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Standard furniture

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STANDARD FURNITURE
by Adam Rogers
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Abstract.

I seek simplicity through my intention to establish a particular beauty, a certain calm achieved both visually and through the intangible feel of my furniture – itself simply a reservoir for the collection and ordering of possessions. The result will reflect the balance between the order inherent in the modest furniture forms that follow function and the emphasized personal quality of certain components of the whole.

Through exercising restraint in form, the central element is emphasized, thereby omitting the unimportant to magnify the important.

I chase an elusive beauty and an ethereal quality in my furniture. I intend to explore this idea through the marriage of conventional forms - founded on appropriate proportions, material selection, and well considered subtle details - with specific elements whose consideration allows for a softened, human feel to the object.

This approach may facilitate a process of making where a form can be standardized, produced, and given its individual voice through the introduction of the specifically considered components with the goal of achieving various, yet consistently unique furniture.
Intention.

My goals for my thesis are many, but among them is to, if not entirely, better understand my approach to designing furniture. That is, to define my values as a furniture designer. I’d love to identify the aspects important in my decision making, beyond simply trusting my instincts as a designer.

Before returning to graduate school to study furniture design, and learn how to make furniture with my own hands, I worked as a designer in architecture. In my experience as an architectural designer, each project was different, not just in scope, building type, budget, etc., but different in that the parameters were defined each time. In architecture, the compass, if you will, is called a “program”. The program is the document that states all of the specific objectives of a building. The document details the spaces to be included, the relative adjacencies, the area requirements, and many other detailed objectives that the design must meet.

Surely each project had an overall aesthetic style that was to be consistent, but was typically defined more by the building type, the site, the client’s brand, or even the architecture firms established style. These factors often made my approach to design easier in that they served as a support, something to base my ideas on, measure my success against when approaching and working on a given project. However, while at once a comfort, these factors also felt limiting, in that my voice, my perspective, never had the opportunity to make its way into my design.

I made the decision to shift scale, to concentrate on the design and production of furniture for many reasons, but certainly to satisfy my desire to be involved not only in the follow through of an idea to its realization, but to satisfy my desire to convey my perspective.

After having made that decision, and becoming comfortable in the various techniques of furniture making through the first years of graduate school, it was clear to me that making the ideas happen was the easier part, or even to have an idea worth making could happen with relative ease. However, the challenge is to define this perspective that I’ve for so long had a desire to share, yet have had
only an abstract idea of what that perspective actually entails. How then can I ensure that I convey this perspective without having an understanding of what that perspective is? To define this perspective is my goal. The ultimate goal is that the resulting furniture itself embody, and even convey the ideals I’ve identified to be my ‘program’. I believe that the notion of ‘good’ as applied to design, is entirely subjective. That is, this label can only be applied if the idea or object in question meets the goals intended to be achieved. This is therefore a foundation of my endeavor, to better understand, and ultimately establish my own parameters for success, perhaps for myself alone, to have something to measure against, a way to determine, if only for myself, whether what I’ve made is in fact successful; indeed - establish a definition of my perspective.

How does one look back, look within, and understand the moments that contribute to a perspective? Surely as a designer, maker, and an individual, I have opinions, and preferences. This applies nowhere more strongly than for beauty, not as a judgment, but rather as a sensation. When something works – that is – when something is in harmony my ideals, its beauty is not only tangible but intangible, spiritual as well as physical. It doesn’t merely look right, it is “right”. Surely this is the case for all who care about their surroundings, those whose comfort - beyond their physical comfort - is affected by their environment. While I know this is true for me, where did that start, how is it defined? What is its foundation and how has it been fostered to this point? And does it matter? I believe this search for and study of my ideals is important because I work with what I consider to be instinct. Beyond simply relying on these instincts, I want to better understand their origins. I trust this will improve my work as a whole, directly impacting its cohesion as my work, work that embodies the ideals I hold as sacred. I am searching more for a definable set of ideals than a reliable process. The process may well be apparent in the finished work and is therefore largely part of the result not only a step along the route to the product.
Ultimately I seek a better informed position, and a strengthened and definable philosophy. The philosophy I intend to foster, revise, or perhaps even abandon as a result of this investigation is the approach I bring to my work, my perspective of other’s works, both object and idea. I trust it’s fair to say, the way I see life. This philosophy I speak of now just an abstract notion, an ideal I cannot yet define. Its concise words are elusive, though I intend to try. In a sincere sense, this is an endeavor to define a stance, to find what guides my work and my decisions. And most importantly, to consistently make work that embodies these ideals.

