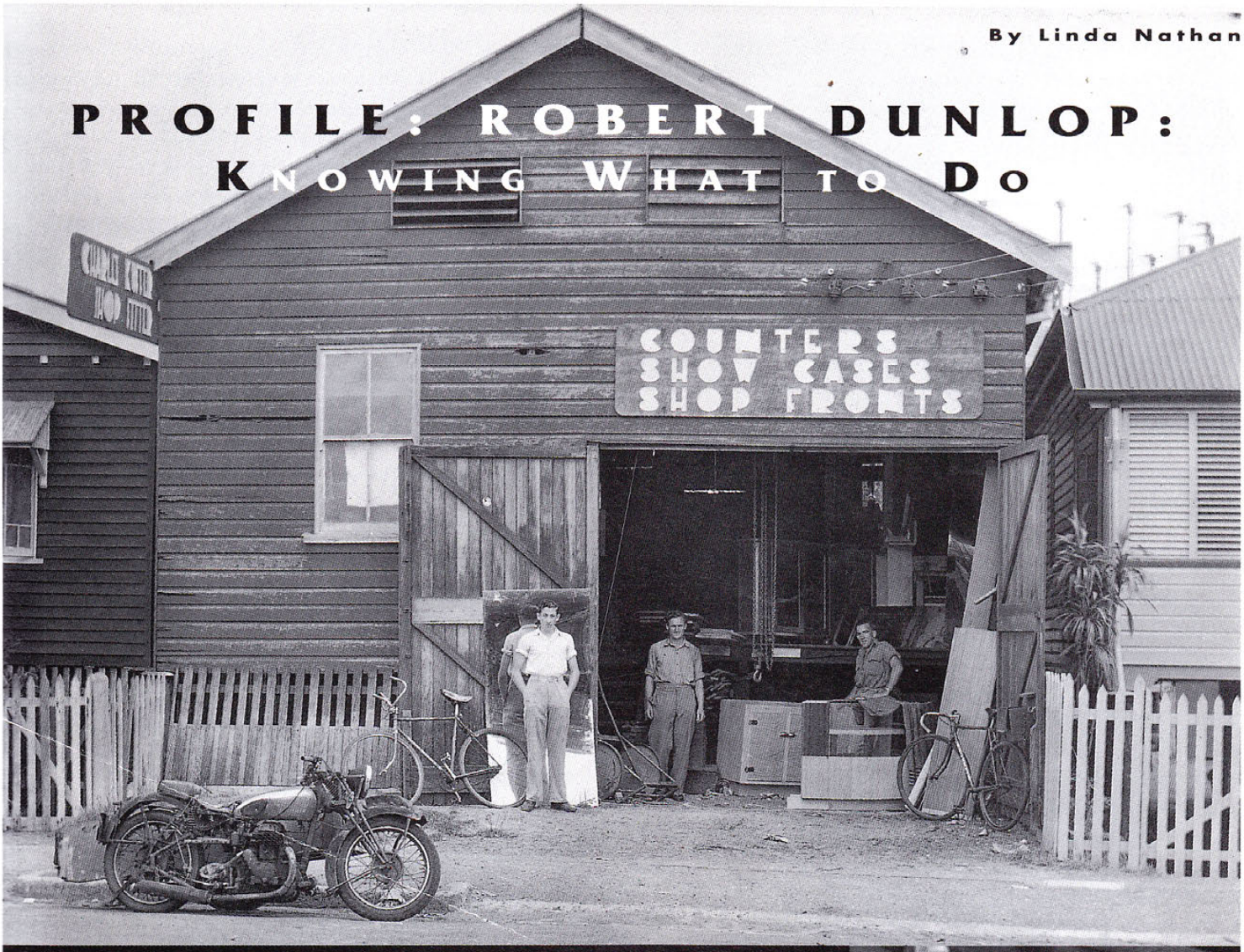
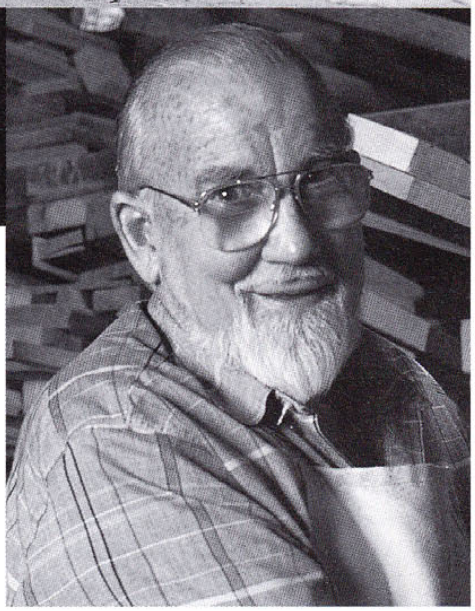
By Linda Nathan

