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Bernhardt Design
Goes to School



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THE MAGNIFICENT

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The collaboration between Bernhardt Design and Art Center College of Design resulted in many promising proposals; works by seven students from the class are being put into production despite the manufacturer's original intention to produce only three items.

By Jade Chang



SHAWN LITRELL



ANA FRANCO

"Everyone else calls it the *Vanity Fair* shot, but I like to call it the *American Idol*," says Jerry Helling, creative director of Bernhardt Design and now a sort of good-hearted Sven-gali for a group of young furniture designers from Art Center College of Design, in Southern California. The nine students, whose pieces were chosen from a class of 21 to be produced by Bernhardt, are being posed by marketing director Carolyn Smith in a white-box studio in Bernhardt's Lenoir, North Carolina, factory headquarters. "We couldn't have cast a better group of characters if we'd tried," Smith says.

It's been a long road from school to factory, and before their work debuts

When a 116-year-old furniture company teamed up with a class of student designers, the learning process went both ways.



Four of the pieces selected for production from Art Center's collaboration with Bernhardt Design are (clockwise from top left) Robbyn Carter's Segue bench, Justin Porcano's Edge chair, Shawn Littrell's Calyx chair, and the Float table by Ana Franco.



Buzz around campus started early—this class project would translate into actual products with the potential to yield a real commission.

Creative director Jerry Helling (above) spearheaded Bernhardt's collaboration with the school and personally participated in critiques throughout the process. Bernhardt's final selections took place in the Wind Tunnel space in Art Center's South Campus (right).



in Bernhardt's booth at this year's ICFF, there would be materials to source, manufacturing problems to solve, and strict rounds of quality control—and there's no guarantee that all nine will make it through.

Helling, who was responsible for bringing Ross Lovegrove, Fabien Baron, and Jeffrey Bennett to Bernhardt's 25-year-old design division, had been toying with the idea of an art school collaboration for a few years. He considered partnering with London's Royal Academy of Arts, a 237-year-old institution that went from educating Turner and Constable to showing Damien Hirst. Then in the spring of 2004, he and Smith attended Art Center's first design conference. The three-day gathering of high-profile thinkers and doers, plus a conversation with the college's persuasive president, Richard Koshalek, convinced Helling to move his project west. Buzz around campus started early—a class project that would translate into actual products with the potential to yield a real commission was the talk of the school. "None of us had ever heard of an opportunity like this," says student Justin Porcano, who was so excited he designed two chairs in the class.

About 40 students applied for 21 spots in the 14-week class, taught



EMI

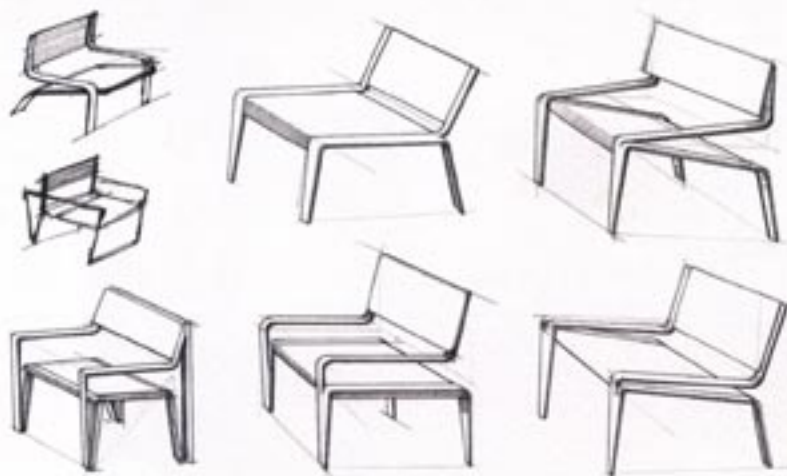
EMI FUJITA

Early sketches (right) show various configurations of the Emi chair's stainless-steel arms.

Process photos at the welding studio (left) document how the first prototype (bottom left) evolved.

by David MocarSKI. Originally Bernhard agreed to select up to three designs for production. "We told the students that we're the client and they needed to design products appropriate for the marketplace and our company," Helling says. To fit the Bernhard aesthetic, they would have to be "plain, simple, and understated. The product has the appearance of a certain level of quality and permanence. It looks expensive, even if it doesn't cost a lot. We don't do fun, disposable products."

