

AD

ATHENA CALDERONE TAKES MANHATTAN

PERSONAL BEST

Top Tastemakers at Home

\$9.99

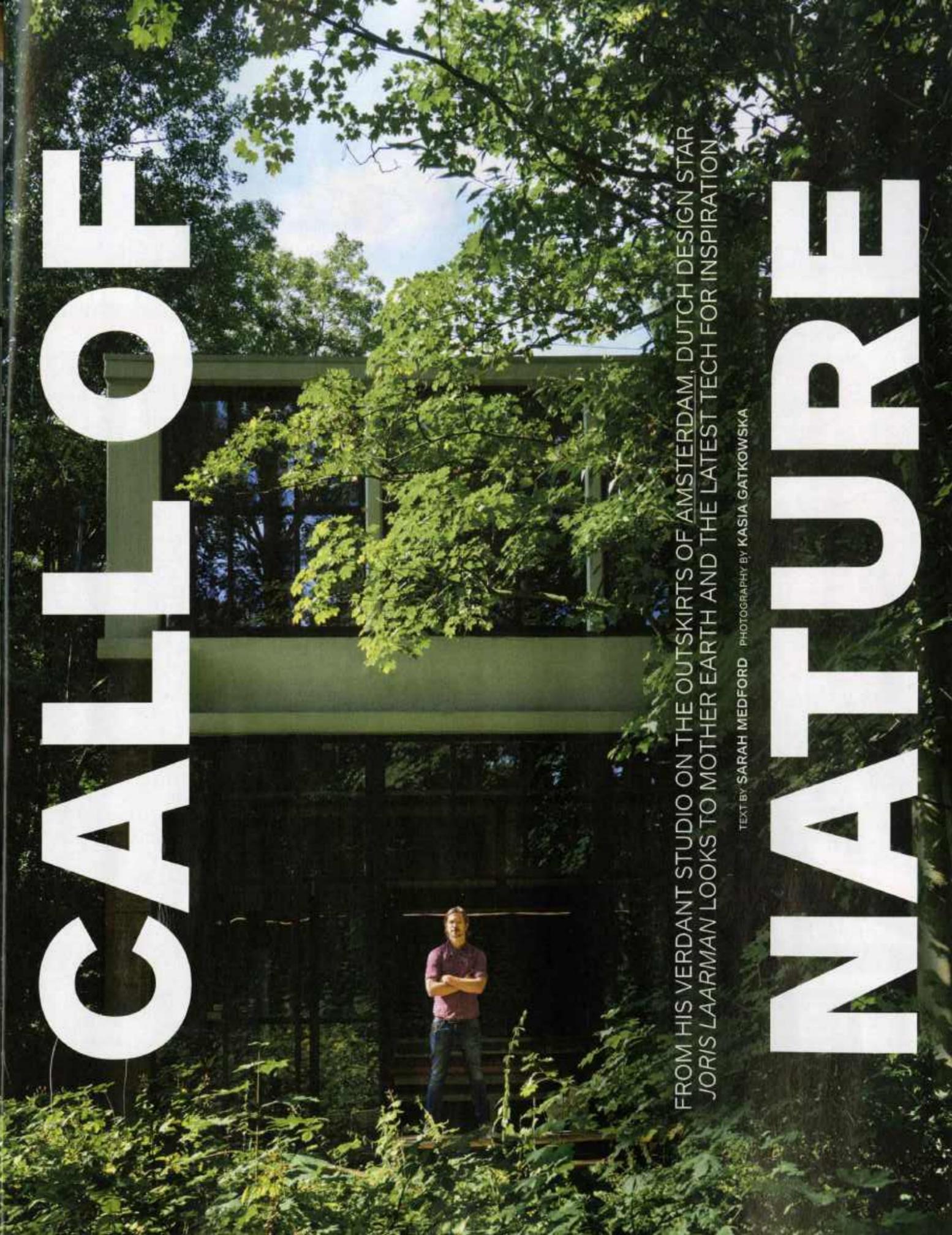


0 09128 08430 5



GROUPED IN A CORNER OF JORIS LAARMAN'S STUDIO OUTSIDE AMSTERDAM ARE A SHELF, DESK, AND CHAIR FROM HIS PLY LOOP SERIES. OPPOSITE LAARMAN AT THE BUILDING, A FORMER MILITARY FACTORY.

CALL OF NATURE



FROM HIS VERDANT STUDIO ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF AMSTERDAM, DUTCH DESIGN STAR JORIS LAARMAN LOOKS TO MOTHER EARTH AND THE LATEST TECH FOR INSPIRATION

TEXT BY SARAH MEDFORD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KASIA GATKOWSKA

PHOTOGRAPHED MID-CONSTRUCTION, THE 2025 PLY LOOP DESK IS FABRICATED, BOTH DIGITALLY AND MANUALLY, USING OAK-AND-WALNUT VENEER.



Vacations are usually eventful and sometimes restorative. But life-changing? Honestly, how often can you say that?

In the winter of 2018, the Dutch designer Joris Laarman and his family traveled through the wilder reaches of southeastern Australia, returning home stupefied by the unruly beauty of its plant and animal life. The following year, they learned that bushfires in the region had decimated 59 million acres of land, home to billions of living things.

"It was awful, and we were very touched by it," Laarman says. "We just made the decision—okay, let's try to focus on working together with nature, and also *in* nature. Which is hard to find in the Netherlands, honestly, because we are a crowded little country."