PROFILE: ROBERT DUNLOP: KNOWING WHAT TO DO



Above: The 1946 workshop of Charles Kuffer in Chester Street, The Valley, Brisbane. Robert Dunlop is on the right, Charles Kuffer centre, Brian Dunlop (brother of Robert) left. In the foreground the Enfield motor bike and sidecar 'delivery wagon'.
Right: Robert Dunlop in his Stafford workshop.



The unlined face and clear eyes reflect the lack of inner conflict in Robert Dunlop, highly regarded cabinet and furniture maker. A career which has spanned five decades and shows no sign of slowing down has been marked by a notable clarity of purpose. Working primarily in wood, the end products have been diverse, and numbered both as one offs and by the thousand.

He reckons he's had it easy, compared to some. Not by material standards; not in terms of long hours of work and a lengthy education of trial, error and experience; and not even by the yardstick of money; but because he always knew what he wanted to do and was passionate about.

Robert Dunlop's exceptional memory (the 70th year birthday cards still stand about the office) dates his knowledge of purpose back to when he was five years old and wanted to work in wood. The five Dunlop children all went into trades, though no one else in the family had previously had an interest in wood until he and later his brother Brian came along. Dunlop remembers his parents for their encouragement, and for the gift of good health they gave him.

In 1937, the year he was apprenticed, Dunlop comments that cabinetmakers and woodcarvers had the standing of street sweepers. At thirteen he earned the equivalent of around 80 cents a week from Charles Kuffer, the man he still refers to as his boss and whose photo stands on his desk.

Charles Kuffer, a cabinetmaker schooled in the traditional way, came to Australia from Lausanne in Switzerland. Dunlop was Kuffer's thirteenth apprentice—the other twelve were unable to bear the severity of the master craftsman who was, by Dunlop's account, a brilliant tradesman, but not brilliant, it seems, at human

relations. 'When I started (I could hardly get my nose above the bench) Kuffer said to me "I will not teach you—you will learn."'

He recalls: 'We used to cut dovetails (in those days everything was dovetailed) and we would have a stack of a dozen or so pieces and cut downwards. One time I saw Kuffer lick the face of his chisel before each cut, so I did it too and noticed that that small amount of moisture stopped the end grain pulling out. If he scratched his backside, I did too...' In short, young Dunlop had to work hard and catch on fast. He agrees it certainly developed his powers of observation. 'At the age of fourteen I used to have to cut dovetails for a drawer (that's four corners) and carve the draw pull in an hour'. And when the drawers were finished they had to fit just as well upside down as they did right side up.

