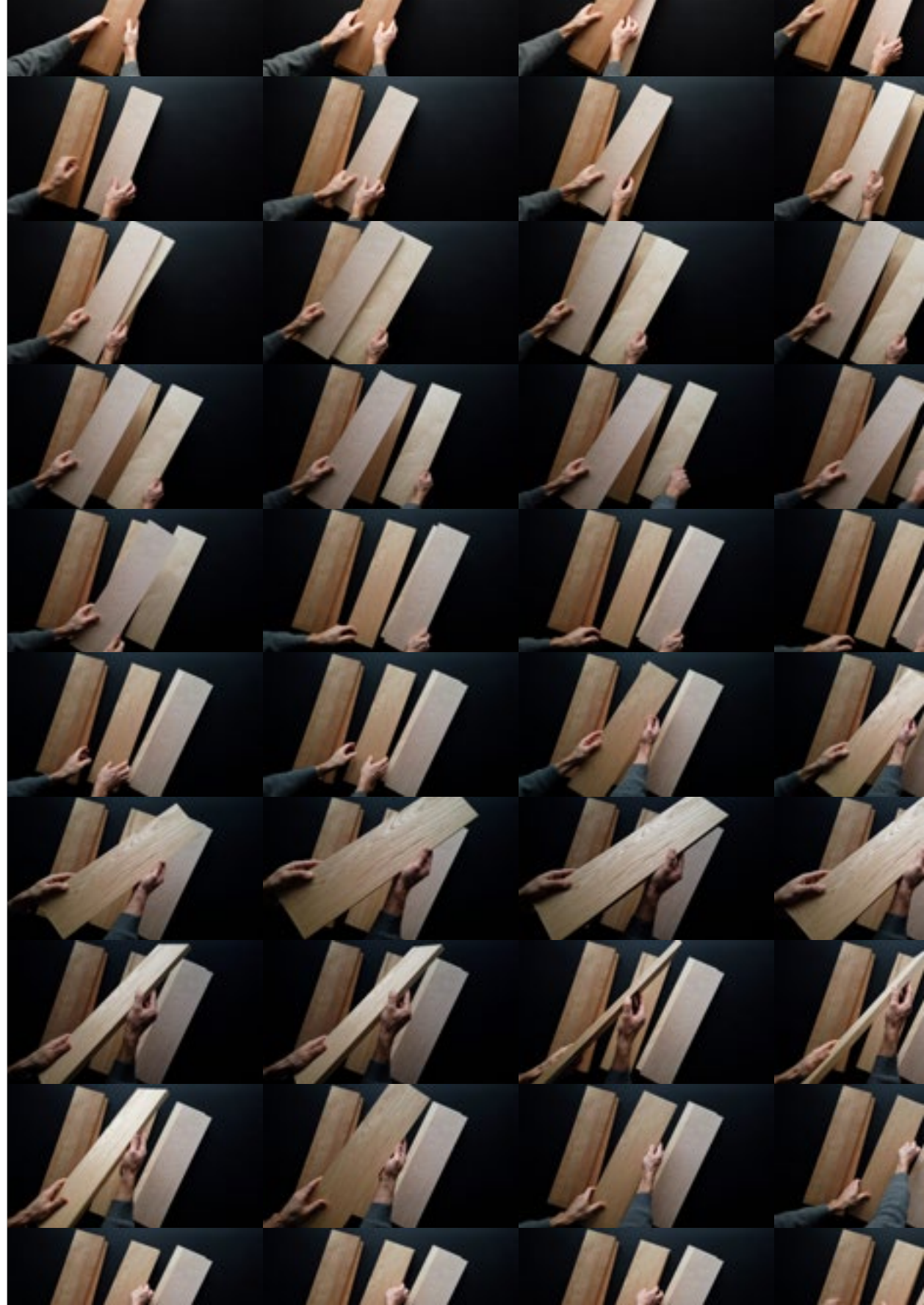


The image features a minimalist, abstract composition. A large, solid red square occupies the top-left quadrant. A diagonal line extends from the bottom-right corner of this square towards the top-right corner of the entire page, creating a white triangular area in the top-right. The remaining space is white. In the bottom-left corner, the text 'Connected' and 'Made Together Apart' is displayed in a red, sans-serif font.

Connected
Made Together Apart

MADE
TOGETHER
APART



Contents

INTRODUCTION

Foreword	08
Into the Woods	10

1. THE JOURNEY

Ini Archibong	20
Maria Bruun	32
Jaime Hayon	44
Sebastian Herkner	58
Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska	70
Sabine Marcelis	82
Heatherwick Studio	92
Studiopepe	104
Studio Swine	116

2. THE TABLES AND CHAIRS

The Kadamba Gate	130
Nordic Pioneer	136
Mesamachine	142
Stammtisch	148
Arco	152
Candy Cubicle	156
Stem	162
Pink Moon	166
Humble Administrator's Table and Chairs	172

3. THE PROJECT

Thinking Through Making	178
The Exhibition	182
Environmental Profile	188
Credits	192



Foreword

Justin McGuirk
*Chief Curator of the
Design Museum, London*

A year ago, asking a group of designers to set about designing some wooden desks and chairs would have felt redundant, possibly frivolous. But then, quite unexpectedly, these most conventional of design objects became worthy of re-examination. As the Covid-19 pandemic brought the global economy to a halt and we locked ourselves indoors, indoors came under a new scrutiny. Most of us had probably worked from home at least a little, but not all the time, and not for months on end. Now we were spending hour after hour on Zoom calls in bedrooms or at kitchen tables. It was these two conditions – being trapped in unideal homes and learning to work with colleagues through virtual meetings – that led to the *Connected* project.

Nine international designers were selected and given two challenges, though one was more of a gift. Each had to design their ideal workstation, and to design it exclusively for their own use, according to their own habits and idiosyncracies. A dream brief for a designer. The other challenge was to work only virtually, with a craft workshop in England, not setting foot in the workshop or laying a hand on a prototype. Remote working, but with wood – a frustrating constraint for a designer. Could this new sense of us all being connected online apply to the world of making solid things?

I remember well our early conversations with the designers. When Thomas Heatherwick spoke of how he imagined his worktable being an outcrop of plants, I looked at my own barren desk and the white wall it is pressed against and wondered, 'How have I been sat here for weeks and not once thought about modifying my environment?' I remember Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska describing how her home was no longer just a 'passage-way' between work and somewhere else. It was true, home had become everything and everywhere. And each Zoom call was a window into someone else's home. The impersonality of the office had been traded for an endless sequence of personal interiors.

The final constraint presented to the designers in rethinking their homeworking environment was that they had to work with American cherry or red oak or maple. Designing with choice timbers from the Appalachian Mountains is no hardship, and perhaps helped reconnect some of these designers with the pleasures of craftsmanship. At the time, I was immersed in curating an exhibition about Charlotte Perriand, who felt greatly enriched by her work with craftsmen and with wood in particular. Recalling the free-form tables she designed in the 1950s, she wrote in her autobiography, 'Wood is made for caressing'. You will see from their tables that all of these designers indulged themselves in the pleasures of that softness, and in the grain and the colour and the weight. They did not get the chance to caress anything until it was made, and some have not yet touched their tables at all, but they demonstrate that even when we can only communicate through pixelated screens, the world of making need not be poorer.

The importance of timber to the United States of America cannot be underestimated. As the author Robert Penn points out in his excellent book, *The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees* (2015): 'Some historians believe that ownership of the trees was as instrumental as taxation on tea in raising cries for political representation that brought about the American Revolution... the forest was not just a physical resource: it was also the environment where some have argued, the dynamism of the American character was forged.'

The timbers in the *Connected* project are found in the American hardwood forests which run from Maine in the north, down to the Mississippi in the south, taking in a portion of the Midwest. The forests themselves are much more diverse than they were 200 years ago, as Scott Seyler, American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) chairman is keen to stress from his home in Williamsport, Pennsylvania – which in the nineteenth century was considered the lumber capital of the world. When the forest was initially harvested there was a lot of clear-cutting. 'It wasn't thought out well environmentally,' he says. 'But when the forest came back, it was very strong with a variety of shade-intolerant species like cherry and oak to go along with maple, ash and other hardwoods. Subsequently, a lot of attention was paid to forest practices. It has been – and continues to be – a tremendous success story. In fact, there is now more timber in Pennsylvania than there was a century ago.'

It's a similar tale across New England too. Colonists initially used the great pine trees that grew there as masts for the Royal Navy; after 1691 the best timber was reserved by law for its exclusive use. In the late eighteenth century, there was a boom in sheep farming and the majority of the southern part of the region was cleared. However, when cotton cloth started being manufactured cheaply in the 1830s, replacing woollen garments (especially undergarments), sheep farming collapsed and struggling New England farmers abandoned their farms and headed west for 'greener pastures'. As Jameson French, president and CEO of Northland Forest Products points out: 'Man hasn't been very kind to our forests over most of our history in North America, but luckily the forest has proven to be remarkably resilient.'

Selective harvesting opens up the canopy of the forest, letting wildlife trees flourish and encouraging young saplings to grow.

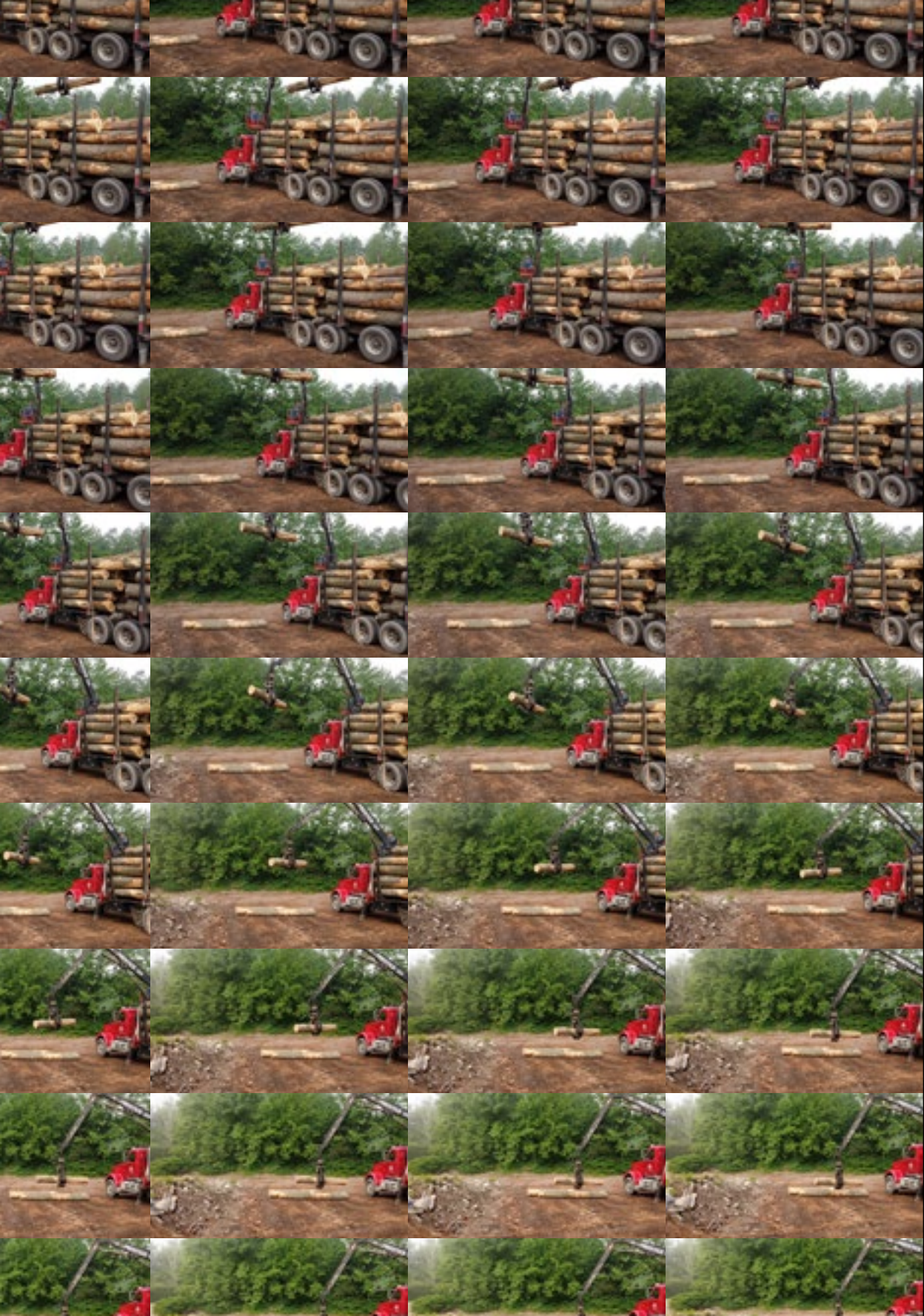


What are the forest's characteristics? Well, it's incredibly diverse, which is vital because it means if one species gets a blight then the whole region isn't completely destroyed. So when the chestnuts were wiped out, oaks could grow in their stead. Likewise, generations of careful harvesting mean it contains trees of many ages, creating a dynamic environment that is vital for carbon sequestration. As French points out: 'If you're managing a forest, you're removing some of the big trees every decade or so. Because you have a diversity of age class trees that are coming up behind – and as light is opened up in the forest – these young trees are able to get sunlight and grow.' The working forest also helps with water filtration, absorption of excess water and prevention of soil erosion. Most paramount, if the forest is properly managed and a genuine economic asset, then it is less likely to be developed than one lying dormant. 'Be in no doubt that effective forestry and selective harvesting are hugely important,' explains Seyler. 'There may be trees that are selected to remain because they make a great place for the birds and squirrels. You might then have trees that are targeted because of the result felling them would have on opening up the canopy, allowing shade-intolerant trees to flourish and contribute to diversity.'

French compares the eastern hardwood forests to their European counterparts, which he describes as 'more manicured, single species planted forests'. 'What grows is what grows best on that site,' he explains. 'You need to consider what the natural forest would look like if you didn't manipulate it.' Which is a lovely sentiment, of course, but doesn't it make business a little more difficult? The duo agree it's a question of holding your collective nerve and not simply kowtowing to the market. 'Just because soft maple, for instance, is out of favour in the market place, it doesn't mean you shouldn't be growing it,' says French. 'In the next cycle, it may come back in. I think fashion is very dangerous for the sustainability of anything. It has driven the harvest of timber around the world for centuries.' The forests also benefit from being owned by a slew of private individuals and families. French, for example, comes from a clan that has been in the hardwood industry since the late 1880s. They become custodians of the land, passing it from generation to generation, rather than taking short-term decisions for easy profit.



High Knob Overlook, North Central Pennsylvania – an area that was completely stripped in the late 1800s but is now one of the main hardwood producing states in the U.S., with nearly 70% of the land covered in forest land.



RED OAK

Keeping forest land as timber land prevents large expanses of forest from becoming developed, maintains air quality and clean water and aids biodiversity.

One of the curiosities of red oak is its name. After all, the wood itself isn't red – although it does sometimes possess a pink hue. Instead, it derives its moniker from the colour of its leaves in the autumn. Importantly, it is the most abundant species in America's hardwood forests and can be found through much of the eastern United States.

A typical red oak tree reaches a height of 21 metres, with a trunk diameter of 1m, and will take around 80 years to mature. One of the wood's key characteristics is its open, porous grain structure, which allows it to take up stain extremely well. It also means that, when soaked, water can travel through the timber, softening it and making it good for steam bending. The wood has a coarse, tactile texture and, as it grows across a continent with a slew of different climates, it can display variations in colour.

In recent years, red oak hasn't been used regularly in Europe, with manufacturers often preferring indigenous oaks, but this might be about to change. It has similar properties to white oak but, due to its availability in the American forests, the wood comes in a huge range of specification options (or sizes) and represents excellent value for money.

Ultimately, this is a warm, grainy, tough and bendy wood, which is full of character. It is the most popular hardwood in the U.S. and is also widely used in the Asian market.

CHERRY

While cherry trees aren't unique to the American hardwood forests – there are individual trees scattered in woodland across Europe, for instance – it does possess an important concentration. In fact, cherry makes up around 3 per cent of the American hardwood forest, and is most heavily concentrated in Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

A typical cherry tree reaches a height of 20 metres, with a trunk diameter of 50 centimetres, and takes 60 years to mature. The wood is easily recognisable by its warm red colour, while it also has a fine texture and a tight grain, which means it's smooth, almost glass-like, to the touch. The timber is moderately strong as well as being easy to machine, shape and connect. One of its more quirky traits are the dark 'gum streaks' that can form in its grain. These are created by the peach bark borer and other insects, but don't affect the performance of the wood itself.

Cherry was a popular timber in the furniture industry 20 years ago. However, more recently it has fallen from fashion. Perhaps though, it's time for it to be rediscovered. The wood is also used for panelling and veneers, and can often be found in auditoriums and concert halls because of its acoustic properties.

It is a rich, smooth, vibrant and flexible wood, quietly adored by the industry's cognoscenti.

MAPLE

There are two groups of maple – hard and soft. Yet, it's important to point out that, in the latter's case, its name is misleading as both woods are relatively hard and heavy. They are also reasonably common, making up around 15 per cent of the American hardwood forest. However, there are small anatomical details between the two groups that create some performance differences. Hard maple is heavier, and generally stronger, for instance. The trees grow in colder climates – so north of New York state and into Canada – while soft maple grows everywhere across the forests, meaning there tends to be more variations in the wood.

Eight species of maple are used commercially for timber and veneer – four hard and four soft – and a typical American maple tree can reach heights of 23 to 27 metres, with a trunk diameter of 75 centimetres. The wood has a fine grain and is white, almost translucent, in appearance.

A little like cherry, maple has rather fallen out of fashion with furniture manufacturers and designers in Europe, but is surely due a comeback. After all it is strong, machines well and can be stained to look like other species if necessary. It can also be used for a variety of things, from kitchenware to sports hall floors and other high traffic areas.

This is a light, fine, flexible, tough wood... oh, and the trees produce a really tasty syrup to boot.

Section 1

The Journey



Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Ini Archibong
The Kadamba Gate





The Giant's Causeway, Northern Ireland. Legend has it that the 40,000 interlocking, basalt columns are the remains of a causeway built by giants. The area was, in fact, created millions of years ago as the result of a volcanic fissure eruption.

There is an ethereal quality to the work of Ini Archibong. He is a designer fascinated by the relationship between heaven and earth – and as such, resides firmly on the fine art end of design's spectrum of activity. However, that hasn't prevented him from working with the likes of Sé, Hermès, Knoll and Bernhardt Design. The American has led a near-nomadic life. Born and raised on the outskirts of Los Angeles in Pasadena, California, Archibong toyed with the notion of going to business school, before studying architecture. He finally found his metier when he joined the environmental design programme at the ArtCenter College of Design in his hometown. It was there he came to the attention of Jerry Helling, president of Bernhardt Design, and his career began to take shape. Subsequently, Archibong worked with designer Tim Kobe in Singapore before gaining a place at the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne in Switzerland. He currently has a one-man studio in Neuchâtel.

MAY 2020. NEUCHÂTEL, SWITZERLAND

As the pandemic is raging across Europe, the designer is still trying to figure out how it will change his practice and appears to be enjoying not having to spend quite as much of his life at an airport. 'Things have obviously slowed down a bit in terms of production – factories have been closed. From my side, since I work with a lot of craftsmen, my biggest concern is that they're able to ride it out and get back to work so they can sustain themselves,' he says. 'As designers we're a little bit insulated from that sort of thing because we have the ability to work with multiple clients. I think it's important to remember that the people who rely on being in a factory are affected a lot more than I am in my daily life. Other than that, I'm a solitary worker. I don't have a big studio. I work here at home. So it hasn't really interfered with my process.'

Although he's known for his use of glass, one of the attractions of the *Connected* project is the opportunity it affords him to work in one of his favourite materials. 'I love wood,' he explains. 'I guess when I started designing and making with my hands, wood was the first material that I worked with – you know taking shop class [workshop skills] in school. It has always been special to me.'

