-bending requires wood to be kept in a steam chamber for several hours to make it pliable.
- ↓ Next, it is clamped to a purpose-made jig to create a curve. Once it cools it retains that shape permanently.
- By using different lengths of timber, Tomoko Azumi lightens the structure at the top and ensures privacy for the person sitting in the seat.





- ↑ The vertical steam-bent rails sit in hand-cut notches on curved rails.
- ← Tomoko Azumi resolves design details on a visit to Benchmark.
- The seat rests on a cube with an intricate 'X' on each face. The pieces of red oak that make up the seat have had the grain carefully lined up.



Amanda Nevill
(British Film Institute)



Sebastian Cox



Writer's Collection

Amanda Nevill CBE is CEO of the British Film Institute, London. The BFI was founded in 1933 to celebrate and champion the art of the moving image.

I initially chose a pen holder as my object for lots of reasons that weave together. The first is that I work in a cultural environment, which is all about storytelling. As human beings, we love listening to stories and I have been an avid reader since I was a child. At the same time, I am really interested in the art of writing, because it's a dying art. On a personal level, I still write letters by hand and I still use an ink pen. There was a third reason, a slightly tangential one, which is that I am interested in how long storytelling has been around. We know about cave drawings, but if you go to the British Museum, one of my favourite exhibits is a very early papyrus that talks about art in hieroglyphics. I find that absolutely mind-blowing. Thousands of years ago somebody sat down with an engineered piece of wood and wrote a story about the importance of art. That's so contemporary, isn't it?

One of the great joys of this project and working with Sebastian Cox has been developing this idea of writing and storytelling. And so, the pen holder has grown to become a storytelling desk in its own right. We will put it in BFI Southbank where it will serve as a writing station for emerging filmmakers and writers, who will be encouraged to leave a record of when they were there and what they were working on.

Of all the physical and architectural materials, wood is one of my favourites. I live in a very, very old house that is wood-framed and has oak beams, some of which came from ships, as they did in the olden days. Wood is organic, warm, tactile, it grows and then lives on and carries a history with it. I have always surrounded myself with objects that have history or a patina and love objects that have been cared for, which is why I live in such an old house.

The BFI National Archive is all about finding and preserving films so that future generations can look back and understand a bit more about what the world before them was like. It's not an easy task because film is fragile, so conserving it is a constant effort.

What I love about this project is that it has made me think about all the things we use wood for and the fact that the legacy of wood continues beyond the life of the tree. We are creating something that is designed from the get-go to last, a sort of living memory.



Sebastian Cox is a craftsman and designer who runs a studio and workshop in south-east London with his wife, Brogan Cox. The practice has a strong focus on sustainability and is known for allowing the material to inform the design process.

Your commission started out small and grew into something bigger. Could you explain the journey?

The original commission was to create a pen holder from American red oak for Amanda Nevill to carry around with her, as she is renowned for writing letters by hand. During the second design meeting, the idea expanded into a desk, chair and pen holder that could be used by someone writing a screenplay at the BFI. The idea is for the desk and chair to absorb the creative energy of the people who use it over time, and become a place where emerging creatives and writers might draw on some of that energy and potentially produce better work.

Where did your inspiration come from?

The inspiration for the piece came from the site: a mezzanine in the BFI that overlooks the box office on the ground floor. I wanted the desk to have the view over the box office because it is almost like being in the wings on a stage. Having spoken to some screenwriters, it seems important to have this balance in observing people or a scene, but then also being able to shut yourself away from distractions, so the desk and even the chair are designed around this triangle perspective.

The desk appears straightforward. Could you tell us about the hidden layers?

There is a lot happening in the piece but it is all concealed, so the desk can sit in a public space and not draw too much attention to itself. If you

sit down and use it, you have these moments of discovery. For instance, if you press down on the left-hand side of the leather writing surface, the opposite side pops up, and you can slide the surface across to reveal a place underneath to store pens and wedges for writing at an angle or elevating a laptop or book. Inside, there is a scroll of paper for everyone who uses the desk to sign, so that eventually the BFI will have this amazing record.

What did you know about red oak at the start of the project?

We have used red oak a few times and I think we are quite unique for that because it is not a commonly used material in Europe and is sometimes perceived as the inferior cousin of white or European oak. Having worked with it to make this piece I can say it sands well, it planes well and it is also really strong. As a practice we are known for seeking out materials that aren't trendy, for using the timbers the forests want to yield. Red oak is the kind of oak that we should be using right now given its sheer abundance and availability, and I love that this project elevates it and gives it status.

