

design works

Marc Newson



The hardest thing about design is to know when to stop. What it does at best is make things better... I try to improve things.¹

WHEN THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM ACQUIRED THE 'MARC 1', ONE OF MARC NEWSON'S EARLIEST CHAIRS, IN 1985 IT COULD NOT HAVE ANTICIPATED THE REMARKABLE INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS OF THIS YOUNG SYDNEY-BORN DESIGNER OVER THE NEXT DECADE. Since graduating from Sydney College of the Arts in 1984 Newson has worked from studios in Sydney, Tokyo, Paris and London; today he is regarded as one of the world's most innovative and influential designers.

If the starkly geometric 'Marc 1' hinted at the emergence of a talented new designer, this potential was realised the following year in Newson's first solo show, *Seating for six*, at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney. The fruit of an Australia Council grant, the six metal chairs in the exhibition made an extraordinarily innovative and daring statement about the nature of seating design. Also in the show was Newson's 'LC1' chaise longue, a futuristic-looking, three-legged fibreglass chaise clad entirely in shiny sheets of riveted aluminium. Known as the 'Lockheed Lounge' when it was later put into limited production, this now international icon of contemporary design has graced the pages of many design publications and achieved notoriety when it was featured as a central set-piece in Madonna's elegant *Rain* video of 1993.

SO WHERE DO YOU GO AFTER YOU'VE DESIGNED A BIKE, A JET AND A HIGH-PROFILE CAR? **MARC NEWSON** IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON THE DESIGN FOR A NEW AIRLINE... AND PERHAPS A SPACE-STATION, **ANNE WATSON** REPORTS.

Following the success of the 'Lockheed', the Powerhouse Museum approached Newson to design a chair for its 1988 exhibition *Take a seat*. With generous funding from Sedia, a local furniture company, Newson designed the now-famous 'Embryo' chair. An elaboration of the distinctive curvilinear form of the 'Lockheed' and clad in bright pink neoprene wetsuit material, the 'Embryo' has since been produced by the Japanese company Idée and the Italian manufacturer Cappellini.

Above (left to right): Marc Newson, Wood Chair, Gluon Chair, Biomega Bicycle. Courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.



Above (left to right)
Marc Newson, Biomega
Bicycle, Coast Chair,
TV Chair and TV Table,
Pod Watch. Courtesy
of the Powerhouse
Museum, Sydney.

Travel inevitably provided Newson with new connections and wider opportunities. On a trip to Japan in the late 1980s, he made one of his most crucial new contacts—Japanese businessman Teruo Kurosaki whose innovative Tokyo company *Idée* produced furniture by emerging young designers. Newson's collaboration with Kurosaki has resulted in a number of significant designs including the 'Super Guppy' lamp and the 'Black Hole' table, but just as importantly it provided an entrée into the European design world. During this period in Japan, Newson also met high-profile designers such as Philippe Starck, and by exhibiting at events like the prestigious Milan Furniture Fair in 1989, he began to make productive contacts with European manufacturers.

When Newson moved to Paris in 1992 his career was well and truly launched. By the following year he had commenced designing for the Italian companies Cappellini, Flos and Moroso, created interiors for German boutiques, and added new pieces to the aluminium limited edition series that had been initiated with the 'Event Horizon' table in 1991. There can be few contemporary designers whose careers have embraced furniture as well as the highly specialised skill of watch design. However for Newson, trained in both jewellery and sculpture, these are two complementary disciplines. He designed his first watch—the minimalist 'Large Pod'—in 1986 and in 1994 established the Switzerland-based Ikepod watch company with Oliver Ike. Today the company produces a range of limited-edition watches which are exquisitely detailed to Newson's designs and incorporate the most technically advanced mechanisms.

Since the mid 1990s, Newson's ever-escalating international design reputation has created many opportunities for the kind of career challenges on which he thrives. Furniture, a series of restaurant interiors in England and Europe, home wares for Alessi, Magis and Iittala, and haircare appliances for Vidal Sassoon all have the stamp of Newson's design ingenuity. However it is the three 'vehicles' he has designed since 1998—the Falcon 900B jet for a private client, the bicycle for Biomega, and the concept car for Ford—that have really created new horizons for this still-young designer. The '021C' car (named after the Pantone-colour-system orange of its first colour scheme) presented the most challenging project of Newson's career to date. Newson described it as 'like designing 500 products at once', and indeed this engagingly curvy little vehicle is replete with his stylistic effects—from the signature 'hourglass' or 'orgone' pattern of the tyre tread and interior carpet, to the Ikepod watch-style dashboard instruments.

So where do you go after a bike, a jet and a high-profile car? Currently Newson is working on the design of a new airline: perhaps the space station he once expressed interest in designing will become a reality.

Not surprisingly Marc Newson has said that he would 'rather draw a curved line than two straight ones' and indeed all his work, from the 'Lockheed' to the detail of the '021C' car, reflects this preoccupation with fluidity.² Newson's signature shape—variously described as 'biomorphic', 'hourglass' or 'orgone' (a term he adapted

from Wilhelm Reich's eccentric 'orgone energy' theories)—has become such a characteristic part of his visual language that perhaps it should be called a 'Newson'!

