

IN STEPP WITH THE FUTURE

BY BARBARA BERGER



Tom Stepp explains his views to Barbara Berger at his design studio in Elsinore.

It's hard to believe that Hamlet's legendary castle is just down the street, especially as Danish designer Tom Stepp unfolds his Millennium vision, but maybe the juxtaposition is no accident. Because Stepp is a designer who's been able to reach back into the past and bring forward a sensibility and a sense of simplicity that might well explain why people, especially in the United States, are so excited about his design.

The fact is, for more than 20 years now, the gifted Dane has been turning out a steady stream of furniture that has won him a large and loyal following all over the world, especially in the United States.

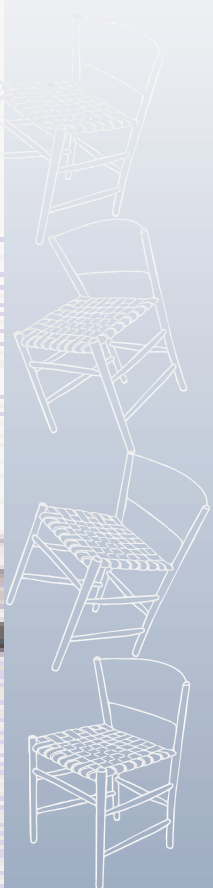
With the Millennium rapidly approaching, I asked Stepp what he thought the furniture of the future would be like. Would it, I asked, become more and more high-tech, like everything else?

Obviously Stepp had already given the matter quite a bit of thought because his answer was unequivocal: "Absolutely not. As the pace of the world continues to speed up, I believe that people will seek to balance all this hectic activity by creating oases of calm and quiet... places they can retreat to which exude a sense of restful-

ness and peace. Their homes, for example. And to create this calm, quiet atmosphere, you will need furniture that helps create this sense of quiet harmony. So I believe the furniture design of the future will reflect the longing that people will have for peace and quiet. And you won't get a sense of peace and quiet from a piece of furniture that looks like it's designed for the cockpit of a spaceship."

A Finger on the Pulse

There's good reason to take heed of Stepp's future vision. Since he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in 1979, his work has clearly demonstrated that the man has his finger on the pulse when it comes to design. In the last 20 years, he's produced a steady stream of popular designs ranging from chairs, tables, chests and sofas to lamps, watches and rugs. Not only has his work been exhibited all over the world, he's won quite a few prestigious design awards such as the Scandinavian Furniture Award in 1992 for his G. Bus chairs, a series of interlockable chairs that, when connected, give the impression of seats on a bus.



Tom Stepp, one of Denmark's most gifted designers, predicts that Millennium furniture will help us create islands of calm in an increasingly fast-paced world. Barbara Berger talked to the Danish designer at his studio in quaint, old Elsinore about furniture design and the future.



The Feel of the Future

Stepp has more to say about the furniture of the future. "In the new Millennium," says Stepp, "people are also going to want furniture made out of natural materials and natural fabrics. Again because natural materials give off a much more peaceful and harmonious feeling than metals, plastics and synthetic fabrics do. Metal and plastic just don't create the sense of peace and belonging that wood does."

"And there's even more to it," he continues. "You must remember, that every piece of wood is an individual, living thing. Each piece is alive with its own history, character and life. And that's another thing I think people are going to value more and more as our world becomes more and more streamlined and high-tech. Because with today's massive globalization, everyone and everything is becoming more and more homogenous. In this brave new world, wood will offer that idiosyncratic quality, that personal feeling that people will long for."

Rooted in the Scandinavian Tradition

Most certainly, Stepp's affinity for the organic look and feel of wood has something to do with his background. Before studying at the Academy, he worked as a carpenter and learned to love wood. "Back in those days," says Stepp, "my heroes were the Great Danes: Hans Wegner, Børge Mogensen and Mogens Koch. I learned to love wood from studying their designs." Even a brief look at his furniture makes it clear that Stepp has deep roots in the organic simplicity and meticulous craftsmanship of Scandinavian Design.

Contemporary Design That's With It

A good example of the meticulous balance Stepp achieves between his Scandinavian roots, his love of wood - and his understanding of the "modern" look that people want today is the popular series of chairs and tables he designed for Kvist, the Danish Furniture Manufacturer.

All the chairs and tables in the series have musical names such as "Funk" and "Swing", which is very appropriate because there's a freshness, a funkiness about his design that's unmistakable. Obviously the series is the work of a gifted craftsman who's added his own special modern twist to the no-nonsense ideals of his Danish predecessors. The popularity of the furniture in the U.S. testifies to his keen understanding of where furniture is going.

"Even though my roots can be found in the old Danish traditions of craftsmanship and simplicity," explains Stepp, "I get much of my inspiration from contemporary sources such as MTV, pop music, advertising, a walk by McDonald's and the latest fashion trends. I follow them all closely and somehow all these influences are funneled into my designs. I don't think I would be able to do good work as a designer if I wasn't acutely aware of everything that's going on around me. I have to absorb it all to make my design relevant, fresh and personal."

Popular in the US

When asked why he thinks his chairs and tables are so popular in the United States, Stepp replies, "I think it's because of their simplicity and the calm feeling they radiate. Even though my furniture has a modern look, all my furniture is very sensible and well balanced. The proportions are right and everyone can feel that. Take my chairs for example. Everyone can immediately see why one of my chairs looks the way it does. My chairs aren't



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The "Break" stacking chair, designed in 1998 for Kvist Møbler, is the latest addition to the family. This simple yet elegant café chair is available in beech or dark walnut, with a supporting frame made of chrome, aluminum or black lacquer. Also available with upholstered seat. Matching table available. Photo courtesy of Kvist Møbler.

funny, because I don't make funny furniture. As far as I'm concerned, funny furniture is like a joke - and you can only tell a joke once. My furniture is logical - and it meets your needs."

Stepp also credits much of his success in the U.S. to his long working relationship with Danish furniture manufacturers such as Kvist and Stouby. "The people at Kvist, for example, are just great to work with," says Stepp. "Kvist is one of the main manufacturers of my furniture - and the atmosphere at Kvist is young and dynamic. So there's plenty of room to experiment. For a designer like me, that's very important because it means I am free to try out new ideas and to push myself - and them - to make better and better furniture."

Designing the Perfect Home

Stepp admits that much of his design is based on his own needs. "Actually, I sometimes feel I've spent my whole career as a designer, designing my own home!" laughs Stepp and points to one of his most recent designs - a gorgeous sofa he designed for the Danish furniture manufacturer Stouby. "I needed a new sofa and started thinking about what the perfect sofa would be like. You can see the result here."

All I can say is the sofa called "Don Don" is a beaut. I was ready to order one on the spot. ■

Pictured below:

The "Funk" stacking chair (1994) was the first chair in Tom Stepp's popular series of chairs with musical names. The curving, organic shape of the wooden shell is accentuated by the strong, simple lines of the metal supporting frame. The chair is available with or without armrests. Matching table is also available. "Funk" is made by Kvist Møbler in Denmark. Photo courtesy of Kvist Møbler.



The "Don Don" sofa (1998) is an excellent example of Stepp's furniture for the New Millennium. The sofa is elegant but superbly human. And it exudes precisely that feeling of calm restfulness that Stepp says we will long for in the next century. Designed for Stouby. Photo courtesy of Stouby.



Pictured above:

Another member of Stepp's musical family, the "Swing" easy chair (1994) produced by Kvist Møbler, radiates calm comfort. The frame is made of laminated beech, while the seat and back are made of flax webbing. Also available with upholstered seat. Photo courtesy of Kvist Møbler.