Laarman is one of his nation's master problem solvers, the kind of clairvoyant who can bend steel and make compostable surfboards—and has. Since graduating from Design Academy Eindhoven in 2003, he's created a pretzel-shaped bench printed by robots for the LeBron James Innovation Center, on Nike's Oregon campus, and designed the world's first 3D-printed bridge, for Amsterdam's red-light district.

Designing a new life for his family (Laarman and his partner in business and life, Anita Star, have three children, ages 9 to 14) took him several years. Things got a jump start when the couple found acreage on Zaandam, a forested peninsula 15 minutes from central Amsterdam that, for centuries, was home to the manufacturing of ships, then explosives, and eventually rifles and ammunition. In recent years it's taken on a new identity as a mixed-use haven. Now 26 families in Laarman's orbit have come together to build a thriving live-work community.

Laarman's new studio, in a former factory, has pleasing proportions and a soaring curved roof, "so that if a bomb explodes, the force would go through the windows and not the ceiling," he explains. It's big enough to house the futuristic tools of Joris Laarman Lab, from laser cutters to milling machinery. On a typical day, a team of 20 or so works within view of a massive window wall (Laarman's addition), beyond which is an organic garden and a communal dining table. As factory life goes, it's pretty idyllic.

"An artist, a maker, is usually in an industrial setting—here, you're in the middle of the woods. You'll see a fox or a deer run by," marvels Marc Benda, whose Friedman Benda gallery in New York will mount a long-awaited show of Laarman's new work in May. Plinths and shelves hold beguiling prototypes, including the biophilic Bone chair, a breakout 2006 design conceived when Laarman was messing around with early AI software intended for the automotive industry. The project hinted at a direction he's pursued ever since: Nature's wisdom can bestow a higher purpose on design.

"We're trying to evolve from focusing on technical things and innovation to actually using technology and merging it with nature to create something new," Laarman says of the studio's latest work. Take Symbio, a series of elemental outdoor seating made of recycled concrete. Beyond drawing attention to a radical new technology for reducing concrete's CO₂

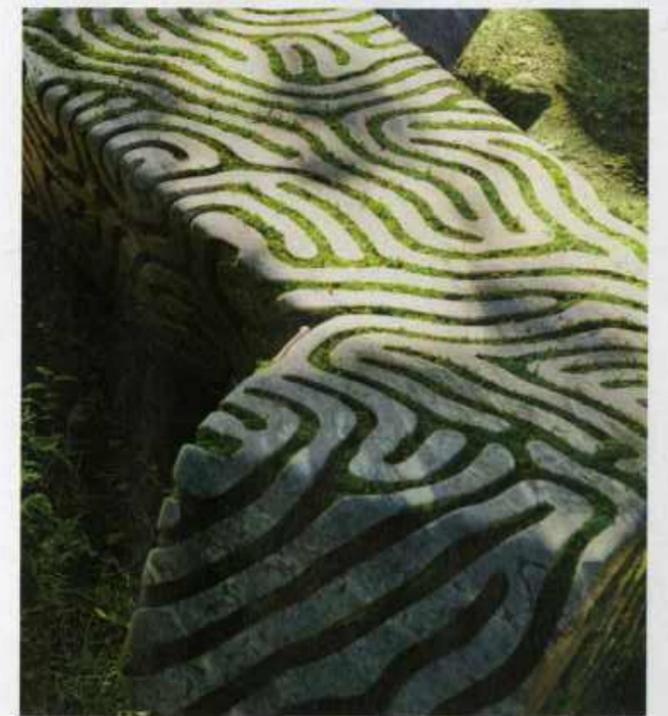


emissions, a major contributor to global warming, the boulder-shaped pieces are channeled with algorithmic patterns resembling coral or fingerprints, in which moss and other plant life can grow. Decorative, performative, restorative: These are furnishings for the future. “You can make panels of this material,” Benda adds excitedly—which Laarman is already doing. “With Symbio, you could green an entire city.”

The designer’s new Ply Loop furniture evolved from his research into plywood, an innocuous-seeming timber composite bonded with glues now known to be both carcinogenic and polluting. His “greener” version combines strength, elegance, and recyclability. A balletic shelf from the series debuted at Design Miami Paris in October. Experimenting with hand tools, digital fabrication, and sustainable materials, in this case oak-and-walnut veneer, Laarman develops a language of organic forms—like his shelf torqued into an explosive pirouette.

“Technology in itself can be quite boring,” he says. “But the combination between craft and technology is where design starts to become interesting.”

In life as in design, synergy is a worthwhile and often attainable goal. Zaandam has provided Laarman and his family with the rare chance to live and work in nature and in community. “It ticks a lot of boxes,” he says. The one wrinkle in this seamless world is its proximity to the rest of his crowded little country. In 2026, a new contemporary art museum, ZAMU, will open nearby, and the prospect of throngs of visitors fills Laarman with trepidation. But give him a few months. He’ll figure something out. ▀



TOP EXHIBITED IN THE WORKSPACE ARE A 2025 NIMBUS COFFEE TABLE, A 2010 BRANCH BOOKSHELF, A 2015 MICROSTRUCTURES GRADIENT CHAISE LONGUE, AND A 2024 FOREST COFFEE TABLE. ABOVE A DETAIL OF A SYMBIO BENCH. OPPOSITE LAARMAN GATHERS WITH HIS FAMILY AND TEAM IN THE STUDIO’S GARDEN.