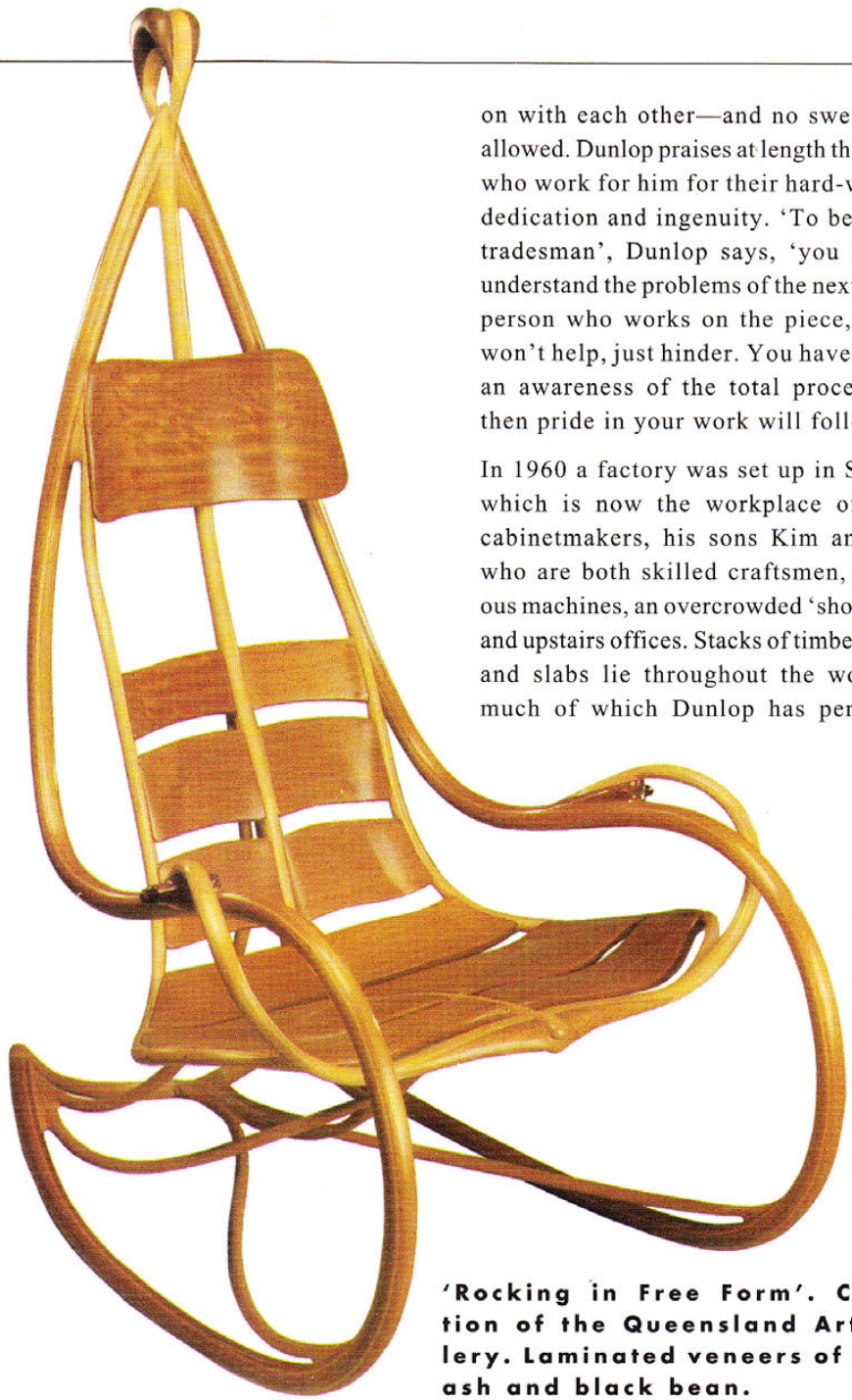
Master and apprentice worked in the room where Kuffer also slept, above the Valley baths in central Brisbane. When a job was completed it had to be lowered to the pavement through the window and then transported to its owner balanced on Kuffer's motorbike and sidecar. Dunlop remembers how the police on points duty would move around to face the other way at the sight and sound of Kuffer's approach. Arguing with Kuffer as to the legality of such transportation was not lightly undertaken. In fact, if Kuffer grew disenchanted with a client during the course of making a commission he was just as likely to 'pull the pin' and refuse to deliver the piece, haughtily stating: 'I do not wish to live in your house'. Body and soul went into the making of each piece and Kuffer was not willing to sell his soul.

