

T H E



P R O J E C T





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Steven Clutton

Jess Corteen

Amos Field Reid

Markus Kayser

Rentaro Nishimura

William Warren

Introduction:

THE THONET PROJECT

Thonet

Michael Thonet (1796–1871) is the Godfather of the modern chair, a pioneer of the ‘flat-pack’ principle and one of the first great figures of industrial design. Thonet’s patented steam forming process for creating bentwood furniture on an industrial scale was revolutionary and ahead of its time – as was the reduction of components for each piece of furniture to the minimum number of standardised and interchangeable parts, and the use of just a few screws to fit them together. With his formulation of the basic tenets of mass-production together with the subsequent virtual abandonment of ornament in favour of austere yet sculptural forms, he set the agenda for subsequent 20th century design and manufacture.

Forming beech rods in a Thonet factory; an iron bending form gives shape to the iconic model No. 14



The most well-known of his chairs is the model No. 14 (c. 1862), also known as the ‘café’ or ‘consumer chair’ of which 50 million had been sold by 1930. Found in homes, cafés, schools, and other public spaces throughout the world, they are still in production and thought to be the best selling chair of all time. Whilst the frames of these bentwoods and the many variants in the vast Thonet catalogue are exceptionally durable, and their screw connections are able to be simply tightened up when necessary, the seats – either caned or made from formed plywood – are, relatively speaking, the weakest element and may require several replacements during their long lives, as is the case with the six chairs in this exhibition.

6 broken chairs

This project was initiated because six old Thonet bentwood chairs were in need of replacement seats. The five

examples of the model No. 20 (c.1870/90) and a No. 14 with arms belonged to graphic designer Peter Brawne and he wanted to put them back into use around his kitchen table:

‘The chairs had been in my family since 1957 after my parents bought them from a junk shop in Portobello Road. Over the years we replaced the seats, at first with third-party dished plywood ones sold at a local hardware store, then more recently, with DIY flat ply seats which were an inadequate and uncomfortable solution. For the last ten years or so they collected dust whilst awaiting their next resurrection, but replacement seats for these models are hard to come by. Amos came to me in need of some graphic design, and we agreed to barter services: I’d do some graphic design for him and he’d solve the problem of creating some new seats for these chairs. But this proposal, born out of a practical need, was also seen as a potentially rich design/making opportunity by a group of up-and-coming designers.’

6 young designers

Amos Field Reid and fellow students Steve Clutton, Jess Corteen, Markus Kayser and Rentaro Nishimura formed a group alongside their lecturer, the designer William Warren and set out to explore replacement seat solutions. The underlying thinking was that Peter’s situation was potentially echoed around the world: there are several hundred million Thonet bentwoods thought to be in existence but how many are out of service simply because their seats are missing?

The idea of contributing to the ongoing dialogue about the re-use of consumer goods through an explorative design brief appealed to us. Producing proposals for third-party replacement seats for these timeless chairs was one such outcome. Encouraged by Peter’s openness to our various approaches to filling the voids in these iconic objects, what had started out as a purely pragmatic brief became one of much more expressive opportunity.

6 new solutions

In exhibiting our six solutions we hope that the Thonet Project will inspire and assist other owners in getting these proto-modern masterpieces out of their attics and basements and back into use.

Amos Field Reid

Gift

Steven Clutton The six chairs in the Thonet Project are being resurrected for an expressly social purpose: they will reclaim the kitchen table, centre-stage of a family home. Picturing their role in the ceremonies of everyday life, where the important relationships that govern our lives are built and maintained, led me to the anthropologist **Marcel Mauss**.

In his seminal work, **The Gift**, Mauss discusses the role of gifting in relationships. He argues that there is no such thing as a free lunch, that all gifts are designed to place the receiver in debt. Paradoxically it is this requirement for reciprocity that transforms gifting into a force for social cohesion, for it is not a zero sum game; a counter gift does not balance the books, it simply reverses the roles, creating the endless cycle of debt we know as relationship.

The solution I have proposed is a seat and four gifts (coffee cups) in ceramic. The pattern required to produce each cup is marked on the seat so that even when separated the objects remain in dialogue. To offer a cup (as a gift) is therefore to offer part of the seat itself, the symbolic equivalent of a permanent place at your table. This is a powerful expression of friendship, but it is also a Trojan horse: the cup will take up residence in the recipient's home, thus giving you a 'seat' at their table. Reading Mauss, this reciprocity is an act of love.