What does wood mean to you more generally?

I feel passionately about wood and not from a romantic, traditionalist perspective but because I don't think there is a better material that suits the needs of the age we are living in. If we were to sit down and design the perfect material it would be strong and light, warm to the touch, different every time you sourced or used it and globally abundant. And if we were being ambitious, we would also design it to require nothing more than sunlight and rainwater, to emit oxygen and to absorb carbon dioxide as it grows. Wood has all those qualities. It is key in the fight against climate change, yet it is often overlooked.





Is there a wooden object in your life that has been passed down and has great significance for you?

My great-grandfather was also a carpenter, and I have some of his Norris planes in my workshop. They are shoulder planes, and when I first got them, I spent a day sharpening them up. There was an amazing sense of reviving these objects that have been handed down and putting care and effort into keeping them maintained. However, I suppose the strongest legacy in my life is not an object, but trees. I grew up on a farm and it had some acres of woodland that I still manage. Earlier this year I became a dad, and to mark the birth of our daughter we planted forty trees. The amazing thing about trees is that you are planting and managing them for future generations.





- ↑ Cleaning up the joints before the oil finish is applied.
- ← Sebastian Cox spent a week at Benchmark with members of his team, who helped make some of the pieces by other designers too.
- The angled curve of the desk relates to the perspective lines of the BFI mezzanine where *Writer's Collection* will be installed. The chair is on the same line of projection.





- ← The chair seat is shaped by CNC while the legs are shaped by hand. The individual components are held together by wooden dowels.
- ↓ The pen holder is made by CNC and finished by hand. It is lined with leather.
- The discreet leather panels on the desktop can be removed to reveal a compartment for the pen holder and a paper scroll for the desk user to sign.



Hans Ulrich Obrist
(Serpentine Galleries)

Studiosmama

Serpentine Postbox



Hans Ulrich Obrist is Artistic Director of the Serpentine Galleries, a London-based cultural institution dedicated to showcasing art, architecture and design.

There were many reasons for choosing a postbox as our piece. First of all, postcards play a very important role in contemporary art. Artists have often used postcards as a medium – think about the mail art movement or Fluxus. And of course, today, we live in an age where handwriting is disappearing. The writer Umberto Eco was very worried about handwriting, calligraphy and doodling disappearing in the digital age. He said we should do something about it. I meet artists, poets and architects every day, so I started to ask them to write or doodle something – a poem or a sketch, a sentence, a slogan, a motto – and then I post it on my Instagram account. It has become a small movement, trying, as Eco suggested, to save handwriting.

I have a very personal relationship with postcards too. When I was fourteen, I discovered the art of Alberto Giacometti, and became interested in modern and contemporary art. I started to buy a lot of postcards with my pocket money and to curate little exhibitions with postcards in my room. When I became a curator in my early twenties, I would always invite artists to make postcards. The postcards wouldn't just reproduce the artwork; the postcard would be the artwork.

Together with our curator of exhibitions and design, Rebecca Lewin, we have been thinking how wonderful it would be if visitors could send a postcard from the Serpentine. They could tell a friend about the show, write about what they see. You wouldn't have to remember to buy a stamp because we could have stamps too. There would be an immediacy to recording a reaction to an artist, an artwork, or a memory.

Here in Kensington Gardens my relationship to wood is mostly through trees. Agnès Varda, the late film director, said that a day without seeing a tree is a wasted day. There is a great book by Richard Powers called *The Overstory*, which addresses the destruction of forests and has a very important ecological message. We live in an age of mass extinction – a million species are under threat. At the Serpentine we have a long history of addressing and resisting extinction because, as the late artist Gustav Metzger said, 'If you talk about climate change people will never wake up, you need to address the theme of extinction.' Our thinking around Metzger's approach is directly linked to the postbox – handwriting, postcards and languages themselves are disappearing along with species and environments. We need strategies that connect people to ways of resisting these changes, which brings us back to the postbox. We see fewer postboxes now in public space than when I was a kid and I wanted to bring one back. We have 1.2 million visitors a year at the Serpentine so it will be a very public postbox!