Through the study of recorded ideas both similar and opposing, I strive to better understand the essence of my opinion and the journey, if not the origin, of like ideas. I consider ideas that support my philosophy and approach only as valuable as those who refute or deny the value of my intentions. Any sincere challenge to my stance will either force me to reconsider, or strengthen my resolve in my ideas. Armed with this knowledge, my design process and designs will improve due to a clarity of perspective, allowing me to sort through both sincere ideals, and fleeting and/or fashionable notions.

Any conclusion should be understood to be a landmark, rather than the destination, an inventory of concluded ideas to date rather than a declaration of comprehension. And perhaps I should say that this will be more of a quest for a hypothesis, than a conclusion.
Consideration.

I can identify four elements that are the main considerations in the decisions I make regarding not only what to make, but each decision within a piece, from archetype to the details. These elements are (1) over-all style, feel (2) unique, one-of-a-kind ”ness” (3) production considerations (4) environment, context. I don’t consider any one of these four elements as the lone guiding factor of my work, nor is there a hierarchy among them. Each has its role, and this role varies from piece to piece, and from decision to decision.

Feel

The first element I can identify in my work as a guiding principle, and as a main consideration in what may constitute my philosophy is what could be summarized as the overall style of my work, or even as the feel of what I do. This may be the most difficult aspect to describe, but perhaps the most critical as far as defining the decisions I make. This aesthetic that I strive for is what I consider beautiful. Defining or assigning words to a concept like beauty is daunting, if not intimidating for me. When I ask myself the question, “How do I describe beauty?” The most sincere answer I can come up with is “By saying ‘that is beautiful’”. That may trivialize this endeavor, and is not intended to be some version of a Zen riddle, but it’s just that simple. However, I realize this is counter to what I’m after here. To explain how I describe beauty, or the aesthetic I’m after, I have two strategies; one is to reference precedents, influences. The other is to include adjectives I consider goals.

Any description of my desired aesthetic must include a list of sources I consider to be my north star[s]. Like anyone passionate about design, art, architecture, etc. I’ve amassed a pile of resources that I relate to. I can reliably approach a certain
set of precedents when I need inspiration. I regularly rely on revisiting, but also have an overall picture of my intentions based on years of reference to ideas, objects, spaces, that I consider successful, whether beautiful or brilliant, or just plain interesting. This is likely how I’ve modeled my aesthetic.

Without elaborating, or being too specific, the influences on my work, whether aesthetic or philosophic, I consider being strongest include:

- The philosophy of Adolf Loos
- The architecture and approach of Carlo Scarpa
- The architecture and approach of Peter Zumthor
- The philosophy and work of George Nakashima
- Mid-Century modernist aesthetic
- The ideas of simplicity of John Pawson
- The architecture and approach of Tadao Ando

While these are in no particular order per se, I trust the first few most strongly influence my approach. The common threads between those mentioned, and the work thereof is an essence. The positions of the individuals I reference are reflected in their work. The words that they speak, the ideas they espouse are clearly evidenced in the tangible results of these ideas. The ideas that they share are simplicity, and clarity of thought. Whether it is the strong stance of Loos to damn ornament as criminal as he does in his seminal work ‘Ornament and Crime’, an essay that was strongly contented when he wrote it in 1908 by a society in love with decoration, or Carlo Scarpa, whose buildings reflect his commitment to an emphasis on details and elevating the construction of a building to a level beyond that of simply decorating a structure.

Peter Zumthor is a Swiss architect who was trained as a cabinetmaker and whose constructs, whether installations or buildings, clearly manifest the ideas of experience that he speaks of and writes of in books such as ‘Atmosphers’.
Zumthor expects the power of the built environment to be dependant on the users' interactions with it, understanding that he or she brings to this relationship a lifetime of experiences that influence the impact an object or a space will have on them. This impact is nearly impossible to define, as it is entirely intangible, but felt, and clear.