Despite Kuffer's severity, he was revered by Dunlop, who stayed with him for five years before going to war as an infantryman. After the war Dunlop returned to work for Kuffer for a while and then, in 1948, started his own business in Michelton in the front bedroom of his house. He won't talk about the war years ('that's a closed book'), but it is evident that those years are ironically responsible for Dunlop's cheerful disposition: 'I'm just happy to see the sun come up every day'.

In those days the clients were local—the people who lived on the other side of the Brisbane river were regarded as 'foreigners'. The cabinets he built were delivered literally on Dunlop's back as he rode his bicycle. The workshop was moved to behind the house and at that time his present day foreman, Bernie Hoffman started working with him.

Kuffer's student in skill and dedication, Dunlop developed his own skills as an employer and has striven to create a harmonious workplace. A picture of Robert Dunlop's real boss, Jesus Christ, sits next to the photo of Kuffer on the desk. Dunlop is a fervent Christian and claims to run a Christian workshop, not that he tells those who work for him what to believe. He just means they have to get on with each other—and no swearing is allowed. Dunlop praises at length the people who work for him for their hard-working dedication and ingenuity. 'To be a good tradesman', Dunlop says, 'you have to understand the problems of the next tradesperson who works on the piece, or you won't help, just hinder. You have to have an awareness of the total process, and then pride in your work will follow'.

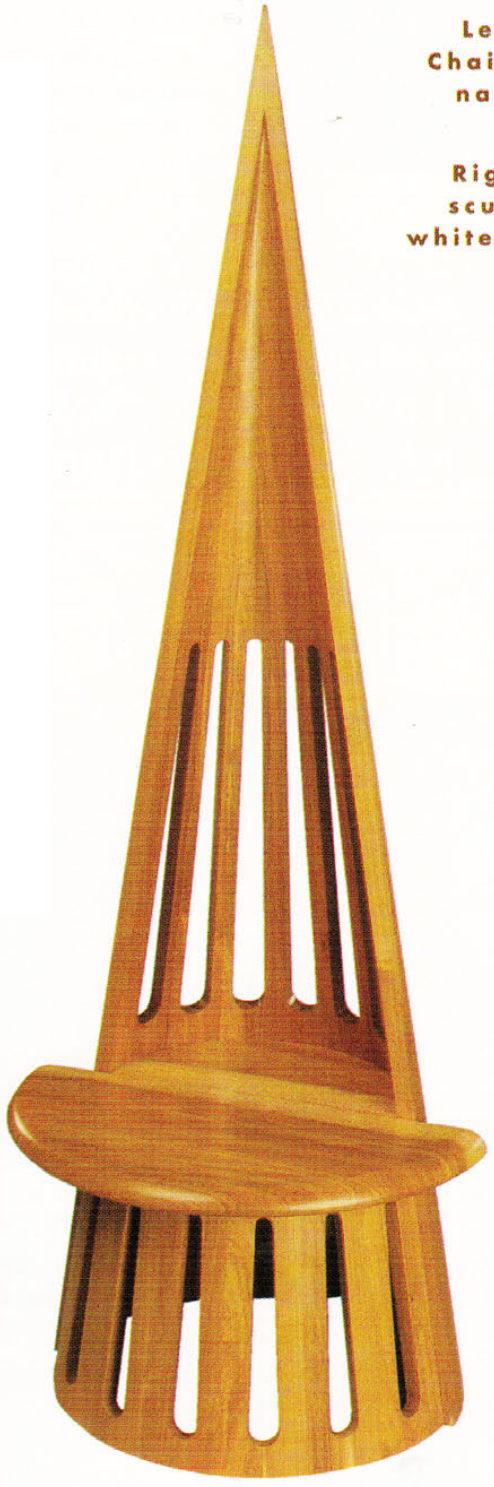
In 1960 a factory was set up in Stafford which is now the workplace of seven cabinetmakers, his sons Kim and Brad who are both skilled craftsmen, numerous machines, an overcrowded 'showroom' and upstairs offices. Stacks of timber boards and slabs lie throughout the workshop much of which Dunlop has personally sourced from huge, still-standing stumps of cedar and other species, many of which still carry the marks of the old timber cutter's springboards. Everyone knows that these hard-to-harvest parts of the tree contain the wood with the most figure and promise. The timber itself has always been a great lure to Dunlop and he has a reputation as an expert on working native timbers. Despite this, he doesn't have favourite timbers: 'There is no bad timber, only bad tradesmen', but delights in using native hardwoods to effect. A dining table made of spotted gum with purple gidgee detailing stands testimony in the showroom. The showroom is in fact crammed with fine pieces in red and white cedar, silver ash, black bean, brown