Studiomama is a London-based design consultancy and studio that specialises in product design, interiors, furniture and exhibition design. Founded in 2000 by Nina Tolstrup (NT) and Jack Mama (JM), the practice is known for its sustainable approach to design and a pared-back but characterful aesthetic.

What was the brief?

JM The brief was to create a postbox that would encourage visitors to the Serpentine to have a spontaneous moment where they could send a postcard then and there. It could also potentially be used to leave feedback about the show the person had just seen, so could function on two levels.

What was the inspiration for the piece?

NT Hans Ulrich Obrist's Instagram account is all about handwriting and quotes from interesting people, it is something he is passionate about. We found that inspiring, to think of a postbox as something that's not just a place where you post bills but that is also about poetry and writing longhand. When I think back to my school days, I knew the handwriting styles of all of my friends because we sat next to each other. You knew who had neat or messy handwriting, who had a very idiosyncratic or fun handwriting style. This knowledge is being lost and it is not just literally about the handwriting and letters, but also about a sense of relating to each other.

Could you tell us about the design process?

JM We started by creating a range of designs. Some referenced the typology of a postbox in a playful way and others were slightly more abstracted. The design that was chosen was the most communicative as it accentuates the opening where you put the postcard in. It is also one of the simplest designs that we came up with, so we were

happy because that meant it could act as a canvas for us to embellish and add to its originality and performance. We wanted people to have a surface to write the postcard on so they could post it straight away. Our postbox, in little and large iterations, has a flat top that people can lean on as they write.

How does the piece reflect your approach as a design practice?

NT We wanted to make a recognisable postbox because it will go in an art gallery so it shouldn't be confused with a work of art. But we like to make things that have an element of playfulness, and in this case we made a feature of the opening so as to accentuate its functionality.

What does working in wood mean to you?

NT Wood as a material has always been central to what we do at Studiomama. We have a wood workshop and I love to be there. It is an ongoing learning curve when you work with wood because it is a living material. Understanding the grain and how it is going to move is always a lovely challenge. Wood is a plentiful, renewable material and in this age it is important to work with a sustainable material.

Do you have an object in your life that has been passed down the generations and means a lot?

NT In our house we have a wooden bowl that belonged to my grandmother, which I remember from my childhood. The bowl lived very well in her house and it lives very well in our house, and for me that is very much about a kind of Scandinavian simplicity. It has had a long life and only gets more beautiful as it ages. It also has this family history travelling with it. I have collected wooden bowls by the same maker ever since.



Did you know anything about American red oak before you started?

NT We hadn't worked with red oak before but it is very similar to other oaks in terms of machining it and working with it. The reason we haven't worked with it is simply because it isn't available where we buy oak. We will definitely work with red oak again.

What do you hope the future of your piece will be?

NT We hope the postbox will still be at the Serpentine in several years. It would be nice if it stood the test of time.

JM If it could influence other institutions to do the same thing and encourage visitors to spontaneously write a postcard or note and send it, that would be a great legacy.





- ← The fluting detail on the postbox exterior is created using a spindle moulder.
- Jack Mama and Nina Tolstrup at Benchmark decide where the mouth of the postbox should be positioned.





- ↑ The 'barrels' of the postbox are made from individual fluted strips of timber, which are glued together.
- ← The mouth of the postbox is created from a CNC-shaped block of red oak.



Tamara Rojo
(English National Ballet)



Martino Gamper



Musical Shelf

Tamara Rojo CBE has been Artistic Director of the English National Ballet since 2012. The institution was founded in 1950. Its troupe performs throughout the UK and around the world.

When I was very young we didn't have a television at home, and I was an only child so I often entertained myself with my parents' LPs. I would put music on and dance around the living room. My parents emigrated to Canada before I was born so they came into contact with a very different style of music from what they had grown up with in Spain. They were avid collectors of music. One of the musicians they love the most and therefore I do too is Leonard Cohen; one of the first vinyls I borrowed from them and never returned was a record by him! I also have quite a lot of Spanish folk music from them. The first LP I bought was *Thriller* by Michael Jackson, so that was the start of me adding to the collection.

When I moved to London I took a lot of my collection with me to try to recreate that feeling of home. Recently I had to move out of my flat for a year while it was being renovated and I really missed my records. When I moved back in, there was nowhere to put them and I realised I really wanted a place where I could put my LPs so I could enjoy them on my days off.