George Nakashima, again both his work and ideas have long influenced the approach I’ve employed when thinking about creating something tangible, building or furniture. His resolve to keep visual clutter to a minimum while building upon the successes of the proven works of those before him, all while not only respecting, but even celebrating the material employed. Nakashima, like Scarpa, elevated details to a level of importance beyond that of simply being necessary for construction by choosing to not only incorporate them into the work, but integrating them into the design and the resulting object.

Mid Century modernism is now an aesthetic that resulted from an era of design that truly stripped design to its essence. The now cliché idea of form following function was employed across the design spectrum from skyscrapers to lamps, by designers from Mies Van der Rohe to Ray and Charles Eames. The style was indicative of the ideas of creating a lifestyle driven by the built environment, stripping elements to their purest forms, satisfying the intentions of the usefulness of structure, or the object alone, and defining beauty as having succeeded in accomplishing the functional needs first, and without a reluctance to employ technology if it aided in the accomplishment of the goal.

John Pawson is a British minimalist architect who has written less than extensively on the ideas that guide his built works. However, his intentions are clear in work. Pawson speaks plainly about the power of simplicity. His work clearly illustrates a goal of mine by eliminating the unimportant to magnify the important. His buildings eloquently employ only the elements that are necessary in creating a
functional structure and rely on the consideration of each element, the relationships between them and the users interaction with them to establish an intangible power that results from a lack of tangible and perceived clutter, initially visually, but ultimately emotional.

Tadao Ando is similar as it’s relates to my reverence. Ando is a Japanese architect whose spaces employ an emphasis on the relevant alone, avoiding anything superfluous. His work however heightens the experience from that of emotional to powerful. The considerations of spaces, their relationships, and uses includes a certain combination of stark materials such as formed concrete and glass that creates a feeling nothing short of spiritual. Space and light are as important in his work as the materials. His designs not only consider but incorporate all possible factors in creating environments that foster in the creation of an essence.

Each has aspects I consider to be valuable in my work, whether related to one another or disparate. I relate to these sources for various reasons, but in some indefinable way, they each impact each decision I make. This is a quick list that goes a long way in influencing my phenomenology.

With a background in architecture, contemporary architecture could have made that list, but more in the vein that Memphis would. I am very interested in the fashion of architecture, that is, the evolving aesthetic of the day. And while I find it valuable to look at the work of today’s ‘star’chitects such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Morphosis, etc. they strike me as being precisely what Loos warned of; the notion of a specific aesthetic too closely representing a specific time. I can’t help but think what these masterpieces will become in twenty years time. Perhaps their acclaim will grow, but I’m more likely to think they will fall out of fashion, mainly because they are today so in fashion. Therefore this issue of timelessness is paramount to me.
Surely the specific aesthetic I am drawn to is influenced by the style of mid century modernism. But I attempt to balance that with a result whose presence defies a category. I intend to make work that while it can conjure the feel of a certain style, also speaks of my take on it. I’d like to think of my work as being of a certain context, but without needing that context to be successful. I will talk more about this later, but as it relates to timelessness, I’d like the aesthetic of my furniture to fit in a house designed by Carlo Scarpa, as well as a developer of subdivisions today. The qualities I consider to comprise timelessness are non obtrusive forms - generic enough that they could be of, or in many environments, regardless of time, or style; a combination of elements cohesive within the piece, but allowing for a flexibility of placement as it relates to style. These elements include material, finish, color palette. An important issue in the idea of timelessness as it relates to what I make is the archetype itself. I do not intend to redefine the idea of a chair, or of a table. I make cabinets as cabinets. I don’t intend to design use, just objects that facilitate a certain use. Contemporary design often focuses on designing use as much as an object to facilitate it. I’m comfortable accepting the idea of a chair is the best way to sit, the idea of a cabinet as the best to store things, the idea of a table as the best to place things on, etc.

