

MAX LAMB Bringing material to life

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Knowing how to be patient has been one of the keys for Max Lamb finding the place of his dreams. He now lives in a workshop converted into an apartment, on a former North London industrial estate. It is an area that is obviously deprived and ethnically very diverse. The estate is a small one; a central street runs for some 50 metres between a jumble of flats and workshops. Max shares a small, open-plan space with his girlfriend. The flawless white of the walls explodes at this hour of the day, when the midday sun shines down through the large skylight a floor higher up. Functional and bare, everything has the simple, sensitive warmth of North European minimalist industrial décor. Even the floor is a bright grey, so some of Max's own objects, and the Eames chairs around the table in the sitting room, stand out like jewels against a clean cloth. The workshop in the adjoining room has been temporarily converted into a storeroom, but its structure is still clear and tools and workspaces can be made out.



It seems as if the *Apartamento* team have come meet to Max and visit his apartment like a small army of nosy-parkers. "Marco was here yesterday, we talked about the project for *Apartamento*, and I think he wanted to take a look," Max says with half a smile which suggests that he finds our weakness amusing. But I suspect he is also flattered that his life arouses this curiosity, and because he is proud of his home, which he has created with his own hands, just like his designs. A day after Marco Verardi's visit, I arrive, and sit on his black, polystyrene sofa (the only two-person sofa he has produced; an object that is aggressive to look at, because it looks so rough, but is soft to the touch and comfortable to sit on). We talk easily, accompanied by coffee and biscuits, while Max continually fetches objects and samples which help explain his past and on-going projects, ideas he is considering and the materials he uses.

Max Lamb is 28 years old, and in 2008 was named Designer of the Future by Miami/Basel Design, where he launched his *Solids of Revolution*, stools made of ultra-light cement and felt. In 2006, he completed an MA in Design Products at the Royal College of Art. Over the last few years he has exhibited throughout half of Europe and the United States, won prizes for innovation in furniture design and spent a couple of years working with Tom Dixon. In 2008 he has given classes at ECAL in Lausanne, and has seen his first design for Habitat in the shops. He has also been working on an infinity of ideas that seem to live peacefully together in his brain, without threatening to close it down. However what brings us to him is not so much his CV but rather the chairs, benches, stools, armchairs and tables that he has created. His "projects" as he calls them: sometimes as crude as chunks of nature; at other times more refined, but still just as imperfect and in all cases with a visceral and atavistic attractiveness. We are also drawn by his working methods, which combine the rigour of industrial processes (both traditional,

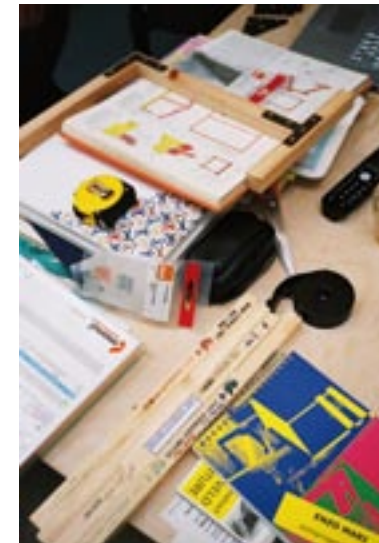
and cutting edge) with the ingenuity and viability of handicrafts and even championing DIY; his exploration of materials and techniques as a creative and aesthetic base; his focus on the process more than on the finished product; and an approach to communication that includes filming the construction process and, sometimes, installations featuring these videos and the chance to "try out" his work.

This was the case with *Exercises in Sitting*, his RCA graduation project, an exploration of some thirteen ideas which resulted in seven designs for seating. For his final exhibition, Max arranged the chairs and stools in a semicircle in front of a small table with a monitor on it showing

videos about the construction of each object. But he has filmed all his works. There are videos on the internet showing him turning polystyrene for his series *Polystyrene*, melting pewter on the beach to make his *Pewter Stool* or sanding cement down for the forms of his *Solids of Revolution*. This is the method that he uses systematically to show his work, and differentiates him not just from artists who have occasionally filmed some of their work (Richard Serra, for example), but also from

a growing number of contemporary designers who have a similar relationship to materials and processes (and here I can't help thinking of Hella Jongerius). Why this approach to communication? "Before I even made any of my projects I had an idea of how I wanted to exhibit myself. Maybe following the idea of what kind of exhibition I didn't want, a very shy exhibition to show the finished object. It is all about letting people into a secret, how you can communicate, more than 'this is my design, my aesthetic and my perception of the future'. I put the focus more on the process than on the finished object."

