

Top: Blackwood Grainwave tray, detail.  
Centre: Colourtube table, painted PVC, and MDF.  
Bottom: Pendulus light, laminated blackwood, leatherwood, alum, checkerplate, patinated copper.

# FACE TO FACE WITH JOHN SMITH: LIVING INSIDE IDEAS

**Look at any piece of John Smith's furniture - any piece - and you're looking at an idea come to life .**



The man even lives inside an idea, in the shape of a towering white geodesic dome on Hobart's Mount Nelson, high above the city and the Derwent River. In fact he and his wife Penny, a potter, have two full-size domes, plus a small one that was the prototype. Made of prefabricated glass-fibre panels on a timber frame, the pioneering design enables easy erection.

"It goes together like a piece of furniture," says John. And, if the domes' construction is a key to their owner's profession, their very existence gives a hefty clue to his approach. Strange, bright and glossy, they are a surprising find at the end of a straggling dirt driveway in about five acres of eucalypt bush.

But then, consider what John identifies as one of his work's main themes: "The use of contradictory forms and materials, ie. organic "found" tree elements with "high tech" geometric forms."

When it comes to his furniture, that theme is obvious. His very extraordinary Bride

and Groom chairs are just one example: they combine steel, leather and neon with raw branches of an odd Tasmanian timber, "horizontal scrub".

Or take his new Boomerang stacking chairs, in which the most aggressively modern of shapes is seasoned with the random splash of black-figuring in the sassafras veneer.

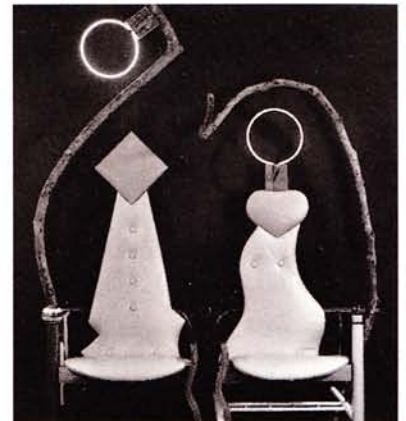
When John pits soft curves against hard geometry, and mixes natural timber with advanced materials such as aluminium, perforated steel, patinated copper and plastic laminate, not to mention strong colours and high finishes, he believes he is reflecting the mixed inheritance of many people in today's world.

Four-fifths of Australian's, he says, live in cities but maintain a strong hankering for the bush. In this part of the nation's emotional make-up, he detects something which has universal appeal - and he tries to echo it in his furniture. Individual pieces, he explains, can lean one way or the other, but his total output is built on this combination of opposites.

John's "day job" is running the University of Tasmania's Centre for Furniture Design, of which he is director. In a way, the centre itself embodies a mix of nature and art. Established with federal compensation money after a Canberra decision banished loggers from a large tract of the state's forests, its purpose was to foster the more job-creating or

"value-added" uses of Tasmanian timber. Both John and associate Kevin Perkins have put their personal spin on this brief in a studio where they and a handful of colleagues can concentrate on developing modern designs, with the aim of contracting to provide their services to industry.

Here, too, a lot of effort has gone into evolving an Australian idiom which combines a strictly contemporary feel with elements taken from the bush. That this should reflect John's own preoccupation is not surprising: as he says, "I've used my own work very much as research to feed back into the teaching." He explains that the university's approach encourages this. What is more, for about six years he has taught for only half the time. The arrangement gives him a happy flexibility in the development of his own work: only half of that is undertaken to commission, with the rest consisting of research and experiment.