I intend my work to be considered serious, starkly serious. I attempt to accomplish this with my approach to material selection, treatment of materials such as the copper panel of my cabinet, the leather for the chairs, and the marble for the table. I think the forms themselves suggest a certain seriousness with their simply geometric characteristics, and lack of free flowing expressive forms. I struggle a
little with the balance between cold and uncomfortable. Cold is acceptable as a
description of my work, I feel that to magnify the idea of its seriousness, but
uncomfortable would be my fear. Uncomfortable could be the result of pushing
the stark and serious qualities too far. Just as someone may say, “if you get to the
railroad tracks, you missed my house”, if I get to uncomfortable, I missed serious.

![Images of architectural spaces](P. Zumthor; Klaus Chapel, C. Scarpa; Tomb of Brion, P. Zumthor; Kolumba Museum)

I realize this idea of furniture having qualities that are intangible is not only hard
to accomplish, but hard to describe. But this is a goal of mine. In the Tao-te-ching,
Lao-tzu described intangible as “formless form”. It is such an important part,
u nuance or not, that if this intangible quality I’m after is lacking, I may as well miss
the mark on the proportions, or the material. I’m not clever enough to have my
own definition, but I do have an impression of what I’m after, so taking inventory
of successful objects, and understanding the elements that lead to their success is
and has been my approach. This is another reason I rely so much on referencing
the work of others I consider precedents.

The work of Ando and Zumthor exemplify the notion of spirituality in something
built. I want the impression of my work to have qualities bordering on, if not
appropriately described as spiritual. Truly a formless form, this notion may be the
most elusive, and possibly impossible as a goal. But with the proper balance of
subtlety, seriousness, and coldness, spirituality seems realistic. Certain
combinations of materials, patterns, space, and light can aid, but this is truly
ambitious. Once again, a reference to say The Church of Light by Ando, for
example is the best way to illustrate the desired feel.
The only other adjective I have in mind when I make decisions is simple. Surely an over used word in design, and perhaps in life, I truly want to make decisions whose success exemplifies simplicity. Dieter Rams famously said “good design is as little design as possible”. I trust that employing simplicity magnifies a designs power through subtlety. There is undoubtedly a strength captured through removal if executed properly, that is tip-toeing on the limits of simplicity, just before becoming lackluster. John Pawson describes this as “presence through absence”.

So what do all these adjectives amount to? It’s an essence I seek. Just as ideas, or even people have an essence, so too do objects. Unlike ideas, objects need not and often cannot be explained. And unlike people, one can’t get to know an object, or learn who they are, what makes them tick, and so forth. The essence of an object therefore lies in its impression, which is a product of its visual impact, ones interaction with it – the use and tangible qualities, and its place in the world, its context. Because it’s an essence, a feel I’m after, I will continue to try to magnify the qualities I think best illustrate, and ideally, accomplish this. I’ve identified therefore a few vehicles to employ, such as timelessness, seriousness, a sense of spiritual, and simplicity.
Short of tirelessly stacking adjectives, a feel or a feeling, an essence cannot be explained, but it can be known, it can be recognized, it can be felt. I intend to make objects whose essence is its strength, its tangible qualities a testament to the intangible ideals of its intention.

Production

Short of getting into a lengthy discussion of my interest in the ideas of David Pye, the concept of workmanship of risk versus workmanship of certainty, I’d like to think these issues are strong considerations not just in the work I produce, or the objects I design, but also in the plans I have, and intend to employ in the production of my furniture. I trust this will yield the opportunity to combine the two approaches to workmanship.

I’ve approached the design process as having to incorporate elements whose production can be outsourced, through standardizing. I say elements, because it is important to me that the piece be mine, and I don’t want to be in a position where my designs are being realized entirely by someone else. This was the position I was in for years as a designer in the field of architecture. By outsourcing certain components of my work, I can minimize the workspace, and the overhead in general associated with large scale production. The work I do perform can be minimized, but concentrated on. This work will include focusing on design in general, but also on the creation of elements to be combined with the outsourced standard components that will lend it the voice of its maker. For instance, and as an implementation of my strategy, the cabinet with the sliding panel, the standard carcass can be outsourced, and was as an exercise and trial. Although the trial yielded two cabinets made by a third party that ultimately were not included in my thesis body of work due to their lack of aesthetic cohesion which was a failed experiment in contrasting the richness and the warm qualities of wood with the
stark qualities inherent in a white lacquered mdf case. While the process was successful, the result was not. I thought it was possible to convey the ideas present, the mass produced juxtaposed against the handmade, through material incorporation, but the result was not in line with my ultimate intentions.