It is the same spirit that animates his imperfect works, riddled with constructional details, whose design stems from the interaction between the materials and the actual potential





apartamento – Max Lamb





of the techniques. In the Pewter Stool the grains of sand that made the mould are clearly visible. We bring one out as we discuss it: it tempts one to touch it. While the surface that is exposed to the air is taut and shiny, the legs are rough and uneven, and the moulded pewter is covered in holes and grains. Similarly the structure of his Copper Stool – whose design evokes wax as a material, natural honeycombs and the research of Buckminster Fuller – shows the marks of the wax and the sophisticated processes of electroforming with which it has been moulded. His Polystyrene series cannot hide the powerful nature of his craftsmanship; it is clear that the material used for the Starch Stool comes from extruding biodegradable materials; and the Rusty Sheet Steel Chair does not just show the oxidation process to which the steel was submitted but also its cutting with a high-precision tool such as a laser. “It is the honesty of the object itself, so the object becomes almost like a story or record of the process, and you can see visual details that describe the process.” For his clean, minimal designs, Max counterpoints a concept of crude beauty: “Designing is generally trying to disguise these kinds of construction details in a way. Everything’s got to be hidden. I agree with that but also think that there is real beauty in the raw details. So I prefer to celebrate the beauty of the construction methods or the materials. Let the details be, rather than designing for an aesthetic.”

Recently he has produced a small table for Habitat based on his Pewter Stool. The prototypes had to travel between India, where the factory is located, and London, where Max inspected the samples. It was the first time that he has been involved only in the design aspect, and he found it difficult to imitate industrially the perfect imperfections of a product that was originally made by hand. “I think we have six samples, and every one ignored a particular detail, and then I had to redraw it, focusing on that particular detail, and then they would forget other details. Maybe it is almost impossible to do, so we finally decided to let it go straight, and that would look better, because at least they will achieve a more consistent object. So it is very interesting how this thing turned out. Exactly the opposite to other things that I have produced.”

A CULTURE OF OBJECTS OF VALUE

Max has now dug up a copy of a 1973 magazine titled “Create your projects at home”, a type of

DIY manual with instructions for building garages or erecting fences or putting up shelves. It also explains how to construct a chair out of fibreglass, using a mould. “This is amazing! If every single family uses all this material to make a mould, it is a bit crazy, they would have a whole street full of moulds!” We laugh. “And then they would have the same chair.”

We have entered the terrain of Do It Yourself. Max discovered DIY when he started trying to produce his own work and saw how impossibly expensive everything was. So he started thinking about using DIY, even in the context of industrial processes, such as for the Pewter Stool. “The word ‘sand’ made me think of sand-casting, which is an industrial process used in foundries. So I went to the beach and made my own mould on the beach. And that’s when I thought: rather than making a solid mould, a patron, which makes every single object identical, by carving into the sand directly I can make the same object six times and each one is going to be different. So that was working with a very industrialized process but using it in a hands-on way.” His Pewter Stool is probably the object that gives the most complete idea of his concept of crafts-industry-DIY. But there are many facets to the concept. One of them is this project which he gives *Apartamento* so that everyone can try it at home, using simple, cheap materials that are easy to get hold of. “It engages people in the actual process of making it, which is what I dedicate my life to doing. I think this is what lots of people do. There are so many handy people out there, making their own work! I think we need to encourage that.”

We talk about all the people who make things and who, for generations, have devoted themselves to making things with their own hands. We start discussing the idea of this kind of culture which, even today, to a certain extent is rooted in modern life. “Although the reasons we make things now are perhaps different to those of previous generations,” Max thinks. With the same interest with which he dissects industrial and craft processes, or rummages through materials to work out designs, he analyses the mechanisms of our world of value and consumption. “I think now it is a reaction to a kind of loss of identity. Objects now are so cheap in the shops, really, scary cheap. And the problem is that everything becomes so fashion-

able, so transient, and these objects shouldn't be temporary because they still have a huge amount of material investment. Solid materials, metal, plastic, wood... And because they are so cheap they have no inherent value and become disposable, far quicker than their function is lost. So they get disposed of and then another one is bought, and then it gets disposed of and then another one is bought..."