He appears to be quite advanced in his thinking about the piece. 'Honestly, I have the design done,' he says. 'But you never know. It isn't finished until it's finished, right?' So, the obvious question is what the idea behind his design might be? And here things get, well, spiritual. 'There are many layers. There's an idea of being connected to the earth, the earth being connected to the stars, and the notion of microcosm and macrocosm,' he says. 'That led me to being inspired by the Giant's Causeway and its columns of basalt hexagons. The concept is to create a form of language for the base reaching up from the

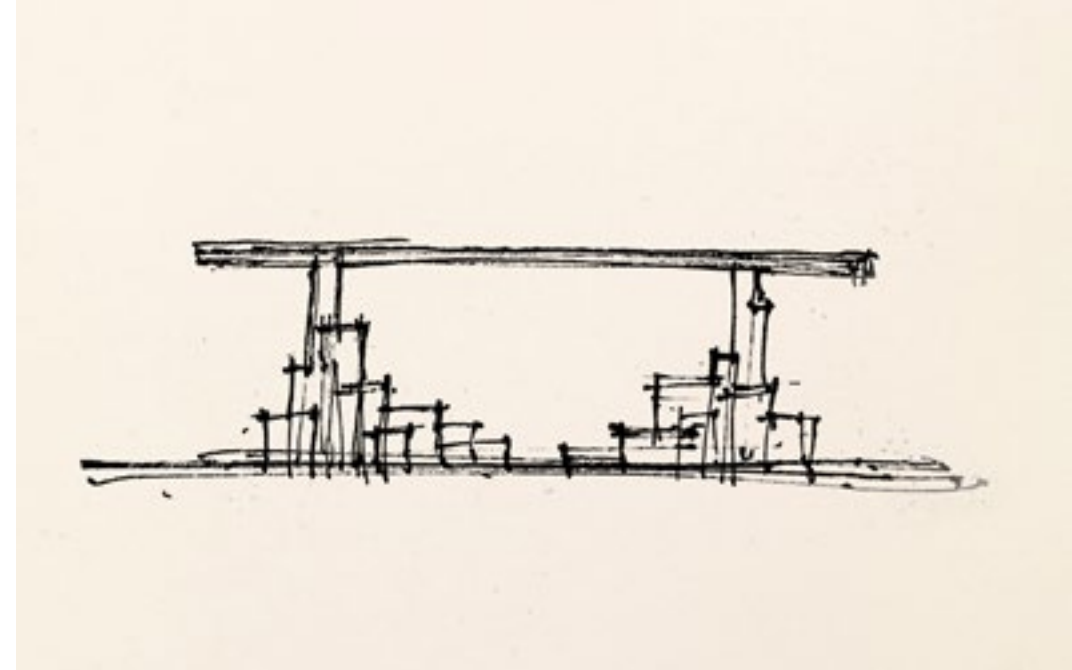
ground to hold the tabletop, which represents the sky. The process has used algorithms to generate natural shapes. I wanted it to look organic and non-repeating.' He is planning to use an assemblage of offcuts from the workshop to create his legs, so in this instance, the three species of timber the designers have been asked to use seem less important. 'The idea is that they come from different species – it's a statement about globalisation, humanity and life in the twenty-first century,' he attests.

'I DO MOST OF IT IN MY HEAD. ONCE I HAVE A BRIEF OR A CONCEPT BEGINNING TO FORM I JUST CONSUME A LOT OF STUFF RELATED TO IT – WHETHER IT'S BOOKS OR MUSIC OR STUFF THAT I NOTICE WALKING AROUND – UNTIL I HAVE A BANK OF INSPIRATION AND ALL THE IDEAS ARE FLOATING IN THE SAME SOUP.'

While the other designers are assiduously filling up sketchbooks of ideas, Archibong takes a different creative route. 'I do most of it in my head. Once I have a brief or a concept beginning to form, I just consume a lot of stuff related to it – whether it's books or music or stuff that I notice walking around – until I have a bank of inspiration and all the ideas are floating in the same soup,' he says, adding, 'then eventually it crystallises into a form or some kind of object in my head. Subsequently, I turn it around and look at it from all angles until I understand it. Once that happens, I'm usually ready to get on the computer and make the model.' Currently, he's listening to the likes of Quintessence, Piano Overlord and Weather Report. The finished results promise to be intriguing.

SEPTEMBER 2020. NEUCHÂTEL, SWITZERLAND

Archibong's piece, entitled *The Kadamba Gate*, is finished. There is a surfboard-like quality to the bright green tabletop and matching benches, while the legs bear more than a passing resemblance to the promised Giant's Causeway. Perhaps the biggest surprise for Benchmark is that, during the process, Archibong decided that the piece should be for outdoor use. 'It represents the type of work that I feel has been missing from my life since my career started ramping up. It's an outdoor fantasy play worktable. I don't think they expected that,' says the designer with a broad grin. 'So, then we had to consider how to make it suitable for working outside with the species we were going to be using.' The answer was to finish the tabletop with an epoxy resin, making the piece waterproof. However, drainage was still an issue. So, it was designed with a camber that directed excess water towards drainage holes, disguised by an



Above: Original pen to paper sketch by Ini from the start of the project.

Below: the fully formed computer render by Ini.





Hexagonal brass inlays mirror the random rock formations of the Giant's Causeway, doubling as covers for water drainage holes.

enjoyably tactile, honeycomb-shaped brass inlay, and through some connecting tubes to the ground below. The finishing touch is a leather cover, for when the piece isn't being used.

On reflection, Archibong says, he agreed to take part in the project because: 'I don't have a lot of opportunities to design things that are for me. A lot of my work is client-based product design whereas this allowed me to experiment with the type of work that might go into gallery spaces and that's more creative and less industry-driven.' The extraordinary set of circumstances also provided some impetus. 'The other thing that really intrigued me was designing something that's based on how we work but that is also going into a museum. I've done a task chair before that was sold on the contract market and you kind of have to make things that go well with everybody else's furniture and fulfil the very specific needs of the workplace. The way I work is a little different to most and so the result is probably not a table that anyone else would use for a typical office.'

The designer ended up using cherry, red oak and thermally modified red oak, although the suspicion remains that the type of timber was not his prime interest. 'I knew my process was to try and do something sustainable and to use wood that would normally be discarded. So more than a particular species, it was about figuring out the constraints that would come from trying to use timber that maybe didn't have a home.'

Working digitally, without being able to visit Benchmark and meet the craftsmen, didn't seem to disturb Archibong's equilibrium. He puts this down to working by himself, rather than with a team. 'That usually entails a lot of working digitally,' he explains, 'making sure technical drawings are up to par for the manufacturer. It was difficult not to get into the workshop as much as I usually would but, to be honest, Sean [Sutcliffe] and the Benchmark team made it so it didn't feel that bad.' However, he's also keen to stress that he doesn't want to be cooped up in his apartment the whole time. 'I don't necessarily want this to be the way I work from now on. You lose the opportunity for a certain kind of novelty that comes from being in the room with experts.'

Ultimately this is a piece that Archibong has long-term – and charming – plans for. 'I was thinking a lot about creating an heirloom and making a table that my daughter could grow with. The Giant's Causeway basalt formation was manifested in a way that would be fun for her. She loves to play with blocks. It was also about creating a table where I could get my area to work, while she was building her micro-architectures. I hope one day to have a home where this table could reside, that weeds grow over it and, maybe, a grandchild someday could be playing at it.'





A green, epoxy resin coating protects the red oak tabletop from the elements, and the slight camber of the top encourages drainage from the surface.

MAKING THE KADAMBA GATE

'We started off with a narrative around heaven and earth,' recalls Sean Sutcliffe. 'We'd got a little way down that path when Ini surprised us by saying the table was going outdoors. We gulped.' Why? Because none of the timbers in the *Connected* project are meant for outside use. As a result, Benchmark had to devise a method of waterproofing the piece.

Initially, Sutcliffe's team looked at using thermally modified timber, which has been baked at a high temperature converting the cellulose and making it less attractive to the microbial life that's responsible for rotting wood. However, it doesn't take colour so well and the piece was meant to be an iridescent green.

Eventually red oak was specified because it's the most durable of the three timbers; the top was shaped and drainage points inserted. The piece was finished with a waterproof gloss lacquer that sealed the wood. Cherry and thermally modified red oak timber were used for the base.

TIMBER:
American cherry, red oak and thermally modified red oak

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
42kg CO₂ (equivalent to a 329km drive in a typical family car)

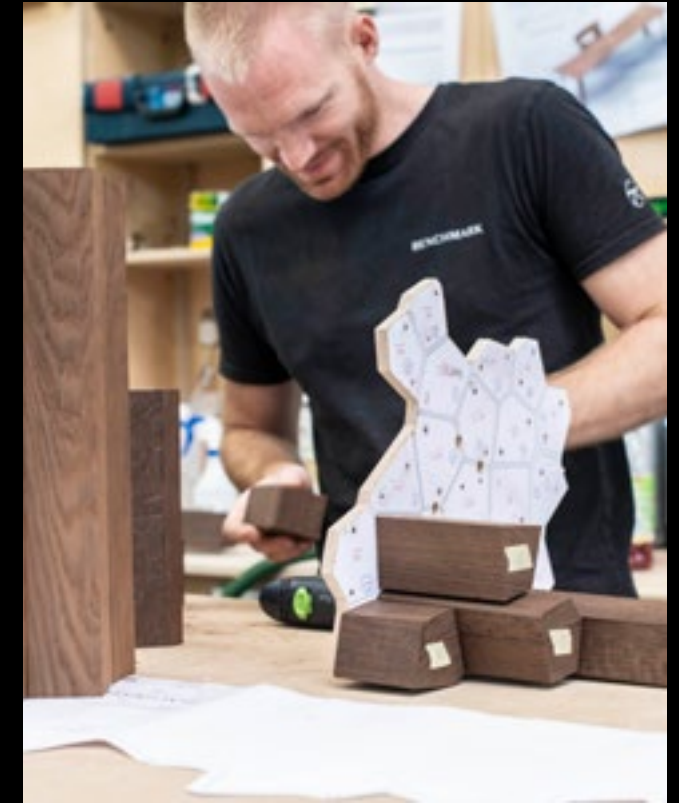
0.6 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 209kg of red oak and 24kg of cherry to be replaced by new growth in the forest



Opposite: Thermally modified red oak used for the hexagonal columns of the base.

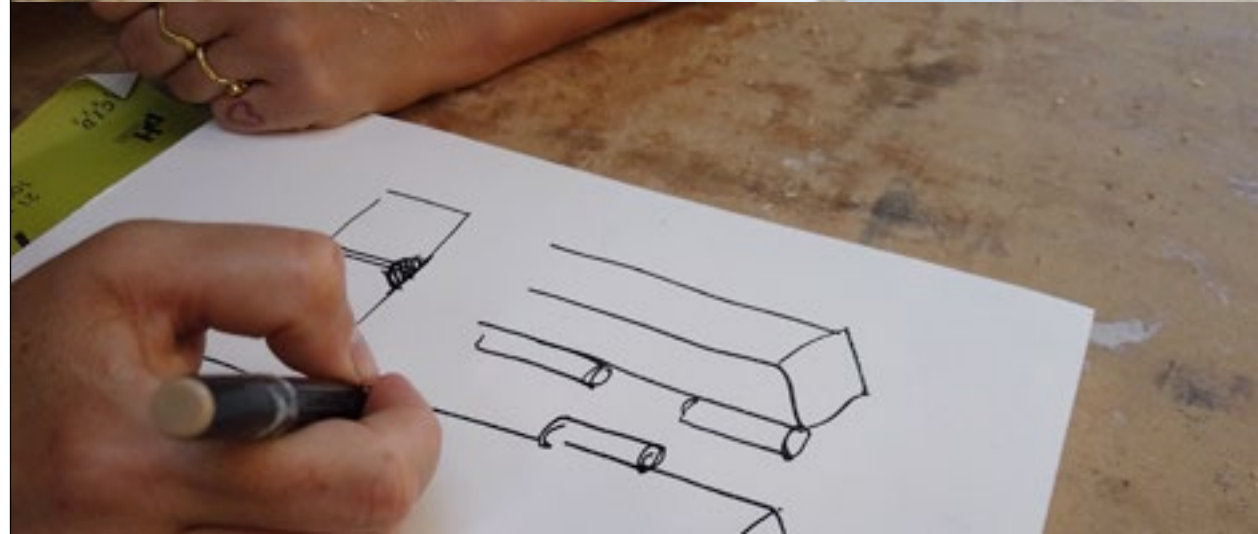
Right: Organic shapes are carefully plotted on to a computer-generated pattern.

Below: Brass inlays act as clever disguises for the table's drainage points.



Copenhagen, Denmark

Maria Bruun
Nordic Pioneer



Rather than creating them herself, the 'new normal' meant that Maria was reliant on Benchmark posting prototypes to her to test the intricate features of the table and chairs.



Maria Bruun is a designer whose output resides somewhere in the hinterland between the industrial and the handmade. After graduating from the School of Design at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2012, she came to wider attention in 2014 when her series of mirrors – entitled *Mirror Mirror* and notable for the fact they reflected from several angles – won the Danish Design Award's Design of the Year. In 2019 she picked up the Emerging Talent prize from the Danish Arts Foundation and has carved out an international reputation for creating thoughtful, beautiful pieces in timber, which have obviously been influenced by her Scandinavian background. 'I am in many ways standing on the shoulders of historic Scandinavian designers,' she explains. 'I know that we are respected worldwide for our design and it's part of my aesthetic upbringing – part of me – that I can't remove. And I wouldn't want to remove it because it gives me easy access to the world – someone has already made the path for me and I can step onto that. But I also think that in many ways I view the traditions differently. I can tap into some of the classic ideas of Danish design but I try to disrupt them and take them into a new narrative.'

MAY 2020. COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

There's a sense of quiet confidence about Bruun. She is, after all, very much in her element. 'I feel pretty at home being invited to do this project,' she says. 'Wood is my material, so I know how this works.' That said, the virus and ensuing lockdown have obviously transformed the way she would like to work. 'I almost always insist on doing my prototypes myself, it's part of my learning. As soon as I know how to operate the materials and the machines around them, I know what's possible. And then I can push those boundaries.'

It's also clear that the piece she has in mind has been directly inspired by the way she, and many other people, have been forced to live – juggling work with family life. Her partner, who consults on rehabilitation programmes for war veterans, is also home and they're both looking after their child at the same time. As a result, Bruun wanted to create furniture that provided her with private space. 'I wanted something that was mine – like a place of reflection that I could leave and nothing would be touched when I came back,' she says. 'That's what I do in my studio. I leave things and I have them in the back of my mind. I might not be doing anything with them but they're in my presence and I still think about them. I really needed that in my home life – a place where I could leave everything else as it was.' However, by the same token, she also has an eye on the post-Covid future. Her notion is that the desk could fold out and guests would be able to join her in the space by sitting on the stools. 'The way I understand the brief is to be connected physically and mentally again. So I wanted to extend my table and extend my space.'



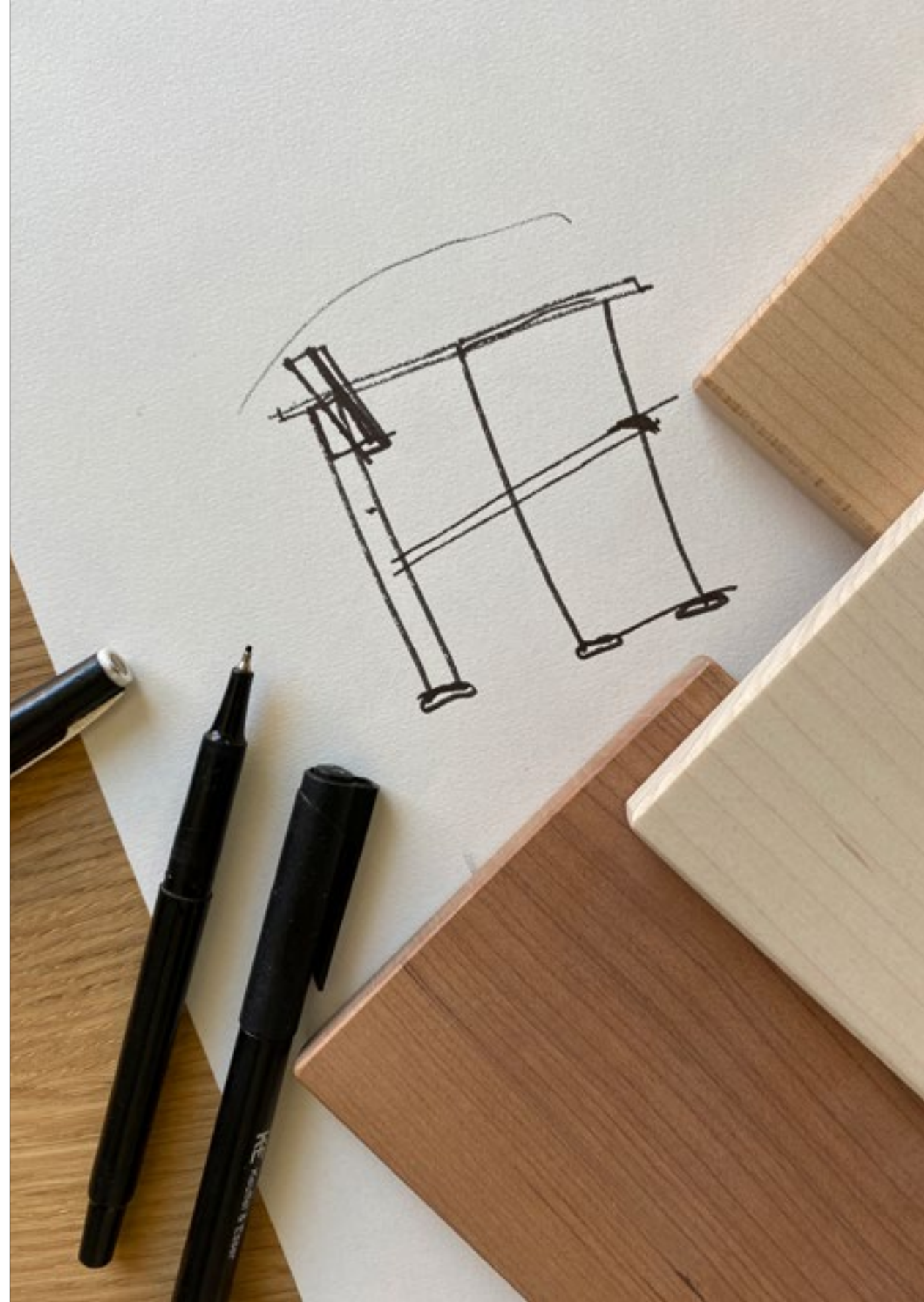
Left: Maria's material library, including samples of red oak, cherry and maple that were sent to all of the designers as a starting point to explore the potential of the three timbers.

Opposite: Original sketch by Maria Bruun. Flexibility and adaptability were crucial elements when Maria was forming the design. The piece needed to fit into both her work and home life in an unobtrusive way.

It's a charming notion and, while the piece isn't the most exuberant of the *Connected* bunch, it's one in which the minutiae really matters. As the designer is keen to stress, a little prophetically: 'What you will see from me are details that contain some very carefully carried out craftsmanship. I'm not saying what I'm doing is rocket science, but it is quite complex.' This includes some wooden rotational joints which are key to the project's success.

SEPTEMBER 2020. COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

Although Bruun has yet to see her design physically, she seems delighted with the results. 'The piece came from my own challenges during lockdown – being at home, trying to maintain my work life but also trying to keep it separate from my family. Concentrating for long periods was really challenging. My needs were about focus and my own safe space.' *Nordic Pioneer* consists of a desk, chair and a pair of stackable stools, all made from maple. The name, she explains, comes from the idea that 'an important characteristic of a pioneer is to explore new knowledge, take away from a situation and then transform and activate that knowledge into a new context. The furniture is





A private workspace was one of the key elements Maria was missing after being thrown into a new working-from-home set-up.

pioneering in a moment when the concept of housing is changing. Pioneers must be flexible and adaptable — therefore the furniture can be changed as needed.'

