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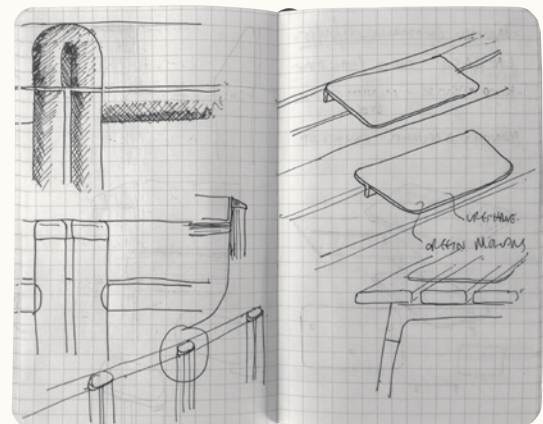
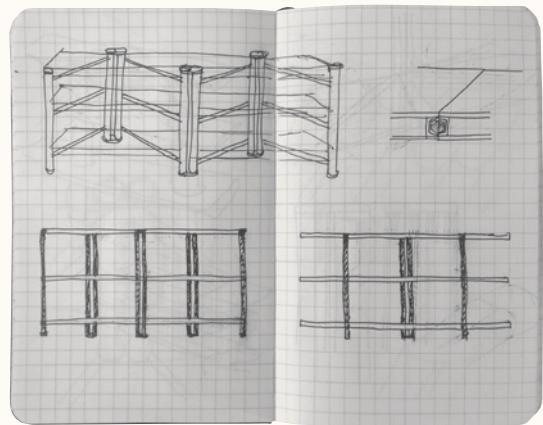
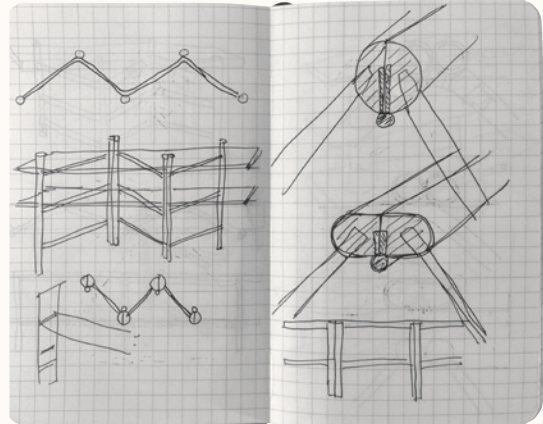
Anatomy of a Table

Words Kim Colin and Sam Hecht

Industrial Facility's Run collection of tables, benches and shelves for Emeco was a quiet presence at this year's annual Salone del Mobile in Milan. The series was inspired by simple picnic tables, yet there is more to it than meets the eye. Here, Kim Colin and Sam Hecht of Industrial Facility discuss Run's conception.

We're quite lucky to be a small office in that we've managed to maintain quality, while searching for a deeper language of thought, craft and execution with every project. So we were naturally thrilled when Emeco approached us, since we have always enjoyed their work. There is a certain charm in the projects Emeco make, in particular the Navy chair. It's born from that American period of industrialised utility and you know it's built with a particular view to resilience. The factory is in Pennsylvania, close to Gettysburg, the site of one of the decisive battles of the Civil War. It's this flat landscape and as you get closer, you start to see hundreds of grass mounds that stretch out towards the horizon, each of which is a monument to a particular regiment. Then you finally arrive at the Emeco factory, which is a little anonymous. Here is a company that in one respect could so easily have become consigned to history, but its owner Gregg Buchbinder has managed to reinvent it. They believe that design can lead the company to new places. Gregg sees the designer as a giver not just of form, but of culture, context and quality.

The discussion with Emeco originally centred around wanting a table – a café table specifically. Gregg kept talking about a table that would work with all the Emeco collection and support the idea of people coming together. So while speaking to Emeco, we realised eventually that we shouldn't really do a café table. Partly manufacturers come to us for a vocabulary to communicate what they want to do, and often when they are needing to examine a new type of object. With the Run tables, there were two big things that we were responding to. First, public space is being eroded in city centres; second, kids now have a social world that happens almost entirely online. We wanted to make a collection that brings people together in a socially relevant and comfortable way. We started by looking at the traditional outdoor



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Sam Hecht's sketchbook showing the development of the Run series for Emeco.

picnic table, the one made up of several planks. When you share a table like that, there is not really a hierarchy to it. With a table that has one continuous surface, it's easier to treat the whole thing as "your" table, whereas something made up of several planks has a more democratic dynamic. You still get the feeling that someone can sit on one side of the table and have a coffee, while someone else can sit on the other side on a laptop without having the pressure of interacting – yet you are still close. It becomes a table where you can perform different tasks simultaneously. Of course that's true of all tables, but do they read that way?

The aluminium extrusion is in essence continuous, so it gave us the idea of doing a series instead of just a single table. With Run, we could create a collection of tables, benches and shelves using the same materiality and tooling, which is economically and aesthetically satisfying. But without realising it we had fallen into this trap of creating a system. That was not our intention – particularly as now many people think that every project we do is its own system. It's not in any way deliberate, it's just that if you spend all of this energy creating something new, why wouldn't you try and capitalise on it?