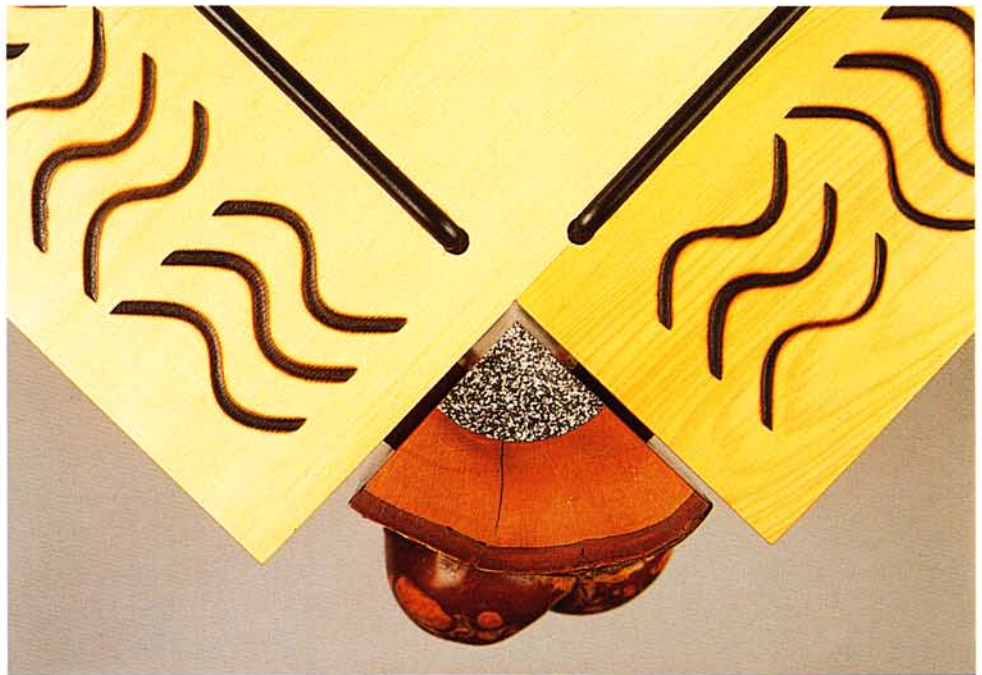
**Bride and Groom chairs.**

He spends much time preparing exhibition pieces, which he refers to as his "calling cards". His first solo show was nine years ago at Woollahra's Holdsworth Gallery. But he is also involved with production runs of small objects, for example a little tray made of veneer, perforated steel and anodised aluminium.

His commissions tend to be architectural rather than for private clients. The pick of them, completed in 1988, was undoubtedly to furnish the three-room suite of the Leader of the Opposition in the New Parliament House. That called for a desk and return, two wall units, file storage, two TV cabinets, two coffee tables, four side tables, a dining table and sideboard. The job involved not only designing, but also making to one of the tightest specifications ever seen in Australia. Kevin Perkins fulfilled a similar brief for the Prime Minister's suite. The twin assignments have gone a long way towards establishing the two men's eminence as top-notch cabinetmakers.

It's ironic, then, to hear John say, "I wouldn't call myself a craftsman". He goes further. "For the most part making things is a pain in the bum." He declares he does not get high on the smell of huon pine, and calls the routine of the workshop "not all that pleasant" (though he gets a certain relaxation from jobs such as sanding). Instead, he sees making as an exploration of materials and techniques which broadens his design thinking. Committed nonetheless, to doing it as well as he can, he sums up by saying: "A badly made object doesn't service a good idea."

His training has ensured that he can move between idea and reality with ease. Perhaps because he has never spent time in industry, he can explore the wackiest of ideas without a blush. Now 43, he began at art school in Chesterfield, England - "I thought I wanted to be a painter." After two years he discovered the furni-



**Above: Postech Table, laminates and patinated copper over MDF, glass.**

**Below: Boomerang Chairs are stackable. Made from blackheart sassafras and aluminium veneer over plywood torsion box, painted steel and stainless steel.**

ture design faculty, became hooked, and moved on to High Wycombe College, then as now the UK's premier furniture centre, where he took a BA in Furniture Design.

He migrated at the beginning of the '70s, with Penny and their infant son Aaron, to a job teaching graphic design at the Hobart Art School. Shortly after becoming part of the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education, the school (to which his career has been linked ever since) developed an industrial-design faculty with a strong furniture focus.

By the end of the '70s, when John went on a study tour to the UK and Europe, society was renewing its fascination with artist-craftspeople. According to John, there was a "community push" to develop woodcraft teaching. The industrial design program lost its broader scope, and in 1981 - the year the art school



entered the University of Tasmania - it gave way to the school's Design in Wood program. Today's Centre for Furniture Design is linked to the same program, and feeds on the same idea of developing designer-makers who are connected with industry but not dependent on it. For a human prototype, students and observers need look no further than John Smith.