I was born in Canada and American red oak is common there. The leaf turns deep red and creates a wonderful contrast to the greenery of other trees. Even though I grew up in Spain I have always felt a connection to the colours of that tree and the shape of the leaf. I am in contact with wood every day because every morning we start rehearsals with two hands on the barre, which is made out of wood, and we dance on wooden floors. At home, the first thing I did was to remove the carpet so I could walk barefoot on the hardwood floors. Wood is something I feel physically every day.

My job as artistic director of a ballet company is to take care of our legacy, to understand our traditions and the works that have been created in the past and pass them on in a way that is relevant today. I think this is what this project is about too, it's about making furniture in a way that is new and relevant. I love things that are made by hand because I feel they live forever, especially if you take care of them. I intend to really enjoy this piece because it is such an incredible privilege to have something created and made by hand just for you. Hopefully one day it will be passed on to somebody else to enjoy it too.



Martino Gamper is a furniture designer and maker who lives and works in a renovated printing factory in east London. As well as product design, Gamper studied sculpture and has also worked in kitchens – food and experimentation are regular themes in his work.

What is your studio known for?

My practice is about both thinking and making. We don't only come up with new ideas and designs but we also make and fabricate pieces, so the workshop is an integral part of the studio. In this case the pairing with Benchmark was interesting because there was an overlap. It was interesting to go and see their workshop and how they make furniture and the conversation between me and them was very much furniture-maker to furniture-maker.

How does *Musical Shelf* reflect your approach?

One of the aims of the shelf was to make something modular. The shelving is held together by a particular one-sided dovetail joint that you can insert from the top rather than the side. It provides a similar strength but is easier to manufacture and use, and creates endless possibilities for modular shelving. I am very interested in this kind of micro detail. The shape of the piece is sculptural and that is also something I am interested in – challenging the idea that a piece of furniture has to be square or two-dimensional.

Where did you find inspiration for the piece?

The inspiration came from looking at how records are usually displayed, mostly with the spine facing the user. Yet we remember the covers of records rather than the spines. I thought I would turn the shelves at an oblique angle so that Tamara Rojo could see the covers and find what she was looking for more easily.

What did you find interesting about American red oak and how did you use it in the piece?

Before I had mostly seen red oak as a veneer rather than a solid timber. It is quite a fast-growing oak so the grain is a lot more open and has strong grain features. In order to highlight these characteristics I chose to differentiate between the vertical and horizontal elements in the shelf and use different finishes, so the horizontal ones are fumed and look almost like a dark chestnut or a walnut, while the vertical ones are slightly bleached. In the same way, I made the horizontals from solid wood as they are the structural elements, while the verticals are veneered to create more movement. The shelf already has movement as it is inclined to one side but I tried to give the shelf even more movement through the grain – so the grain is going in one direction and the shelf is going in another.

What do you think about wood as a material?

I was lucky enough to get my hands on wood from an early age. I did an apprenticeship at the age of fourteen in Italy so wood is part of my DNA as a maker. But it is nevertheless a material that keeps surprising me and I am constantly trying to reinterpret it. One of the reasons I chose to work with wood when I was younger is that for me it is a far more precious material than, for example, metal. With metal, you can weld it if you do something wrong. You can kind of fake it. With wood, either you know how to work with it, or you don't. You can't cheat with wood.

What were the challenges in this project?

The deadline was short and everything had to happen quickly so that was a challenge, but I enjoyed working with Benchmark because I could talk directly with them. Pete and Matt [from Benchmark] came to the studio and I made a little mock-up and we quickly came





up with the final detailing, so the process was fast but at the same time collegial and open.

What does the idea of legacy in design mean to you?

I guess the term legacy has many aspects. It often means something stays in the world because it has classic features. It is also something that is passed down through the generations. I create work that I hope is going to be in the world for a long time because I think that is the sustainable way to make furniture. But legacy is also about how people look after a piece and its emotional value. Altogether this knits into a story, a narrative – a legacy.





- ↑ The vertical elements of the shelf are fixed into the horizontal panels using an angled tenon made with a spindle moulder and a table saw.
- ← The shelf is modular and easy to slot together. It features a one-sided dovetail joint that you can insert from the top rather than the side.





- ← The upright components are veneered at an angle so that the grain appears to be moving in a different direction from the shelf, emphasising the oblique design of the piece.
- The horizontal shelves are made from solid wood and then fumed to give the timber a rich, dark brown colour.