Students were given four categories—round seating, chairs, sofas, and occasional tables—and were cautioned against developing products that would require costly tooling processes or construction that



couldn't be done with jigs. Metal bending was acceptable, but plastics, for example, were outside the scope of the brief. Helling visited the classroom several times during the course: "The first week I went in there, it was a mixed bag. Some of them were surprising in that they were well-thought-out mature designs—very appropriate. But the large group was unfocused and not very sophisticated in their thought process. I had just a moment of ner-



AIRE

JORGE CRUZATA

At the final critique (above), Cruzata displayed several miniature walnut-and-Plexiglas models of the Aire on one low table (top right). Four of the models are shot individually at right. The Aire table (top left) was ultimately fashioned from walnut, stainless steel, and glass.

vousness there." For the students, the transition from pushing crazy concepts—that need only be rendered in pen and ink or cyberspace—to considering production realities was a difficult but enlightening jump.

"Probably the biggest shock to me was from the first session to the second, and what David Mocarski was able to do with these kids to get them to focus on the job at hand and put aside personal idiosyncracies, put aside the idea that they'll come in and design the next new thing," Helling says.

"I used to think I designed with a certain aesthetic," says Ana Franco—who went to Milan's Salone del Mobile last year with a chaise as part of another workshop and has a set of tables at ICFF—"but now I realize that the look of a piece changes according to the client's needs."

Students also got a taste of client capriciousness, an X factor that, as any working designer knows, can pop up at any moment. Most of the time, Helling has an air of school-boy mischief—a little outrageous

and full of jokes—but he can morph into what the staff occasionally calls "Scary Jerry." According to Emi Fujita, whose sophisticated leather and metal chair is in the final group at ICFF, "At the second or third meeting he came in like someone who was shopping for shoes—just looking and saying 'like' or 'don't like,' but not why. At first David was afraid he wasn't going to like any of the furniture."

By the final critique in December 2004, the student work was so polished that Anne Bernhardt, the

It's tempting to use reality-show jargon to describe them as the final seven.

At the end of a long day of deliberations they chose ten products and nine designers (both Porcano chairs made the cut). Some stellar designs were derailed because they couldn't be produced profitably. Other products were simply too close to the existing Bernhardt line—though that didn't stop the team from choosing Shawn Littrell's "plain, simple, and understated" lounge chair, which Helling immediately declared would be the best seller. The products chosen in the crit also included Alvarado's Jaguar-inspired chair; Robbyn Carter's wood and chrome-banded bench; Ryan Vasquez's wooden benches with padded backrests; Trilby Nelson's cleverly folded chair; and three from designers that, Helling says, "came right out of the box with perfectly realized designs"—Jorge Cruzata's glass, wood, and metal tray tables; Franco's cuboid end tables made of those same materials; and Fujita's chair.

All of the pieces fit easily into Bernhardt's current offerings. At first Helling seemed to be looking for pieces that projected a younger sensibility, but the final group was largely made up of more polished pieces—and an older collection of students with an average age of 26. "Usually I choose the person and we work on developing the product, but in this particular case we were actually looking at products and ideas," Helling says. "It was product shopping, not talent shopping." The brief's emphasis on hewing to the Bernhardt way led to more conservative designs than the students were accustomed to creating, but, Helling says, "we got some fresh approaches within our vocabulary"—and the company is optimistic about the sales potential of student pieces. Each student will receive a commission, a portion of which goes back to the school.

But the journey to ICFE was only half over. After the announcement, Campbell, who is responsible for shepherding designs through the production process, walked through each product, taking note of necessary changes: Is the pitch of the seat right? Are the legs too long? Too short? Can you actually sit in it without collapsing the whole thing? He would return to the factory and construct a prototype of each piece, finding out whether the students' careful handcrafting could translate to factory-line production.

Lenoir, North Carolina, is the heart of furniture country. Major manufacturers like Broyhill and Thomasville are either here or in nearby Hickory; both towns are bordered by the Blue Ridge Mountains. In mid-January, Mocarski and all nine students traveled south to Bernhardt's factories for three intensive days of prototype evaluations, PR workshops, a factory tour, and the photo shoot. Call it "Camp Chair," without the bunk beds.