Newson himself finds it difficult to articulate the source of this idiosyncratic form. Over the years he has acknowledged many inspirations, from 60s style to science fiction, quantum physics and wave forms: 'I really don't think I could ever be as inspired as I can be just sitting next to the beach somewhere in Sydney. That, for me, is the most beautiful sympathetic environment, just watching the waves ...'³ But perhaps what it is that has made the curving silhouette of the 'Lockheed', the 'Embryo', the 'Orgone' lounge or the 'Rock' doorstop so engaging to Newson's public, is also what has driven his almost obsessive preoccupation with this shape. Perhaps it has a deep-rooted, primal familiarity that we only subliminally apprehend.

Many of Newson's early objects were made either by him or as collaborative exercises and his early sketchbooks testify to the importance of the quick sketch as the starting point of the creative process. Since the mid 1990s, with growing demands on his time and the move to working with industry, Newson has depended increasingly on computer-aided design technology as a tool to solve the problems encountered in turning a two-dimensional concept into a fully resolved three-dimensional virtual model. The manufacturing process takes care of the rest. One of the clearest examples of

this link between design process and finished product is the injection-moulded polythethylene 'Dish Doctor' dish rack whose packaging is decorated with the computer drawings that made its curvy form possible.

Since 1997 Newson has lived in London leading a busy practice that demands constant travel. He visited Sydney briefly in 2000 to oversee the final touches to his spectacular Opera House lighting design for the Olympic Arts Festival, but for this global designer the stimulus of new places, contacts and projects is now crucial to his creativity: 'I've designed bits for space travel, boats, a car, bike, the interiors of a jet, but there's still a lot of things in this area to accomplish. It's very difficult for me to switch off. Your best ideas happen at strange moments.'⁴

Anne Watson is Curator, Decorative Arts & Design, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. This is an edited version of an article first published in *Powerline*, the magazine of the Powerhouse Museum, Issue 63, Spring 2001. It is reproduced with permission.

endnotes

1. Interview with the author, July 2001.
2. Davina Jackson, 'Open the pod door', *Blueprint*, February, 1990, p.29.
3. Stephen Todd, 'From elsewhere, by design', *Australian Weekend Review*, 16–17 October 1993, p.12.
4. Interview with the author, July 2001.

• Marc Newson: *design works* is on display on level 3 of the Powerhouse Museum Sydney until 3 February 2002.

Above (left to right)
Marc Newson, Pod
Watch (from previous
page), Marc Newson,
Interior of Coast
Restaurant (London),
Gello Table. Courtesy
of the Powerhouse
Museum, Sydney.



{exhibition review}

MARC NEWSON—DESIGN WORKS

Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

10 August 2001 to 3 February 2002

Above (left to right):
Marc Newson with Plastic
Orgone Chair, 1998. Photo: by
Marinco Kojdanovski, courtesy
of the Powerhouse
Museum Sydney.

Installation view, Marc
Newson: design works; The
'Lockheed Lounge' designed in
1986. Made of aluminium,
fibreglass and rubber
by Eckhard Reissig,
Sydney, 1990.

Installation view, Marc
Newson: design works;
'Orgone Stretch Lounge',
aluminium.

Installation view, Marc
Newson: design works;
'Embryo Chairs' designed for
the Powerhouse Museum in
1988. Made of neoprene,
polyurethane and steel by
DeDeCe, Sydney, 1988.

Fifteen years ago a growing international design industry was hungry for a new superstar. Newson had just started out, but already he had developed a language of cool surfaces, flowing forms, an intriguing play of interior and exterior space and a poetic use of material. Producing forms that anticipated the smooth space of computer generated imagery, Newson's work slipped effortlessly between the arenas of sculpture and furniture into a new realm of designer chic. It was the late 80s and the time of the pop culture literate, MTV and also some considerable interest in Australia and its exports. Marc Newson was lucky enough, talented enough and ambitious enough to take full advantage of this time and place. He has been riding that wave ever since.

The first major retrospective of Marc Newson's work is currently on show at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney until February 2002. What distinguishes Newson's body of work is the determination with each new project to push the aesthetic language of his practice through ever more demanding technical, material and formal constraints. Through the 200 odd objects on show, Newson has worked through an extensive range of technological applications. From the self developed hand-

making technology of the *Lockheed Lounge*, to specialist aerospace technology in his *Event Horizon* table, through to mass production of objects like the *Dish Doctor* which, removing the hand altogether, went directly from 3D computer generated model to factory floor. This is indicative of the kind of understanding of the object, and related concerns, that has allowed Newson to take on ever more complex projects. Such as a private jet interior, a bicycle and a very cute, fully functioning prototype motor car for Ford.

Alongside the development of Newson's international career the Australian design industry has also been steadily developing, reaching a considerable level of sophistication. Design graduates need no longer ask 'who will be the next to make it?', as Australia provides increasing support and possibilities for young designers. Gone are the days of all or nothing. Newson's legacy is as one of a generation of designers who have helped to reinvigorate the design industry within Australia. This retrospective marks out a new time and place in the Australian context.

Christian Hall is currently part time lecturer and Masters student in the Object Art and Design department at Sydney College of the Arts and exhibits regularly.