John Sorrell
(London Design Festival)



Dallas-Pierce-Quintero



The Nest

Sir John Sorrell CBE is co-founder and chairman of London Design Festival. Formerly, he chaired both the UK's public design bodies, the Design Council and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and founded and chaired the Creative Industries Federation. In 1999, he set up the educational charity The Sorrell Foundation with his wife Frances, with the aim of inspiring creativity in young people and improving quality of life through good design.

My wife and I have a tiny cottage in the countryside, not far from London, which we have had for thirty-five years. We bought it originally because my parents were getting older and had moved to be cared for by my sister. We were visiting so often at weekends with our children that we ended up getting this little place. And we fell in love with it. It only had a garden to start with but over the years we have acquired bits of land from the local farmer and now we are sitting on about seventeen acres. We have planted 4,500 trees and dug two enormous ponds. One of the ponds has the most incredible views of the sunset where you get this golden reflection in the water. Juliet Quintero has created a beautiful seat from which to view that sunset. We call it *The Nest* because it looks like a bird's nest and it will sit in a crescent of trees.

There are many connotations with the idea of legacy here because this piece is not just for us but also for our children and grandchildren, and in the future it will be for their children and grandchildren. It's a part of my parents' legacy as well in a way, so it is quite deep and emotional.

Wood has so much to do with touch and feel, texture and smell. I had an uncle who was a carpenter and made a wooden toy train for one of his children that was handed down to me when I was about six years old. I've still got it, it's beautiful. He also made me a set of cricket stumps when I was ten.

Wood is part of everyone's lives, yet a lot of people don't think enough about how important it is. The main feature of American red oak, and most timbers actually, is its sustainability. The world needs to find ways to be sustainable. Using materials that don't harm the planet or humans is essential.

Design is about human relationships. If you have a great client and a great designer and you bring them together in the right way you almost always end up with wonderful results. The *Legacy* project is about the classic principles of design: form, function and delight. And design is one of the things that make the world a better place. I have never met a designer who wakes up in the morning and says, 'I am going to design something that will make the world a worse place.' They get up and say, 'What can I do today to make things better?'



Juliet Quintero is co-founder and director of Dallas-Pierce-Quintero, an architecture and design practice that works on public art, public realm projects and cultural strategies with a multi-disciplinary approach.

What was the brief from your commissioner?

John Sorrell's brief was to create a place on his property outside London where he and his wife Frances could watch the sunset. It is going to be installed in a spot overlooking two ponds and within a border of trees that John planted a few years ago. These will mature and grow around the structure so it will eventually feel a bit like a treehouse and weather within the landscape. Over the years, a flock of Canadian geese have used the ponds as their nesting grounds, and in a way our piece is a bit like a nest too, only for humans!

The Nest is striking yet also intended to integrate into the landscape. How will it do this?

We were very keen to get a sense of richness and texture in the walls so that it wasn't a blank façade but something that would almost disintegrate into the view as you look towards it. Equally, from the inside we wanted to offer the experience of something like a cocoon, which would allow dappled light to come through so that you get a sense that you are within the trees. You have these fractured walls with slits where the light comes through, mimicking the woods nearby, and then this very direct view over the ponds. When the sun sets, there is an amazing reflection. It's a space of contemplation and a space of reflection.

What was it like working with American red oak?

The inspiration for this project came from the material. I was given a sample to take home, and was taken by the smoothness of the wood and its grain,

and how it seemed very solid and almost resembled a brick. As I am not a timber craftsperson, I looked at the material more like an architect would, or a builder, and I liked this idea of quite simply stacking the material in pieces on top of each other, similar to the way a bird would create a nest. The red oak brings a feeling of warmth to the piece, especially after being thermally treated, which gives it a deep colouration and significantly increases its durability outdoors. For the moment, it is a deep reddish brown and smells almost like treacle. But with time it will age and go grey, as most timber does.

How involved did you get in the making?

We had a close relationship with Arup, and the design changed according to what the engineers told us would make the structure strong and long-lasting. Originally the intention was to CNC-cut the grooves, but because the CNC machines were so busy that week, in the end a couple of the craftsmen cut all the notches and grooves by hand, which was something we hadn't anticipated. It is a *really* hand-crafted piece.

Is there a project that exemplifies your practice?