As an example to illustrate the design taking the outsourcing component into consideration, and intending to minimize material needs, these outsourced cabinets were designed to be made from a single standard 4’ x 8’ sheet of a given sheet good. The drawer boxes are also an element that are standard and were likewise outsourced. Once I receive the produced elements, I combine them with the components, such as the sliding frame and panel, to make a piece whose success will illustrate the combination of standardized (workmanship of certainty) components with unique handmade (workmanship of risk) elements. Each piece in this body of work employs this strategy differently, but will employ it to some extent. Both cabinets have drawers that have been or can be outsourced, the chairs each have upholstered seats that have been outsourced, and the tables top, in this case marble, had been outsourced. While I’ve made them for this body of work, moving forward there is no reason why I won’t have all of the turned legs, for the cabinets, for the chairs, and for the table outsourced. The elements that I feel important to retain as being mine, or handmade, are the pieces that require a level of visible craftsmanship, such as exposed joinery, for instance the wedged tenons in the cases, or the table, and to a lesser extent, the bridle joints at the leg and arm rest joint of the chairs.

A challenge with this approach is to keep the overall piece from feeling mass produced. The juxtaposition of the various components intrigues me and I trust that will only serve to amplify the element whose role is to give the piece life.
Uniqueness

Given my decision to work within an established aesthetic style and employing recognizable forms, how then do I make this work remain mine? I’m less concerned with the idea of a piece representing me from a standpoint of personal expression than I am interested in a given piece having its own voice, a life of its own even. Certainly being a part of a whole is important, but a certain level of one-of-a-kind ‘ness’ is important as well. This is where the notion of variable components earns its keep. For instance, in ‘cabinet a’ in this body of work, the sliding copper panel represents the element that is emphasized. The characteristics of this will vary from one to the next. Due to its materials, copper, natural tendency to respond differently each time treated, the result will be similar, but individual enough to afford the panel it own life. The success of this material, treated in this fashion, with its depth, its seriousness, its visual relationship to the walnut, embodies the very essence, and the uniqueness that I am after in my work. I could never replicate the patina on that panel; each copper panel will certainly be unique, which directly facilitates my intention to create standard, but unique furniture.

The notion of a piece having a mark of its maker has long been an issue of consideration in my work. While the cabinet addresses this idea via the sliding panel, with its exposed joinery and copper panel, each piece in this body of work will address it differently. The element considered to be unique is the aspect that will embody this mark of the maker. The notion of playing down the whole, simplifying forms to amplify certain components will be employed variously in each piece. This amplified element is precisely what I consider the mark of the maker, in this case also the mark of the designer. Rather than employ a single element that is say, ornamental, I’ve incorporated detail as my vehicle for conveying the mark of the maker.
The idea of the mark of the maker is less important to me than the mark of a maker. I’m less concerned with the idea of the furniture clearly being made by me, than the idea of the furniture being made by someone. This could be accomplished a number of ways, the most obvious to me is the employment of visible joinery, making it clear how a thing is made. Perhaps this speaks of my interest in quality, but as much as anything, I trust it contributes to the feel, this intangible quality that is paramount in what I make.