Of the three available timbers, maple was the obvious choice to work in. 'It has a few qualities that I found intriguing,' she confirms. 'I like the narrow veins of the wood and it's very soft — it has a sensual touch. Also, it's so white and light, it has an almost invisible presence. It's very, very easy to be around.' There are a couple of elements of the work that are impossible not to notice. As predicted, making the wooden hinge so that the mechanism is nearly undetectable provided designer and maker with a real challenge. 'It was difficult to sort it out without being able to stand face-to-face and each explain how we wanted it to work,' Bruun recalls. However, they got there in the end. 'Trust is essential between a designer and craftsman — the connection between the person who created the idea and the hands that turn it into reality. I cherish the dialogue I have with the craftspeople I work with. It's where you develop the details. I want to be able to learn from the person creating the piece, discovering my options and possibilities. In the case of the chair, normally I would be able to make adjustments. However, in this case, I have to trust that we share the same values when we're sitting on a piece.'

The other talking point is the feet, each square leg finished at the bottom by a doughnut of timber. She came up with the design partly for practical reasons — giving the legs a more contoured finish that meant they were less likely to scrape across her floor — but it also provides the piece with an important sense of movement. Or as Bruun believes, 'the character that it would almost move during the night. That it could kind of nudge itself into another place in the apartment.' It's a deliberately quirky, almost lyrical touch to a collection that Bruun otherwise describes as being 'strict'. And she's right, the collection is less obviously organic than one might expect from a Scandinavian designer. 'It gives that sense of order that I needed,' she explains. 'I wanted a calm, strong structure that had a very rational approach.'

And what has she learned? 'There's a lot of stuff that I'd still do when the world returns to normal,' she concludes. 'As a designer, I think we can all save a lot on travel. We could meet less and meet more efficiently. That said, I've also discovered that I need the personal ping-pong — the back and forth of conversation with the maker — to be able to develop good pieces. Ultimately the virus has effected my whereabouts, my exhibitions and my whole design calendar. But I've also found an enormous amount of strength in the fact that I am able to create from wherever I am.' It's an uplifting sentiment on which to end.



For the tabletop rippled maple was used — named so because it appears as if the grain has curled along the length of the board. It's still not clear what causes this occasional phenomenon when the tree is growing.

Opposite: One of many digital design discussions between the designer and maker.

‘TRUST IS ESSENTIAL BETWEEN A DESIGNER AND CRAFTSMAN — THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE PERSON WHO CREATED THE IDEA AND THE HANDS THAT TURN IT INTO REALITY. I CHERISH THE DIALOGUE I HAVE WITH THE CRAFTSPEOPLE I WORK WITH. IT’S WHERE YOU DEVELOP THE DETAILS.’



According to Sean Sutcliffe, *Nordic Pioneer* is quintessentially Danish. 'It's rational. It's restrained. It has a simplicity but it's also beautifully crafted,' he says. Arguably its defining feature is its wooden hinges, 'Maria wanted the functionality of a drop-leaf table but she wanted to achieve that only in wood,' he continues. 'The design also called for a gate-leg and so she wanted wooden hinges on both.'

The doughnut detail – or 'bun' as Sutcliffe refers to it – at the bottom of the legs presented a hurdle for the manufacturers. 'There has to be spacing between the legs to accommodate the bun feet and that challenges the geometry of a hinge,' Sutcliffe explains. 'A hinge likes to work around a single pivot point, not a dual pivot point, so there was a lot of mocking up to do.'

Benchmark was supplied with a parcel of rippled maple for the table. 'It's an attractive rarity found in maple and it gives a real elevation to the simplicity of the piece,' says Sutcliffe. 'It's actually a pretty exotic temperate hardwood.'

TIMBER:
American maple

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-56kg CO₂ (equivalent to a -438km drive in a typical family car)

0.9 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 179kg of maple used to be replaced by new growth in the forest



Opposite: Stackable stools machined from solid maple follow the design language of the rounded feet.

Above: The detail of the foot was important to the character of the furniture. It appears almost as if the piece could move itself.

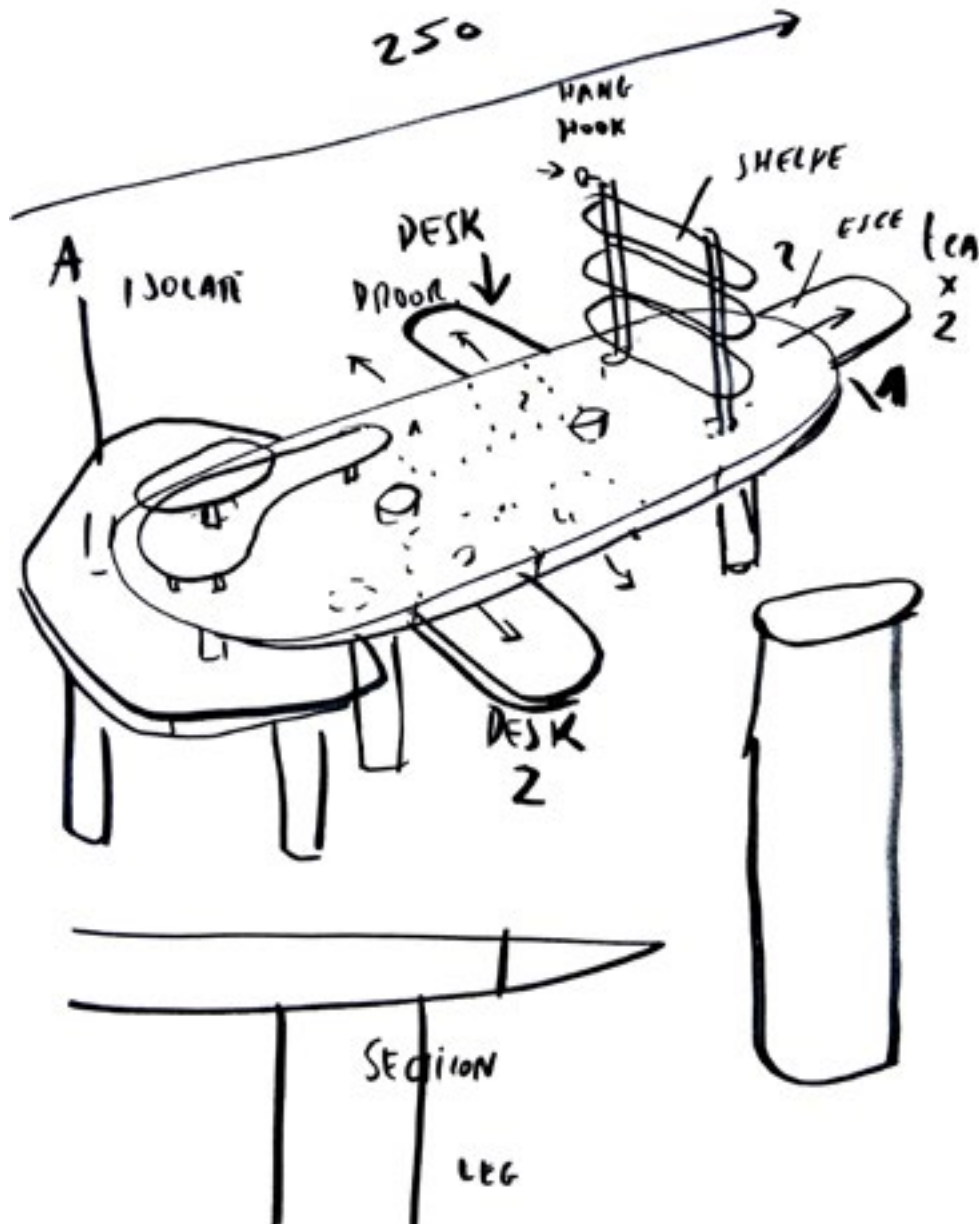
Left: Bar a single brass rod running through the inside, the meticulously crafted wooden hinge is made entirely from timber.

Valencia, Spain

Jaime Hayon
Mesamachine



Table * DESK - MACHINE*



Original sketch by Jaime Hayon. From the outset, *Mesamachine* (translated as 'table machine') needed to be a space where the different parts of Jaime's life could meet – a space to host family and friends but at the same time a space to work.

Ebullient is the word that best sums up Jaime Hayon. In an interview situation or a Zoom call, for instance, a question is answered with a torrent of thoughts and words. And his work is much like the man himself – colourful, bold, intricate, flamboyant even, but never less than thoughtful. The designer's background is well known but bears repetition. He was part of Madrid's emerging skateboard scene in the early 1990s, creating graphics for decks. After a sojourn in San Diego designing for skate-related brands, he returned to the Spanish capital and got a place at the Istituto Europeo di Design. Subsequently, he went to legendary art director Oliviero Toscani's design institute, Fabbrica, in Treviso, Italy, and within a year of arriving he had worked his way up to head of the design department.

Since opening his own studio in 2001, Hayon has skillfully trodden a path between design, art and interiors, creating furniture for the likes of BD Barcelona, Cassina and Fritz Hansen, lighting for Swarovski and objects for companies such as Bisazza, Lladró and Baccarat. In the process, he has become part of an elite group of designers – once dubbed the 'permanently jet-lagged' by critic Deyan Sudjic – that spend huge swathes of their time on a plane, going from manufacturer to manufacturer, new product launch to new product launch, international design festival to international design festival.

MAY 2020. VALENCIA, SPAIN

Hayon's work habits have changed overnight. 'I travel a lot – to meet clients, exhibit work and so on. So not travelling any more is the biggest thing as usually I'm away 15 days, or sometimes 20 days a month. I live my life in airports and planes,' he explains. 'Also, it has been quite interesting to understand that we can do a lot of things without travelling that much. But on the other hand, I've realised that the biggest change of all has been the opportunity to sit down peacefully with my ideas. And that's amazing. Honestly, I haven't done that for 20 years because I'm always on the move: putting my sketchbook in my backpack and working in the plane or the lounge or in the hotel. Now I've realised that I can have a really easy morning and a good coffee. I can chill out and still work with South Korea, London and New York. So, it has been very interesting in that way. My perspective has changed a lot in the last weeks.'

The brief for the project is perfectly in tune with his current situation, marooned at home with his family. 'I've been working at the table in my home forever! Moving around, doing lots of stuff, sharing thoughts, working, having a wine, the kids making models and lots of other things. So, it shows how important this brief has suddenly become. It's very, very exciting. I liked the idea immediately.' It helps too that the project was centred around timber, one of his favourite materials. 'It's a material that's alive; it's a material that changes; it's a mate-

rial that challenges you. It has elasticity but it has limits. You cannot do everything with it. You cannot pretend to understand it properly,' he says. 'It's a fascinating material. All the generations have used it to create something as small and incredibly delicate as a spoon to something gigantic like a Shigeru Ban building. It's beautiful.'

And he has a pretty good idea of what he wants to create, although at this stage he's reticent about giving away too many details, saying enigmatically: 'I know the material but I want to start again from zero — it's about enjoying it as if I was a child and seeing what I can do with it. It's almost as if I were constructing Lego. I hope it will look fascinating for everyone.' There's a real sense that he's going to set Benchmark a challenge.

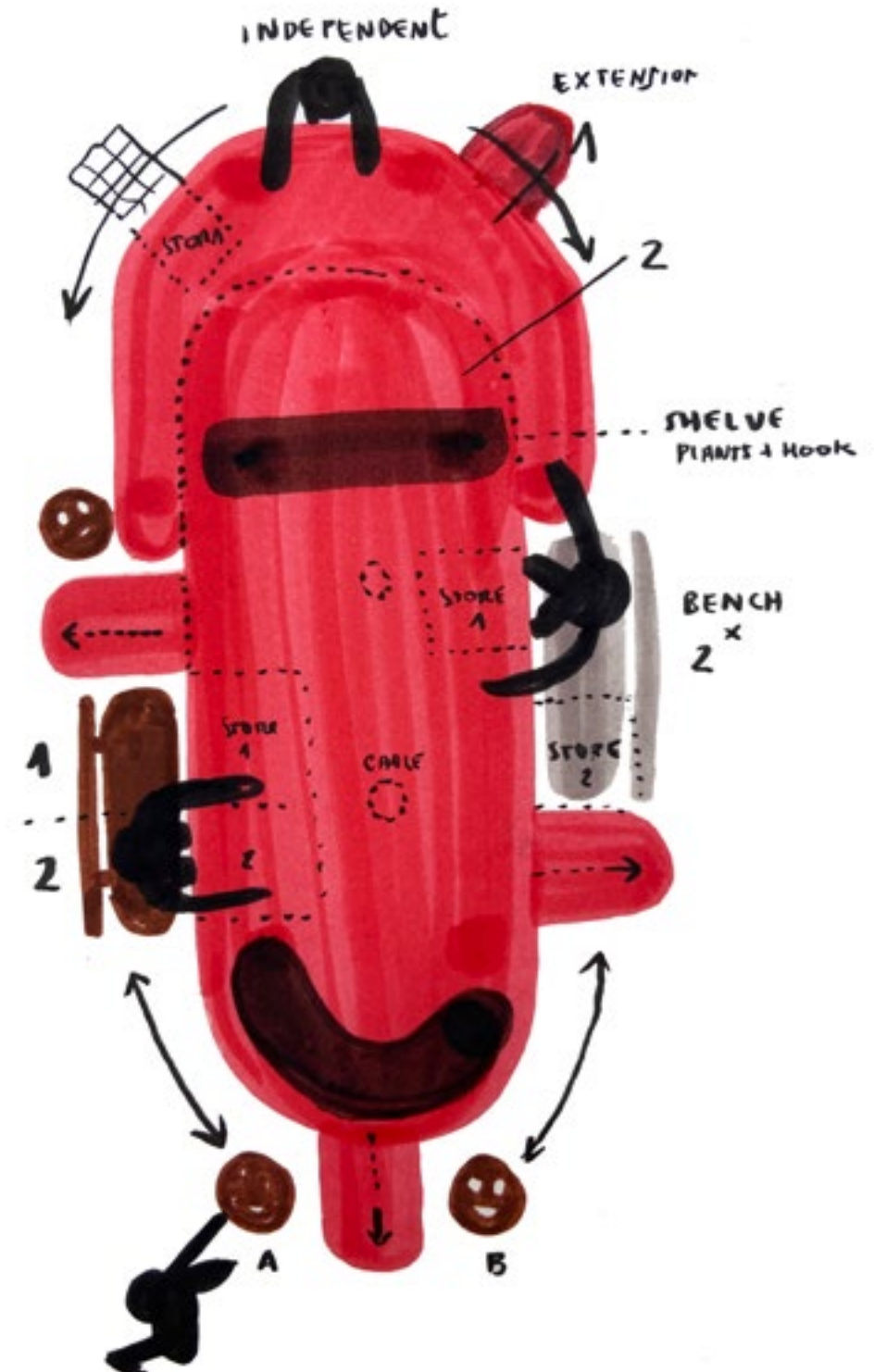
SEPTEMBER 2020. VALENCIA, SPAIN

The virus is in abeyance and it has given Hayon some time to reflect on how his practice has been affected during this extraordinary year. 'We're doing loads of different projects and it's not easy. It's complicated. We're restructuring our minds. Obviously, we're doing a lot online, but it's not the same. It's a completely different mindset, a completely different way of thinking,' he says. 'I did a lot more sketching, and there's a lot more explaining through video. Also, a lot of long discussions because often it isn't easy to make yourself understood. It has been quite challenging. At the same time, I would say it's very surprising because I've seen the work we've done over this period and I'm amazed at the quality and detail. I don't know, maybe I have to stay at home forever. It gets better when I'm not there.'

'IT'S A MATERIAL THAT'S ALIVE;
IT'S A MATERIAL THAT CHANGES; IT'S
A MATERIAL THAT CHALLENGES YOU. IT
HAS ELASTICITY BUT IT HAS LIMITS.
YOU CANNOT DO EVERYTHING WITH IT.
YOU CANNOT PRETEND TO UNDERSTAND
IT PROPERLY.'

It's safe to say that his finished work, entitled *Mesamachine*, is a hugely complex piece of furniture that provides a single space in which to work, play and eat with the family. The main table frame is made up like a hollow torsion box, with tensioning ribs running along its length. There are various storage solutions and extending shelves, as well as a pair of stools (with smiley faces cut out of the seats, a typical Hayon touch) and a bench. The designer compares it to a Swiss Army knife. 'I thought that the table could do the same thing as a Victorinox. It could expand. It could reduce. It could have two places to sit,

Original sketch by Jaime Hayon. Like a Swiss-Army Knife, the table can be pushed, pulled, extended so that the main function can be changed without having to move everything around.





Cherry was the timber of choice and, whilst injecting some humour into the design, Jaime wanted to honour the simplicity of a material used for centuries and that will be used for generations to come.

places to share, places to organise. So, for me, it's a machine, not a table anymore.'

He wasn't entirely certain which timber to specify in May but decided to make the piece in cherry. 'It was really hard for me to choose,' he says. 'We had a big discussion about it. Ultimately cherry was my favourite because of the grain. It doesn't really change very much. Something I had clear in mind is that the piece had to have the same finish all over, so it would look like a sculptural work.' He has just seen the first images of the finished article and gushes in praise for the maker. 'As a designer and an artist I wanted to challenge Sean and the workshop,' he says excitedly. 'I wanted to do something that was able to be refined. Something that people will think is really well done. Every angle is beautiful. Actually, I'm really proud of the underside of the table, the part nobody sees.'

Unlike some of the other designers on the project, Hayon had no problem disregarding the market and designing something specifically for his own use. 'I always design for myself first of all,' he explains, a broad grin spreading across his face. 'And it's not a selfish thing. It's like loving yourself then you can give love to the rest, right? It's an honest way of looking at design for me.' He's also sanguine about not being able to visit the factory – actually you sense he enjoyed the constraint, seeing it as a problem to surmount. 'The fact of not visiting the factory, not seeing Sean and his team, not seeing the atelier? That was a super interesting part. You can change your design because you see a detail you love in the factory. You can see somebody doing something specific. But we didn't have that, so you had to imagine it. You had to reconsider your way of designing.' When pushed, however, he will concede: 'Something that was really lacking was not being able to feel the weight or the tactility of the pieces and their "presence". That's the part I've missed but for the rest, it has been a great experience. It's possible to be home and be able to do a great job.'

And you sense this is what designing the *Mesamachine* for *Connected* during a period of huge uncertainty has taught Hayon: 'You learn that you can go on, no matter what'. He concludes with a sense of energy that radiates off the screen, 'Ideas win. And ideas are always going to win. We can do good things and we can create even if we're locked in. You can still be positive, and you can still do beautiful things with a human touch.'



The frame of the table is made up like a hollow torsion box with every angle just as beautiful as any other.



'Mesamachine is a really pure piece of cabinet making,' says Sean Sutcliffe. 'What makes it interesting, challenging and satisfying is that it is only made from wood. There is no element in it that isn't wooden.' At one stage Hayon had proposed mechanical runners on the drawers before deciding to make wooden versions instead. 'It's relentlessly wood,' continues Sutcliffe, 'and relentlessly one species. We were really lucky to get some fantastic American cherry for this. The grain runs through the satellite and the main table. It's cut from one length.'

Sometimes the designer's choice of timber is purely aesthetic. Sutcliffe says cherry was specified for the piece because 'Jaime just liked the look of it best. As far as I can remember no other wood was considered for it.'

The piece is made from a sandwich construction and the Benchmark team was worried about its balance. 'We were concerned that the shrinkage on the top would exert a lot of pull,' confirms Sutcliffe. But actually, Jaime had done a really sensible, rational and intelligent design of the spine.'

TIMBER:
American cherry

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-102kg CO₂ (equivalent to a -795km drive in a typical family car)

2 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 176kg of cherry to be replaced by new growth in the forest



Opposite: Hand-turning the stools on the lathe.

Above: Cutting out the curved elements of the trays.

Right: Jaime chose cherry for its grain, a timber that is light in colour when freshly cut and then darkens and mellows on exposure to light.



