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BIG IDEAS FOR HOMES, HOTELS AND SHOPS FROM THE BOUROULLECS, DAVID CHIPPERFIELD, JULIE D'AUBIOUL, THOMAS DEMAND FRONT, NOEMIE GOUDAL, ALFREDO HÄBERLI, MOBY, OMA, MARCEL WANDERS, SUZUKO YAMADA AND LOS ANGELES

€19.95 EU - CHF 30 Switzerland - $18.95 USA - $23.50 Canada - £14 UK - $28.99 Australia - ¥3,570 Japan - WON 40,000 Korea
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec used just three components to produce a wooden chair for the cost of a plastic one.

Words Chris Scott
Photos courtesy of Studio Bouroullec

'A' chair, the 'Hay' chair or the 'Copenhagen' chair, as it is now known, is the result of a collaboration among the University of Copenhagen, Danish furniture company Hay and French designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.

The University of Copenhagen wanted its own chair, one that would keep students, who seem to spend less time at school, inside university buildings during and after lectures - and, more generally, to keep them from dropping out of school completely. Perhaps a chair with a domestic character? Discussions and research to find the right kind of chair included serious consideration of Hans J. Wegner's Ypsilon. Ultimately, however, the choice fell on 'something new altogether'. Of the six chairs selected as reference models, three were designed by the Bouroullecs. This prompted Rolf Hay, the owner of Hay furniture, to approach the brothers directly.

Somewhat selective about the companies they work with, preferring long-term alliances and not too many clients, the Bouroullecs are hesitant about accepting offers from new design companies. They had an immediate and positive response, though, to Rolf Hay's email: 'To have the chance to do a chair for a university - for the students - was a marvellous opportunity, something quite different from a job for a bourgeois customer,' says Ronan. 'We were very happy to design a strong, sensual chair, especially because normal office-type furniture is so often boring and hard.'

Hay's request came with a caveat: they had only a limited amount of time to complete the job. The Bouroullecs accepted the commission in February 2012, and the deadline for both design and realization was January 2013. The brothers often spend several years researching a design before it's ready to be manufactured. They had a good synergy with Hay, an open-minded company that gave them free rein - apart from some practicalities - and was ready to be challenged by the duo.

The job was in safe hands. At all hours, ideas, sketches and remarks flew from one mobile phone to another, as the passionate French designers and an equally enthusiastic Rolf Hay developed both their relationship and plans for the university chair. A formal briefing did not take place. Hay provided them with no more than factual requirements. With their expert knowledge - 'We're a couple of old designers now, after 15 years of work, we don't need to be briefed for something like this' - all they needed was Hay's short list of reminders: the chair had to be strong, comfortable, ...
‘Normal office-type furniture is so often boring and hard’

... stackable and affordable. Four demands that had to be addressed, without compromises.

The first sketch became their starting point: two pieces of bent plywood for a seat, with backrest, supported by four wooden legs. A split in the chair - where seat meets legs - turned out to be a problem. If that joint wasn’t at the right place, the chair would not be comfortable. Plywood is difficult to mould, and the curvature in the seat caused the wood to crack. They sandwiched a sheet of fabric between the layers of plywood, a technique that Arne Jacobsen had used in his Butterfly chair. One problem solved, but they still had to tackle the radius of the bend, which required many tests before achieving the best result.

Then there was the question of material. Ronan preferred pine, but it wasn’t sturdy enough. They tried beech as well, but the university favoured oak. Decisions had to be taken with regard to connections. Should they use screws, nuts and bolts, or glued dowels? Drilling through the wood weakened the connection. The best option was glued dowels.

Designing a chair composed of only three parts allowed the brothers to create a wooden chair for the price of a plastic one. There is virtually no manufacturing waste.

Four standard lengths of timber used in the furniture industry form the chair’s identical legs. The brothers admit to drastically changing our way of designing. Normally we spend a lot of time refining the curves. This time, however, we worked in a very direct way and liked the aesthetic that emerged from this straightforward approach.

To obtain the necessary certification, the chair had to endure a fortnight of tests in the ‘torture chamber’. In the meantime, with the tight schedule in mind, Rolf Hay started manufacturing - legs in Slovenia and seats in Denmark – a sure sign of confidence in the designers’ product. The all clear was given and the January delivery duly accomplished. Relief and joy all around.

The chair design has been so successful that the Bouroullecs went on to make a series of furniture based on the same principle. Their 20-piece Copenhagen range of stools, tables, desks and benches – in different types of wood and a variety of finishes and colours – will soon be available on the retail market, permitting the general public to enjoy their practical, comfortable and very good-looking ‘university’ design. _bouroullec.com_
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