Our very first project set us on a certain pathway in terms of design. It was a competition on an estate in Southwark, London, with the aim of revitalising certain streets and dealing with some of the issues within the community, such as speeding traffic, waste and antisocial behaviour. The food-growing scheme featured soft and hard landscaping elements and spaces to play, congregate and grow your own produce. It was a means of giving people ownership of the public realm, and a chance for us to think about our design in terms of leaving a legacy for people. As a designer, I feel that we create something but then hand it over, and when that is successful it is uniquely satisfying.





Do you have an object in your life that has been passed down, with meaning beyond monetary value?

Not really, as I grew up in the Middle East and had to flee when the First Gulf War broke out and my family lost all our belongings. But my father is Mexican and every year he would make me a piñata for my birthday, and now I continue that tradition with my own children. It is quite a long process because there are several steps involved. For me, legacy is more about that idea of handing over a cultural tradition. In the case of the piñata, you could say it is an object as event; it is destroyed and then we look forward to the new one next year.





- ↑ The red oak is thermally modified to increase its durability outdoors.
- ← Juliet Quintero discusses design details in the timber mill at Benchmark.
- The outdoor seat evokes the slightly random configuration of a bird's nest. Each layer uses the same width of timber with some pieces notched (reduced in width at one end) to allow light to filter through at different points.





Sean Sutcliffe is Managing Director of Benchmark, a leading English furniture-maker with a commitment to sustainability and craftsmanship, which he founded with Sir Terence Conran in 1984.

What did you know about American red oak before the *Legacy* project?

I was aware that it was a prevalent timber but I had always been brought up with European white oak (*Quercus robur*) as a cabinetmaker and had a set of preconceptions about red oak based on anecdotes and a life spent being a craftsman. Not only that, here at Benchmark we have to deal with architects, designers and other clients who also have the same predisposition towards white oak. In terms of its properties, red oak is lighter in weight than European oak, so I always thought it wasn't as strong. It has a very, very porous structure and I knew it steam-bent well because we have done some pretty radical steam-bending with it before, but I didn't know much else.

You started the project by doing a week-long series of experiments on different aspects of red oak. Could you elaborate?

We brought together a wide group of our craftspeople, with a collective pool of experience of 300-plus years, and examined red oak for the qualities and characteristics that we look for and value in a wood. We compared boards of red oak from northern and southern regions within the U.S. with American white oak and European oak and devised some forty tests that looked at things such as stiffness, strength, flexibility, stability, joint strength, shock resilience, look, grain pattern, performance, how the timber machined, how it worked by hand and how it took finishes. Andrew Lawrence, the head of timber engineering at Arup, oversaw the methodology of the mechanical testing, so though the results aren't scientific, they are credible and serious.



What was the outcome of the testing?

It was an eye-opener because the tests showed that American red oak is as strong, in fact strength to weight stronger, than European oak. It took more force to make it fail and that's probably because it's more flexible as a wood. The experiments also showed that it bends very well, glues very well and joints very well.

You also examined visual appearance during the testing week. Why was this important?

Because one of the things we choose timber for is its visual qualities, something that is of course much more subjective. So we did a series of tests that sought to modify or change the look of the timber and made up tiles of wood that we bleached, fumed, stained and variously modified. One of the challenges red oak definitely faces is this perception that it's a bit red. It's funny because it's not called red oak because the wood is that colour, but because the tree's leaves turn red in the autumn. The wood is actually also a bit redder than white oak. It varies a lot too, and that can be an issue for matching the timber up.

Is there a reason for red oak's variation in colour and appearance?

When we buy European timber we buy it in sawn up logs, so we know we can make everything from within one log. When we buy American timbers they have been sawn up and made into packs and the pack might come from fifty different trees. I think this is a significant factor. As a species it also just has more natural variation than *Quercus robur* and this depends on the region it is from. If it is northern it tends to be darker, if it's southern it tends to be paler. It's to do with the soil and temperature conditions.

Are there any misconceptions around red oak?

There's still a perception amongst our clients that we are bringing red oak all the way from America and that this means a big carbon footprint, but I know

from all the work we have done over the years with life cycle assessments that the actual shipping portion in a sea container is remarkably low in carbon. Road freighting is considerably higher in carbon output so if we are road freighting oak from Croatia or shipping red oak from Boston, then the red oak is likely to have a lower carbon footprint (depending on how big a road journey it made at the U.S. end). And, paradoxically, people don't say the same about walnut, which is mostly American as European walnut is so rare and expensive.