IDEAS WIN. AND IDEAS
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— Jaime Hayon

Offenbach, Germany

Sebastian Herkner
Stammtisch





Images taken by Sebastian whilst exploring Offenbach with his team in lockdown.

Sebastian Herkner is a product and furniture designer with a profound interest in craft. He opened his studio in Offenbach after graduating in product design from the German city's University of Art and Design in 2006. Arguably though, his big breakthrough came in 2012 when ClassiCon launched his *Bell* table. The piece combined subtle use of colour – something the designer attributes to a year he spent working at Stella McCartney while he was studying – with traditional techniques. The product's glass base, for instance, was hand blown using a timber mould at Freiherr von Poschinger – a company that was established in 1568 and is run by the fifteenth generation of the same family.

Since then, his rise has been rapid and a burgeoning portfolio includes pieces for the likes of Cappellini, Moroso, Thonet and Wittmann. In the process he has forged a genuinely international reputation that led to him being named Designer of the Year at the Paris-based furniture fair Maison&Objet in 2019.

MAY 2020. OFFENBACH, GERMANY

Herkner finds himself sitting in the living room of his apartment a little disorientated by the 'new normal'. 'For the first month and a half we stayed at home,' he explains. 'I have a team of five people and we tried our best to work on our current projects across Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp. It has been a new experience because usually we're in the workshop. We're next to each other; we have lunch together; we discuss all the projects; we sketch together. We have a normal studio life but now everyone is sat in their own kitchen. I put all the computers in boxes and drove them to my staff's various homes so they can work on the proper screens. It is a big change.'

Like many of the designers involved with *Connected*, Herkner treasures the relationships he builds with the makers and manufacturers of his products, developing new pieces over the course of months. Sometimes years. Working across video conferencing platforms is going to present a challenge, as he's keen to make clear. 'Design is about using all your senses. It's about touching, about seeing but, for me, it's also about the smell. I really enjoy the smell of the workshop and I imagine at Benchmark there's a beautiful wooden aroma. It's the same if you go to a glass workshop or a metal workshop. As a designer it's in my DNA to go and visit craftsmen. But this is a different way. It's a new adventure and I'm curious.'

His design is already taking shape – although he's not quite ready to go into too much detail yet, preferring to describe it with a broad brushstroke. 'Since I've been at home with my partner we've done nearly everything on our table. We've worked on it, had dinner, played cards. It has been the centre of our home,' he says. 'The table is such an important typology. So we're working on something that will be the centre of life.'



AUGUST 2020. OFFENBACH, GERMANY

It's nearing the end of August and Herkner has recently returned from a holiday in the former East Germany. He's never been before. 'We wanted to stay in the country this time. Infection figures are going up again here because people are coming back from vacation,' he says. Slowly restrictions are being brought in. 'We have to wear masks again and you're only allowed in restaurants in groups of four from the same family. Infection numbers are going up across Europe. Some friends of mine have just had to cancel their holiday to France, for example.'

'IN GERMANY IF YOU WANT TO CATCH UP WITH PEOPLE YOU MEET AT THE STAMMTISCH. IT'S A TABLE PEOPLE SIT AROUND AND HAVE BEER, EAT AND PLAY CARDS. IT'S A PLACE TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER. ON THE OTHER HAND, STAMMTISCH ALSO MEANS TREE TRUNK AS WELL AS TABLE.'

However, he has returned to the studio and appears to have plenty of work on the go. 'Finally it's good to be back with all my books and materials, as well as having proper conversations with my team.' That said, other than a short trip to Venice, projects are being communicated digitally. It's a question of making the best of the situation: 'We look at pictures and have Zoom calls but direct contact is always different. However, we have a new platform and new possibilities. We have to find a way to develop that because we don't know when Covid-19 will disappear.' In that sense it seems that *Connected* has acted as an extremely useful dress rehearsal for working with clients planning to take his products to market.

The studio is also learning to work in a slightly different manner: 'The speed has changed. It's much slower now. Normally I'm travelling a lot so I get feedback from clients on location, I can immediately WhatsApp the team and they can work on it. Now it's video presentations and discussions about prototyping. So on the one hand it takes longer, but on the other, in some ways, it's more efficient. Let's see what the products look like when they reach the market next year or in two years' time.'

His piece for *Connected* has just been finished in the Benchmark workshop and he's full of praise for the company's team of makers. Initially it feels as though the name of the table and stools needs unpicking. *Why Stammtisch?* 'Ah yes. In Germany if you want to catch up with people you meet at the stammtisch. It's a table people sit around and have beer, eat and play cards. It's a place to bring people together. On the other hand, stammtisch also means tree trunk as well as table. So it's an appropriate German word for the project. It's a table



From the sets of wood samples sent to the designers, Sebastian and his team started to select the finishes that had the most interesting surfaces and tactile feel.

Original sketch by Sebastian Herkner and his team. The final shape of the table is an organic form, in reference to the shape of a tree trunk. Individual trays sit at different heights and can be moved along the surface of the table.



for my home office but also for a small dinner, which we have been allowed to do here. It's the heart of the living room. Something solid, something honest, something functional.'

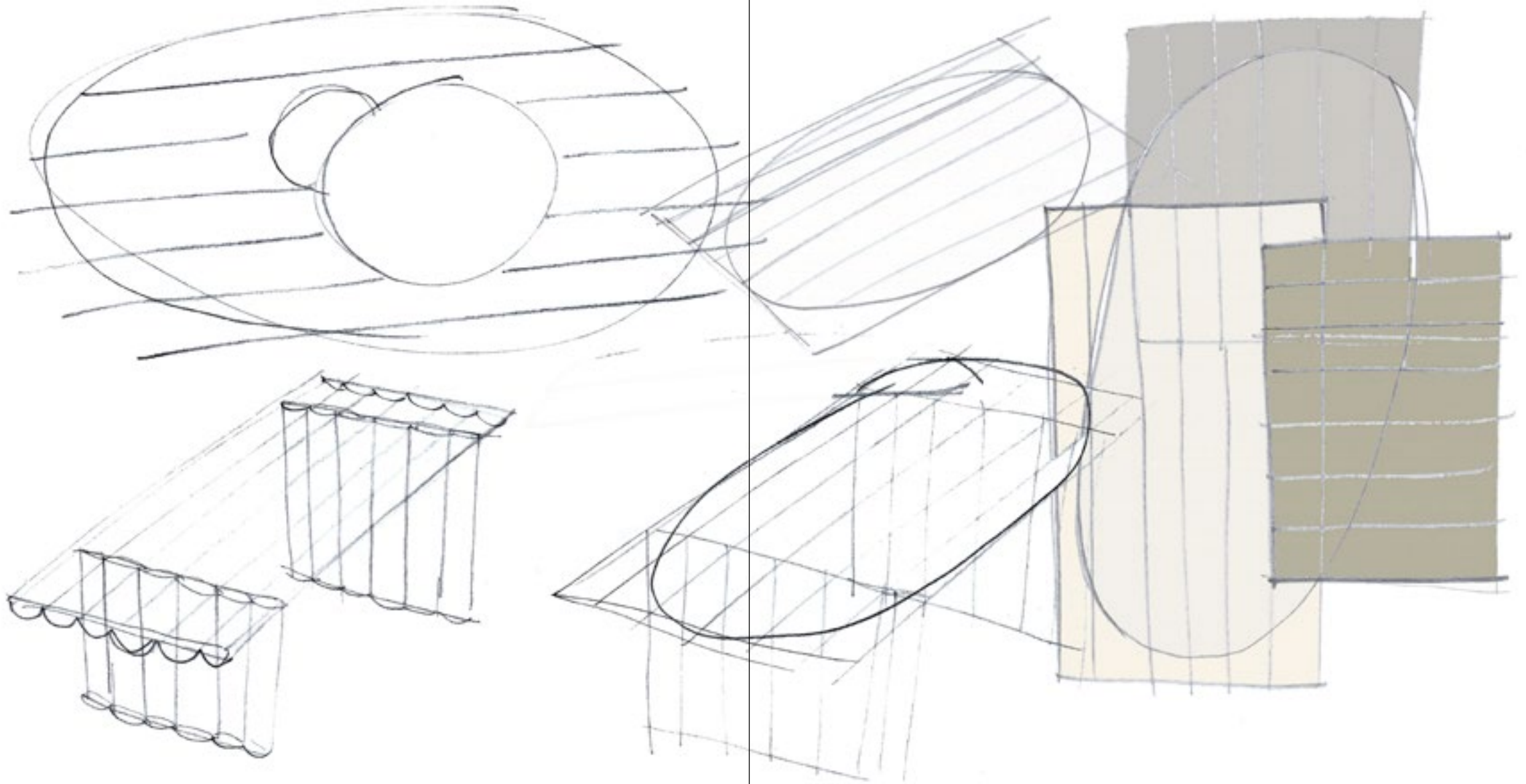
The tabletop is made from planks of solid red oak and is organic in form, which, according to the designer, is a reference to the tree itself. Meanwhile the obvious detail is the pair of trays, or plateaus, that sit at different heights and can be shifted across the surface on tracks formed by the planks of timber. The notion is to use them to create different settings or scenarios. One of them is at the correct height for a laptop camera, allowing the designer to conduct Zoom conference calls. 'Before I'd been using a box or a couple of books,' he explains. 'I always have a lot of pens around and materials and the plateaus could be a stage for those things but then I can just move them to the side when I'm having dinner or lunch or meeting people or needing more space for sketching.'

The idea for the piece came almost as soon as Herkner opened a box of sample timbers AHEC sent him. He was instantly attracted to three finishes of red oak, going from light to dark. 'Some were really standard and smooth, others had been brushed so you really feel the structure. We combined those. The soft colours work really well together and then there are the black stools. We were really inspired by the material.' He also enjoyed some of the juxtapositions the piece has thrown up. It combines CNC technology (to create the wave detail in the profile) with traditionally crafted joinery, for example, while the warm timber of the finished piece contrasts nicely with the concrete of the floors and walls of his apartment.

Using the red oak, a timber that is often overlooked in Europe, has opened his eyes too. 'There's a huge possibility for me to develop things that are different and unique from European oak,' he muses. But perhaps most importantly the project has taught him how to work with clients in a changed world. 'It's the first time working in a virtual way,' he says. 'Now it's becoming a bit more normal and it's how we're operating with other clients. It was amazing how it has come together in such a short space of time. Often product development like this could easily take a year. It shows the huge know-how of the Benchmark team.'



Original sketches by
Sebastian Herkner and
his team. Experimenting
with the shape and
colour of the table.



‘Sebastian Herkner wanted to create a piece that was haptic and tactile,’ says Sean Sutcliffe. ‘*Stammtisch* has real subtlety. The chamfer on the underside of the edge, which you don’t really see, is a beautiful element, for instance. It’s only when you feel it with your hand that you pick up on it.’

Red oak was specified for the table because the designer wanted to create a grainy texture. ‘You can rake out the soft bit of the grain through a process of wetting and wire brushing. You can’t really do that with maple and cherry,’ says Sutcliffe. ‘The irony of it was that we then bleached it to get this pale, driftwood effect that Sebastian wanted and you end up with something that doesn’t look very oak-like.’

The two plateaus that run along the tabletop are made of different materials. One is harewood – a type of maple which has been stained with iron sulphate to produce a blue/grey colour. The other is made from oak that has been scorched with a blow torch, then lightly wire-brushed and oiled.

TIMBER :
American red oak
and maple

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-71kg CO₂ (equivalent to a
-555km drive in a typical
family car)

0.3 SECONDS :
Time taken for the 162kg
of red oak and 16kg of
maple to be replaced by
new growth in the forest



Opposite: Selecting boards
at Benchmark.

Right: Planks of red oak form
tracks that the trays can be
moved along.

Below: Craftsmen assembling
the final table to show to
Sebastian and his team.



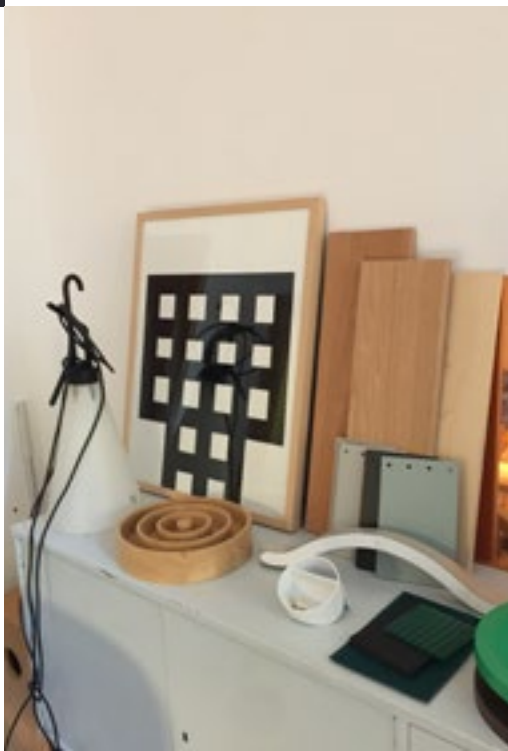
Warsaw, Poland

Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska
Arco





Maria's work-station during the first lockdown at her home in Warsaw.



Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska is a designer with many strings to her bow. Arguably best known for furniture, the French-born and Warsaw-based creative has also turned her hand to exhibition design, interiors, curation and writing. After studying at the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne, she worked in Paris for Galerie Kreo before gaining vital experience in the studios of Konstantin Grcic and Alexander Taylor, in Munich and London respectively. Returning to Poland to set up her own practice in 2012, she has subsequently worked for the likes of Vitra, Ligne Roset, 1882 Ltd and Kvadrat. More recently, she has been working on a new closet system and series of accessories for Plato, a new, locally based company.

MAY 2020. WARSAW, POLAND

As *Connected* begins, she is one of the only designers back in her studio. Lockdown started on 12 March 2020 in Poland and has just come to an end. It has obviously had a profound effect on the designer. 'No one knew how it would change our lives on a micro or macro scale,' she says. 'I'm not sure it has affected the work, but it has opened my eyes to working from home and the quality of space you'd want to achieve. I've also been reminded of the emotional comfort objects can give you. They provide a sense of identity and are capable of communicating who you are to other people.'

Like others, she spotted the effect video conferencing was having on the way we perceived our domestic spaces, adding: 'I think there's a new emphasis on the home. The public is entering our homes through Zoom meetings. You can see how people live.' The experience seems to have reinforced her interest in creating pieces that reside somewhere between architecture and furniture and provide a sense of separation.

As a result, it's the chair that is already taking up much of her thinking space; she is looking at how it can aid privacy, as well as creating different resting points to help posture. 'I've been looking at the typology of office chairs as well as doing some research on the Shakers,' she says. 'They were a community that was self-sufficient and also lived and worked in the same space. I'm really happy because I've done a few trials with chairs but this will be only the second I've ever finalised. And in wood, which I've wanted to work with for a long time. So in terms of typology, it's a bit of a dream.' Meanwhile, the table is likely to be 'a simple, beautiful surface'.

At the moment she's in a period she describes as her 'warm-up', researching and filling up sketchbook after sketchbook with drawings. The concept is being hammered out and she's toying with the idea of using both cherry and maple for the piece, although she's about to have a meeting with the Benchmark team to discuss the finer details.

SEPTEMBER 2020. WARSAW, POLAND

Jeglinska-Adamczewska has just returned from a long holiday by the Baltic Sea near the Russian border with her husband, an architect. 'We decided to stay in Poland this time because of the whole situation. I've stayed weekends there, but never this long. It was a nice discovery for me,' she explains, looking relaxed. When asked what the current mood across the nation is and how it's coping with the ongoing pandemic, she puffs out her cheeks. 'It's funny. On one side everything feels back to normal – or maybe we just got used to the whole situation. But the government is bringing in new regulations and restrictions. It feels like you have to live in the present moment, day-by-day. So it's really difficult to plan anything.'

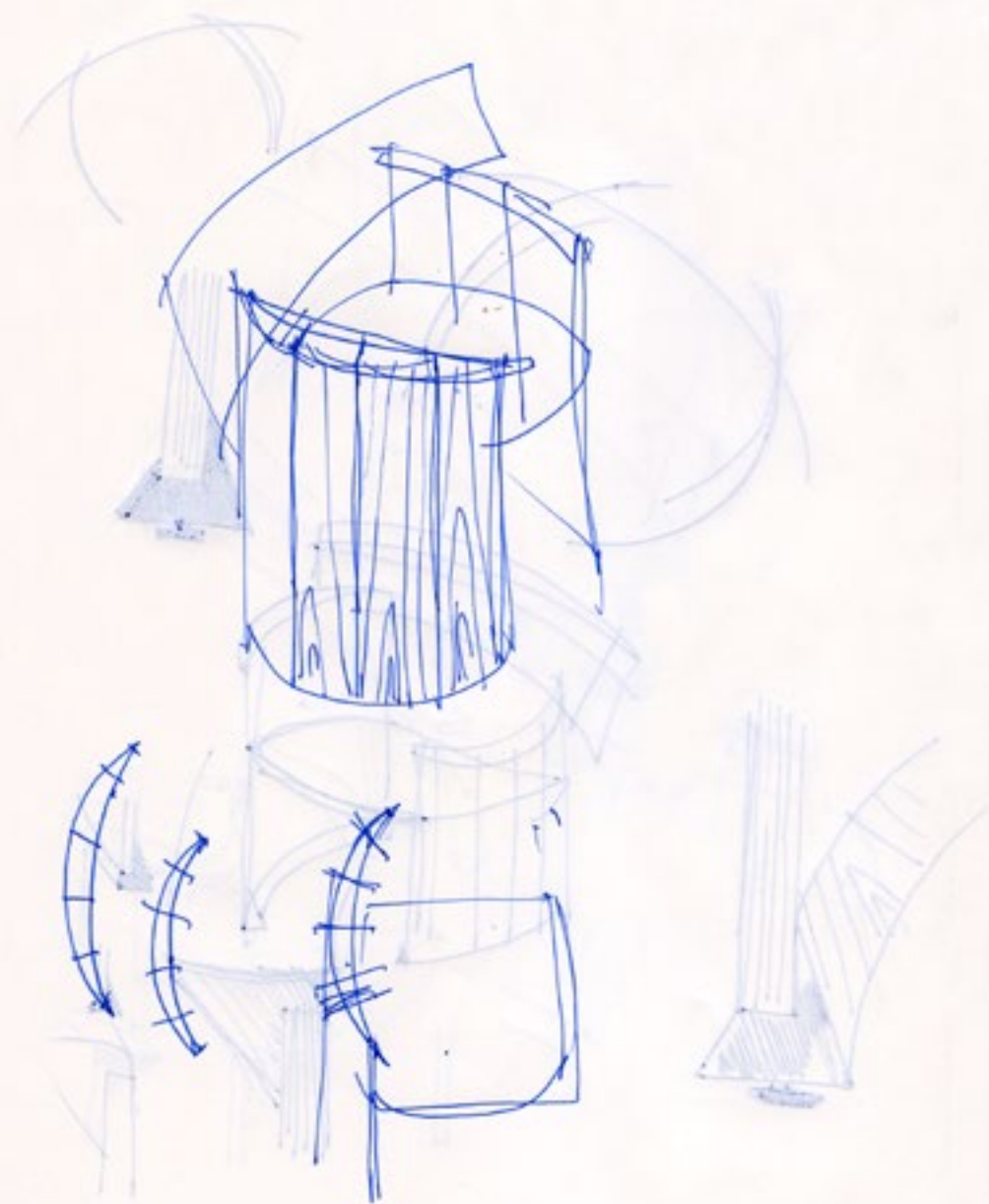
Original sketch by Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska. She started the design by taking one shape, a curved surface, and looked at how it could be repeated horizontally and vertically to form the seat and the table.

'I'M REALLY HAPPY BECAUSE I'VE DONE A FEW TRIALS WITH CHAIRS BUT THIS WILL BE ONLY THE SECOND I'VE EVER FINALISED. AND IN WOOD, WHICH I'VE WANTED TO WORK IN FOR A LONG TIME. SO IN TERMS OF TYPOLOGY IT'S A BIT OF A DREAM.'