'Rocking in Free Form'. Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery. Laminated veneers of silver ash and black bean.

magnolia and more. Dunlop has always used the local timbers and shows some amusement at the recent 'discovery' of Australian species which he learnt to use and appreciate many years ago during his apprenticeship. He again quotes Kuffer: 'You Australians are stupid—you use the best wood for house framing'.

In 1970 Dunlop met up with Tom Larson, a Danish designer, and together they produced the *Studioline* range, which was based on Australian 'squatter's' furniture with an added Scandinavian feel. The original squatter's furniture was made from a forked green saplings onto which were tied wet cowhides. The hides were weighted and allowed to dry into shape. Dunlop and Larson used radiata pine, aluminium and leather to make the lounges and seats which were part of the range they planned to export and sell locally. An overseas trip to sell the range was financed totally on a Diners card, acquired expressly for that purpose. With thirty days to pay up, the motivation to sell was very real, however Dunlop claims *Studioline* found immediate favour with buyers: 'it took ten minutes to sell in Denmark (and we found an agent who sold it for us in seven countries) and twenty minutes in Dubai'. *Studioline* still sells in Australia, however export ceased eight years ago.



Left: 'Vortex Chair' made of native brown magnolia.

Right: Rocker sculpted from white cedar and silver ash.

Questioned on the use of radiata pine for a quality furniture range, Dunlop responds that 'we (he and Larsen) took radiata pine from a garbage-packing crate attitude to produce the highest quality furniture' and notes that in Denmark radiata pine is much appreciated for the yellowing which occurs in the timber over time, a characteristic which their local pines do not have. Despite Dunlop's faith in this timber, he admits he has met with retailer's resistance on this fact alone.

The factory has for many years undertaken work for architects and designers, along with private and public commissions. Runs of turned and carved componentry (chair and table legs, cutting boards, saddle inserts and so on) have also been completed as have such diverse items as five intricately carved pillars for the Solomon Islands display at Expo in 1988, and a skid for a Vickers 'Vimy' 1916 airplane bomber reproduction. Dunlop vows they will never again undertake 'mind-deaden-

The 'Star' Cafe in King George Square, Brisbane, 1947. Robert (centre seated), Brian Dunlop and Charles Kuffer (behind the counter). Other fitouts were also completed for the old Andronicus and Acropolis cafes in central Brisbane.

ing' work such as the complete furniture fit-out for ten hotels in China, completed some years ago, which included the manufacture of two thousand lounge suites and one thousand coffee tables. He is, however, proud of the lounge chair which was shipped to China in knockdown form. Unable to supervise the quality of the final assembly Dunlop designed the chair to strengthen from the pressure of being sat on. 'Not one came back' he stated, although he did agree with me it was a long way to send back furniture for repair or replacement!