The detailing is perhaps most important as it relates to uniqueness, is the idea that the details are the aspects of my work that let it be mine. I trust that many people make furniture similar to mine. I’m not the only person making mid century inspired wood furniture. Surely I’d like my quality, and design, etc. to rival any similar work, but my approach to details is what makes it mine alone. It fosters, directly, my aesthetic, this aesthetic that I find nearly impossible to define with words, but trust will be evident in the complete body of work. This unique component is what will help my work be recognized as being just that, my work. A couple examples of where I consider this to be employed are where the frame of the panel in the cabinet meets the carcass, the fact that it sits proud rather than flush with the carcass body. The frame is held together with two wooden splines at the mitered corners, with the splines being spaced so that the front spline is exactly half way from the front of the panel to the carcass. Another example is where the marble meets the vertical rails in the coffee table. Because the marble top is elliptical, the wood has to be scribed and hand cut around the shape of the top, creating a scallop in each rail whose affect is unique, and noteworthy, as it sits just proud of the marble so as to be displayed, or even celebrated.
Context

The final element of the four I’ve identified as being most considered and influential in my work is the environment, the setting, the context. The work I make is less concerned with being a spectacle, than being appropriate and considerate in and of a given environment. I genuinely believe that the furniture I make is stronger, if not more understood, if a context is established. This may be accomplished by grouping my work together, when being displayed. Or, it may be accomplished by designing elements to help unite the furniture with its environment such as wall panels, or even creating wall hung art, or producing furnishings such as clocks. The idea of establishing an environment for my work is at its core, an opportunity to justify what I do, to create a setting that explains why I make the decisions I do, to establish a place where my furniture makes sense. While I’d love to believe that the furniture I’ll produce could work anywhere, I conceive of it within certain parameters, I have an aesthetic that I cling to as part of a whole. I love to refer to the Eero Saarinen quote “Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context -- a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan”.

This approach is in direct opposition to the approach of the work done by many of today’s biggest names in design, such as the starchitects I’d referred to earlier, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Morphosis, etc. I trust the approach of spectacle making, or monument building sets up the mandate to judge. Not only would I be comfortable with my work not prompting opinions, I’d be comfortable with it not being specifically noticed, as this would to me be an indication of success, suggesting that it was a seamless integration into its environment, its context. I’d hope the success of the environment would be a testament to all present objects, including my furniture, as truly integrated.
Another way I plan to establish this context is through branding, as I consider the bigger picture as it relates to my goals as a furniture maker. When I refer to branding, I am speaking of an image, creating, or establishing the right feel not only within, but supporting and promoting my work. I have rigorously considered, designed, and developed the design of a website, for instance, ensuring that this is an establishment of, and support of this context that I consider so important. The graphics are certainly important, but the imagery of the work and the presentation is critical in defining the feel of the work, and its intended context.

This section is nearly impossible to keep isolated from the discussion of feel, as the two overlap, but are individual as well. The feel is contained within the environment, and the environment is an opportunity to enhance, or foster this feel. The idea of cohesion with the work is critical, but so too is the cohesion between the furniture itself and this environment. The environment then truly is a vehicle to establish the feel, with the contained furniture being its life blood.
Having identified my goals, and establishing a few vehicles to rely on during my pursuit of said goals, I put my head down for a couple of months and just plain made furniture. Surely I took a breath now and again and even tried to step back and critically analyze what I was up to, but it became clear to me that maybe I was onto something, as each consideration seemed to fit into each piece without much forcing. I’m unsure whether this is a chicken or an egg, but whether I’d identified correctly the variables that defined my instinct, or if I’d better sculpted my instinct to have a foundation, I was on a roll.

The pieces I ultimately chose to create for, and/or include as parts of my thesis body of work include a cabinet (cabinet a), three chairs (chair a, chair b, chair c), a coffee table (table a), and a sideboard (cabinet b) that I’d made previously.