On a personal level, though, things have obviously been strange, but work appears to be ticking over. 'It has been an intense time. A few projects were halted, others are still happening, which is a good thing. Overall it has not been too bad but everyone has been on their toes to see how things might develop. No one is making any big decisions.'

While all this has been going on, the Benchmark team has been working in its Berkshire workshop and Jeglinska-Adamczewska has just seen the first images of her finished piece. On first viewing, it seems a straightforward piece of work. 'I tried to make the project more elaborate but every time I did I kept coming back to something really simple and basic,' she laughs. Which may be underplaying her hand because the result is a smart, subtle piece of work.

'I am interested in objects or furniture that are like an extension of your body, like a prosthesis – something that's interconnected rather than separate,' she explains. The notion of holding her arms out gave her the idea for the curve of the elongated back of the chair. 'It gives a sense of the minimum space that you need to be comfortable,' she adds. That curve then fed into the rest of the project – there's hardly a straight line to be seen. Even the legs are a gentle crescent. 'I like economy, both in my drawing but also in construction,' she says. 'So the same curve is used in all the elements. It's repeated horizontally and vertically. It creates quite a distinct design. The scale gives you the opportunity of working, eating or hosting people. It gives you that freedom and I like the notion of independence.'





American cherry was chosen to give the furniture a warmth and depth of grain. It was steam-bent to form the back rest of the chair.

At the start of the project, she was thinking about using both maple and cherry. Ultimately she elected to use the latter. 'I specified it because of its distinctive colour – it's very warm. Also, I liked the grain. There's a nice contrast between the grain and the simplicity of the design. Both play together and both bring out the best in each other.'

One thing she certainly has missed is direct, physical contact with the workshop. 'There were a lot of frustrations, particularly knowing Benchmark's huge possibilities,' she confesses. 'To just be able to see the machines and speak to the people.' There's an audible sigh. The problem with digital technology, it seems, is that it takes away the all-important element of chance, the moment of serendipity that can make a project. 'A visit to the factory makes things faster and easier,' she continues. 'It's about communicating, specifically about certain details and finishes. And often there's something that comes out of the discussions by chance.' Working purely digitally is tough. 'You really have to think ahead a lot more.' Could she discern any benefits from working in this way? 'Hmmm. Not sure,' she ponders.

The table and chairs will eventually go into a house she is building with her husband in the Polish countryside. But has it been a strange sensation designing something for herself, rather than the open market? 'It's easier to hide behind the client, doing the job for someone else,' she says. 'I kind of withdraw from my own self and always try to be more functional than personal.' By the same token, regardless of who it is being designed for, a chair needs to look good and function well. 'Sometimes you're sitting in a chair but other times you're looking at it in your own space. So it has to provide pleasure as well as comfort, the notion of being at home, of shelter.'

And this, you sense, is what the project has been all about for Jeglinska-Adamczewska, a rediscovery of the home.



Without physical access to the workshop to test prototypes, Maria fashioned her own prototype using cardboard to test the ergonomics of the seat.

Opposite: One of many design discussions at Benchmark.



‘I SPECIFIED CHERRY BECAUSE OF ITS DISTINCTIVE COLOUR – IT’S VERY WARM. ALSO, I LIKED THE GRAIN. THERE’S A NICE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE GRAIN AND THE SIMPLICITY OF THE DESIGN. BOTH PLAY TOGETHER AND BOTH BRING OUT THE BEST IN EACH OTHER.’

MAKING ARCO

Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska wanted the chair back to hug the body. 'That started her whole narrative on the curves,' says Sean Sutcliffe. 'Arco became all about those curves. They evolved from the chair back, through the rest of the chair, into the table, the table under-frame and the table edges. They are all different but recurring curves.'

The designer specified cherry almost immediately. 'It's toned, evolving from pink into red. It has a warmth that I think some of the designers were particularly missing during the lockdown period,' explains Sutcliffe. 'We were very lucky to have sensationally good American cherry to work with. It's a big table and the piece we used was unusually defect free.' The back of the chair was steam-bent to create the curve, otherwise, Sutcliffe describes it as a 'pretty straightforward cabinetmaker's job'.

TIMBER :
American cherry

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-157kg CO₂ (equivalent to a -1281km drive in a typical family car)

2.2 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 196kg of cherry to be replaced by new growth in the forest



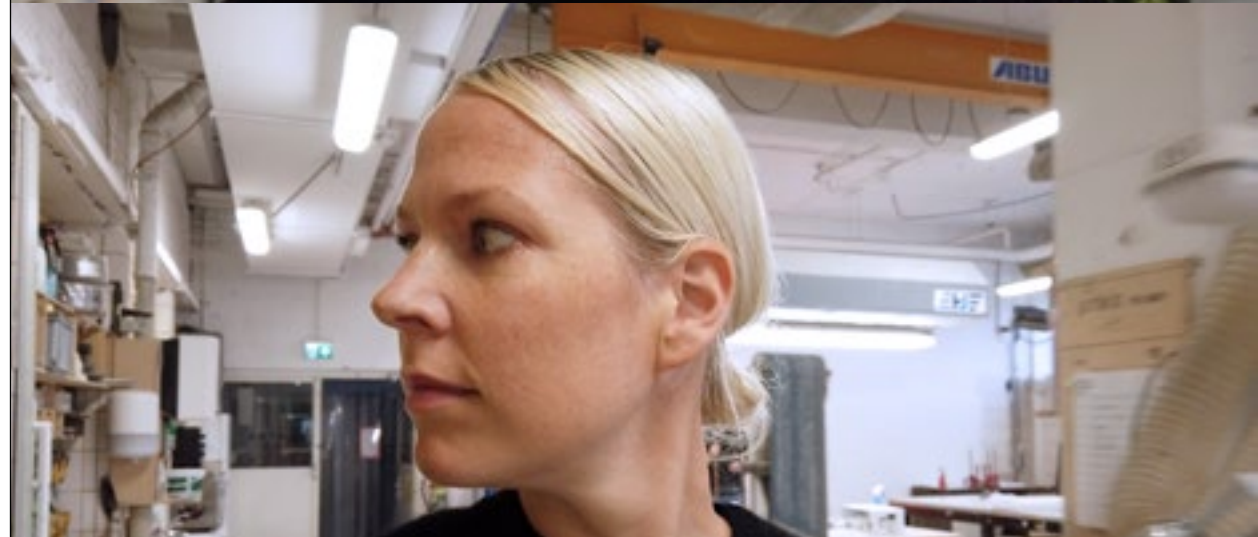
Opposite: The sides of the chair were made using an old barrel-making technique called coopering.

Above: Finishing touches are added to the chairs, ready to show to Maria.

Left: An interlocking joint on the underside of the table gives it stability.

Rotterdam, Netherlands

Sabine Marcelis
Candy Cubicle





True to form, Sabine wanted to incorporate materials that played with transparency, whilst having an element of surprise with colour.

Sabine Marcelis is an intriguing choice for this project. After all, the Rotterdam-based designer is best known for her work in materials such as glass and resin, which often play with light and colour. She hasn't had much experience of working with wood, though she does have an impressive CV. Since leaving Design Academy Eindhoven and opening her own studio in 2011, she has produced fountains for Fendi, created an installation at Mies van der Rohe's renowned Barcelona Pavilion, as well as designing pieces for the likes of Established & Sons. Her work has been exhibited in places such as the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam and Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, while she has also worked with the likes of Aesop, Burberry and Celine. To cap it all, in 2020 she was awarded Designer of the Year by Wallpaper* magazine.

JUNE 2020. ROTTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

Rotterdam appears to have emerged relatively unscathed from the first wave of the pandemic. Marcelis is already back in her studio, rubbing shoulders with her five-strong team. 'It's getting pretty close to normal. The terraces were able to open again at the beginning of the month but only a limited number of people can be inside cafes and you have to book in advance,' she confirms, a twang in her accent betraying a childhood spent in New Zealand. To add an extra dimension to her life, she has recently had a baby.

She's happy to admit that the chance to work with timber was a major attraction for the project. 'I'm foreign to working with the material, to be honest,' she says. 'Over the years I've tended to have a preference for things like glass and cast resins, which are materials where you can play with transparency, the interaction with light, and reflection. Those sort of properties aren't the first things you think about when you consider timber. So I thought it was an interesting challenge to work with such a different material and find interesting moments within it.'

Intriguingly, her starting point appears to be a scene from the Quentin Tarantino movie, *Pulp Fiction*, where John Travolta opens a briefcase and the reflection from whatever lies within shines a bright light on his face. As the designer points out: 'It makes you wonder, what on earth is inside?' This moment of inspiration is combined with a rather more prosaic domestic situation. Her architect partner has been working from their loft conversion during the lockdown and she's keen to find a way to hide his huge computer screen and general work gubbins when his day is done. The fact that there aren't many walls in their apartment means it is difficult to make the place look tidy. 'The desk is something that can be transformed from working mode and then back into hiding mode. It means we won't constantly be confronted with work equipment,' she explains.

‘It needs to have a comfortable seat because he’s using it all day long. The piece has also got to be able to move within the space. We don’t really have any rooms, so we want to be able to push it from one end of the loft to the other.’

While the concept and shape of the piece are in place, there are still material tests to do with Benchmark and she’s toying with the idea of using either maple or cherry.

SEPTEMBER 2020. ROTTERDAM, NETHERLANDS

Rotterdam still appears to be doing relatively well. Marcellis has come back from a holiday in France where it was mandatory to wear a face mask in public. In her home city, by contrast, people have to don them on public transport but not in the majority of shops. ‘I feel life has got a little more normal,’ she says. ‘It’s like the world is waking up a little. People are still getting the disease but deaths per day are extremely low. It’s much more relaxed here than in other countries.’

Projects are coming back into the studio too – including a large installation in a Shanghai shopping mall – although she sold a lot more tables and mirrors during lockdown. ‘I think people have a new appreciation for being at home and are wanting to create a nice environment,’ she opines. That said, from her own perspective, she’s keen to stress, ‘my problem has not disappeared because my boyfriend is still working from home.’

Another positive by-product to come from this tragic situation appears to be that the studio developed some more structure. ‘We were a bit like cowboys running a studio before but when everyone was at home we really had to organise. Now, for instance, we have a big Monday meeting, which I’m sure most companies do anyway. It has been a good side-effect.’

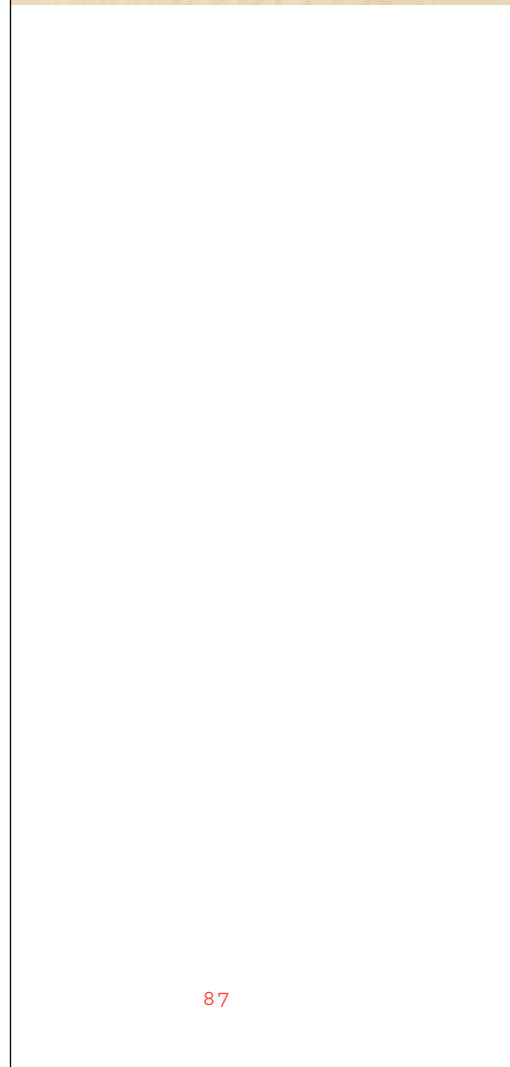
She has just seen the first images of her finished piece, entitled *Candy Cubicle*, and appears delighted. As promised, the large rectangle of timber opens out on hidden castors to reveal a bright yellow interior, which contains a small stool, a set drawers (both on wheels), shelves, and plenty of space to store a screen and computer tower. The top can be used as a work surface. ‘It’s a workstation but everything is inside, kind of like a Kinder Surprise,’ she laughs.

After deliberating for a while, she ended up specifying maple as her timber of choice for the project. ‘The main reason was the grain. I thought it had the most beautiful lines going through it,’ she attests. While the outside is about celebrating wood in its natural state (the surface was only waxed for protection), the inside is very different. It was coated with a high-gloss yellow varnish and subsequently polished. The contrast is stark and hugely effective.

It all appears to have panned out rather well but what did Marcellis make of working digitally with the maker? ‘It’s very, very different,’ she says, after a slight pause. ‘Most of my



Sketches by Sabine Marcellis. The shape of Candy Cubicle is inspired by the suitcase scene in *Pulp Fiction* – the minimal shape is nondescript but, on the inside, is a surprise to be discovered.





American maple veneer was stained and then coated with a high gloss lacquer to achieve the vibrant yellow of the desk interior.

pieces are produced in a workshop directly downstairs from my studio, so it's a very close relationship and we're seeing and touching everything all the time. This was the complete opposite. The most exciting part of the collaboration was this blind trust you had to have in Benchmark. The makers really think with you on the design.'

'WHILE THE OUTSIDE IS ABOUT CELEBRATING WOOD IN ITS NATURAL STATE (THE SURFACE WAS ONLY WAXED FOR PROTECTION), THE INSIDE IS VERY DIFFERENT. IT WAS COATED WITH A HIGH-GLOSS YELLOW VARNISH AND SUBSEQUENTLY POLISHED. THE CONTRAST IS STARK AND HUGELY EFFECTIVE.'

Which isn't to say there wasn't any back and forth. Getting the colour right when screen resolutions differ was tricky and there were, apparently, some issues with the wheels, but they thought of a beautiful solution. 'It was a very luxurious way to work with a company, where you're not scared about how the piece is going to be produced. It will be the way you imagined it.'

It seems there are some benefits to working this way too. 'I think by not having the object so close to the studio and being confronted with it all the time gives you more space to think. I've had a real sense of calm during this project. I'd just had a baby at the start of the pandemic, so I was forced to be a bit removed from my team. Working like this has definitely taught me that I don't need to helicopter manage everything. I'm more comfortable taking a step back. And, for sure, I'm not going to travel as much as I used to. Things can be done on a screen just as effectively.'

Of all the projects in *Connected*, Marcelis's is probably the most personal. She had a very specific reason for designing *Candy Cubicle*. But was it a strange sensation creating something for herself? 'I know my own space so well. I was constantly thinking about where it would live. It forces you to keep analysing,' she says. 'That said, I sort of feel that I had a client on this project — my boyfriend.'



Candy Cubicle is unusual as it is largely fabricated in birch plywood and finished with a maple veneer. 'Maple was the obvious choice because it's quiet and simple. Sabine wanted this purity, so it would just sit there as this pale box when it was shut away,' says Sean Sutcliffe.

The interior is stained yellow before a high gloss lacquer was added, while the exterior was oiled and completed with a matt finish. 'It has different personalities depending on whether it's opened or closed, which reflects the nature of working from home,' continues Sutcliffe. 'It's a dual purpose thing – you're trying to live in your home and work from it at the same time.'

The gloss lacquering presented them with a challenge. 'You're putting a different finish on one side to the other,' confirms Sutcliffe. 'Normally you'd try and balance your finishes so they're exacting the same tension on either side of the board. We were worried the two sides would pull differentially.' The stool and pedestal were both fashioned from solid maple and the urethane wheels were made bespoke in Rotterdam to match the colour of the piece's interior.

TIMBER :
American maple

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-80kg CO₂ (equivalent to a -630km drive in a typical family car)

0.1 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 30kg of maple to be replaced by new growth in the forest



Opposite: The distinct grain of the maple was still visible through the gloss lacquer.

Left: Laying out the matched and jointed maple veneer.

Below: Solid maple stools are coloured to match the inside of the desk.



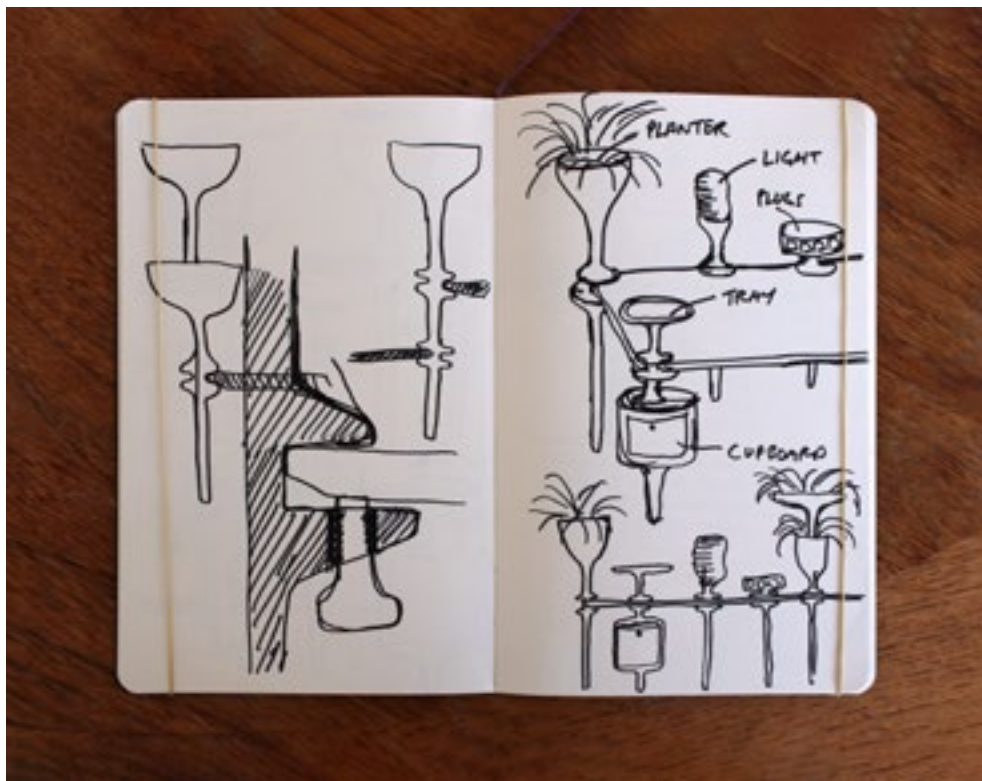
London, UK

Heatherwick Studio
Stem





Original sketches by Tom Glover, Heatherwick Studio. From the outset, the studio wanted to explore how to integrate planting into a design that would wrap around the user.



Thomas Heatherwick is about as close as the design industry gets to being a household name. Why? Because his studio created the new London Routemaster, the Olympic cauldron for the 2012 Games, the kissing buildings of Coal Drops Yard in Kings Cross, and the Vessel in Hudson Yards, New York. He is responsible for that curly bridge in the Paddington Basin and the cafe in Littlehampton, which resembles a piece of drift wood.

Since coming to prominence in the mid-1990s, he has shifted his practice from designing installations and furniture, to creating buildings and rethinking pieces of urban infrastructure.

Look carefully through his portfolio though and a clue to some of his thinking for *Connected* can be found in an un-realised project he did back in 1997, when he designed some traditional-looking, spear-topped railings for the outside of a house in West London. In Heatherwick's hands, though, they were prised apart and plants in terracotta pots inserted in the spaces in-between.

MAY 2020. LONDON, UK

As the *Connected* project is underway, Heatherwick's 180-strong team are all working from home. Heatherwick seems sanguine about the situation. 'There's been an unfolding of an extraordinary global tragedy. Luckily in the studio nobody has been touched strongly by the virus and so we've been able to adapt and adjust far better than I imagined possible,' he explains. In fact, he is seeing a positive, democratising aspect of working digitally. 'We've started new projects over this time; we've developed new ideas; and we've drawn and sketched together as a team. You don't know whose line is whose and, as a result, it has acted as a great equaliser. I'm spending much more of my day with a pencil in hand. So, there have been some unexpected joys and benefits.'

