By William H. Hamilton

THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF STYLE

May 25, 2006

Three Cornell University architecture students, Brian Carli, 30; Justine Cheng, 21; and Peter Klassen-Landis, 24, exhibited a little of the old-fashioned youthful fair spirit with their prototype of a plywood chaise that rises from the floor, where it is framed by the sheet of plywood from which it was cut, like a design being born before one’s eyes. Asked where it would fit in the marketplace, Mr. Carli described it as a “fairly high-end chair,” with a price of more than $2,000. But first, of course, it has to be made sturdy enough to sit in.

TWO, three, four, five," said Nolen Niu, counting the thousands on what will be the probable retail price for Zero, the lipstick-red lounge chair he showed at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York last weekend. “My target market is the younger, upwardly mobile generation — the loft generation,” said Mr. Niu, a 31-year-old Los Angeles designer (nolen@nolenniu.com) who got his start with shoes and sunglasses, and is also working on a house for Joseph Hahn, the D.J. for the rap-rock band Linkin Park. “They have a little bit more disposable income. They want to get something that individualizes their space.” Mr. Niu, who was part of an exhibition of emerging talent sponsored by the fair and by the Bernhardt furniture company, typified a new attitude on display throughout the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, where the fair was held from May 20 to 23. Like many other young designers there, he had clearly thought at least as hard about the financial side of his work as he had about the engineering or design. He has produced several chairs working with Los Angeles fabricators, but explained that the design was “factory ready” if a manufacturer showed an interest. (None did at the Javits center, though several people expressed a desire to buy the chairs, Mr. Niu said.) Certainly the fair did not offer the brave future of furnishings once promised by events like this.

There was a surfeit of perfectly acceptable, reasonably affordable, stylish if not stimulating goods on the floor — wares that seemed to please both the exhibitors (nearly 600 from 31 countries) and the more than 23,000 visitors. Aside from a few idiosyncratic pieces — sofas that seat up to 20 people, inflatable rec rooms, foam carpets that change color when exposed to heat — what was notable was a new pragmatism among young designers more interested in finding a way to prosper in an increasingly competitive design market than in making a statement. Talk of reinventing life at home, a
subject designers used to yammer your ears off about, has been replaced by conversations about how to find buyers for a $5,000 chair, or a manufacturer for a $50 lamp. A piece that held pride of place at the fair, the 50-year-old rosewood lounge chair by Charles and Ray Eames (several versions of which marked the anniversary in a display at the Herman Miller booth) pointed up, in its iconic status, how significant this change in the contemporary furniture market has been. In 1956, when the Eameses designed their chair, it stood out easily from the mass of traditional pieces from which it was making a clean, clear break. Even more recent pieces, like Marc Newson’s 1986 Lockheed Lounge, a prototype of which will be auctioned next month for a price that Sotheby’s in New York estimates at more than $800,000, have managed to become cultural touchstones.

But if a latter-day equivalent were introduced today, it might go unnoticed in the teeming contemporary furniture market that comprises West Elm, Ikea, Todd Oldham for La-Z-Boy, Thomas O’Brien for Target, and companies like Kartell, which show in Milan as well as in New York. Then there are new faces like Mr. Niu, trying to turn designschool diplomas into careers.

Indeed, Mr. Niu and his colleagues are competing with the Eameses themselves, who are alive and well in the form of popular production pieces, along with scores of other midcentury designers, whose work is continually reissued for an enthusiastic new audience that doesn’t distinguish between modern and contemporary.

Then, too, there is the difficulty of getting a design produced. Emeco, a company with a best-selling aluminum chair designed for the United States Navy in 1944, has worked with Philippe Starck, Frank Gehry and other design celebrities to produce new models of its chair. But it doesn’t work with talented unknowns.

"The development cost of a new product can be $500,000 to $1 million," said Daniel Fogelson, Emeco’s vice president for sales and marketing, standing before a fleet of aluminum chairs at the fair. “You can’t risk it on kids.”

For those who have struck out on their own, like the Minneapolis design firm Blu Dot (bludot.com), the risks are acute. Blu Dot first appeared at the New York furniture fair in 1997, and has managed to succeed and return each year since largely on the basis of practicalities like efficient shipping and attractive pricing. Though it doesn’t manufacture its own products, it designs them to anticipate ways in which manufacturing costs can be kept down, and the products themselves are easy to pack and ship.

"We’re the only ones left standing," said John Christakos, one of Blu Dot’s three founders, of the designers who received major media attention in 1997, making a nervous joke.

But Mr. Fogelson of Emeco, whose 25-year experience in retailing design spans the history of the furniture fair, which started in 1989, said that he thought a new emphasis on professionalism was strengthening the hand of today’s new designers.