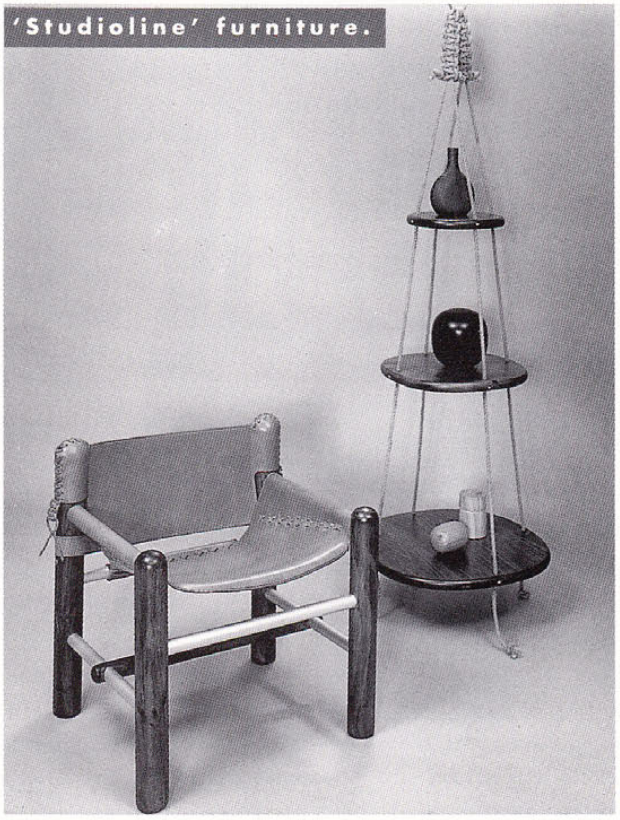
One of the highlights of the entire Dunlop team's output was work completed for the new parliament house in Canberra. The massive Kings Table, made for the 'King Hall', was ten metres long and made of Tasmanian myrtle, blackwood, jarrah and tallow wood. Occasional furniture was made for the Senators' rooms. In fact a total 68 pieces were made by the workshop for parliament house and what pleased Dunlop more than anything, was the fact that all items were received without complaint, where 'other work was knocked back left, right and centre'. Other public commissions include the Speaker's Chair for the Isle of Mann Parliament, the Rising Christ carved for St Peter Chanel Church in 1980 and furniture for the High Court of Australia in Canberra.

Dunlop makes to commission but work of his own design is characterised mainly by its sculptural carved form, though the full range of woodworking skills are visually evident. Laminations feature in both large curved sections and in elegant bentwood-like structures such as in the frame of the chair acquired by the Queensland State Art Gallery. Carved panels and motifs frequently appear and some surfaces are textured straight off the chisel. A recent work is the seven foot square 'chessboard' table in white cedar, with chess piece chairs whose backs are carved as kings, queens and bishops. With its black and white chequerboard surface the suite is of 'Alice in Wonderland' proportions. If Robert Dunlop is something of a romantic he makes no secret of it with pieces of such grandeur. He is anxious to sell the suite so he can make way for his next vision, a full-size replica of King Arthur's round table, complete with a cutaway section, to allow the seated to be served from within.

Sometimes traditional, sometimes sculptured, quirky and romantic, Dunlop's work is often earthy, especially when it features extravantly figured slabs and waney-edged sections. At times his work is delicate and fluid (as in *Rainforest No.1*), at times economical and refined of form (*One Kilo Chair*). Not primarily a designer, Dunlop is above all a craftsman who enjoys employing all methods to explore his medium rather than to develop his own stylistic vernacular. The attraction of a Robert Dunlop piece is the feeling of craftsmanship with which it is imbued. A Dunlop piece could only be made in wood, unlike the works of some designer/makers whose statement may come through just as clearly in other media.

The influence of his early training was paramount, learning as he did exacting standards of workmanship, commitment (Dunlop says there is a bit of him in everything he makes and besides attaching a brass plaque to each piece he makes, he often inscribes messages on sometimes hidden sections) and, above all, the discipline with which to apply those skills. At the age of 70 Dunlop still works wood for a living and, more importantly, does so for pleasure and that's why he says he's a lucky man. As he is fond of saying '...I love what I do—and they pay me for it, too!'

Footnote: Robert Dunlop was presented with an Order of Australia on Queen'sBrithday, last June, for literally decades of community work for the Scout Movement, the Salvation Army, prisoners, youth groups and Meals on Wheels.



'Studioline' furniture.