Before the pandemic, the prospect of designing a table might not have held much allure for the practice but being forced to work from home has made the designer think. 'This crisis has suddenly thrown us into our homes. Workers are spending three months sitting on one chair. Furniture means even more than before and it is part of a collective experience as well as a personal experience. It's a funny one but now your place of work is a mini-television studio. You're speaking to the world and what's behind you and around you is being shared,' he says.

It also provides him with an opportunity to experiment further with biophilia – something that has been a feature of the practice's recent architecture output, including Maggie's Cancer Care Centre in Leeds. 'We're curious as to whether we can include planting in a piece of furniture that can also wrap around the user.'

Unlike the other designers, Heatherwick knows Benchmark well, having fabricated his second building in the workshop for the late Sir Terence Conran, and describes the company's co-founder Sean Sutcliffe as a mentor figure. Still, he says, it will be frustrating not being able to visit. Indeed there's a sense that his ambitions are wider than simply creating something for his own home. 'I want to see if it's possible to add new ideas to an area that has had thousands of ideas in the past. There must be a million designs for desks, but the desks that were being designed before didn't have this particular twist and impetus behind them. I hope it feels relevant to what we've learned at this extraordinary time,' he concludes.

SEPTEMBER 2020. LONDON, UK

It appears some of Heatherwick's digital evangelism has faded. Staff are slowly returning to the studio. 'We'd come to the end of the novelty of it,' he says, over a Zoom call. 'Bit by bit people have been coming back and that's so much more engaging and exciting. The human interaction between people is so different.' Going forward his team will spend their working time between the office and home. 'It's not an either/or, it's about how you navigate both,' he explains. 'Whoever wants to come back can – we've got space for them. I'm here so I can be in the middle of reviews, conversations and discussions. And we're starting to have real meetings,' he adds, with discernible relief.

He has just seen images of his finished piece at the workshop and seems delighted. In typical Heatherwick style, the studio thought around the brief and, rather than design a desk, has instead created a series of rippled legs of different heights and diameters that finish at the top with planters, holding ten different species of vegetation. In the middle of the leg is a clamp, which can be tightened with an Allen key, and will hold a flat surface to create a table. The effect is pretty extraordinary – all of a sudden the workstation resembles a mini Kew Gardens. 'It came out of rather selfishly thinking that if I'm going to sit for eight or nine hours a day, at a desk, alone, what would be something that would give me the mental neutrality to allow me to focus on a screen? Or give me a break as my eyes needed to relax?'

The system, entitled appropriately enough *Stem*, could be specified to hold up worktops or simply be used as a standalone piece. Either way, accessories such as charging and power points, lighting and cabling can be integrated. The legs could also be mixed and matched with products from other companies (he cites legs available from IKEA as an example). Importantly too, the series is capable of wrapping around the user, effectively forming a leafy cocoon from the immediate surroundings, as well as providing a soothing backdrop for

Each leg began as a solid stacked block of maple, which was later carved out on a 6-axis CNC machine to achieve the asymmetrical shape.





Each leg has its own character yet there is cohesion when they are grouped together, allowing for adaptability of home working, without compromising on space.

video conferencing calls. Meanwhile, his chair is upholstered in Gotland shearling, with a carved base that references the other elements.

The inspiration for the rough-looking finish came from a collection of African wooden spoons belonging to his mother. 'We were looking at how we could make something that wasn't clinical and slick, but instead felt like splendid pieces of timber,' Heatherwick says. Although the product looks hand-finished, it was actually made using a CNC machine. He elected to use maple because of its inherent warmth, ability to age beautifully and the fact that it machines well, which was extremely useful for this piece. 'Also because of its neutrality relative to the heroes, which are the plants themselves,' he adds.

'THE POSITIVE SIDE OF THE LOCKDOWN IS THAT PEOPLE WILL WANT TO MAKE THEIR HOMES BETTER AND EMPLOYERS WILL REALLY HAVE TO GET THEIR ACTS TOGETHER.'

There's no doubt the designer has plans for the piece. 'For me, if the outcome is a fancy desk in my own home, which maybe works a little bit better, that's not so satisfying. I'm interested to see if we can turn this into a product idea in some way.'

Our transformed world requires new thinking, even with a typology as well rehearsed as the table. As Heatherwick is keen to stress: 'If someone had asked us to design a desk a year ago, it would have felt anachronistic and harder to engage what angle to come at to produce a fresh outcome.'

Stem, it seems, may form part of his campaign to change the environment in which so many people work. 'Desk-ing can seem so corporate in atmosphere. We are interested in making something that is rawer and has a vitality. I think the workplace is going to become more and more like our homes. If you're going to bother to go to work, then it has to connect with your values,' he says. In short, designers have to overcome the 'sterility' and 'plasticity' of our workplaces — one of the ways of doing this is by specifying natural materials such as timber and bringing the workforce closer to nature. 'The positive side of the lockdown is that people will want to make their homes better and employers will really have to get their acts together. They can't get away with crappy place-making. How can we reinvent the word "corporate" to be a good thing, where the ethics of the organisation inspires its team?' It's an undeniably optimistic vision of the future.

It may be that *Stem* is a step in a new direction. Heatherwick set out to add new ideas to the furniture market and he appears to have succeeded.



'We started off looking at this piece in cherry – partly because, in its initial iteration, it had more of a spoon carved feel,' explains Sean Sutcliffe. 'It was going to be shaped by draw knives, spokeshaves and spoon carving knives. So it was going to have a really handmade, tactile texture. Cherry is fine-grained and lends itself well to that treatment.'

However, as the design evolved and became more complex, the choice of timber changed. Heatherwick decided he wanted to use a lighter wood, so maple became the obvious solution. 'The really complex part was the shapes that became asymmetrical,' says Sutcliffe, adding that Heatherwick's CAD drawings were run through a biomimicry programme that effectively randomised *Stem's* geometry. 'At first you look and think it has been turned but there isn't an element of it that's round in plan. You can't turn it on a lathe, it required a 6-axis CNC machine.'

TIMBER :
American maple

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
259kg CO₂ (equivalent to a 2026km drive in a typical family car)

1.6 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 320kg of maple to be replaced by new growth in the forest



Opposite: Maple was the timber of choice for the individual legs of *Stem*.

Right: The clamping mechanism is uniform across each design so people can buy as many or as few as they would like to clip onto a surface of their choice.

Below: The idea of the rough-look came from a collection of African wooden spoons belonging to Heatherwick's mother.



FURNITURE MEANS
EVEN MORE THAN
BEFORE AND IT IS
PART OF A COLLECTIVE
EXPERIENCE AS WELL
AS A PERSONAL
EXPERIENCE.

— Thomas Heatherwick

Milan, Italy

Studiopepe
Pink Moon





Photo taken by Studiopepe of their working-from-home set-up during the first lockdown in Milan.

Narrative is a key element in the work of Studiopepe. Founded by Arianna Lelli Mami and Chiara Di Pinto in 2006, the Milanese studio has a hugely diverse portfolio that encompasses interiors, product design, communication design and art direction. And behind each project is a story that often emerges from an unexpected place. In the 2019 Milan Design Week, for example, the duo came up with *Les Arcanistes*, an immersive installation investigating contemporary living, which was set in an old industrial space and took its cues from tarot cards.

MAY 2020. MILAN, ITALY

The duo are back in their office and relieved that the worst of the pandemic appears to have abated. Milan was hit hard and early, acting almost as a canary in the mine for the rest of the continent. That said, the pair are keen to find shafts of light in a dark situation. 'We wanted to see the pandemic as a chance to rethink our way of working together. It has been a very challenging time but, by the same token, we have learned things about ourselves. Strangely, it has been quite a creative period,' says Lelli Mami. 'It has been interesting to be able to slow down and have time to read, to sketch and to think. So it has been a rare opportunity.' Di Pinto nods in agreement but also stresses: 'We shouldn't forget that it has been a tragedy. We've been lucky to spend six weeks in this way.'

The pair wiled away much of their time during lockdown listening to music and realised that they had both independently alighted on a song by Nick Drake, entitled 'Pink Moon'. It provided the spark for their *Connected* piece. 'We both heard it on a number of occasions but we'd never investigated its meaning. A Pink Moon appears in April and is named after pink flowers called Wild Ground Phlox, which bloom in early spring and appear throughout the United States and Canada. It indicates a time of new growth,' explains Di Pinto. 'It was perfect for this period. We saw it as a sign. Its meaning is beautiful for these times of change. After a crisis there will be a rebirth,' chimes Lelli Mami.

The song, and their shared desire to get in touch with nature after weeks of being cooped up, led them to design a table and chairs that resembled an abstract landscape. 'One of my favourite places is a mountain range a couple of hours from Milan, where I sometimes go trekking,' says Di Pinto. 'When you see the moon rising from the mountains, it is something that is ancient and slightly mysterious. That is what we wanted to capture.'

At this point they aren't entirely certain which of the timbers will best translate their thinking but they are keen to point out how important the initial sample box they received from AHEC has been. 'The idea came when we got the samples, you could smell the timber and understand the character of the woods,' stresses Di Pinto. 'This period has only heightened our respect for nature and trees.'

And while in an ideal world they would love to visit Benchmark, they appear to be sanguine about the situation, trusting in the maker to translate their idea into a finished piece of furniture. 'Now it's a different way but, at the same time, when people are good at their job – which Benchmark undoubtedly is – it's easier to communicate. They understand immediately what we are going to say,' concludes Lelli Mami.

SEPTEMBER 2020. MILAN, ITALY

By the beginning of September, Milan appears to be keeping the virus at bay and the pair have both come back from the traditional Italian August break. 'The situation looks to be under control,' says Mami. 'People are beginning to live as usual but maybe working a bit "smarter".' That said, normal is a relative term. Everyone is still wearing masks in shops, for instance, and as Di Pinto points out: 'We will see in the next 15 days how things are going. There has been an increase in numbers but, generally speaking, we're doing very well. We have to consider that we started from the lowest point. In March we didn't believe we'd be able to go on holiday over the summer. That looked like a dream.'

Happily, work appears to be picking up too, with several projects about to start. 'We were a little surprised about that because you just don't know during this period,' confirms an obviously relieved Di Pinto. They have just seen the finished images of their piece, *Pink Moon*, and seem happy with the results. As far as they're concerned the table represents a moment of optimism in amongst all the gloom. 'The Pink Moon is a spring moon. It's like a rebirth,' explains Di Pinto. 'Yes, it's a rebirth after Covid, after all these crazy times,' adds Lelli Mami. 'It's a good message.'

The eponymous Pink Moon – or, more accurately, moons – isn't hard to spot on the high back of the two chairs. Meanwhile the large, organic-looking table (painted in a natural green pigment) represents a mountain and the legs – two of which have a zigzag inlay pattern – have been inspired by the art of the Indigenous people in Brazil, Karajá. There is more than a hint of Memphis about the whole endeavour, which the duo is happy to admit. 'For sure Memphis is a great inspiration for us because it's very Milanese but, at the same time, very playful. It investigated colour, texture and materials,' says Lelli Mami.

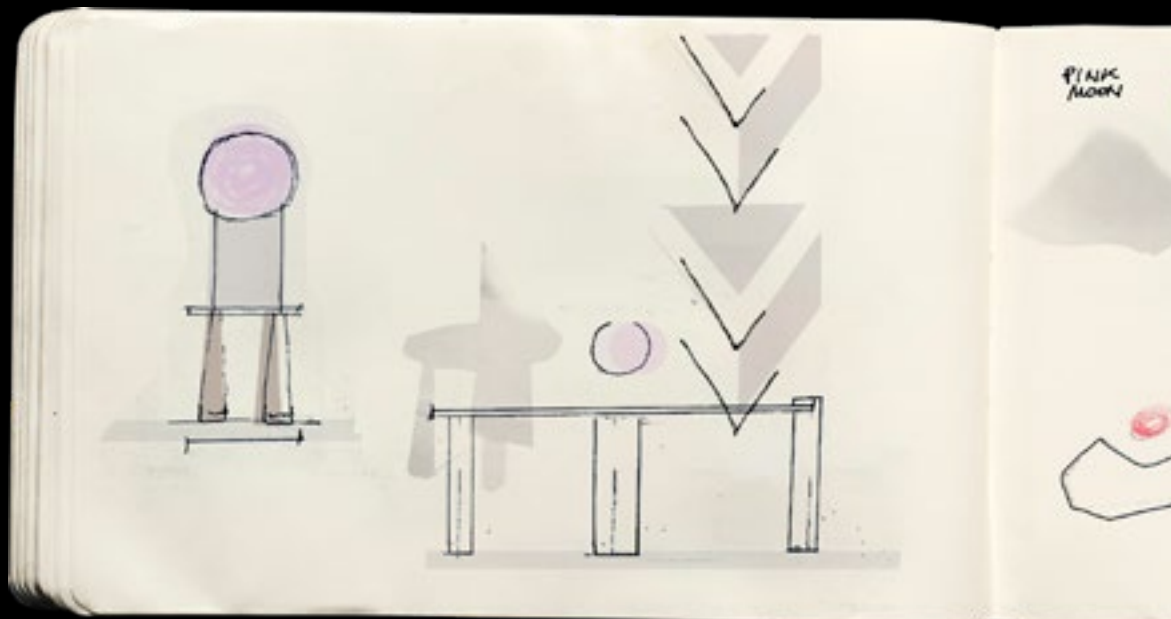
In the end, they decided to make the piece in maple, largely at the suggestion of Benchmark, and they're keen to stress the importance of collaboration. 'The back and forth with the producer is really important for us,' says Lelli Mami. 'It's a completely different way of working and you have to talk a lot to describe exactly what you want, not just from an aesthetic point of view but also the concept. We wanted to keep the folk aspects but, at the same time, make sure the piece

Right: Artwork by Studiopepe. The Pink Moon appears in April and its name is derived from the pink flower of the Wild Ground Phlox that blossoms in the spring.

Below: Pablo Picasso, *Youth Circle*, 1953. Spiritually, the Pink Moon signifies rebirth and renewal as the seasons change. The Pink Moon is a sign that life goes through cycles: flowers may die, but they always come back again each year.



The legs of the table reference the decorative techniques of Indigenous people who used geometric decorations as protection symbols. Painting, but especially body painting, was a symbol of union and integration. Photo credits: Indigenous people in Brazil, Karajá, photo by Vladimir Kozak.



Original sketches by Studiopepe. The design concept tells a story. The perimeter of the table is shaped around the skyline of the mountains and the headrest of the chair is the rising moon, symbolising a time of rebirth.

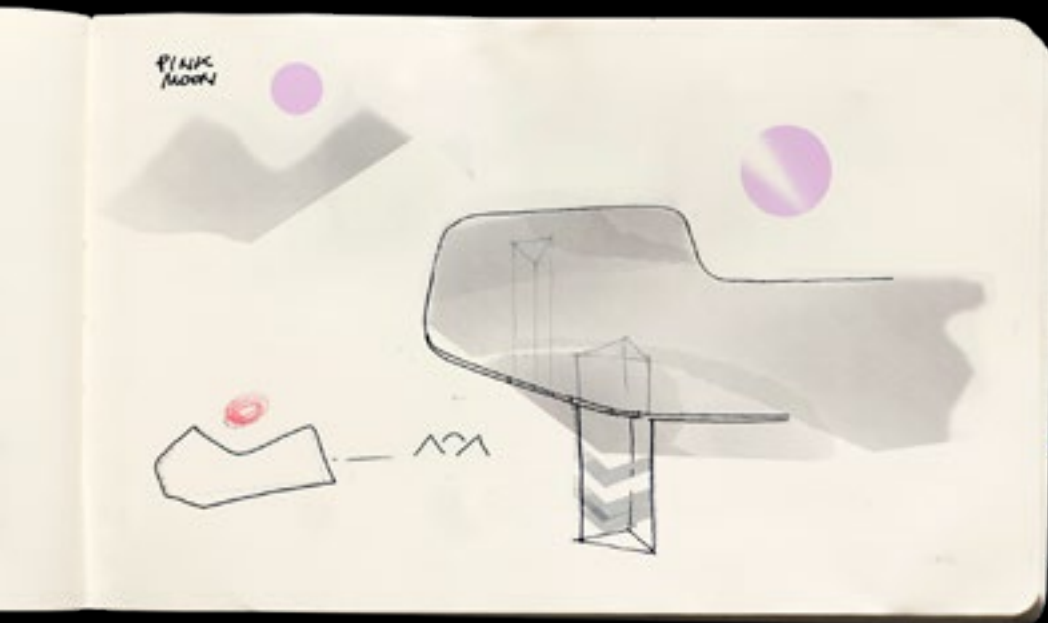
was very refined.' So was the Benchmark team familiar with the Nick Drake track? 'I don't think they knew it,' laughs Lelli Mami. 'It was weird that we were both listening to the same song at the same time through the lockdown,' says Di Pinto. 'We just thought we should investigate it more. It was the starting point but you never know where inspiration can come from.'

Like all the designers, the pair found working digitally, without ever meeting the maker or going to the workshop, presented some hurdles. 'It was a little bit challenging,' says Di Pinto. 'There were a lot of emails and calls on WhatsApp. They sent us some samples for the legs too. It would have been really different, and maybe a bit easier, if we'd had the chance to go there.'

The big question is what happens to the table now? Have they worked out some sort of time-share agreement? It transpires it's destined for the Studiopepe offices. 'It's important because we'd like to put it in our entrance hall. There's always someone working there but sometimes she's joined by others,' says Di Pinto. 'It's a good table to work at alone but also with a group that comes on a more temporary basis.' It's certainly a strong statement to potential clients as they walk through the doors.

It has been a traumatic year for Milan but you sense Lelli Mami and Di Pinto are determined to embrace the future, however uncertain. 'I think we've learned that it's possible to change,' explains Lelli Mami. 'We can have another lifestyle; we can work from home; we can work from other places; we don't have to travel so much. The experience has taught us that a better way of living is possible.' 'Even in the worst period, you could find opportunities for growth,' adds Di Pinto. 'There was something positive even in the most difficult moments.'

In this context, perhaps *Pink Moon* should be seen as a statement of intent.



American maple, almost translucent in colour, was the perfect species for achieving the pink and green specified by Studioepe for *Pink Moon*.



‘IT’S A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY OF WORKING AND YOU HAVE TO TALK A LOT TO DESCRIBE EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT, NOT JUST FROM AN AESTHETIC POINT OF VIEW BUT ALSO THE CONCEPT.’

Studiopepe were quick to decide on their choice of maple for the narrative-driven *Pink Moon*. From the maker's perspective, one of the trickiest elements of the design was the legs, which were created with a chevron pattern. 'The obvious way to approach them would have been to do it in marquetry. So laser-cut veneers and veneer up the legs,' explains Sean Sutcliffe. 'But the idea of veneering a leg that's going to get bashed by brooms and vacuum cleaners, as well as take a kicking from shoes, didn't seem right. I just felt it would degrade too quickly.'

Instead, Benchmark decided to take a different route. 'We chose to make our lives somewhat difficult,' Sutcliffe laughs. 'The legs are made in solid maple with 6mm lasts of dyed maple cut into them. It's solid maple laid into solid maple. We carefully cut them in and mitred them all together. I don't think anyone looking at it would realise. Probably they would think the pattern has been dyed or stained on.'

TIMBER:
American maple

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-80kg CO₂ (equivalent to a -630km drive in a typical family car)

0.6 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 122kg of maple to be replaced by new growth in the forest



Opposite: Colour tests and samples were a critical to ensuring that the finishes used matched Studiopepe's expectations.

Left: *Pink Moon* is large enough to have a presence when placed on the high back of the chair.

Below: After experimenting with veneers for the chevron pattern of the legs, Benchmark opted for the sturdier method of having them cut and mitred in instead.