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MEDIA RELEASE

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About the Cornell Council for the Arts

The Cornell Council for the Arts (CCA) — composed of representation from 12 university departments/units affiliated with the arts at Cornell University — supports the production of art, interdisciplinary creativity, and the synthesis between the University, Ithaca, and global locations. CCA is an Advocate for interdisciplinary, collaborative, and experimental artistic forms that require special sponsorship and resources.

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“Young companies like Blu Dot look like real companies,” he said. “And the kids showing here are aiming at that.” Mr. Fogelson added that, unlike the fresh-out-of-school hopefuls whose unproduceable art-student or craftlike output was once typical at the fair, “They’re aiming at a completely different level than they were 10 years ago.”

And Adrienne McNicholas, a consultant who works with designers on the business aspects of product development and introduction, said she sees the tide shifting among younger designers, from “wanting to be a rock star to knowing they’ll have a reliable, viable business.”

This focus on viability may have drained some of the creative spirit out of their work, but it has also contributed to what may be the most promising aspect of contemporary design right now, its widespread concern with accessibility, and with finding innovative ways to achieve it.

North South Project (northsouthproject.com), a Canadian exhibitor, produced elegant, affordable furniture by pairing manufacturers in developing countries, like Peter Mabeo, 35, and Otsele Mabeo, 30, in Botswana, with its designer, Patty Johnson, 46, in Toronto. The Mabeos, who are married, own their company. Ms. Johnson worked side by side with them, developing her designs more as a collaboration with the manufacturers than as a job to be outsourced to them. The Mabeos, in turn, were able to help the designer incorporate a higher level of craft and finish into the design.

New designers like Kouichi Okamoto, 27, who showed an accordion of paper that unfolds, like a party ornament, into a lamp base (kyouei-ltd.co.jp), or Michelle Butler, 32, of Isolyn, who creates magnetized felt flowers and panels as a kind of wallpaper you can play with, are doing what designers do best: using ordinary materials to create interesting products without extraordinary costs involved (isolyn.com).

Ideas are cheap. Matthew Kroeker, 29, designed Splinter, a funny and likable pair of teak chairs that share a jagged edge that can be interlocked to produce a bench, or pulled back apart. Mr. Kroeker called it “a metaphor for a bad-marriage day.” Divorce as design; settee as quick settlement. Because of the cost of North American teak (Mr. Kroeker is based in Winnipeg, matthewkroeker.com), the chair, if produced, would likely cost more than $1,000. The prototype cost $1,800. But because the concept is strong, the designer is considering using other materials, including recycled plastics. As of yesterday, no one had made Mr. Kroeker any offers to pick up the design.

Shawn Sinyork, 34, and Eskil Tomozy, 37, of Emesu ("use me" backward; useme@emesu.com) in San Francisco, had a belt-leather beanbag lounge chair and ottoman with them — a Birkenstock for the body and, with its suede good looks, an upscale update of a downscale favorite. Though they hope a retail price would be no more than $1,800, the prototype cost $3,000 to make. At the fair, Emesu said, it was approached by several manufacturers interested in producing the lounge.

Terhi Tuominen, a Finnish designer, brought Blackbird, a metal-mesh chair she showed in Milan, which has the simple unexpected silhouette of strong fashion. Blackbird is also structurally uncomplicated and would be easy to manufacture (terhi.tuominen@uiah.fi).
Before this course I didn’t know a thing about welding. Now I’ve learned two different types of welding,” said exuberant architecture student Rebecca Southworth as she sawed, sparks flying, at a steel angle iron in the Sculpture Foundry. “A neat experience,” agreed fifth-year student Pete Klassen-Landis as his drill bored into a plank of walnut.

Cornell may be known for its world-famous architects, from Richard Meier to Rem Koolhaas. But industrial design? That’s for the Rhode Island School of Design and the Pratt Institute.

But in the 2006 academic year, the Cornell Council for the Arts (CCA) and its director, Milton Curry, associate professor of architecture, launched the university’s first industrial design program with 10 undergraduates taking designs beyond conception and sketchpad and actually building something.

Last weekend their efforts went on display in Manhattan’s Javits Center as part of the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, one of the world’s largest furniture trade shows. In a tiny booth measuring just 10 feet by 10 feet by 8 feet high, the Cornell architecture students, under the banner of the CCA xdesigngroup, presented their ideas to buyers from Milan to Melbourne. Their booth was a setting of curved laminate and wood chairs, of right-angled steel lighting, of a silicone rubber screen, of a walnut storage wall – of “space frozen in a moment of transformation,” as Andrea Simitch, associate professor of architecture, put it.

