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the HILTON touch

AWARD-WINNING BRITISH DESIGNER MATTHEW HILTON TALKS ABOUT CREATING FURNITURE THAT JUST GETS BETTER WITH AGE.

His name might not be as familiar as his contemporaries' (the likes of Philippe Starck), but Englishman Matthew Hilton's mark on furniture design is just as indelible. The 54-year-old was named Designer of the Year at the British Design Awards in 2008, and his works are permanent fixtures at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and Design Museum in London.

Matthew's designs exemplify sleek simplicity and detailed craftsmanship. While in Singapore recently to launch his namesake collection produced by De La Espada (and sold at Dream Interiors), we had another furniture designer – Singapore-based Jarrod Lim – chat with the genial gent on his inspiration for even better things.



WHAT DESIGN PHILOSOPHY GUIDES YOUR PROJECTS?

I'm always concerned with the same thing when I design a piece of furniture – it has to exist and function as a proper piece of furniture. I consider the ergonomics, manufacturing constraints and possibilities, cost, sustainability and transportation. I always try to make something with personality, with spirit, so it's not dull. That often comes from taking some kind of risk with the structure, or pushing the manufacturing technique a little bit.

I want my designs to be used, and for people to keep them. Part of this comes from using materials that age well. People shouldn't freak out about furniture that gets scratched or scuffed when it's used.

IS THAT WHY YOU CHOOSE TO WORK WITH TIMBER?

Timber, leather and good metals. There are some materials that age well and some that don't – like plastic. Most natural materials tend to be better than other things in gathering creases and weathering.

HOW HAS YOUR PHILOSOPHY AND DESIGN STYLE MATURED SINCE YOU STARTED?

It's the same as it was, but I'm more confident now. I know exactly what I want to do, and I'm more comfortable doing it.

YOU'RE INSPIRED BY ARCHITECTURE AND RAW, INDUSTRIAL SHAPES. HOW DO THESE TRANSLATE IN YOUR DESIGNS?

Architecture is a very important theme and influence for me, as is manufacturing. The rough, raw walls of a factory are great for shooting products – this is my way of not following the formula of photographing furniture in big, glamorous houses. People are going to buy my furniture and use them however and wherever they want, and I don't want to dictate where my pieces should be. I also don't like the facade of luxury in marketing furniture – I think people have more imagination than that. >

From left: The Low Lounge Chair, Fin Dining Chair and Tapas Chair lineup at Dream Interiors.





"THE ITEMS I DESIGN HAVE TO FUNCTION AND EXIST AS PROPER PIECES OF FURNITURE."

WHAT DOES BEING A ROYAL DESIGNER FOR INDUSTRY MEAN TO YOU?

I belong to a UK organisation run by the Royal Society of Arts, which is a hallowed organisation in Piccadilly. It's like a lifetime achievement club. There are 200 Royal Designers at any given time, who invite you to join after they assess your body of work. It's an honour. Nobody in Britain knows anything about it; nobody in the world knows anything about it. But it's a great honour.

DO YOU USE YOUR OWN DESIGNS?

At home, I have the Orford sofa I designed for SCP, the Tapas and Fin chairs from De La Espada, a bed I designed for Habitat, and a sofa I created for Driade. There's not enough space for one of every design, but I do like having my things around. Besides, I have easier access to them than most people!

Use the Fracture Table as one main coffee table or three side tables. (op) Former SCP colleagues Matthew Hilton (left) and Jarrod Lim catch up with each other.



DO YOU SEE A MARKET FOR LOW VOLUME, HIGH CRAFTSMANSHIP FURNITURE ITEMS?

Definitely in Europe. There's a keen interest in high quality and longer-lasting items – and not just furniture. I suppose it's a response to the economic situation and the problems we've been having with the environment.

WHAT'S NEXT ON YOUR PLATE? WILL YOU FOCUS ON FURNITURE OR EXPAND INTO OTHER AREAS?

I'd like to grow the range with De La Espada. Although wood is still their priority, I'd like to do more upholstery, cast metals, ceramics and also develop some lighting and carpets. I want to explore lots of different areas.

WHAT WOULD YOUR IDEAL PROJECT BE?

I'm in a pretty ideal situation now. This is what I've always wanted to do – to work on my own thing with all the creative freedom. It's fantastic having my own brand and collaborating with a company like De La Espada. It allows me to decide what products to make and control how my creations are presented. ●

Matthew Hilton produced by De La Espada is exclusively available at Dream Interiors, 456 River Valley Road, tel: 6235-0220.