Tokyo, Japan

Studio Swine
*Humble Administrator's
Table and Chairs*





Above and below: Images taken by Alex whilst exploring the streets and gardens of Tokyo in lockdown.



Hunter S. Thompson, author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Hells Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, is unlikely inspiration for a pair of young designers. However, Alexander Groves and Azusa Murakami, who together make up Studio Swine, have adopted his gonzo style of journalism in their practice and built a hugely successful career.

After leaving the Royal College of Art, the pair moved to São Paulo with no prospect of formal work. Instead, they created a series of stools made from aluminium cans they found on the street and smelted in a self-built forge that ran on used vegetable oil. Another project saw them travel to China to track down the world's largest human hair market and using the material to fashion an array of beautiful products. Subsequently, they took a trip to Brazil's rainforests to uncover the story of Fordlândia, Henry Ford's failed vision of a utopian rubber factory, and ended up turning locally tapped rubber into Ebonite for a range of furniture.

By contrast, working with timber might seem a little, well, pedestrian. But apparently not. As Groves explains: 'We love nature and natural materials. And we love being around wood. It has this warmth, a haptic quality. It also resonates sound nicely. Even when you're locked indoors it can connect you to nature. So there's lots to like about it.'

MAY 2020. TOKYO, JAPAN

The pair are currently based in Tokyo, which doesn't appear to be as badly affected by the virus as Europe. A young baby is occupying much of their time and they seem to be coping with the pandemic. 'It has been quite interesting for us because we work from home and have done for the past decade. So in that sense our working environment hasn't changed,' says the softly spoken Groves. 'But the slower pace of things, and having projects put on hold, has given us time to reflect and make some long-term plans. In a curious way it has been a positive thing for us.'

At the moment they are weighing up various options for their table and chairs. The pair haven't got as far as choosing a timber but, stuck in the middle of the city, they're keen on the idea of bringing nature inside. They also have shared memories of a time they spent living in New York to draw upon. 'We became quite familiar with the native trees. I'd say a lot of our approach to this project is remembering very fondly the upstate landscapes where these timbers are coming from – the East Coast forests. There's a lot of romance in that area,' says the designer. 'Rip Van Winkle was set there and it inspired David Thoreau to write *Walden* about self-reliance and going back into the woods. Generally, when we're doing a project we immerse ourselves in a place. Here we're immersed in the memory of the woods and Tokyo, so we're feeding off those influences. We're

keen to bring out all the different qualities that the wood has. The textures and colours and shapes it can form within one piece.' For a practice that is genuinely experimental and concept-driven it's intriguing to find out what they hope to derive from *Connected*? 'It would be nice to make something that we haven't anticipated yet. It's also quite exciting that we can keep the piece,' replies Groves. 'Over the past ten years we've lived in quite a few countries and we haven't really made a home for ourselves. So a chair and a table is a really nice way to start.'

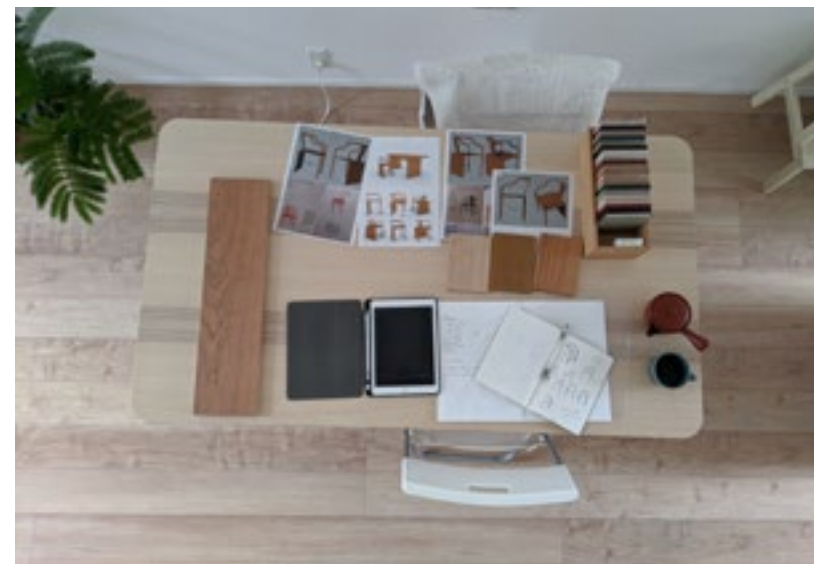
SEPTEMBER 2020. TOKYO, JAPAN

Four months later, the piece is finished and Groves seems pretty relaxed about the process. Japan has escaped the worst of the virus. 'I think the nation has ridden out this storm quite well actually. It has been quite low on the rate of fatalities.' Nobody is quite sure why, although a number of theories have been put forward, as he attests: 'There has been a lot of things in the media about why it has been handled so well, down to even the language having fewer harsh consonants so less air is projected. There have been a few things that culturally really benefitted Japan. It's a bowing rather than hand-shaking culture, for instance. Azusa and I have been staying at home and we work from home anyway. It feels that we've been preparing for this moment for a decade.'

'WE LOVE NATURE AND NATURAL MATERIALS.
AND WE LOVE BEING AROUND WOOD. IT HAS
THIS WARMTH, A HAPTIC QUALITY. IT ALSO
RESONATES SOUND NICELY. EVEN WHEN
YOU'RE LOCKED INDOORS IT CAN CONNECT
YOU TO NATURE. SO THERE'S LOTS
TO LIKE ABOUT IT.'

It transpires the pair have been busy with a fistful of projects too. 'It has been a bit non-stop actually,' he confirms. 'I thought this was the global pause that we'd been waiting for.' Before lockdown, they had been on a research trip in China and it provided the inspiration for their *Connected* piece, entitled *Humble Administrator's Table and Chairs*. 'We're particularly interested in Chinese gardens and the way they occupy this space between architectural order and natural forms in that unordered state. They find a harmony between the two. That's something we keep going back to as a source of inspiration, especially during lockdown in Tokyo, which is so built up. We've been yearning to get back to nature and get out into the woods.'

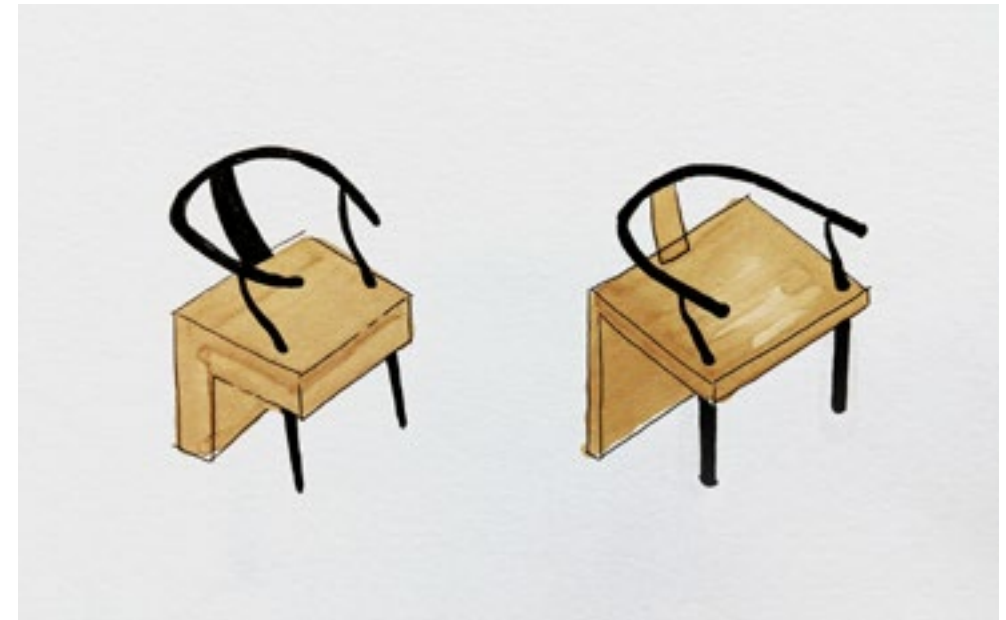
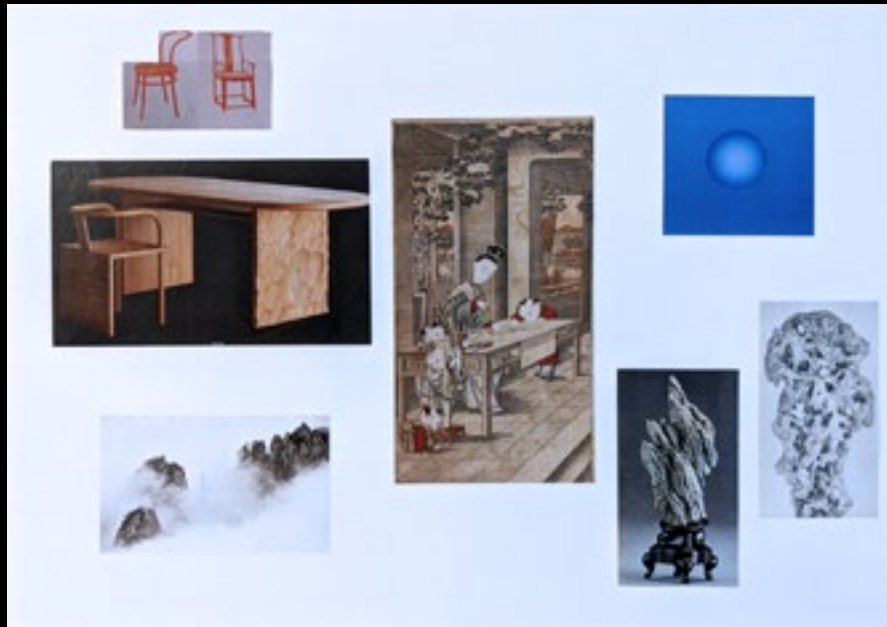
With all this in mind, perhaps it isn't surprising that the pair were fascinated by the archetype of the Ming chair, which in Groves's words, 'is throne-like, with a geometric base and a



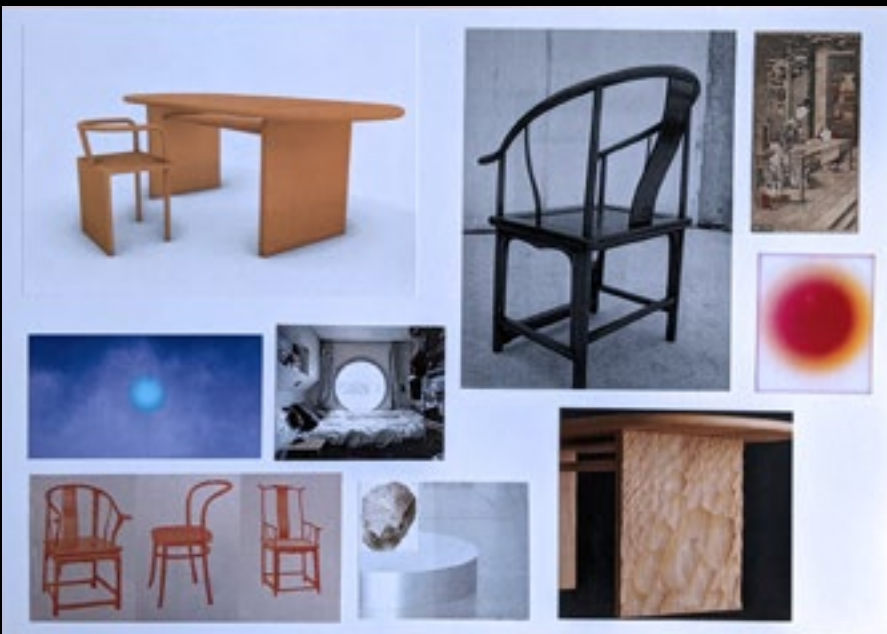
Above: Studio Swine's workstation during the first lockdown at their home in Tokyo.

Below: A restaurant seating arrangement, photographed by Alex whilst exploring the city in lockdown.





Above: Original sketches by Studio Swine. Drawing inspiration from the archetype of the traditional Ming chair.



Opposite: The pair have a lot of back and forth dialogue, combining their backgrounds in sculpture and architecture and thinking about the space the piece will inhabit. A research trip to China sparked the inspiration for the *Humble Administrator's Table and Chairs*, particularly the harmony found in Chinese gardens.

Serpentine, organic, curving back... it's a really inviting chair. It's very much a portrait of the sitter.' It profoundly influenced Hans Wegner when he was designing the classic *Wishbone Chair*, another Swine favourite. 'What really appeals to us about mid-century modernism is this architectural order meeting a sensuous human and inviting shape.' By contrast, their table is simple, echoing the curved lines of the chair back at each end and featuring a drawer where work stuff can be tidied away in the evening.

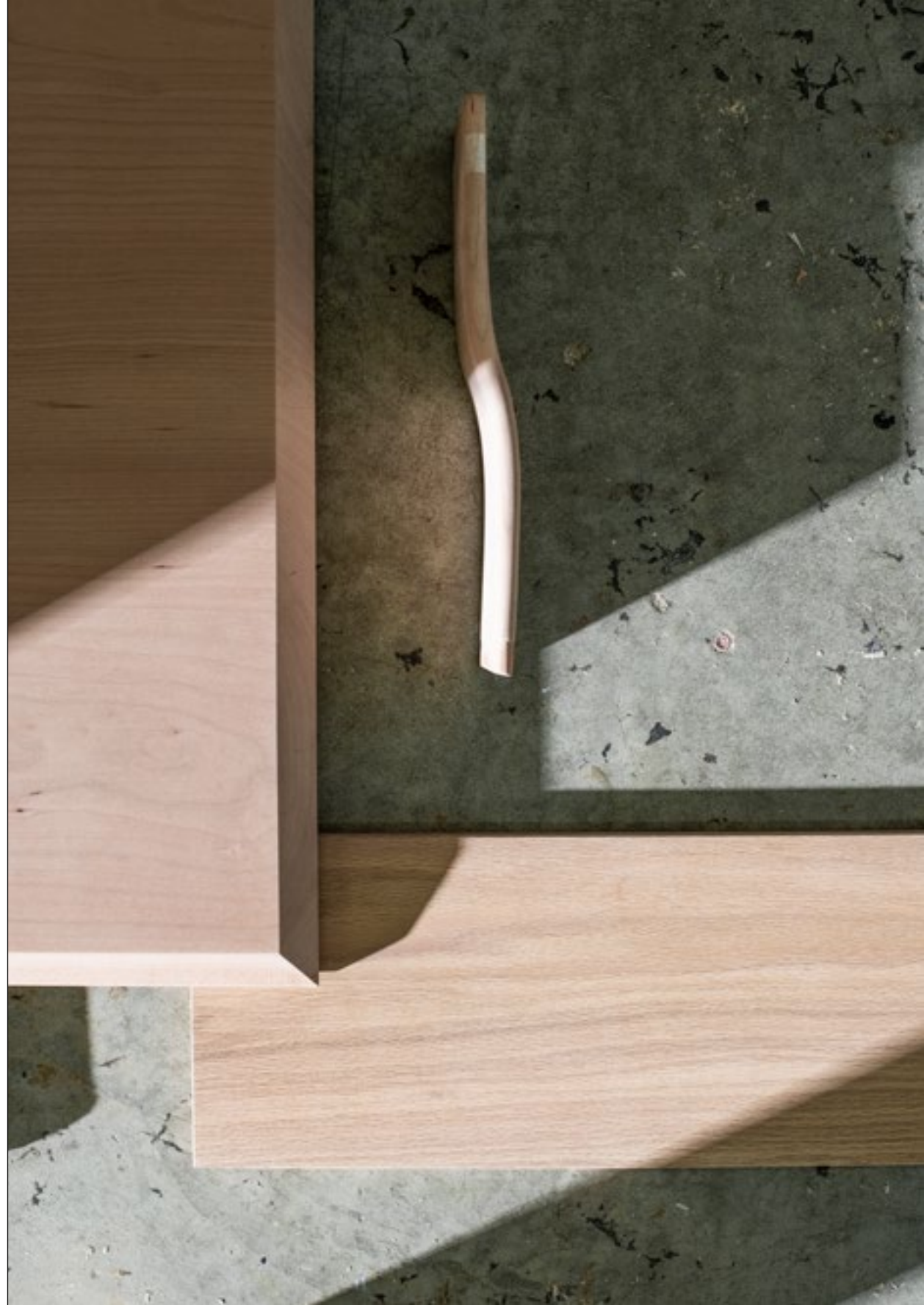
The pair had initially looked at specifying red oak before changing their minds. 'The oak looked more modern, but there's just something that grew on us about the cherry. It was very warm and, it sounds funny to say, kind of appetising. It looks caramel-coloured and has a flowing grain. It makes you want to reach out and touch it and be around it. It was important to us in our home to have something warm.'

Working digitally presented some difficulties, although Groves is quick to heap praise on the Benchmark team, pointing to the workshop's skill at steam-bending the hardwood for the chair legs and back. 'I've learned a tremendous amount about furniture and making chairs from them,' he says. However, it seems one idea couldn't be achieved without their presence at the workshop. 'Often our work requires us to do some hands-on experimenting. There was a plan to do this very textured, chipped surface but it was something that didn't really work out. I think it would require us to spend a day with the wood and the tools. When you start a design you go in with a percentage of what you know and a percentage of the unknown and what you might discover.'

You sense the chairs and table signify a new phase in the couple's life. They have a small child and there's an obvious desire to put down some roots. 'Since we've been going as a studio we've lived in quite a number of different countries and cities – São Paulo, Shanghai, New York, London and now here. We're quite a nomadic studio. It has been really exciting because we haven't really furnished a home before. Until recently we didn't have any chairs and we were sitting on the floor. It's the first item that we've really designed for ourselves, for our home. It very much influences everything else, the objects we want to collect – the ceramics, lacquerware and whatever else. We see this table as continuing and growing out as we build the rest of our home around it.'



Experimentations with the timber.



The challenge for Benchmark when it came to making the *Humble Administrator's Table and Chairs* was the seat's leg and back. 'The table itself was straightforward,' says Sean Sutcliffe, 'a classic piece of cabinet making. It's all wood, there are no metal fixings or screws.' While that was made in cherry, the craftsmen looked at other materials for the chair. 'We tried over and over to bend cherry,' confesses Sutcliffe. 'The whole leg and back is one continuous bend. In the end, we used red oak, which being much more porous and having a more open vascular structure in its grain, is more flexible.'

Still, the kiln-dried wood had to be soaked for two days in a nearby river before it could go into the steam box. Once it had softened the wood was taken out, its fibres compressed down the length of its grain using steel straps and subsequently, bent around a jig while still hot. It then was left in that shape to set for two weeks.

TIMBER:
American red oak
and cherry

CARBON FOOTPRINT:
-98kg CO₂ (equivalent to
offset a -765km drive in a
typical family car)

1.8 SECONDS:
Time taken for the 159kg
of cherry to be replaced by
new growth in the forest



Opposite: Soaking the red oak in a nearby river for two days makes the timber more pliable for steam-bending.

Above: After being steamed, the timber is moulded in one continuous bend and left to dry for two weeks.