ABOVE THE CORNELL COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

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The idea of the course – the first in a five-year program – which Simitch co-curated with professor of sculpture Roberto Bertoia, was to give Cornell students an understanding of what it takes to work as a group and build full scale from the designs they conceive. “They now understand,” said Simitch, “how ideas can be located within a particular material and just how long it takes to build something.” Senior Brian Carli, who helped man the booth, enthusiastically agreed. He and two other students, Justine Cheng and Klassen-Landis, worked as a group on a chair made of poplar veneer designed to follow the contours of the back. “Our idea was to make the chair appear as if it has risen from a strip peeling off the floor,” he said. That, said Curry, is the essence of the designed objects: “A process of inscription, from line to plane to multiple planes.” In concrete terms, that means a floor pattern made up of two-dimensional birch plywood strips, seeming to sponsor a three-dimensional space.

And what has been learned from the experience? “This makes them better designers by teaching them to manage materials and process and to collaborate on ideas,” said Bertoia. And, as Curry noted, in today’s design marketplace, which is all about mixing low-tech with high-tech manufacturing processes, knowing how to take an idea from conception to finished product is a big advantage.

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CORNELL STUDENTS EXHIBIT CONCEPTUAL DESIGNS AT 2006 INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE FAIR, MAY 20 - 23, IN NEW YORK CITY

May 24, 2006
Ithaca, New York

A team of 10 Cornell students: Mariela Alvarez, Brian Carli, Justine Cheung, Amy D’Onofrio, Nathan Friedman, Hugh Hayden, Pete Klassen-Landis, Spencer Lapp, Rebecca Southworth, and Rich Tong — known as ‘X designgroup’ — will showcase their original furniture at the 2006 International Contemporary Furniture Fair May 20–23 in New York City’s Jacob Javits Convention Hall.

The furniture was designed as part of the first year of the CCA’s 5 Years/50 Designers Initiative — for the next 5 years, 50 student designers will produce work for the ICFF show and possibly the Milan Furniture Fair, 2006–2010. Co-curated this year by Cornell professors Roberto Bertoia, sculpture, and Andrea Simitch, architecture, the work is exhibition-quality and is constructed at Cornell facilities with the Curators’ insights and experience as a guide. The CCA booth feaured five different pieces of “furniture as infrastructure for living.” The pieces interact in a dynamic and fluid way, forming intimate spaces. The initiative engages the contemporary processes of production in industrial design, furniture, and exhibition/installation design. The forms and modes of production — sketch models, small mock-ups, full-scale mock-ups, and material testing — are engaged throughout the semester during the critical transformation from prototype to finished product.

CCA hosted a reception and launch party celebrating the work of ‘X’ at 5–7pm on May 21, at 50 West 17th Street, with media, prominent and young alumni, and designers in attendance. Having this furniture featured at our own booth at the ICFF is a distinct honor as it demonstrates CCA’s and Cornell University’s commitment to offering artists and designers a forum to take conceptual design to the next — tangible — level.

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CORNELL STUDENTS EXHIBIT THEIR CONCEPTUAL DESIGNS THIS WEEKEND AT NEW YORK CITY’S 2006 INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE FAIR

May 17, 2006

ITHACA, N.Y. -- A team of 10 Cornell University students - calling themselves 'X designgroup' - will showcase their original furniture at the 2006 International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) Saturday through Tuesday, May 20-23 in New York City's Jacob Javits Convention Hall. The ICFF is often billed as "the global design community’s mecca."

As part of their CornellPublic Program, the Cornell Council for the Arts (CCA) will sponsor the ICFF booth featuring the students’ work. The CCA also will host a reception and launch party celebrating the work of X designgroup, 5-7 p.m. Sunday, May 21, at 50 West 17th St. Members of the media are invited to attend.

The CCA booth at the furniture fair will feature three lighting pieces - two in steel, two chairs in wood laminate, and one credenza/bureau made with walnut boards. Together, the pieces represent a contemporary interpretation of urban living - adaptable and intimate, sensual and abstract, said Milton Curry, CCA director.

"Having this furniture featured at our own booth at the ICFF is a distinct honor as it demonstrates CCA’s and Cornell University's commitment to offering artists and designers a forum to take conceptual design to the next - tangible - level," said Curry.

The Cornell Council for the Arts’ CornellPublic Program supports the production of art, interdisciplinary creativity, and is an advocate for interdisciplinary, collaborative, and experimental artistic forms that require special sponsorship and resources. This year’s launch of the X designgroup collection is the first year of the CCA’s "5 Years/50 Designers Initiative 2006-2010," which will bring 50 emerging designers from Cornell to ICFF in New York and potentially, Milan. Co-curated this year by Cornell professors Roberto Bertoia, sculpture, and Andrea Simitch, architecture, the work is exhibition-quality and is constructed at Cornell facilities with the curators’ insights and experience as a guide.

Editors’ note: Journalists can view Cornell student’s work at Booth #1846 at the ICFF.

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