

VOGUE

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What Happens When Architects Design Furniture?

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by AHNNA LEE



Photo by Dan Kukla, courtesy of Friedman Benda

At Friedman Benda gallery, two architect-designed furniture exhibitions show the constant inventiveness of the genre. “Inside the Walls: Architects Design” presents remarkably rare pieces of furniture by some of the most preeminent architects of the 20th century, while “No-Thing: An Exploration Into Aporetic Architectural Furniture”—

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aporetic meaning perplexing—investigates new ideas around furniture and how it can inspire behavior in the domestic space.

Upstairs at “Inside the Walls: Architects Design,” you’ll find an exceptional selection of unique furniture designed by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles and Ray Eames, Frank Gehry, and Rudolph Schindler, thoughtfully curated through the expertise of renowned 20th-century modernist design collector, Mark McDonald. Contextual visuals and text lead to an understanding of custom furniture design, revealing both historical value and impressive originality, especially considering the architects’ limited resources at the time.

As they weren’t bound by the parameters that a furniture-maker or interior designer might have, these architects were able to produce exactly what they desired, with a receptive client and interiors they could control. Sometimes a single piece would result in a separate series of furniture produced for the masses. The iconic Eames Storage Unit (on exhibit) was produced for four years. All the original dimensions and proportions were designed specifically for the Eames House—it inspired the architects to create furniture with Herman Miller, using economic materials like fiberglass and laminated plywood. “The idea was the growth of the house then becoming a piece of furniture,” explains McDonald. In France, Charlotte Perriand’s Mexique bookcase (1952), designed for Atelier Jean Prouvé, also disrupted ideas around furniture with new materials and structure. Since the country was rebuilding from the war, Perriand was left to use inexpensive material like metal and tin, which she created in blocks of bright colors, based on the ideas of Corbusier. Frank Gehry’s rocking chaise lounge chair, on the other hand, was designed specifically for production. It was sold at Bloomingdale’s in the ’70s, though not successfully commercial because, despite Gehry’s fame, many thought it to be cheap (perhaps because he chose cardboard as his material of choice).

For McDonald, the most interesting pieces are the ones that were made specifically for a house and then later adapted to be made for production—a very rare breed of work. Be sure not to miss the beautiful Louis Kahn desk at the exhibition, one of the few freestanding pieces of furniture he designed.

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Frank Gehry, "Easy Edges" Rocking Chaise Lounge (1973)
Dan Kukla / Courtesy of Friedman Benda



For "No-Thing: An Exploration Into Aporetic Architectural Furniture," Juan Garcia Mosqueda conceived the contemporary equivalent to Mark McDonald's exhibition, gathering nine architectural practices to dismantle preconceived ideas around furniture. In contrast to the certainty of the 20th century's prominent architects, Mosqueda describes these participants as skeptical. "I think it's part of the sociopolitical situation [now]," he says. "That level of skepticism that we're living in is being reflected in the creative."

None of the items at his show are recognizable as furniture. Instead, they leave viewers wondering exactly how to interact with them. One piece, the Rocker, conceived by Leong Leong, envisions a new interpretation of a meditation bench. With no back, it encourages practicing balance and posture as a way to sustain awareness. It's also provocative as a design object or sculpture, offering two versions: one in refined gneissic stone for indoors and the other in perforated stainless steel for outdoors. Another piece to note is Frame 01, designed by SO-IL (Solid Objectives), a lounge chair made in stainless steel mesh that can seat two to four people at once. It looks like a piece you'd find at a playground, adjustable for comfort with simple hooks and comfortable due to

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the pliability of the mesh chain. As Ilias Papageorgiou, partner at SO-IL explains, “It’s part of an ongoing exploration that a lot of our activities today are hybrid and not so determined. There is this idea that our furniture is also not so defined in its use but there is also this idea of play and also to provoke the user to figure out how to use it.” As uncertain as this type of furniture can be, the understanding is that design is no longer just around to solve problems. Instead, it can push boundaries and provoke curious investigation, moving us towards new inventions of our own.

Both shows open January 18 and run until February 17 at Friedman Benda, New York, NY.

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