Once you've figured out the dimensions of the die, extruding aluminium is like squeezing out dough. The trickier part is the connections and the finishing of it. We decided to anodise the aluminium, but if you just do that and then put some keys on the tabletop, you end up damaging it quite quickly. So we added a very fine brush finish prior to its anodisation – it's just enough to mask any light scratches. But this process is very different from other ones that Emeco uses. The Navy chair, for example, is made from a very soft recycled aluminium, which is annealed through a series of ovens that bring it to a very high temperature before cooling it, the result being an extremely hard and durable material. The extrusion for Run is a completely different process, but it's the same base of materials.

Looking at it, the collection is ridiculously simple, but it takes a lot of guts to do a collection which might appear boring or have little character. There's no big invention with Run, which was deliberate. This placidness would allow all of the Emeco chairs to be brought together and look good.



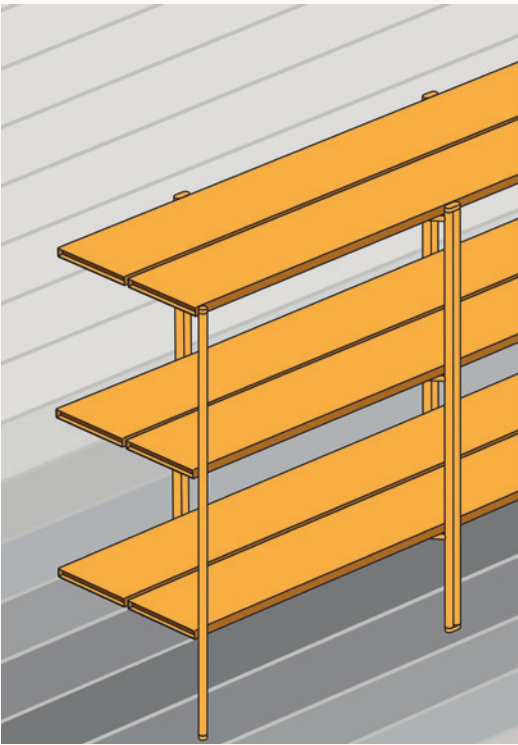
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2
The felt seat pad has a seam to help line it up with the gap between planks.

3
Industrial Facility developed a series of posters for the launch of the Emeco Run collection in Milan.

4
The Run series adapts the same parts for different purposes: shelves, table tops, seats and legs.

5
Wooden accessories slot into the gaps between planks.



3



4

If you spend
all of this
energy creating
something new,
why wouldn't
you try and
capitalise on it?



5



6

A table, bench
and shelf are surfaces
where life is played
out – that’s their design.
Nothing should get
in the way of this
simple concept.



Whether it’s the Parrish chair by Konstantin Grcic, the Lancaster by Michael Young, or the Alfi by Jasper Morrison – they are like characters and its important they remain so. But there are some small inventions in the details of Run. We developed a new type of leveller where you just turn the foot to find its stable position without creating ugly gaps between the leg and leveller. Another interesting detail is that the gap between the planks gave us an opportunity to support cords and wires, which was driven by an LED light solution we designed for Wästberg that provides tabletop power. One development with the new generation of laptops is that they don’t need a very thick cable with a large plug anymore, so we made sure that a USB cable plug could feed through this gap. A table, bench and shelf are really surfaces where life is played out – nothing should get in the way of that.

But the gap between planks fulfils another function too. Even with a shared space, you still have the need to work privately or feel some ownership of the space. So we developed a series of accessories to help territorialise the space, while keeping the feeling of openness. These accessories live in the gaps – they just slip in and are held in place by tension. The accessories become part of the piece and so we made them in wood to give some warmth.

When we saw the whole series together we looked at the bench and thought “Wouldn’t it be interesting if we took the low or high legs off the tables and put them on the bench?” It created this slightly odd but very relevant archetype in terms of the spatial conditions it will inhabit and how it will be used – it’s a perfect depth for breakfast or working on a laptop. It’s testament to the flexibility of the series that this actually worked.

The reception in Milan was very positive and we were both a little shocked, because achieving that kind of impact with a piece of furniture that is not a chair is very unusual. It’s tough to get excited by a table. We were allowed to design the Emeco stand and we kept it deliberately bare – just a table, bench and shelf. This way you see the potential more than the product. The nicest comment was from Gregg who said that after 70 years, the Navy chair finally has an Emeco table to sit at. END

Based on an interview by Johanna Agerman Ross.



7

6

A visit to the Emeco factory in Pennsylvania gave insight into production of the Navy chair.

7

A die-casting braces the planks and lets the legs screw into either side.

8

The aluminium used for the extruded planks is 100 per cent recycled.

9

A new type of leveller was developed for the leg of the table and bench.



8



9

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Writer's note: 2016/ is a highly complex endeavour, but quite central to the discussion is the theory of mingei, the folk crafts movement conceptualised in the 1910–20s and prominently led by critic and philosopher Soetsu Yanagi as well as his son Sori. Although Sori died in 2011, his approach continues to be reinterpreted by artists and designers globally.—Tiffany Lambert

2016/ – 2016arita.com

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Designer's note: My colleague Philipp and I were invited to visit a chip factory that was next door to the Emeco factory. It was a bit surreal seeing the process from potato to crisp, but our love of production and factories means that as a designer you can never say no to a visit. You never know when the knowledge might come in handy.—Sam Hecht

Emeco – emeco.net

Industrial Facility – industrialfacility.co.uk

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