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Jess Corteen We live in an era where furniture comes as flatpack from Ikea, is lived with for a few years at best, then thrown away. The short lifespan and throw-away aesthetic of these cheap products denies us the chance to form emotional attachments with our furniture. Thonet's pioneering manufacturing processes were the precursor to contemporary mass-production in furniture, yet these chairs are beautiful, long lasting objects which can become imbued with sentimental value as we live with them.

When we come into contact with old, used furniture we sense the stories behind them, yet cannot 'read' them without more information.

With Journey, the DMS (Degree, Minute, Second) co-ordinates of all the known locations where this chair has 'lived' have been laser-etched onto the surface of a new plywood seat, creating a graphic narrative of its journey over the last 50–130 years. Though recognisable as co-ordinates they are presented as decorative pattern. But armed with an atlas, the outline of the chair's story can be discovered. Additionally, the graphic nature of this solution also seemed appropriate when the commission was for a graphic designer.

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Drum

Amos Field Reid Without seats these elegant and light-weight steamed beech Thonet No. 20 frames are more sculpture than chair. In filling the void where the seat used to be we are putting these everyday sculptures back into use. But the tight constraints of the brief and the chairs ubiquity seemed to invite subversion. I felt the challenge was to find a balance between a purely pragmatic response and a more experimental one whilst still respecting the beauty of the supporting structure.

Michael Thonet was born into a family of tanners and whilst his career took a new direction, leather is a material he would have understood well even if it did not fit into his vision for mass-produced furniture. The tensioned Drum seat features an interpretation of the pattern that once adorned many of the Thonet plywood seats, is high on comfort, low in weight and can be fitted without tools. As a simple organic material that lasts and ages well, leather seemed a good fit with the chairs aged beech limbs, whilst the strapping shares the bolt-it-together pragmatism typical of Thonet's constructions. As a lower cost alternative the design can also be implemented in screen-printed dyed canvas.

This piece was produced in collaboration with cutler and leather craftsman Justin Parker.

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Mirror

Markus Kayser From a wok pan to a hub-cap, I tried to find a pre-existing perfect match until I placed a flat round mirror into the circular frame of the chair. The mirror struck me as it almost seemed like the seat wasn't there, and my feeling was that the chair did not require a new aesthetic but rather a continuation of its existing one.

But a hard flat surface is just not very comfy, so the task was to create a mirrored-seat that was also dished – like the original Thonet ply seats – as well as making something suitably resilient. As a one-off this was most efficiently achieved by spinning a seat in brass, plating it with nickel and polishing it up.

The Mirror seat maximises the sculptural presence of the chair's bentwood structure whilst simultaneously projecting the contemporary on to this familiar old form. When not in use the seat becomes a sculptural element of its environment and when sat upon it's just a nice chair!

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Fold

Rentaro Nishimura The recent history of Peter's chairs interests me. The chairs moved home several times with the family and had various replacement seats fitted since their purchase over 50 years ago. Throughout this time they provided seating for family and friends, children and adults. As a child I always had 'my' chair at the table, always the same chair, and so the idea arose of making seats that could be made personal by individual users, were easily transportable and cheap to replace.

As a thin, lightweight and inexpensive material that can easily be personalised by the owner I felt paper had much to offer this project. But paper is fragile and using it presented a structural challenge in terms of the seat being able to support the weight of the sitter and be durable enough to withstand rough domestic daily use.

The design was developed through a series of CAD drawings and physical testing using folded paper models. The sheer number of folds and their arrangement is such that they support each other three-dimensionally, distribute the load evenly across the structure and make it possible to achieve a seat made from a sheet of paper that supports the weight of a person. The series of creases also creates a geometrical pattern of light and shadow that answers the challenge of designing a seat which works not just structurally but aesthetically too.

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William Warren:

‘A fixed chair can be worth more than one that has not been broken.’

The brief for this project has two aims. The first is to develop an object that highlights an aspect of my design thinking in an exhibition; the second, and arguably more important is simply to ‘fix’ the chairs so that they can once again be put to daily use in a family home.

I chose to look for a simple and subtle intervention that added a twist to the experience of using the chair without messing with its primary function: being a seat.

The Siren seat is admittedly a fairly basic bit of slapstick. My fear is that this light-heartedness may disqualify it from also being a relatively serious response. It’s funny – yes – but what’s wrong with that? It’s an experience rather than a cosmetic re-style. A chance to interact, to know and eventually to love the seat.

This is a one-off object. One of six seats that will all be quite different and have their own stories, fitted into six fantastic iconic chairs that are already full of sentimental value for one family to use. It’s a conversation waiting to happen.

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The Thonet Project

Note:

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