Helling had instructed each student to come with a list of possible names. During the test photo shoot—the real one would be in L.A. two months later—Smith and Helling also engaged in rapid-fire rounds of naming. Some suggestions, especially the ones that seemed like an alphabet jumble, received immediate approval—Nelson's Rekyra, which she derived from Reykjavík; Porcano's Via; Littrell's Calyx; and Alvarado's Eva—while others got some well-deserved ridicule. Vasquez, for example, came up with a list that included Schlong ("Who gave you this one?") and Godfrey, a name he saw on a local billboard, while Fujita had only one name: Ima. "As in, I'm a chair?" Helling asked. She nodded, "I couldn't even name my puppy!"

Playing on the slightly gangster bling of her benches' chrome bands, Carter suggested Gotti, Triad, and Wrap, but settled for Segue. Years of product naming have given Helling and Smith a short list of considerations: How will people pronounce it? Does it look good in print? Can it be misinterpreted or conjure up bad

associations? (Tilt, for example, was nixed immediately.) Is it taken? And finally, does it work for the product? In the end, almost everyone was satisfied. Vasquez's became Fli, Cruzata went with Aire, Porcano's wood and metal chair became Edge, Franco's was named Miter but later changed to Float—but Fujita's chair remained anonymous.

During a factory tour led by the head of manufacturing, Elliot Spohn, the group—slightly worse for wear from a night at the local biker bar, Iron Thunder Saloon and Restaurant—walked wide-eyed through the enormous warren of rooms, digital cameras at the ready. There was plenty to photograph. The factory may finish a unit every 1.5 minutes (nearly 70,000 a year), but instead of a modern army of robots, most of the work is still done by people, many North Carolina natives whose families have worked in the area's furniture business for three or four generations. Not far from a sign that warned "Concealed handguns prohibited on these premises" sat the testing machines, which looked like Pilates equipment gone awry. One trial dropped 300 pounds of dead weight on the back of a chair, and a drag test pulled a chair over the worst-case scenario—a rough cement floor. "Will our furniture have to pass that?" Carter asked.

Absolutely. And so it was on to the individual evaluations of the products, which took place in the Bernhardt Design offices, filled with collection pieces from recent photo shoots. Campbell and Bernhardt product designer Alyssa Coletti circled the factory-built prototypes with each student, strengthening table legs and tweaking seat pitch. Trying to determine optimum table height during Cruzata's evaluation, Campbell pulled aside a Jhane Barnes Martini table and plopped Cruzata's table right next to Fabien Baron's B.1 sofa. There was a collective intake of breath—the table looked perfect. Franco's table, which was prototyped in a light-colored wood that she seems to dislike, had stability issues. The thin steel bar holding together the wood and glass was too weak, and would either have to be beefed up or helped along with wood infill.

"The chair is beautiful," said Helling of Emi Fujita's still unnamed product, "but it looks like it's crawling on its hands and knees." Varied stacks of wood chips were placed under the front legs, the pitch was considered and reconsidered, and finally a few changes were approved for the next round of prototyping. Meanwhile, more names were suggested—Pilot, for the chair's weightless but commanding appearance, and the eponymous Emi, but of course Fujita hated them all.

Two products—Ryan Vasquez's short bench, Fli, and Trilby Nelson's lounge chair, Rekyra—were dropped in mid-February. "After experimenting with Rekyra, the only thing you could do it in was a medium white felt, and that's just too constraining to the customer. I'm not sure the product had the gravitas to pull it off. Ryan's was just uncomfortable, and there was no way to make it comfortable," says Helling, who may have been more despondent over the cuts than the students were. For them it was all part of the real-life experience promised by the class. Now the final seven—it's tempting to use reality-show jargon to describe them as finalists, survivors, the last ones standing—are making their professional debut at ICFE, where they're showing their work to buyers.

More valuable than the potential royalties is the sense of possibility that this workshop has given the participants. All nine, including Vasquez and Nelson, are now sure about what they want to do. Franco explains, "Bernhardt was enthusiastic from the beginning and trusted us, and that was a very encouraging experience for young designers who are used to hearing 'no' more than 'yes.'"

For more information visit Bernhardtdesign.com

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