Cabinet A was the piece that I started from the beginning and served as the vehicle to illustrate each of my goals in this thesis. Each additional piece addressed each issue, but this cabinet embodies most specifically and successfully exactly what I am after. I began with the idea of making a cabinet as a way to convey my interest in the concentration on proportion. Given the rectangular format, it seemed an appropriate vehicle. I did not want the cabinet to have a specific function, as its ability to simply collect and store objects would suffice, and would further my interest in its versatility. Taking a number of issues into consideration, such as material choice - which was ultimately walnut, over all dimensions - which allow for construction from a single 4 x 8 sheet of sheet goods, incorporate an outsourced element – the drawer boxes, incorporation of splayed tapered legs, I began the massing. Once I’d settled on the overall size of the carcass, I constructed it. I then began to explore the element that would satisfy my desire to have a ‘one of a kind’ component. I knew this would be the panel that would slide in a frame. I designed a series of panels that incorporate a laser
cut pattern. Each panel had a pattern that was based on simple manipulations of geometry, varying in complexity and arrangement from one to the next. This pattern would be the vehicle for my expression in the piece. After constructing five iterations of this steel panel with the laser cut pattern, and engaging discussions regarding their strengths and weaknesses, etc., I was left uncertain. It seemed that each discussion about the cabinet as a whole became focused on the pattern of the given panel employed. This was not my intention. When I was exploring various materials to use for the panels before ultimately choosing to have steel laser cut, I had taken a sheet of copper and put a liver of sulfur patina on it. On its own, it was simply a material sample, but as the success of the patterned panels began to flounder, the stark pattern-less copper panel began to peak my interest. Ultimately it became clear that my interest in including just a touch of what I consider to be ornament with the inclusion of the laser cut patterns was not the appropriate vehicle for my personal expression. In fact, in hind sight, it was in direct conflict with my intentions. It hit me all at once, that my expression was not going to be conveyed via decoration, but rather, via the incorporation of the panel into the piece as a whole. That is, keep the material choice consistent, copper in this case, with the overall feel of the work, and emphasis not a pattern, but the integration of the panel. This is what I did.

Ultimately I disregarded ornament in favor of detail to facilitate the key of this endeavor, to establish an intangible as the sum of all of the employed intangibles. At once it became clear that each subsequent piece would too, not include any decoration as an indication of being mine, but would serve as a canvas to amplify the details, this is my voice. This is my perspective. Marco Frescari famously wrote of the “tell-the-tale-detail”. This is precisely what I would do in each piece; let the details tell the tale. As I briefly discussed earlier, this cabinet now represents ideally the detail considerations I consider primary in my work. The detailing I speak of is evident in the overall relationships of the parts, where the panel meets the carcass it sits just proud, rather than being flush like may be expected. Among other
things, this allows for a visible spline that holds the mitered frame of the panel together. The clearly ‘made’ dovetailed drawers are designed and incorporated in a way that allows the end grain of the tails of each drawer to become part of the aesthetic of the piece as they are visible from the front, rather than being concealed as half-blind dovetails would be. The pulls are intended not to become an additional visual element but to enhance the visual that the drawers create, however once a pull is engaged, the user can feel a slight void where the fingers slip under the horizontal pull, a consideration that speaks the language of the detail. The legs are attached via a round tenon mortised through the bottom of the carcass with a wedge securing the fit. These wedged tenons are visible when the panel is open, furthering the aesthetic.

The sideboard (cabinet b) used as part of my thesis body of work was considered as an appropriate inclusion because while at first it served as a benchmark for what I was trying to accomplish with the new pieces, it became clear before long that it embodied the ideas so specifically that it would be a seamless integration into the actual body of work. This was the piece that I first explored the idea of taking a recognizable furniture format – a low, long, horizontal cabinet and making it mine through the incorporation of specifically considered details, such as the relationship of the thicker top and sides that is mitered with a sever edge profile to the thinner flat front bottom element of the carcass. The sideboard also incorporates the tapered legs with the visible wedged tenon. The vertical kerfs on the doors and drawers are a visual element that while dominant, are subtle and do not take away from the true intention of the piece as a vehicle for the proportion and details. The pulls are again simple without becoming an additional element, with the intention of serving strictly functional goals without competing with the overall.

The three chairs (chair a, chair b, chair c) were born of the idea to amplify the idea of taking a standard, recognizable chair form, a simple box chair, and give it
individual voices through the incorporation of varied details. Each chair is identical in its proportions, its height, its width, its seat – which allows them to be interchangeable, and its construction. Each chair incorporates visible joinery in the form of a bridle joint to further the handmade aesthetic of the chair.

The first chair (chair a) was intended to be the most straightforward in its relationship to the other pieces, with its tapered turned legs serving as a direct link to the other pieces. The element that sets it apart from the other two chairs are in fact the legs themselves, but the more considered aspect of the legs incorporation was the rear leg, its connection and relationship to the rail that it is jointed to. Ultimately the angle at which the side rail is cut at the back, and the distance it protrudes from the vertical back rail is its intended strength, as it relates to showcasing the detail consideration.