So, in his view, there are two options for generating (and surrounding ourselves with) objects which have value. "One option is that you have to make something expensive so then people have to question themselves, to make a decision: if they will buy it in the first place, and then if they want to keep it. And the other way is trying to make it yourself. My parents still have little things like Christmas decorations that I've made. So every Christmas my mother shows it to me saying 'Do you remember this?' 'Yeah, thanks, Mum!'" He laughs. "So you make something and all of the sudden, though it is incredible shit, you love it. It has an incredible value! And that value is amazing, this sentimental... I think sentimental value is so important. Things that you can pass down to the next generation. Not only that an object has to have a quality that allows it to exist for several generations, real good quality of workmanship. But also it has to have some kind of sentimental value..."

He is also seduced by the exchange of products and services, or bartering. "I've made this and you've grown tomatoes, so we would exchange the chair for some tomatoes," he laughs. "Well, something like that. In fact, he has started to work on an exchange with the clothes brand Blak, which will soon open a new shop in London. Both produce almost unique pieces, which are therefore expensive. So Max will construct furniture and they will contribute their models. With the added dimension that, in this way, they will start a relationship. "The kind of relationship that used to be so important in society, in life. That way we might become friends", Max enthuses.

Max Lamb is both sensitive and rational at the same time, and talks openly about his memories of family and childhood and the geography which contains and stimulates him. His mother studied art and occasionally painted. He remembers evenings of social events and

tea with painters. His father still works for the Royal Air Force. But when looking for antecedents, he mentions his maternal grandfather and spending summers at his farm in the county of Yorkshire, or God's Own County, as the English call it, thanks to the greenness of countryside. "My grandfather was a scientist, but he retired into farming when I was almost 4 or 5 years old. So he also designed and built his own house, two houses actually, one that my mum grew up in. He was one of the most practical people I know. As a child and teenager I spent all of my holidays at the farm with him, just making things. Building my own dry wall using sand and bricks. This was my entertainment for the day, doing so many practical things. I would be casting driveways, driving tractors, doing all the farm work, hay bale dens, searching for buried horseshoes or glass bottles or making a tree house named Tremonk."

Similarly in his native Cornwall, on the southernmost peninsula of Great Britain, there is an infinite source of inspiration, with rocks like raw lumps of metal, its moorland vegetation and a past of pewter-smelting that has marked its history and its people. Max looks for and finds a photograph from his childhood, taken on a beach in Cornwall, the same one where he recently constructed (and filmed) the Pewter Stool. In the picture, he is five years old, wearing swimming trunks, his longish hair bleached the coppery blonde of a childhood summer. He is holding a plastic spade and has just dug the tunnel which you can see beside him. The 28 year-old Max laughs. He says that he has always been a builder.

www.maxlamb.com





DIY chair by Max Lamb

PICTURES AND TEXT BY MAX LAMB

The DIY Chair has been designed to be constructed using very cheap and basic building materials readily available from your local DIY (do-it-yourself) or hardware store, using simple hand tools and joinery methods, by you. I would like as many people as possible to have a go at building their own DIY Chair.

The material I have used is called 'Smooth Planed Pine' which is a type of softwood commonly used by the building industry and has a smooth, splinter free surface. The size of the wood is 34mm x 18mm and available in lengths of 2 metres or 2.7 metres. I bought seven lengths of 2.7 metre pine. Hopefully you will be able to buy the same size and type of wood from your local DIY or hardware store. The most important size is the 18mm x 34mm cross-section of the wood as this dictates the width and depth of the DIY Chair and also the spacing between the seat surface and backrest slats. Depending upon the standard dimensions and availability of softwood in your DIY or hardware store, a second option is to call your local timber merchant or saw mill who will definitely be able to offer you wood with the exact dimensions. This can be a surprisingly rewarding option enabling you to select your favourite type of wood from a plethora of soft and hardwood choices.

In England, where I bought my materials from, the wood and the screws required to make one DIY Chair cost just £9.77. Thus it is possible to personally construct a dining setting for eight people for less than £80. Of course the more the merrier. The point is, the DIY Chair is a piece of furniture that you can construct yourself, sit on and be proud of.



01. Tool list: tri-square, ruler, sharp pencil, fine tooth tenon or panel saw, sand paper (180 grit is perfect), cordless drill, 3mm drill bit, countersink, cross-head screwdriver, and 124 screws (4 x 35mm).

02. Using a pencil and ruler mark a line on the first length of wood at 47cm.

03. Place the tri-square against the edge of the wood in line with the pencil mark and scribe the line across the width of the wood.