## JOHN SMITH, BACK FROM BARCELONA...

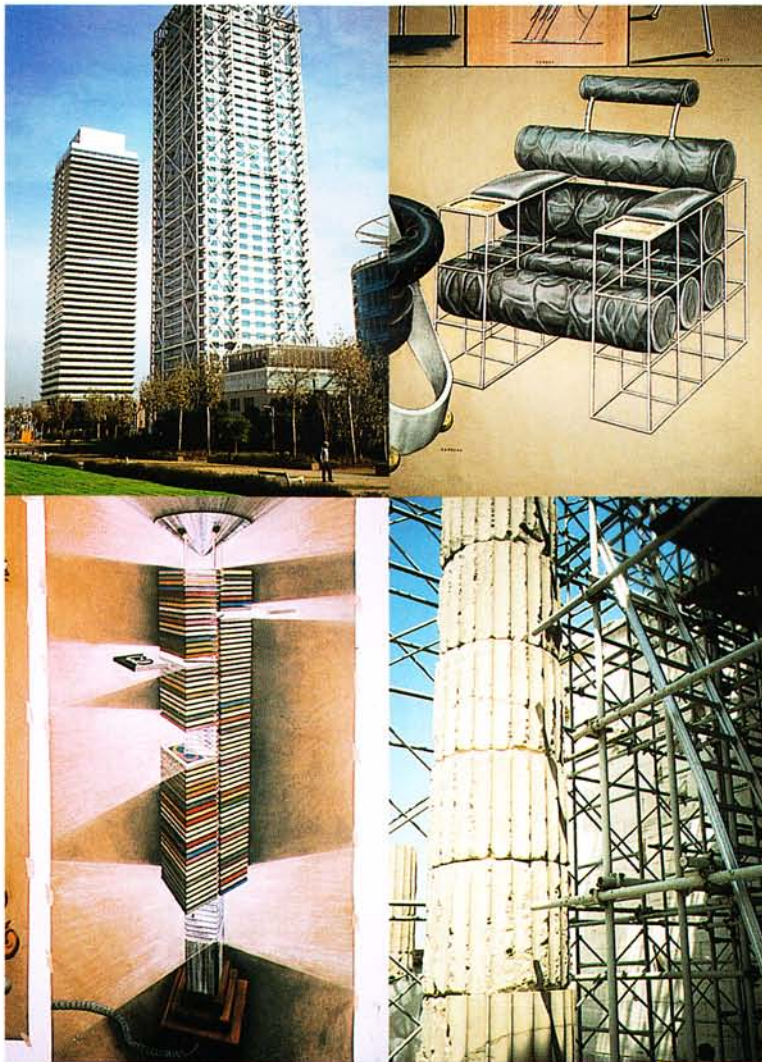
The majority of my early furniture was preoccupied with the playful juggling of Platonic solid geometry into sculptural relationships, but always maintaining utilitarian functionality. These statements in geometry were exercises in the use of fundamental forms, such as the square, the triangle and the circle, and loosely paralleled the form/colour theories of Itten, quite deliberately echoing childhood memories of building blocks through the use of primary colours. So it was very much an extension of the modernist tradition, although often documented in magazines as *post-modern*.

This interest in strong geometry continues, although is sometimes juxtaposed with more organic forms and materials, with a softening motive, or decorative motif. Crisp, mathematical geometry can be found in nature, but most commonly requires microscopic study to reveal it, and so it more comfortably reflects an abstraction of the human mind, whereas the human *spirit* generally seeks expression in more fluid or decorative elements.

It is this relationship between man and nature, between man-made structures, historic and the contemporary, between architecture and environment, between objects (ie furniture) and people, and between the static rules that stabilise society and the dynamic everchanging will of its individuals that progress it towards a different

future, which continues to intrigue me. Design is simply a means of trying to understand these complexities and contribute towards that future vision. It is making a vote through positive action.

Although primarily looking at contemporary Spanish furniture design, seeking the sources of ideas led me to look at earlier artists such as Picasso, Dali, Miro and inevitably, Gaudi, and the rich decorative quarry that is *Modernista*. But also the desire for a decorative expression of the human spirit in modern geometric cities which erupts as public graffiti, or equally as personal tattoos, interests me also. As does the permanent presence of contemporary scaffolding in our cityscape needed to maintain our architectural heritage (especially in Europe), or a rural sky scribbled with power-lines, or the ether-choked-with communication airways. These things affect our aesthetic sensibilities and mould our vision. These concerns lie behind my current ideas.



Right top and bottom: SCAFF chair, developed from looking at columns and scaffolding, at fleshy forms contained within external skeletons.

Left top and bottom: CD TOWER, developed from looking at the tower as symbol of technological power (skyscrapers such as the Olympic towers of Barcelona, communication towers, lighthouses, cathedral spires to rocket launch pads).

My recent study period in Europe, spent mostly as a resident of the Australia Council's Barcelona studio, gave me the opportunity to consider some of these issues as they surface in different communities, and to respond with design drawings for future furniture pieces which give personal expression to emerging ideas.