The second chair (chair b), relies on the detail of its rear leg-to-rail connection just as chair a does. In this instance, the leg itself is the same thickness as all other members of the chair, but is severely angled back at the rear, with the joint to the bottom side rail being at an angle. The connection from the bottom rail to the vertical, just as the leg to bottom rail allows a half inch of the bottom rail to remain, serving to present the detail consideration. All three chairs have the rear seat rail set in from the back, but as in the case of chair a and chair b, its function is to isolate and enhance the main detail of the chairs which takes place at that joint. If the rear rail were not set in as it is, it may compete with the detail I was trying to present.

Chair c is the final in the series of chairs. This chair was not originally intended to be part of my thesis body of work, as I had planned to make only two chairs. However, original to the design of the first two chairs was the inclusion of wood armrests. Once the first two chairs were fit and the armrests would be added, it became clear after great deliberation that the armrests were just not appropriate for the chairs. Although they were intended to bring a slight contrast and therefore
pop as being details, they competed and just plain did not work. My solution, because I was so committed to this wood armrest idea, was to make a third and final chair that would be more appropriate as a platform for this detail. The chair is like the others, but the rear leg is effectively unremarkable and without the detail consideration of the first two. The detail then, is the armrest, and the armrest alone. I am happy with the decision to make a third chair rather than to force the armrests onto the other chairs and competing with the existing elements.

The final piece is a coffee table (table a). The table’s most noteworthy consideration is the marble top. The actual piece of marble chosen was critical in conveying the aesthetic that I am after in this work. The choice of marble itself as a material felt in line with the material selection of the accompanying work; the copper panel, and the leather seats. I wanted some variation of tone in the stone, from white to gray, but not a dramatic pattern. The combination of marble and walnut is potentially strong, but had to be from the correct piece. After finding what I trust to be the appropriate slab, I built a base to simply display the marble top. The base is of the same character and even has the same tapered legs that the cabinets and one of the chairs has. The part of the table that I focused on as a detail was the transition from the vertical walnut caps to the marble. Because it was an ellipse, I had to hand cut the walnut to accept the top. I had an mdf template laser cut from the same design file that I had the marble ellipse CNC cut so that I could more easily move back and forth and fit the top into the vertical caps. The result of the transition is the emphasis of the table, as the scalloped scribed caps meet the marble at a height, and in a way that allows for their recognition without competing with the beauty of the marble itself.
CONCLUSION

Any conclusion should be understood to be a landmark, rather than the destination, an inventory of concluded ideas to date rather than a declaration of comprehension. And perhaps I should reiterate, this has been more of a quest for a hypothesis, than a conclusion.

Reflection.

When I began this process, I was a little unsure if I could accurately describe what I was after. Beyond that, I was unsure I’d be able to define the approach I desperately wanted to understand, the considerations employed in my decision making process; the variables that contribute to my perspective. Through the patient guidance of my thesis committee and the challenges they posed, I slowly began to dissect the components of my thought process, eventually identifying some main factors that inform the decisions I make, and ultimately, the objects I produce. By better understanding the various considerations, I can more systematically and consistently approach my work. I seek a certain cohesion in the work I consider personal. I have a greater confidence in the cohesion of my future work now that I’ve identified some specific characteristics I value. I’m not entirely confident that I could describe my work without many pauses while considering the appropriate adjectives. I continue to believe that I chase an elusive beauty in my quest for simplicity, striving for a calmness both visually and through the intangible feel of my furniture.

Projection.

From here I plan to continue to explore the many ideas that contribute to my perspective. I will always consider myself a student of the history of furniture. I intend to keep studying what has been done before, what has been deemed by
time successful, and try to better understand the ideas that predicated the tangible results. I hope to continue to be exposed to new ideas, from new perspectives, ultimately better informing the continual evolution of my own perspective. I trust the furniture I design and make will progress according to the ideas I am exposed to. With a new understanding of what my personal philosophy is, I can be prepared to apply it to an evolving world of made objects.


chair b