04. Carefully cut along the pencil line with the edge of the saw to the outside edge of the line, making sure you hold the saw vertically to ensure a square edge.

05. Sand the edges clean to remove splinters. Repeat steps 2-5 until you have a pile of 31 identical pieces of wood, all 47cm long.

06. Position two pieces of wood at right angles with the wide edge on top of the narrow edge, and use the longest width (34mm) of a third piece as a measuring guide.

07. Use the tri-square to check the two pieces are at 90° and ensure the lower piece of wood is still 34mm away from the end of the top piece of wood.

08. Hold the two pieces of wood steady and drill two vertical holes next to each other evenly spaced apart, approximately 25mm deep. Then countersink both holes.

09. Screw the two pieces of wood together. If possible, set the clutch of your drill so that it automatically stops when the screws are tight.

10. Rotate the two joined pieces vertically. Place a third piece overlapping the other two ensuring its end is flush with the edge of the vertical piece.

11. Drill, countersink and screw the third piece of wood, as in steps 8 and 9. Repeat through the face of the vertical piece of wood to form a perfect triangle with 6 screws.

12. In a similar manner, join a further two pieces of wood to the opposite end of the third piece of wood.



13. Drill and screw a sixth piece of wood at the opposite ends of the two parallel horizontals to create a square frame, ensuring a 34mm gap remains at the end.

14. Two additional legs can be drilled and screwed to the square frame.

15. You should now have a square frame and four legs consisting of eight pieces of wood and twenty-four screws.

16. Flip the frame upside-down and using a spare length of wood as a measuring guide, drill and screw another piece of wood parallel to the front edge of the frame at both ends.

17. Repeat step 16 eight more times leaving the last remaining gap free.

18. Stand the frame upright and you should have a total of eleven slats across the top surface of the frame. This is the seat of your DIY Chair.

19. Create a new square frame using four pieces of wood. Place two lower pieces on their thin edge and the other two adjacent on top on their wide edge.

20. Use a spare piece of wood as a measuring guide so the two upper pieces overlap by 34mm.

21. Using eight screws, join the four pieces of wood together. Remember to check they are at right angles.

22. Slide the frame up the legs of the original frame and use the width of four pieces of wood as a guide before drilling, countersinking and screwing the frame permanently.

23. Sixteen screws should be used to attach the support frame - two screws though every wide edge of the wood - four per corner.

24. Begin the backrest. Repeat steps 6 & 7 to create a right angle with two pieces of wood. The upper piece should overlap the lower by 34mm (the wide edge of the wood).



25. Drill, countersink and then screw the two pieces of wood together. Place another piece of wood on its thin edge at the opposite end of the upper piece of wood.

26. Place a second horizontal across the thin edge of the lower pieces of wood and use the narrow width (18mm) of a spare piece of wood as a spacing guide.

27. Hold the second slat in position whilst you drill and countersink.

28. Screw the second slat in place and then repeat steps 26 & 27 twice more.

29. Your backrest should have four horizontal and parallel slats in total.

30. Flip the backrest onto its side and add another piece of wood for the right armrest. This should be placed directly beneath the lowest backrest slat and joined using four screws.

31. Two screws through the wide edge of the vertical piece into the side of the armrest, and two screws through wide edge of the armrest into the vertical of the backrest.

32. Repeat steps 30 & 31 to attach the second armrest. This completes the back and armrest of your DIY Chair.

33. Return to the chair frame and legs. Turn the unit onto its side. Place a piece of wood towards the front of the chair parallel with the leg but pointing in the opposite direction.

34. See picture for exact position. This piece of wood forms the vertical support for your armrest. Join the vertical piece of wood to the frame using four screws.

35. Attach a second armrest support to the opposite side of the chair frame using a further four screws.

36. Take the back and armrest section and slide the two vertical pieces of wood through the large gap in the seat slats.



37. Lean the backrest backwards as far as it will go and slide it up or down until the front ends of the armrests are in contact with the vertical armrest supports (see image 39).

38. Using your final eight screws join the two vertical pieces of wood of the backrest to the inside of the chair frame (image 37), and screw the top edge of the armrest supports to the side edge of the armrests.

39. Your DIY Chair is now complete and ready for sitting on.

40. Finally, for the finishing touch, please cut or copy the label and glue it to the underside of your new DIY Chair

Designed by Max Lamb, made by you. Enjoy.

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by Max Lamb
for Apartamento

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