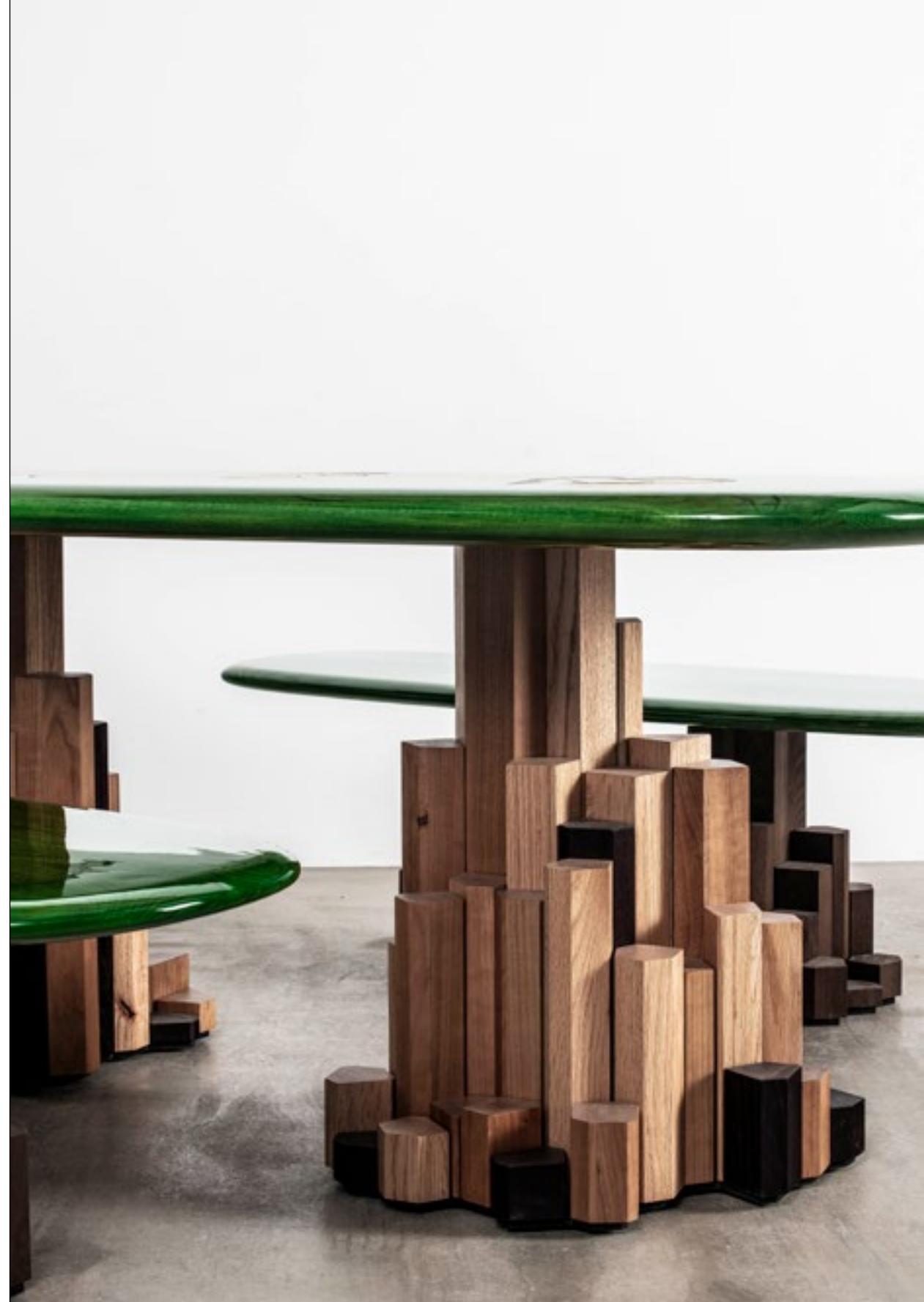
Right: Cherry forms the solid base of the chair and the steam-bent red oak is turned for the arm and back rest.



Section 2

The Tables and Chairs









NORDIC PIONEER
MARIA BRUUN







MESAMACHINE
JAIME HAYON







STAMMTISCH
SEBASTIAN HERKNER





ARCO
MARIA JEGLINSKA - ADAMCZEWSKA





CANDY CUBICLE
SABINE MARCELIS

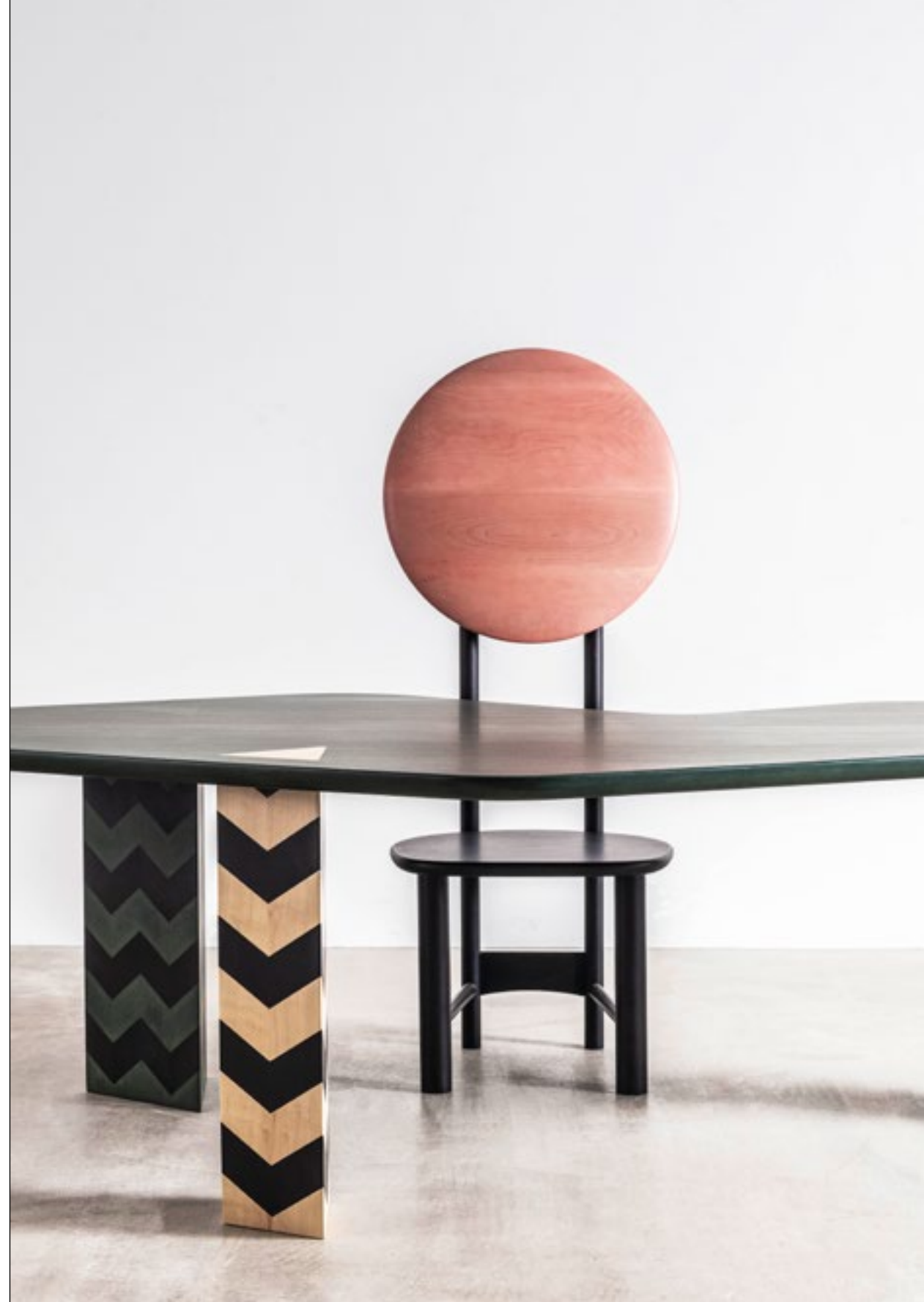
















HUMBLE ADMINISTRATOR'S TABLE AND CHAIRS
STUDIO SWINE





Section 3

The Project



Thinking Through Making

The collaboration between Benchmark Furniture and AHEC

Connected is the fifth time AHEC has collaborated with Benchmark. The high-end furniture maker was co-founded by Sean Sutcliffe and Sir Terence Conran in the grounds of the latter's home during 1984. Starting out with a team of three, it now has a staff of 70 and a reputation around the globe for its craftsmanship in timber. But, like every business, it was affected by the pandemic. Significant projects have been delayed, and in some instances, cancelled. However, work has continued, if at a reduced level. 'It's not a job you can do from home. You need to be in the workshop. But we're lucky in the sense that we have a big space – two metre social distancing is not a problem for us – and we all go around with these,' Sutcliffe explains, holding up a heavy-duty mask rather proudly.

Talking in May 2020, as the virus is at its peak in the UK and the world in a state of flux, the greatest change for Benchmark has been how to communicate and use technology fluently, something that chimes perfectly with *Connected*. 'Not a day goes by in our normal lives when we don't have architects, designers or clients visiting here: touching, feeling and discussing things in the workshop,' he says. 'And that stopped completely. All the design resolution is being done remotely now. So that brings its own challenges.' At the moment he's still at the getting-to-know-you stage with the designers themselves and freely admits he's on a learning curve with a group that is genuinely diverse – in terms of geography, age, experience with timber, and working methods.

Naturally enough he's on firmer ground with the timbers themselves and is evidently savouring the chance to change people's perceptions of cherry and maple in particular. 'Sadly, pale woods just went out of fashion,' he explains. 'For the last 15 years, oak and walnut have been what everybody wants to use and sell. The issue is that nature grows the trees that nature grows. In a naturally regenerating forest, cherry and maple still grow. If you remove the market value from them you end up compromising the forest's economic viability.' It's a question of persuading the market to diversify its tastes and retailers to widen choice. Meanwhile, red oak has long struggled to gain a foothold in Europe. Partly he ascribes this to the fact that the continent has its own oaks but also because it can vary in colour. However, as he's keen to point out, its technical performance is excellent and it comes at a very good price.

A couple of months later and the project is near completion. The final pieces are sitting in the workshop ready to go and Sutcliffe's hair has got a little shaggier. 'The project has been really fascinating because – bar Thomas Heatherwick – I hadn't worked with any of the designers before,' he says. While it's clear the processes for each piece have differed, a common thread has been noticeable. 'One of the things that has come

through again and again is that people are seeking to connect with nature,' he confirms. 'With only a couple of exceptions, the forms are all quite organic.' Heatherwick has gone as far as creating an indoor garden.

While being (rightly) wary of national stereotyping, he also suggests that geography and context have been important factors in the finished work. Maria Bruun's desk is restrained, simple, clean-lined, functional and, well, a bit Scandinavian. Whereas Jaime Hayon's piece, in his view, is 'playful, joyous and full of sunshine'.

There's no question that both designers and makers have missed seeing each other in person, but the workshop seems to have enjoyed the process. 'It's not just another commercial interior. It's not another headquarters building. It's not another reception desk,' says Sutcliffe. 'It has brought challenges and excitement.' As well as the odd moment of friction (vital to any successful creative endeavour). 'I have occasionally had to say: "You can't do that with wood,"' he confesses. 'I'm not saying that the maker of things should dictate the outcome, but the craftsman should be listened to because the craftsman knows what technically is going to work and what isn't. So part of my job is to advise on how the wood is going to behave. It's a lively material, so you can't just treat it like it's inert.'

'ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HAS COME THROUGH AGAIN AND AGAIN IS THAT PEOPLE ARE SEEKING TO CONNECT WITH NATURE. WITH ONLY A COUPLE OF EXCEPTIONS, THE FORMS ARE ALL QUITE ORGANIC.'

Video conferencing isn't about to completely replace physical contact, yet Sutcliffe is surprisingly bullish about possible benefits in our new emerging world. Reducing travel and, therefore, carbon emissions is the most obvious one, but there's another, more nuanced by-product of our current situation. 'There is a potential benefit in making craftsmen step up to the plate and shoulder a bit more responsibility, to have an opinion, to look at the piece,' he explains. If the architect or designer can't be on-site then the maker suddenly acquires more responsibility – decisions can no longer simply be passed up the chain of command.

'One of the battles you have in a large workshop is to get the craftsmen to really think about what they're doing and not just follow instruction – so it isn't just a case of using their hand skills but also visual perception and interpretation. That will be a lasting gain in our workshop,' he concludes.

Opposite: The team at Benchmark (left to right) – Alex Simpson, Noel Hunt, Mike Richards, Graham Martin, Steve Cooper, Josh Hale, Ben Morgan, Mark Carey, Tom Parfitt, Timothy Anscombe-Bell, Craig Brown and Ben Clarridge.

Below right: David Venables, AHEC's European director and Sean Sutcliffe, founder of Benchmark.



The Exhibition

Connected at The Design Museum





Previous page:
Mesamachine by Jaime Hayon displayed for the first time at the Design Museum.

Left: *Pink Moon* by Studiopepe.

Below left (from top left): David Venables, Tim Marlow, Justin McGuirk, Chiara Di Pinto, Arianna Lelli Mami, Stuart Wood, Thomas Heatherwick, Tom Glover, Maria Bruun, Sean Sutcliffe, Mark Carey, Maria Jeglinska-Adamczewska and Sebastian Herkner.

Opposite: *The Kadamba Gate* by Ini Archibong outside the entrance of the Design Museum.



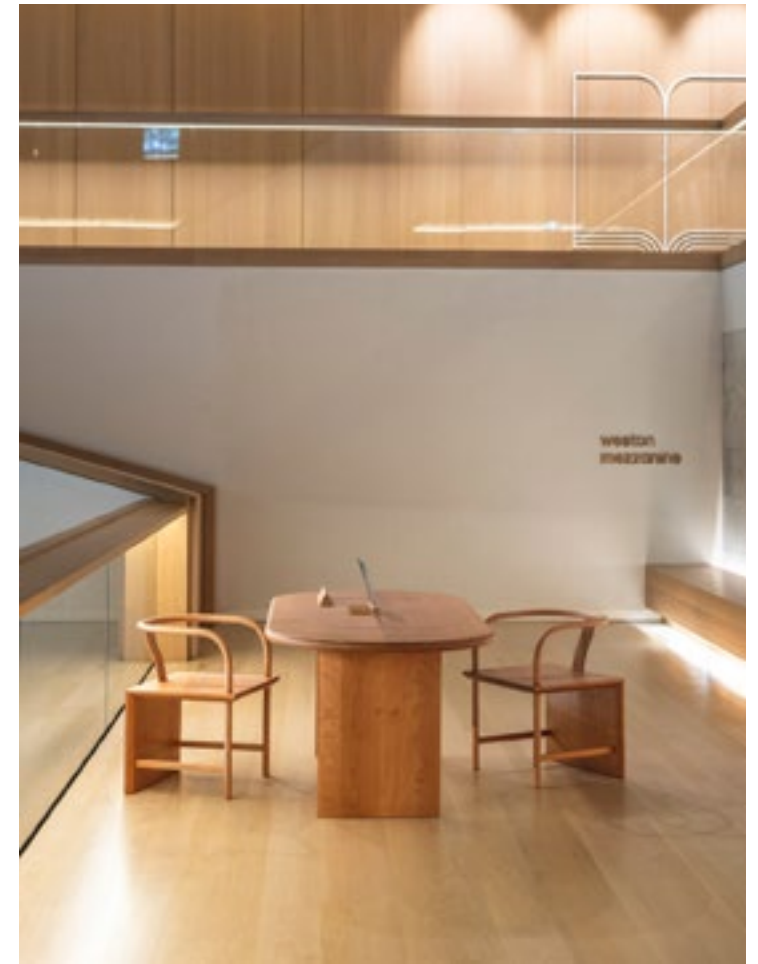


Left: Sebastian Herkner with *Stammisch*.

Below left: Maria Bruun with *Nordic Pioneer*.

Right: *The Humble Administrator's Table and Chairs* by Studio Swine.

Below right: Chiara Di Pinto, Sean Sutcliffe and Arianna Lelli Mami with the finished *Pink Moon*.



Environmental Profile

Achieving a negative carbon footprint of -342kg of CO₂

When considered as a group, the *Connected* pieces are better than carbon neutral. The total global warming potential (GWP) – often referred to as the ‘carbon footprint’ – of the nine pieces is -342 kilograms of carbon dioxide equivalent.

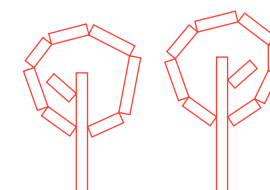
Carbon neutrality is achieved as the carbon stored in the wood used for *Connected*, together with a small offset due to use of process waste for energy production, exceeds all carbon emissions during the extraction, processing and transport of raw materials, manufacturing at Benchmark, and delivery of the finished designs to the Design Museum in London.

A RENEWABLE RESOURCE

The foundation of any claim about the carbon benefits of wood products depends on them being from a sustainable source. U.S. government forest inventory data shows that every year, after natural mortality and harvesting are accounted for, the volume of maple, red oak and cherry in U.S. forests increases respectively by 29.2 million, 28.7 million and 5.4 million cubic metres.

10 SECONDS

Time taken for the timber used in *Connected* to be replaced by regrowth in the forest.

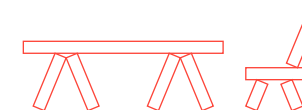


A CARBON STORE

The American hardwood lumber delivered to Benchmark represented a significant store of carbon and provided the essential raw material for manufacture of carbon neutral products. The carbon stored in the wood during growth (2.51 tonnes CO₂ eq.) exceeded all carbon emissions during material extraction and processing and transport from the U.S. (1.36 tonnes CO₂ eq.).

2.51 TONNES

The amount of atmospheric carbon locked within the materials used in the entire *Connected* project.

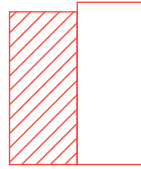


MANUFACTURING EMISSIONS

Emissions through electricity use during manufacturing were negligible due to Benchmark's decision to purchase from Good Energy, a supplier of 100 per cent renewable energy. Wood's dual role as a material for product fabrication and as biomass for energy production also has implications for the carbon footprint. The use of wood process waste for heating at Benchmark provided a carbon offset. A large share of emissions to manufacture the pieces was due to use of non-wood materials including glues and finishes, glass and metals, textiles and fillings.

☑ 1175KG EMISSIONS
☐ -2250KG OFFSET

Reduction of footprint through CO₂ stored in the wood and emissions saved using waste for production of energy.

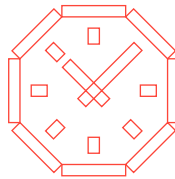


LONGEVITY OF DESIGNS

Benchmark typically guarantees a minimum 15 years' lifetime for manufactured products and claims an expected life of 100 years. Apart from ensuring that products do not need to be replaced, which means no duplication of impacts, a long life ensures that the 1.89 tonnes of CO₂ eq. is stored in the designs rather than released into the atmosphere.

100 YEARS

Expected lifetime of all furniture manufactured by Benchmark, with a minimum guarantee of 15 years.



10.2s Replacement time of harvested timber.

-324kg Carbon footprint (kg of CO₂ equivalent).

-2877km Equivalent distance in a family car.

-14.5 DAYS Equivalent carbon footprint for average European citizen.

*Negative numbers are due to carbon sequestration and other carbon offsets exceeding total carbon emissions.

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Connected
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11 September – 11 October 2020

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www.americanhardwood.org

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BENCHMARK FURNITURE

Benchmark Furniture was founded by Sir Terence Conran
and Sean Sutcliffe over thirty years ago. Benchmark is widely
regarded as a powerhouse of craft. With a sustainable
approach at the heart of everything it does, it designs and
makes furniture using traditional craft techniques alongside
innovative technology. Benchmark's particular strength is
making spaces more human, welcoming and personal,
blurring the lines between home and commercial space and
instilling natural warmth and soul. All of its furniture is made in
workshops in West Berkshire, England which means it is able
to tailor to suit individual spaces.

www.benchmarkfurniture.com

THE DESIGN MUSEUM

The Design Museum is the world's leading museum
devoted to contemporary architecture and design. Its work
encompasses all elements of design, including fashion,
product and graphic design. Since it opened its doors in
1989 the museum has displayed everything from an AK-47
to high heels designed by Christian Louboutin. It has staged
over 100 exhibitions, welcomed over five million visitors
and showcased the work of some of the world's most
celebrated designers and architects including Paul Smith,
Zaha Hadid, Jonathan Ive, Frank Gehry, Eileen Gray and
Dieter Rams. On 24 November 2016, The Design Museum
relocated to Kensington, West London. Leading architect
John Pawson converted the interior of the 1960s modernist
building to create a new home for the Design Museum giving
it three times more space in which to show a wider range of
exhibitions and significantly extend its learning programmes.

www.designmuseum.org



the
DESIGN
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BENCHMARK



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