What has this project highlighted in your view?

The versatility, the look and the properties of red oak, and the fact that it is strong and flexible. And that is why we wanted to do it, because there is a real conflict between forestry and fashion. Forestry is a hundred-year activity, whereas fashion changes several times a year. You simply can't afford for fashion to clash with forestry, because otherwise you end up with foresters who have 20 per cent of their stock that they can't sell and that's a disaster from an environmental and sustainability point of view. From a purely commercial point of view, it represents great value for such a high quality hardwood.

What has it meant to you personally and for the workshop as a whole?

A lot of stress and a lot of anxiety! It's been interesting because it has brought a diversity of challenges into the workshop. We had more or less two weeks to make ten entirely different pieces, so it was a shock of creativity and it challenged the creative ability and

technical skills of the team. It brought in new designers who we haven't worked with before and introduced us to some cultural institutions. We like working for cultural institutions because they tend to buy things for the long term so it gives the opportunity for proper craftsmanship. As a craftsman, all you can ask is to make something designed to last a century!

What does legacy mean to you? Has this project made you think about your own legacy?

I often think about what it is we are doing here. For me it's about the value of the handmade object, the fact that we make things for the love of making, not for the love of money. What makes a handmade object so special to hold and use is that the love and energy of the craftsperson stays embodied in the object. When I finally hang up my tools, my legacy will be having built a workshop with a team of sixty craftspeople. When we started the workshop, there was no indigenous base of craft in this area so we had to create a local skill base from scratch. We did that by investing in local people through an apprentice scheme and we still have some of those who started as apprentices thirty years ago. When new apprentices arrive they see how good these former apprentices are at making stuff and how they have now got houses and families and go on holiday. They can see what success looks like and it gives them a lot to aspire to. I am very proud of the fact that here, on a converted farm in the countryside, we provide employment for sixty people in good quality artisanal jobs. We're a business with a global reputation based in little old Kintbury in West Berkshire. I like that!



Acknowledgements

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American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) has been at the forefront of global wood promotion for over thirty years, building a distinctive, creative brand for U.S. hardwoods. Its support for creative design projects demonstrates the performance potential of these sustainable materials and provides inspiration for makers. americanhardwood.org

In collaboration with Benchmark

Founded by Sir Terence Conran and Sean Sutcliffe in 1984, Benchmark is regarded as a powerhouse of craft. With a sustainable approach at its heart, it designs and makes furniture using traditional techniques alongside innovative technology in its workshops in West Berkshire, UK. Benchmark makes spaces more human, welcoming and personal, blurring the line between home and commercial space. benchmarkfurniture.com

Created for London Design Festival

Established in 2003, London Design Festival celebrates and promotes London as the world's design capital and gateway to the international design community. One of the largest and most exciting design events in the world, it is a key constituent of London's autumn creative season, alongside London Fashion Week, Frieze Art Fair and the London Film Festival. londondesignfestival.com

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American Hardwood Export Council

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BENCHMARK



ARUP

After the *Legacy* project, the ten pieces will be relocated to their new homes.

Valet will be installed in Maria Balshaw's office at Tate Britain.

Duo will grace Alex Beard's meeting room at the Royal Opera House.

Beehave will be displayed in the Science Museum's new gallery devoted to the future of agriculture.

Wooden Hinge will live in the Whitechapel Gallery's bookshop – and be brought out for awards and events.

Fugu will move to the Directorate Office at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Au will be placed in Kwame Kwei-Armah's garden in London.

Writer's Collection will become a fixture on the British Film Institute's mezzanine overlooking the box office.

The larger *Serpentine Postbox* will be found outside the gallery's front door and the smaller one in the bookshop.

Musical Shelf will hold Tamara Rojo's record collection in her living room in London.

The Nest will overlook the ponds in Sir John Sorrell's country home, surrounded by trees.

With global environmental challenges very much in our minds, any new objects created should be enduring. They should also be beautiful, each in their own way, so their appeal stands the test of time. What our group of brilliant designers and cultural leaders has brought to life, using a sustainable natural material, is a collection of imaginative and wholly unique designs that will, we hope, be used and admired for generations.

– Sir John Sorrell CBE

