

# Modern Design Review

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## What we think about when we think about wood (Branca revisited)

When Industrial Facility introduced the world to Branca, a chair designed for Italian producer Mattiazzi in 2010, a subtle but significant shift in the consideration of wood as a contemporary material occurred. Branca demonstrated that wood could be both engineered and human at the same time, and that neither nostalgia nor blatant craftiness are needed to achieve the emotional reaction that wooden furniture is so good at inspiring. Sam Hecht and Kim Colin are not romantic designers – as they themselves admit, they are best known for reimagining electronic products and office systems. Which makes their work with wood all the more interesting. Here, four years on from their game-changing chair, they reflect on what wood means to them and its significance as today's prevailing design material.

Text by Sam Hecht and Kim Colin

We came to furniture quite late; we hadn't really tackled it in any significant way until Branca because a) no one was approaching us, and b) we felt at the time that there was more room for manoeuvre in the world of electronic products; we felt that there was an opportunity to radically reimagine these kinds of products because what was available was so poorly conceived. We had a fair bit of success with that. We were contacted by Mattiazzi because they had seen our body of work and realised that we hadn't really applied ourselves fully to furniture. It was they who deliberately chose us because we had not designed a chair before. Our immediate thought was, if we're going to do a chair, they're probably a good company to work with because they understand materiality so well. And we have a kind of policy where one of the party in a project has to be an expert and the other has to be a novice – us or them. We've done projects where both are novices and it never ends well. And if both are experts, nothing particularly progressive materialises.

So up until that point, with most of the work we were doing, the intelligence was inside the object: printers, coffee-makers, telephones – these are things where the surface of the product is not really the product. But here, the surface is the chair. So it meant that we needed to alter our process. We deliberately took on the role of a sculptor, sculpting the chair by hand in a process where we would make it very roughly, in a very traditional manner. We bought a few different tools and we experimented. It was a little unnatural for us because design is very much rooted in ideas, and here it was about something to hold the body. There's probably no other item that exists in a manmade world that is touched and felt so unconsciously. Gradually, we started to impose our own constraints to direct it the way we wanted: we would never buy a chair that we couldn't stack; it needed to be fairly light to be able to move around, to not be too expensive; and it should have a presence or some form of clear quality.

The form of Branca surprises you because it blurs what we imagine is the difference between craft and production – it doesn't seem possible that a such a wooden chair can involve so many twists and turns while being produced by machine. We depended on Mattiazzi for this expertise regarding the economy of manufacture in the bending and shaping of wooden blocks and also regarding the recycling of any wastage (which helps to power the factory itself). When the chair was finished and out of our studio, we were surprised to see that although it sits like a very generous chair, there's actually very little material there to achieve it.

Mattiazzi are a family business and very open. They shared their information, their history, their expertise in wood with us, their ability to combine very advanced technology with the oldest, most beautiful handcrafted abilities. That combination of craft and technology intrigued us because at the time most people imagined a distinct line between the two. Exposure to what we call 'the expert' changes everything, and in our naivety we attempted to push Mattiazzi to the edge of their capabilities. We found that the reason the brand has these two strong but seemingly contradictory elements – craft and technology – was efficiency rather than creativity. Previously they had applied robots and CNC machines to the manufacturing process in order to create efficient production, but it had never been about creating a new typology or language. And that became an interesting area for us, something that interests us in all of our work. Mattiazzi have many clients, who act as a type of extended R&D department for them; their large amount of knowledge and expertise has the singular goal of trying to create things at the right price. The amazing part of their story is that they never migrated entirely away from craft. They were balancing their production techniques between traditional carpentry labour and the newer machines – all under one roof.

Nitzan Cohen and Florian Lambl, Mattiazzi's art directors, would come and visit us quite often. They would talk and look over the prototypes. It was exciting and we have enormous respect for them as designers themselves. And they cared; they wanted to understand the design ambition. During that time we were considering the ques-

tions, 'Where does this chair sit within history, and where does it sit within the manufacturing world?'

It is very important for a designer to understand the historical context of a design and the political and social consequences of why something like a chair is created. There are always stories about why something came to be, from the designer's point of view, from the manufacturer's point of view; but perhaps the broader, cultural context is more interesting. If you take an Eames fibreglass chair, it is clearly a product of its time. There were very few resources following the Second World War, and at the same time people were looking for more comfort in the home. Aerospace manufacturing and local fabrication expertise abounded in and around Los Angeles, and their wartime skills were applied newly toward the home.

It was the desire for economy in the Branca project that led to a mathematical equation where we realised that we could mix the processes of robot and handmade and make the end piece look unified. Simultaneously, we were looking at structure, considering lightness. At that time, five years ago, there wasn't much wood around at all. We made the back leg, structurally the most complex and demanding part, using the robot, and we incorporated the hand in the assembly and finishing to arrive at something quite profound. We wanted to achieve an evocative quality, but by using integrated and efficient production: a kind of equilibrium. For some it is still an expensive chair, but it would have been a lot more so had it not been for acknowledging the processes.

It is unusual to have inherent tension in a purely wooden design. Usually it is achieved in contrasts – contrasting wood textures or colours. It is interesting for us to see wood being used together with other materials in the past few years – this direction creates another kind of tension between 'industry' and 'craft', where purposefully industrial materials contrast with wood. For so long wood has been used to express craft, and that is the role it often plays in pieces of furniture where industrial elements (in plastic or metal) express technology or the robot age. Those recent designs are about the dialogue between the two. But with Branca the same discussion is quieter and more subtle, across a form which seems almost impossible and yet very stable.

We took advantage of qualities associated with industrial production – things like minimum wastage and efficiencies – but also took advantage of evocative qualities associated with wooden craft production, such as comfort to the eye, beauty to the eye, tactility. Mattiazzi asked that we design the chair without a single screw: 'Because that is what a wooden chair is,' they said, 'made of wood.' It is a sign of quality and achievement that you can create a chair, a Branca, without a single screw and for it to pass stringent tests. As for the diameter of the arms, that measurement was taken from a broom we had in the workshop, because it had a perfect feel in the hands. We are doing this a lot in all projects: relying upon familiarity and reappropriating. There is good reason for the diameter of that broom to stay as it has for hundreds of years, so why not use it?

We thought about the designers we had come to appreciate enormously, like Hans Wegner and Finn Juhl, and realised that in many ways most of their chairs were not particularly beautiful from all angles – and yet the combination of comfort and presence in a room did something significant to the atmosphere. We realised that Branca needed to give something positive to the environment that it is put into. This is a very deep, long journey that has taught us that sometimes the most beautiful things are those that do not shout for attention and yet somehow elevate the atmosphere.

Design can be a product of its time if it contributes something to where it will live: its context. When people fail to apply this thinking when it comes to designing furniture, there is nothing to quash that persistent question, 'Why does the world need another chair?' Good chairs are very, very much moments of their time, yet they also endure the pendulum swing between need and desire – and that is really quite important.